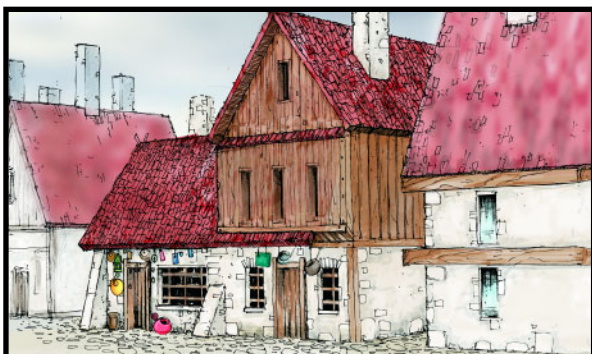




Campaign Journal II: BENRIS' JOURNAL

Your narrator, Benris Hu-Charad, is a young giant woman who was found as a baby by adventurers twenty years ago, abandoned in a level of the Dungeon. Her rescuers left her with the Delver's Guild, whose chief librarian adopted her. Giants being nonexistent in Ptolus, everyone—including Benris herself—has always considered her a human girl, though rather large boned. The only personal item found with her was a bronze brooch bearing the cryptic word “Hu-Charad.” These days she works at the Delver's Guild and has just embarked with new friends on her own life of adventure.



This is the journal of Benris Hu-Charad, an adventurer living in Ptolus who has an interesting past and a unique point of view. Benris is the character of Sue Cook, one of the players in my latest (third) Ptolus Campaign. This journal is a bit different than the Ptolus Campaign Journal that chronicled the previous two (concurrent) campaigns. It is different because it reflects the point of view of one character and is written by a player rather than the DM. I think you'll find it interesting and even entertaining.

You'll find that a lot of the characters use elements from *Arcana Evolved* and elsewhere—some are even player created. These elements are not standard for the Ptolus Campaign as published, as the product is designed for more baseline d20 games. You'll find, however, that the events of the journal reflect well the feel of Ptolus, even if the PCs do not in every case. (It also shows how easily one can work *Arcana Evolved* elements into an otherwise standard d20 campaign.)

Note that this campaign is set about three years after the assumed “present day” of the Ptolus Campaign. This rarely makes a difference, but in a few instances the journal might refer to characters as dead who are, in the *Ptolus* book, very much alive. If you want to read a journal relating even more directly to the *Ptolus* product, check out the first Campaign Journal on this CD-Rom.

Enjoy the journal—but, players, beware of spoilers!

—Monte

CAST OF CHARACTERS



ARCHINEMUS

Archinemus is a sibeccai, an extremely uncommon race in Ptolus (almost singular, in fact — you won't find them in the *Ptolus* book). He's a cleric/rogue, although the player, game designer Bruce Cordell, and I modified the cleric class into one that focuses entirely on business and influencing people the way a normal cleric focuses on religion. He influences humanoids rather than turning undead, for example. As the campaign advances, the group purchases a business, and Archinemus is at the heart of that endeavor.



BARBATOS

Barbatos is a human wizard. He also is secretly the publisher of a scandalous broadsheet that prints half-truths and innuendo about the various noble families. Barbatos seems more willing to view things from the seemier side of the street than most of the other characters. He's interested in history and the accumulation of personal power and has a weakness for the finer things in life, such as gourmet food. As of this writing, he has been punched in the face by his fellow party members five times. This number is likely to go up. He is played by *Dungeon*® and *Dragon*® magazine Publisher Erik Mona.



BENRIS

Benris did not realize it until recently, but she is not human. Instead, she is a descendent of the Charad titans of old. While these giantish folk are long gone, she was left behind as an infant. Benris, a champion of freedom, is the character of my wife and Malhavoc's Editorial Director Sue. She's using a lot of options from *Arcana Evolved* that aren't part of the standard Ptolus campaign setting. (Basically, she wanted to play a giant from *Arcana Evolved* even though there isn't such a race in Ptolus — not really, anyway — so I made it work.) Benris belongs to the Delver's Guild and is very interested in dungeon exploration, technology, and monster lore.



CALISTA

Calista is a human magister, a class from *Arcana Evolved*. Again, this is not a standard Ptolus option, but truth be told I really wanted to put a human magister and a human wizard together to compare the two. Calista is the same Calista from the previous Ptolus Campaign Journal, a character who figured very prominently toward the end of that recounting. She was an NPC there, and she's a PC here. She thus has had a strange and eventful background, of which most of the other PCs are unaware, at least at first. In many ways, her own goals and outlook don't match the rest of the party's, but the bonds of friendship are strong — and thus she gets pulled into things she doesn't always want to be part of. Calista is played by Wizards of the Coast Senior Editor Michele Carter.



CHARNOTH

Charnoth is a litorian totem warrior (another *Arcana Evolved* class). Charnoth is a savage but noble warrior who came to the city with his brother, Tharn (also a PC) to find some litorians who had been kidnapped by slavers. He dislikes Ptolus and finds "city life" distasteful. He fears for his brother's ready acceptance of city ways, which creates many conflicts between the two. Charnoth's outlook is very black and white, which does not always serve one well in a city like Ptolus. Charnoth is played by former D&D® Brand Manager Keith Strohm.



DIETHAN

Whether he recognizes it or not, Diethan is, in many ways, the heart of the group. He's easygoing, up for almost anything, and loyal to every member of the group. Diethan is a human ranger (utilizing the cool urban ranger option from Wizards' *Unearthed Arcana*). He knows a great many people in the city, both high placed and low. His sister lives among the nobility, as her great musical talents were recognized and rewarded by House Kath. Diethan is played by Wizards of the Coast RPG Design Manager Chris Perkins.



THARN

Tharn, Charnoth's brother, is a litorian unfettered (an *Arcana Evolved* class). Very much unlike his brother, Tharn loves Ptolus and the wonders it offers that are unavailable to him as a tribesman on the plains. Tharn can be headstrong and even foolhardy at times, but he is also noble and honest to a fault. He is suspicious of new people — a trait that makes his adaptation to city life more difficult but perhaps in general a bit safer. He attempts to use his keen sense of smell to discern the trustworthy from the not. This rarely works, but Tharn remains undaunted. Tharn is played by Wizards of the Coast RPG Development Manager Jesse Decker.

SESSIONS I & II—A LIFE OF ADVENTURE BEGINS!

5TH OF RAIN: GODSDAY TOURNAMENT AND FESTIVAL

Naturally, it was Diethan who brings us all together. Sometimes I think he knows everyone in the city of Ptolus.

The Godsdays Festival is going on at the Tournament Field just north of the city wall, so decide to meet there. The seven of us want to discuss, of all things, a moneymaking scheme. We all have our reasons for wanting cash. The litorians, Tharn and Charnoth, want to free their captured tribemates from slavers—groups like the Ennin. Barbatos wants money for his lofty wizard's lifestyle. The canny sibeccai Archinemus, a foundling like myself, seeks to avenge his father, who died in debtor's prison. Calista, who practices song magic, is looking for a purpose to her life. Of course, I want to raise enough to pay for the only akashic in Ptolus to tell me about the word inscribed on my brooch: Hu-Charad. (Dad has always told me it must be my family name.) My job at the Delver's Guild sure doesn't pay enough for me to save up that much. I'm not sure what Diethan really wants out of all this, but he's the one who found out about the opportunity.

After talking for some time about what we all are looking for and what we all have to offer, we agree to form a partnership. Our goal: to buy a magic-item shop in Delver's Square called Myraeth's Oddities. Apparently no one but Diethan even knows the owner wants to sell.

Of course, we have to find a way to raise the down payment on the shop. To do that, we decide to venture into the Halls of Cordaris, some Dungeon levels recently cleared of orcs by an unfortunate group of delvers. Just two days ago, their very large group went down into the orc-infested area. From the Guild's records, I've learned that Cordaris was an underground complex created at least two hundred years ago by a fanatical order of monastic knights called the Order of the Legacy. They were dedicated to preserving and guarding some very old secret. The Order diminished over time, and the remnants were wiped out within the last year by orc mercenaries, who made Cordaris their base. These delvers decided to slay the orcs and secure Cordaris once again (and, of course, explore this long-forbidden place to look for treasure — and maybe even the Order's secret). However, the orcs were a lot more numerous and capable than they'd suspected. While the

group managed to slay all the orcs, the delvers suffered terrible losses, and the few survivors retreated. I can't imagine they will ever return. So, we have Cordaris—which would normally carry a danger rating of 4 by Guild standards—standing unguarded and unplundered. There ought to be a lot of unclaimed treasure down there within our reach. And, best of all, I've managed to convince the Guild to keep the area quarantined just a little longer, to give us the edge.

That decided, we join in the festival competitions. The litorians win the brawling match (despite a halfling's attempt to poison them), and I manage to come out ahead in the hurling contest. Our other friends started their money-earning early by betting on the outcomes. I'm glad I didn't fail them.

After the games, we retire to the Ghostly Minstrel tavern in Delver's Square and meet a veteran adventurer named Sheva Callister. She shares with us some of the latest "adventurer's news": The slave trade is increasing in the Dark Market beneath the Undercity Market. (I never heard of a "dark" market!) In addition, she warned us to beware of the Balacazars. (Well, *that* much I knew! Who'd ever want to cross the biggest crime family in Ptolus?) We also learn that a dark elf, Shilukar, is gathering gnoll mercenaries to form a magical burglary force. He has a fence named Ammel Dar. Hmm. Not sure how this information could help us earn money for our store venture, but it's worth knowing, I suppose.

All this sure is a change of pace from my normal routine. I guess that's why I started keeping this journal. My life is really starting to take me somewhere, and I want to remember everything!

6TH OF RAIN

We equip ourselves for the foray into the underlevels—I now carry someone's used great axe, which I bought at Rastor's—and make for the Halls of Cordaris. I've learned the way into this area from Delver's Guild records. We enter through an old building in the north part of Midtown, through an elderly man's broken-down warehouse. We locate some old passages and eventually find our way to a pit. Inside it are a dead orc and a live otyugh. At least, that's what I think it is. There are many dead bodies here, but before I can dwell on that fact too long, we're attacked by an orc sniper and many vicious bats. I thought all the orcs down here were dead! We acquit ourselves well in our first battle: Well, the wizard Barbatos shrieks like a girl and flees, but not bad aside from that.

We find a book about the Legacy, which is supposed to involve knowledge of what the world is, within and without. It says the Order of the Legacy was formed hundreds of miles south of the city near a place called Mrathrach's Pit. Supposedly an angel touched one Lord Timonius Creed and gave him a secret and power, knowledge of the Creator. "World and inhabitants, we are one," the book says. He then bequeathed the secret to a woman named Cordaris, who locked it in a tower. Urulu, an orc shaman, heard of this secret, and his whole tribe fell on the tower and took it over. A monk named Sister Dirann hid with the Legacy in the wilderness. To test it, she found one of many chaos wells beneath Ptolus and tamed it with the Legacy. This Legacy, the fundamental essence of order and purity of the world, can neutralize chaos! (I wonder if we can find *that*?)

What we do find is a dwarf named Ulf Fireseeker. The Order of the Legacy captured him before the Ornu-Nom orcs came here. (Other recent invaders include an urloc leading some Toruk-Rul orcs. Those are scary creatures!) The Legacy monks asked Ulf what the dwarves knew about the Order and so forth. Not enough, apparently—he's pretty banged up, been tortured pretty bad. We find another prisoner, Kanagi, who's been held for fifty years! She looks like a satyr or tiefling, but she says she's a forlaran: half fiend, half nymph. Whatever she is, she's pretty foul tempered. We also find a little grey guy named Shim. He's hard to focus on—he's a skulk and can vanish easily. (The skulks watch everyone in the city, or so he claims. I thought his race was only a rumor until now.) He'd been sneaking around seeking the Legacy's secret. He tells us, in fact, that the secret's in a lower level. Plus, he thinks some monks are still alive down there. He shows us his sign (an X with a top bar and arc across it) and says we should use it if we ever need to find him again. Then Shim leads the other prisoners out.

We find a secret passage in a side room/library. There we locate a treasure room with a dozen chests! That's more like it! We leave with two chests, the ones filled with gold and silver. I can use some of this money to pay off a Master Delver of the Guild to quarantine the area for another month, so we can have the Halls of Cordaris all to ourselves.

In one day of adventuring, I've already accomplished more than I have in my whole life up to now. Who'd have thought it would be this easy?

SESSIONS III & IV—OF EAR-SEEKERS AND GIANT MOBATS

7TH OF RAIN

On our way back down into the Halls of Cordaris for the other ten chests, we're attacked by bats—normal and giant sized. We bring the chests back up in a cart and pay five silver to the old man who lives in the warehouse from which we enter the undercity, in exchange for continued access to his property. Looks like we're finally on our way to that down payment on Myraeth's Oddities. How do regular people afford big expenses without adventuring?

A priest named Mand Scheben tracks me down later today and takes me to Barbatos, whom he found very ill in a tavern. Not the drunk kind of ill—apparently he's infected with an ear-seeker he picked up in the dungeon. We must get him cured immediately or he'll die. Thankfully, Mand's church, the Temple of Asche, takes care of it for us. I had no idea things could get so perilous so fast!

8TH OF RAIN

Poor Barbatos still does not look good. The group decides to rest and recover today. I go to work — there's a tour group of rich Ptolusites coming through the safe underlevels on an "adventure tour," and I have to wrangle the crawlers.

9TH OF RAIN

Back into the Halls of Cordaris! (Barbatos seems a little twitchy after the ear-seeker episode.) First we find a silver statue on a medusa-head altar. It's inscribed with the words "Velator Grillam" — that must be the title of a Legacy official of some kind. In the next room, a similar statue says "Velator Cordaris." After a merry chase with some goblins, we find a chamber used by orcs and goblins (and previously by members of the Order of the Legacy, it appears). We locate a journal page written by a member of the Order. The author speaks of a raving madman named Timerian who's the leader of what's left of the Order. This Timerian is the one who started taking prisoners, it seems, including the ones we rescued last time. The journal also speaks of a chaos well in the area and an infestation of bane-midges (tiny goblinoids). Maybe they're connected with the orcs? Also, it seems we now have a wolf. I have no idea why the litorian brothers wanted to keep it — the thing practically took my head off in that battle we fought with it and its goblin masters.

10TH OF RAIN

We spend today recuperating. I wonder if Dad can tell I've been adventuring? He never wanted this life for me, but how could I resign myself to watching over dusty old tomes all day, the way he does? I love Dad, but the librarian's life is not for me.

Today, the litorians are off to find a kennel for the wolf. I told them we could give it to the Guild to use in our dungeon adventure tours, but they didn't seem interested. I hope they remember to buy more healing potions on the way back.

11TH OF RAIN

Tonight we accidentally accost a wizard in an alley for information on slavers who might have Charnoth's and Tharn's litorian friends. I say "accidentally" because half of us thought we were just going to ask him nicely, but the other half had different plans. Later, at work, I talk this out with a Master Delver named Throwval Greyheart. After the incident in the alley, I could use some good advice on how to keep a group together in harmony. He didn't have any answers, though — he just laughed at me and shook his head.

12TH OF RAIN

Back we go to Cordaris today. Some corpses have been disturbed by rats, giant rats, and ratmen, but everything else seems the way we left it. We get through a new hallway (trapped with big swords that swing down and slice you—intriguing mechanism!) and find two reliefs depicting some knights, their heads held at different angles. A spiral staircase down from the study leads to a large room with a pit holding three baby caterwauls! The Order members thought they could use the Legacy to manipulate sonic creatures like these, we later learn. Moving on, we run afoul of some midges. What pests! Then the mama caterwaul almost kills me. Thankfully Diethan saved me by threatening one of the babies until she left us alone. We find an invisible wall separating us from a room of colored light. Did the Order members try to use the caterwauls' sonic powers to breach the wall? Beyond it lies the chaos well that we read about in the journal pages.

13TH OF RAIN

We rest and heal today. My ribs hurt.

14TH OF RAIN

We return to the Halls of Cordaris and fight more rats and ratmen (I hear the Church of Lothian will pay you silver for each tail you bring in) and discover a rough passage through the rock near an old sewer line. With difficulty, we slay a giant mobat, after he'd managed to stun most of us. I really thought we were done for! Hmm, another sonic creature... Anyway, Charnoth's making a cloak out of its hide and I'm keeping its head. I heard somewhere that great adventurers are supposed to keep trophies of their big kills. This definitely qualifies.

SESSIONS V & VI—DEEPER INTO CORDARIS**15TH OF RAIN**

After some rest following our latest mission in the Halls of Cordaris, Diethan goes with me to inquire about getting our mobat head stuffed. What a trophy! Archinemus sells the other loot we brought up from the Halls.

At the Ghostly Minstrel over dinner tonight we meet a woman named Saedra, a member of the Order of the Legacy! She's seen us down in Cordaris, and now she wants to know our intentions. She says that only a few members of the Order are left, holed up in a tower on the third level. Jastov, their reliquarian/priest, might help us free the rest of them from their crazy velator, Timerian, Saedra says. She tells us to beware of a member named Devar: She's loyal to Timerian.

A group of ten orcs have the Order besieged in the tower, Saedra says. Their urloc leader wields a massive magic axe, and they have goblin slaves (oh yeah, we've fought some of them). She explains that we can get to the third level through the Doors of Purification in a round hallway. She also mentions a secret door to a Blood Pool with undead guardians. They were created when some other crazy velator tried to bring back old leaders of the order, but all he got was horrid monsters. But if we do manage to get through the undead, there's treasure at the pool, leftovers from the monsters' victims, I suppose.

When she departs, Saedra doesn't wish us luck: I know she thinks we're after their precious Legacy. Well, I don't know that she's wrong.

16TH OF RAIN

Back to our hunt, this time via the sewer entrance (not the old man's beat-up warehouse). We fight more midges — those little creeps dropped a brick on me — and orcs and goblins before sighting the urloc himself. What a big, nasty guy! Tough, too. Only thing that saved

us was Calista and her song magic. Her singing distracts him enough that we can get in some good licks, and we manage to defeat them all! I'm feeling like a serious adventurer now, especially carrying the urloc's magical great axe.

When we find the Doors of Purification, however, we can't get through! So much for "serious adventurers." Only Diethan can pass through these enruned bronze-and-glass portals — and even he made it through only the first pair of them. (There are three pairs.) I don't know what we're going to do now.

17TH OF RAIN

Calista has other business today. Barbatos uses his magic to detect which items from our most recent loot are magical. If we want to know more about what they do, we'll have to spend some money to get each one identified. At the Ghostly Minstrel this evening, Sheva Callister, veteran adventuress, offers us some advice on buying curative wands. I think she didn't remember us at first. Strange: We're two litorians, a sibeccai, and several humans — one of whom is a woman more than seven feet tall! *I'd* sure remember us!

18TH OF RAIN

This morning we enter the Halls of Cordaris via the sewers again, looking for the door with the sword hanging above it. When we find it, we notice a fresco here showing knights looking down at a table. Beyond we see a room with Orcish symbols written on the walls. There's a pit here, and a ladder leading down, and barrel of nails, too. (Archinemus doesn't think they're worth anything anymore.) We find a jeweled collar from a dead caged beast in the pit.

While we're poking around, a couple orcs show up! Tharn and Charnoth, our litorian friends, say these are Ornu-Nom orcs from the plains, an honorable people. That's the first time I ever heard anyone call an orc honorable! And I don't think Barbatos or Diethan would call them too honorable — the orcs shot them before the rest of us could stop it! Anyway, they seem to recognize us. "You have killed the Dreadmaster!" their leader says, referring to the urloc, I guess, and his axe that I now carry. "Do you seek the Demon's Soul?"

We come to find out that's how they refer to the Legacy. (And here we'd read that it was bequeathed to mortals by angels!) These orcs follow the message of Urulu, an orc shaman who long ago wanted to destroy the Legacy. They call it an abomination. However, now the orcs don't have the numbers to contain the members of the Order in their tower any more, much less destroy the Legacy (whatever it is), so they are leaving. (The urloc had brought the "spiremen" [local Ptolus orcs] and the Undying [a troll] down here to join forces with these Ornu-Nom guys, but the plains orcs have split from them following the Dreadmaster's death.) They urge us to destroy the Legacy in their place.

Of course, we'll do no such thing if we can't even get to the tower. The Ornu-Nom tell us to drink from fonts in the hall leading to the Doors of Purification in order to gain the insight needed to get through the doors. They tell us the tower lies past the round doors and beyond some staircases, but they warn us to beware the creatures of the Garden. They also warn us of cave morays and other perils in various unexplored areas of these Halls. It's a relief to me to watch them finally leave.

We leave this room and, while waiting for our wounded to heal a bit, we set up a winch and pulley to pull the sword out of the doorway. It's very exciting: This weapon could be *Zelambrast*, guardian of the Legacy! Well, actually, it turns out to be just some pitted and crappy old sword. Still, perhaps it's the artifact in disguise...!

Rather than return to the doors, we decide to go looking for the madman, Velator Timerian, and his magical pipe organ. We pass through a hall with water rushing in and dead orcs lying in sprung traps. We spot another relief of knights with crossed swords in a chamber that houses recessed iron cabinets. They hold components for creating magic items, and a secret compartment has three potions.

Beyond is the organ room. A stone catwalk spans a watery surface, and at the end of it we see Timerian. The madman doesn't give us a chance to explain ourselves, but plays a chord and summons fiery elementals. We dispatch them pretty easily, but not before he zaps me with a *wand of pain-in-the-gut*. (I identified that one the hard way!) Still we advance upon him. As we slay this evildoer, he cries, "The Legacy dies with me! I changed the combina—" then expires. We're not sure we understand, but those poor members of the Order are certainly better off without this lunatic directing their actions.

After experimenting with the organ (which lands us in the water—thanks, Barbatos), we find Timerian's study. Its walls are covered in papers with mad scrawls. We also locate nine magical scrolls, good news for Barbatos and Calista! Tired, we head back up to the city.

19TH OF RAIN

We take a day of rest, trading our loot — er, goods — for cash. We learn that my new axe (mine thanks to the urloc's demise) is a magical weapon, which inflicts extra damage to humans. I'd better be careful never to cut myself with it! Unfortunately, the crappy and pitted-looking sword proved to be nothing more than a crappy and pitted-looking sword. If we want to find *Zelambrast*, we'll have to keep looking.

20TH OF RAIN

My new brigandine armor is ready today! A great fit, now that it's been altered from urloc size.

21ST OF RAIN

The stuffed mobat head is ready today! Barbatos agrees to keep it for me for a couple days, till I find a place of my own. I don't want Dad to see it and worry about me tackling monsters like that. Speaking of worrying, Archinemus received a note today from a lawyer offering us five hundred gold to forget all about buying Myraeth's Oddities! Who else could know of our secret plans?

22ND OF RAIN

Today I use some of my earnings to buy a dungeoneer's outfit—a really warm one with lots of pockets (even secret ones) and boots and gloves good for climbing. Now I'm really set. I'm also really broke. I keep forgetting that I joined this venture to raise enough money to ask the akashic about my brooch, and maybe learn something about my birth family. But these trappings for my new adventuring life are hard to resist!

23RD OF RAIN

Found a place of my own in Midtown today. I can't hide my new adventuring life from Dad forever, so I thought it was time to move out. I spend some time boning up on my dangerous beasts knowledge, too. I want to be more informed next time we venture underground

24TH OF RAIN

We discover that the lawyer who tried to buy us off is actually pretty big-time, with many large-scale criminal types for clients. What an insult to offer us only a measly 500 gold! Of course, we wouldn't take it even if it were more, but he must really think we're small potatoes. We'll show him! Barbatos drafted a nice letter politely declining the offer. The wizard's got quite a way with words.

26TH OF RAIN

Weird thing happened yesterday — I slept all the way through it! I didn't realize I was so tired, but I must have been. When I woke up today, I was surprised to discover I was about three inches taller than when I went to bed! This sort of thing hasn't happened to me in years (Dad always called them my "growth spurts"). I went to see him to ask him if it was really noticeable, but he didn't want to talk about it. Cripes, now I have to go have my armor refitted! I'm even taller than those litorians...

SESSIONS VII & VIII—WELCOME TO CASTLE SHARD**27TH OF RAIN**

Back we go to the Halls of Cordaris today. We are heading toward the Doors of Purification, but on the way we locate a secret door to the Blood Pool. We chicken out on following this path, though, once we hear the movement of undead down the hall. Calista seems really uneasy about fighting them. We took care of the orcs easily enough — I doubt we'd have any problem with some skeletons. But then, she knows a lot of adventurers, like Aliya Al-Mari of the Runewardens, and says she's actually *seen* undead, so maybe she knows something I don't.

While searching the alcoves in the hall leading to the Doors of Purification, we come upon a candle with a combination carved into it: 24-B-13. Could this be the new combination of the Legacy that crazy Velator Timerian was gloating about right before he died?

Tasting the water in all four fonts in the alcoves of this hall, Archinemus leads us through the Doors. His technique seems to be working, till we get to the third door. We think it's magically sealed — it won't open up, even with Calista's spells. A woman approaches us on the other side. When we ask to come in, saying we have important news as to the safety of the Legacy, she calls us liars and refuses! But we weren't lying. We were trying to tell her that she and what's left of her Order aren't safe down here, now that the Delver's Guild is about to open the Halls of Cordaris to explorers. But she plays it tough, claiming that Timerian is still around to protect them. The only way she'll believe we're not enemies is if we find and rescue her comrade Jastov. She thinks the orcs must've gotten him.

So we head up to Level One and start looking. We find a storeroom and some goblins and Spireman orcs. After a bit of a battle, we locate Jastov in one of the cells where we'd previously found the dwarf and skulk. This is Jastov the Reliquarian, whom former Order member Saedra had called trustworthy when we talked to her in the tavern. Jastov said the orcs captured him before he could get some gems from the chaos well. (The Order of the Legacy once thought they could use pure gems to harness the power of the chaos well to protect the Halls of Cordaris.) He said the Legacy was dangerous but, like Saedra, he was magically compelled to tell us nothing more specific. He did tell us that there are only two Order members left besides him, now that Timerian is dead (and he didn't seem too broken up about that, sensible fellow). He said the Blood Pool has spawned horrible skeletal creatures covered in blood.

We try to convince him of the dangers he faces in staying down here — other adventurers will come, we said, and they won't be as scrupulous as we are! He said that if he had the new combination, he would try to move the Legacy and depart with it and the others, but if Timerian changed it, there's nothing he can do. After a lengthy discussion, we decide to tell him the combination we found on the candle. (Charnoth was inclined to bust through the Doors of Purification, punish all surviving Order members for condoning the taking and torture of prisoners — the litorians are very sensitive to that sort of thing, on account of their tribesmen being taken by slavers — but in the end he came around.) Unfortunately, what we'd found was the *old* combination.

However, to show his gratitude for our freeing him, Jastov gives Tharn a few light-emitting crystals and hands us some notes that ought to show us how to find a lot more of them. This crystal is a rare mineral called aethel that absorbs and stores energy. It can store even magical or elemental energy and also make magic items. The notes are from a former member of the Order named Naethus, who found the aethel cave somewhere beneath Ptolus (but not in the Halls). The notes suggest taking a trip to the North Market district, to a candlemaker's shop called Fever Moon.

Then we return Jastov to the Doors of Purification and, after drinking from the fonts, he manages to get through all of them without difficulty. Thinking that we would never get the other Order members to trust us, and that the Legacy was probably far too dangerous for us to mess with (not to mention in the care of these people whom we're trying to convince we're friendly) we agree to leave him to do his best to convince the Order to move out. I hope he succeeds. He says he'll try to convince the others not to treat us as hostile the next time we meet in these Halls — we've still got the Blood Pool to deal with, after all!

28TH OF RAIN

Today we learn about a reward of a thousand gold coins for the capture of Shilukar, a dark-elf wizard who reportedly stole from House Abanar. Something for us to think about to help increase the size of our down payment for the shop!

Shortly after we hear this news, the cleric Mand Scheben of the Temple of Ashe (god of cities) calls up the debt that Barbatos owes him, on account of saving him from the ear-seekers. He needs our aid — and will compensate us for it, too — at Castle Shard. Apparently this is a magical place in the Nobles' Quarter where weird stuff and weird people (like the infamous powerful wizard Moynath Autumnsong) seem to pop up.

Next we go to Myraeth's Oddities to get some loot identified. We also offer Myraeth a first payment of two thousand gold on the shop to seal our agreement. That's half the total down payment, so we're getting there! He takes a look at our aethel crystals and tells us that enough of these raw crystals could bring down a magical energy barrier. Funny, I think that's exactly what the Legacy members were trying to do! Giving us five hundred gold for one of the crystals, he tells us that a source he knows of near the Spire has dried up. I wonder if that's the source our note directs us to?

That afternoon we head over to Castle Shard to meet Mand and find out what he needs us to do. Walking through the Nobles' Quarter was cool. The place was full of the most stately manors I have ever seen! Castle Shard looks like a big stone cylinder, with a column of purple crystal shot through the center. A moat of black glassy liquid surrounds the place. The elaborate tower has windows placed high up on its immense front doors. When we enter, the majordomo, Kadmus, seems very impressed with the house gift that Calista offers. (Wow, she thinks of everything!) We see some real wonders in this place, let me tell you. For instance, a woman in a glinting silver dress glides by on a disk supported by lines held by tiny flapping birds. Kadmus tells us this is Rill, one of the two lords of Castle Shard. We next meet a man named Zavere, the other lord of the place. He wears all black and welcomes us with a low voice. A gorgeous woman with huge horns approaches, smelling of the woods, like a clear mountain stream. This satyrix, Narasha, is a guest at the castle, and she flirts big-time with Diethan!

That might have led to something had not Mand arrived just then. He explains that a gangster named Linech is seeking a group of adventurers for a mission. Why does he want them? Where'd he get the cash to pay them? These are the things the Church of Ashe wants to know, because this half-orc criminal has crossed them and Castle Shard before. So he wants us to get ourselves hired on for this mission, then report back on what's up — for eighty gold each! Sounds simple enough.

So we head off to the address he gives us in the Rivergate District. Diethan explains that Linech is a drug smuggler who deals mostly in shivvel, a very dangerous hallucinogenic drug that comes into Ptolus via ship from an island to the north. Mand said he thought Linech's operation had been shut down, but it seems otherwise. We arrive at Linech's burrow (a cluster of homes). Inside his home, he sits at a large desk, protected by a sizable woman bodyguard named Oukina (of course, I've got almost a foot on her after my recent growth spurt). Also we see a halfling servant named Seanus, a half-elf woman with drug-glazed eyes playing the zither, and a solid gold statue of a warrior. Weird place.

Linech tells us his daughter died on an island not far from Ptolus, and the ship transporting her body went down in the harbor. He wants us to dive down and retrieve her body and its glass coffin. He will give us each a *potion of water breathing* and some *potions of swimming*, plus twelve hundred gold and anything we can salvage off the ship. "It's all the money I've got left in the world," he said. How nice to see that even a criminal can care so deeply about his daughter and her final rest!

He tells us that the ship, the *Dragoneye*, sank three nights ago due to arson, possibly caused by the Balacazar crime family. So the perpetrators might be trying to salvage the vessel too, he warns. We'll have to be on our toes.

So we take the job and shake our tail back to Castle Shard. When Archinemus mentions the gold statue, Zavere wonders whether it was their one-time ally Lord Abbercombe. He also explains that Oukina is Linech's muscular girlfriend, and that the half-elf woman was Biesta, Linech's sister, burned out on shivvel. The lord of the castle also confirms that Linech's daughter (Linele, about twelve or thirteen years old) did indeed die on that island recently. Hey, that's weird, come to think of it. Linech didn't even tell us her name!

We take our commission from Mand and decide to go ahead with Linech's mission as well. The Castle Shard folks said they would welcome more information on the half-orc's activities. Speaking of the Castle Shard folks, that night, Calista learns from her friends at the Pale Tower where she lives that Rill once was a paladin of the goddess Gaen but gave it up for her sorcery talent. Now she rarely leaves the castle. Likewise, Zavere was once a dark knight in the service of House Vladaam, but he renounced it all for Castle Shard, too. What a pair. Their butler Kadmus brought out some great honey cakes, though.

29TH OF RAIN

Seanus, a halfling, meets us to escort us to the Docks to begin our mission for Linech. He seems a friendly fellow and gave away a lot of information about his employer without meaning to. For instance, he said Linech doesn't have to worry about money "now that the guest is here." Turns out that this guest is Biesta's new friend: the dark elf Shilukar, for whom we've heard there's a bounty of a thousand gold! Definitely something to keep in mind. Seanus said that the dark elf gave Linech the gold statue and an influx of cash. The gnoll guards we've seen near Linech's house — quite an uncommon sight around here — must be his.

We arrive at the harbor, and Seanus has a boat all lined up for us. From a little girl in the harbormaster's office, we learn that the *Dragoneye* went down in six hundred feet of water just past a dropoff. She also said that a dinghy rowed by people in purple and gold robes was seen leaving the scene of the ship fire. We drink our *potions of water breathing* and leave Seanus up on the surface with the boat while we sweep for the wreckage underwater.

We finally find it at the dropoff. There's a huge hole in the side of the hull. Swimming through, we begin to explore....

SESSIONS IX & X—UNDERSEA ADVENTURES

29TH OF RAIN

We begin to explore the *Dragoneye*, a ship that sank in the harbor, looking for the coffin of Linech's little daughter, Linele. Poor kid, having to grow up with a shivvel dealer for a father! Who's to say she's not better off in the grave than mixed up in his degenerate underworld life?

While poking around in the hold, we find no coffin, only a number of casks of black globules — unrefined shivvel, we think. We also realize that the big hole in the ship's hull was made intentionally, not from an impact or explosion.

Before we can dwell on that fact, some terrible fish-men attack us! These fierce warriors have wicked teeth. Soon their blood in the water attracts some sharks, so we really have our hands full. Plus I can't use my greataxe underwater too well, so I'm not at my best.

Finally when they're all dead, a much friendlier sea creature named Quillong appears with a dolphin named Sea Dart. He says he's a triton and that he's been following these creatures, called sahuagin, for they're his people's ancestral enemies. He says that long ago, blood drinkers from the surface made a Blood Covenant with the sahuagin to come when six of them together should call using the *horn of blood*. The sahuagin always get some payment for answering, he says. The blood drinkers haven't called in a long while, but apparently now they have, for the fish-men don't usually visit the Ptolus harbor.

Quillong goes on to say that these sahuagin have taken the girl's coffin to a nearby sea cave. They've also been systematically taking the casks of shivvel from the wreck. They knew exactly where to look for the stuff, he says — they must be working with the saboteurs. Our own boat's adrift, thanks to the sahuagin who cut the line. Hope our halfling friend Seanus isn't too worried about us up there.

We swim slowly (compared to Quillong) toward the sea cave. There we fight more sahuagin and some giant crabs. Once they have their claws on you, look out! (Barbato saved a couple of those crab legs for his dinner.) We nab some of the fish-men's underwater crossbows and continue on.

We break the surface at last in a high-ceilinged cavern and spy a small island with some casks piled all around. The coffin's there too, its glass top smashed. Linele's body has vanished but, weirder still, it looks as though she broke out of it from the inside!

As we begin to look around, pirates come running across a bridge to the island and attack us. From what they say, we learn we're in the fortress of the Balacazar crime family! Well, that shouldn't surprise us, as Linech thought they might be behind the destruction of the *Dragoneye*. But why are they enlisting the help of vampires and sahuagin?

Meanwhile, the pirates are putting up a good fight — they have dragon pistols and a lizard man ally! They wonder to each other whether “that damn girl” summoned us. Sounds like they don't want her around... but she's dead — isn't she?

Once we've dealt with all the pirates, we see that the lizard man is in fact a slave, so we break him free of his shackles. Then we spy one more sahuagin at the shore. Right before our eyes it changes form to that of a little girl with long black hair, pointy teeth, a deathly pallor, and a terrifying laugh. No, Linele's not alive at all!

She's talking crazy, though. “The vampires will never get it!” she cries, hanging onto a pocketwatch. “No one must have it.” We try to make her understand that her father sent us to find her, but she just dives back into the water and disappears. Quillong thinks she's risen as some sort of undead — a “rusalka,” he calls her — due to her body's proximity to an evil magic item. The watch? And does Linech know what's befallen his daughter?

We're not quite sure what to do now. The lizard man says his name's Salsan, though the pirates called him “Sir Jingles,” thanks to the noise his chains made when he walked. Tharn and Charnoth are furious at the Balacazars for enslaving him, and Charnoth does something nasty to a few of the bodies in bizarre litorian retribution. Salsan says he came to this place via the slave pens beneath the city a couple weeks ago and adds that he did see a number of litorians held there. Tharn's and Charnoth's tribemates!

Salsan says that some of the litorian slaves were going to try to run off to a city of escaped slaves deep below Ptolus. We ask him to meet us at a wharfside tavern later so he can tell us more. Perhaps he can help us find these litorians again. Even though I've heard folks at the Delver's Guild say that lizard men are usually nasty customers, Salsan's pretty nice to us. No one deserves to be a slave.

Quillong does some reconnaissance and sees that the rusalka has fled to the cave where we killed the crabs. He agrees to take the lizard man safely to shore, and we bid him farewell. Maybe one day we can come visit him in his city, Konagis, in the Deep.

STILL THE 29TH OF RAIN

Before leaving the Balacazar fortress, we burn up the leftover shivvel, then track the rusalka back to the crabs' caverns. She's no longer there. We follow the cavern through a tight passageway and suddenly, before we know what's happening, we find ourselves standing on dry land again, watching some men work along the shore!

There we see Linele, too, but she looks like a normal little girl, the way she must have looked before her death. She's playing with her little dog, Sandy. Have we somehow gone back in time? We explain that her father sent us to see her safely home. She lets slip that her father has a watch that can talk; it tells him where to find the stuff he sells and how to process it. Confused, we wonder if we're going to have to book ship on the doomed *Dragoneye* to get back to the city, when the girl changes form again, back into her rusalka shape.

“I believe that you don't want it,” she says, and agrees to return with us to her father. Then, bang! We're back in the underwater passage! For a little girl, she has some incredible powers. Come to think of it, though, she doesn't talk like a little girl. It's as though she has somehow merged with the intelligence of that watch. But she says that doesn't matter any more.

Back we go to the Docks, and we locate Seanus again, who'd been wondering how to tell Linech that he'd managed to lose us. We all return to Linech's house, with Linele magically disguised as Barbato (we tell Seanus it's the wizard's *mirror image*, and he doesn't argue). When we come before Linech and tell him our story, his aide, Oukina, says the people in purple and gold that some folks dockside saw rowing away from the burning *Dragoneye* were the Hussar, cultists of Unnah, goddess of blades. Then the rusalka assumes her little girl form

again, and wow, is her father shocked to see her! We think he was lying when he said he wanted her back for a proper burial — he just wanted that watch! But he's got Linele back now, so he tells his aide, Oukina, to take us down to the treasury and pay us.

Hmm, why would he allow us inside his treasury? This smells rotten, so I'm keeping an eye open for trouble. On the way, we see some gnolls standing guard, presumably over Shilukar, the dark elf wizard who's staying with Linech. We enter the treasury room, and suddenly men with pistols fire on us! Betrayal! We make quick work of them (though Charnoth comes near death in the process). Poor Seanus is aghast.

Taking the bag of cash from the treasury (well, we earned it, didn't we?), we stalk back to Linech's office to confront the treacherous lout. There we discover that Linele has taken over the place, her father vanished. Calista asks the girl what does she want to do now? She must be confused. Calista offers to take her to the Brotherhood of Redemption — apparently they're experts in showing monstrous creatures a new path. She can finally choose her own destiny. Linele agrees to go hear what they have to say. She also gives us the gold statue of Lord Abbercombe, which we plan to return to Castle Shard, since they seem to know the guy. (Wow, Calista is sure persuasive!) We warn Linele about Shilukar's presence nearby. Diethan decides to stick around Linech's place and keep watch on the gnolls.

Linele doesn't seem too sure about the Brotherhood of Redemption at first, but when they assure her that they can protect her from vampires, she decides to stay with them. We can't believe our good fortune when the doorman offers us a bounty of one hundred gold for bringing her in!

Next, we're off to Castle Shard with the gold statue. "You've brought Lord Abbercombe!" exclaims Kadmus on our arrival. We're confused to learn that this fellow, a noble from long ago, has always been made of gold. Zavere thinks Rill can restore him, whatever that means. This is a weird place.

Barbatos and Archinemus tell Zavere the whole story, and they're impressed to hear we've discovered a secret entry into the Balacazars' seaside fortress. As for the guys in purple and gold, he confirms that they're the Hussar, adding that it's rumored that the Balacazars have captured their goddess. While they hold her, the cult members have to obey them, however unwillingly. I'm beginning to think we were darn lucky to get out of that fortress alive. Who are the Balacazars NOT allied with?

Kadmus has the staff cook up Barbatos' giant crab legs. At dinner, we learn that people have sighted Shilukar's gnolls in the Guildsman District around the Delver's Hole, the area that collapsed into the Undercity some years back. One gnoll was blue! Also on the rumor front, Zavere said that the pocketwatch may hold a demon that helped Linech find his product. Suddenly frightened at what we may have unleashed on the Brotherhood of Redemption, Calista sends word of this new wrinkle to their headquarters. Demons are not to be trifled with.

It's been a long day, but we still have to meet our lizard man friend Salsan at the tavern by the Docks. I decide to collect Diethan from Linech's house on the way — but when I arrive at the burrow, he's gone! So are the gnoll guards he was watching. Hopefully, they went in and Diethan got bored and headed off to the tavern ahead of me. Yeah, that must be what happened.

SESSIONS XI & XII—SEARCH FOR THE SLAVE CITY

STILL THE 29TH

It's late when I arrive at the dockside bar called the Savage Shark. It's a bawdy, loud, and crowded place, but I don't see Diethan anywhere around. I also don't see Salsan, whom we were supposed to meet here. A little asking around reveals that I've missed him by just an hour — he left word that he couldn't stay but would meet us there again in a week. As I'm getting ready to leave, a dwarf hits on me. As if! I must be twice his height!

I head over to the Ghostly Minstrel, where I find my friends and Diethan. It seems that, while spying on Shilukar's supposed hidey-hole, he saw the gnolls come out of the house they'd been guarding . . . with the dark elf! That's the last thing he saw before going unconscious. When he awoke, Diethan found himself face to face with Linech. The treacherous gangster said he was willing to let bygones be bygones. Sure he was — he was the one who tried to kill US! But he let Diethan go, so maybe we don't have to worry about him any more after all.

We decide to keep Seanus on, and he seems happy enough with the arrangement — especially when we offer to pay him 3 silver pieces a day and give him room and board (meaning, he bunks with me). The halfling is good at spying and always seems enthusiastic.

30TH OF RAIN

Today I buy some supplies and to go work. I ask my mentor, Gorti Jurgen (she's the Guild's ranking rep at the Undercity office), about sources of aethel crystal. She shows me on a map the location of the Fevered Moon candle shop in the North Market and explains that extensive caves lie beneath it. It's not real close to the Spire (Myraeth had told us he knew of an old source near there) but it is near the King's River. The notes we were given about the aethel crystal mention a cold river.

Meanwhile, Diethan learns that Shilukar's fence, Ammel Dar, was seen around with a fair-skinned elf (Shilukar in disguise?) and a half-elf woman who can only be Biesta, Linech's addict half-sister.

1ST OF BLOOM

Today is a litorian Gathering Day. We all raise a cup to celebrate their winning the brawling contest on only their second day in town. Wow, was that only a month ago? Charnoth hears an intriguing new legend about something called *Father's Warclub*. Once it was wielded by a female litorian who came to the city looking for something called the Shadow Eyes. This warclub supposedly has the power to heal. Makes for an interesting tale to tell around the fire.

2ND OF BLOOM

Today I hear something disturbing. About ten days ago, blood-dripping undead skeletons burst out of an old shack above the Halls of Cordaris, destroying the shack and escaping into the city to wreak unknown havoc. I'm terribly afraid that this is the old man's warehouse. What have we done by failing to search them out and kill them?

3RD OF BLOOM

Barbatos tells us that he's been looking into the story of Lord Abbercombe. This noble house used to oppose House Abanar, House Vladaam, and House Sadar. It seems that the last Lord Abbercombe was cursed with a wasting disease and died about five centuries ago. Stories claim that ancient wizards tried to find a way to preserve this lord. Is this our golden statue?

4TH OF BLOOM

Over breakfast at the Ghostly Minstrel, a little creature with batlike wings flies into the dining hall and lands at our table! It snaps its shadowy fingers and a horn appears, which it blows. "Your presence is required at Castle Shard!" it announces. Everyone was looking at us. We were very proud.

We arrive and are ushered in by the courteous butler, Kadmus. We're surprised, however, to see that Zavere is VERY angry at us. Or rather, at Barbatos. It seems that our wizard pal also secretly publishes a broadsheet called the *Midtown Partisan*. (Or perhaps not so secretly, since clearly Castle Shard knew about him.) In any case, now it becomes clear that Barbatos' research on Lord Abbercombe was not simply done out of idle curiosity — the golden nobleman was the lead story in his newspaper's latest edition. Barbatos had published all the secrets that he could dig up on Lord Abbercombe — and, according to Zavere, a number of lies to boot. This story is generating too much interest in the golden statue we recovered. For one thing, it used to be a secret that he was gold.

Apparently, we can help, though, Zavere has learned that Shilukar has the key to undoing the curse that binds Lord Abbercombe and keeps him in stasis. We must get it. To do so, our first order of business is to find the fence Ammel Dar. We agree to give it our best try, but if you ask me, Barbatos could have been more appreciative of the fact that we all stepped up to ameliorate a problem he created. He just kept mumbling something about freedom of the press and changing the subject.

While we were there, though, we took the opportunity to ask Zavere about local slaver groups, because we fear we have drawn no closer to finding Charnoth and Tharn's tribemates. The lord of Castle Shard describes the city's most notorious group: the Ennin (Rill says she knows a sorcerer in this evil organization named Vanum Vaal).

6TH OF BLOOM

Today, we split up. Barbatos goes off to do more research. Meanwhile, the rest of us go to the Savage Shark again to gather information on Ammel Dar and Shilukar and to meet Salsan. Seanus goes off to search for word of Biesta, since she was lately seen in Shilukar's company.

This time, we do fortunately meet up with our lizard man friend. Salsan tells us he can take us to the slave city deep below Ptolus—the one that he said some litorians had been trying to escape to. It's a dangerous place, he warns — a lizard man named Ssethenus who used to be Salsan's chieftain now rules there. This cruel and selfish tyrant does not welcome outsiders, it seems. But we're too excited at the prospect of finding Tharn and Charnoth's tribemates to care about the danger. Salsan explains that few escaped slaves ever manage to leave the slave city, because they have no money, they fear that they'd be recaptured in the city above, but most of all, because Ssethenus won't let them. Shilukar is forgotten for the moment as we make our plans to descend to the slave city.

We're interrupted in our plans by some rude oafs who assail Salsan, Archinemus, and the litorians with name-calling: "animal heads," "freaks," and the like. The oafs start a fight, but we're doing all right till an aram archer joins the fray, assuming that Salsan is a foe. It didn't take too many crack shots from that centaur before Salsan and Tharn went down. Of course, in the confusion, some of us try to attack the aram, while others just try to get us the hell out of there. Finally, healed by Calista, Diethan and Tharn wind up in their own brawl over the aram's fate, while I carry our injured out. When the dust settles a bit, we leave a little something for the barkeep for the mess and take off.

The litorians take the injured Salsan back to the Mane for rest and recovery. Meanwhile, Diethan has to carry the unconscious Calista home — this always happens to her when she has to do too much healing. She literally drains her own energy into others. It's then I find out that Calista lives in the Pale Tower! She has been telling us all along that she's "staying with friends." She never mentioned, however, that these friends are ANGELS! Nice to have friends who are the Malkuth! How can I think of her the same way, knowing that while I'm having morning porridge with Seanus, she's sitting across the table from celestials?

Speaking of Seanus, he found Biesta in short order today, at the Griffin tavern. Only problem is, it's too late to go there now, and we're all fired up about freeing slaves anyway. He seems a little put out about that.

Did I mention Barbatos' latest project? Turns out that this "research" actually involves him imbibing some of the contraband shivvel that we found on the sunken ship and, in his hallucinogenic state, attempting to decipher crazy Velator Timerian's scrawls and organ plans. He says later that he thinks Timerian used the organ to open up a rift in reality and transport himself elsewhere via portals activated by the organ. How this will help us, I don't know.

7TH OF BLOOM

As if we don't have enough on our minds, today on our way to the Mane who do we run into but Kanagi, the forlaran we rescued from the prison in Cordaris! She says she needs our help, because someone is trying to kill her. How have we suddenly become the ones you come for protection against assassins? All we're trying to do is buy a shop.

We last saw the foul-mouthed sylph-demon Kanagi a month ago leaving the Halls of Cordaris. Now she's afraid for her life. Someone's been following her, but she doesn't know who. She says that for the last few weeks someone's been killing those of part demonic heritage, like her. She's just received a threatening poem from this person, who writes of "A Dream of Death" and her beauty. I can see why she's freaked out. (Not that anyone's ever written poetry about my beauty . . .)

We promise to do what we can to protect her and, in return, she says she will take us to a dark elf she knows named Esaer. Maybe he can lead us to Ammel Dar or Shilukar himself.

So Barbatos and I head over with her note to the Church of Phoebul, god of dreams. The temple's closed till dusk, so instead we visit a Lothianite shrine headed by Brother Fabitor Thisk. He's been helpful in the past. We ask if he recognizes the poem — is this perhaps some Lothianite attempt to “cleanse” the city of those of undesirable heritage? Although the cleric can't help us, he does say he's heard of the tiefling murders. I even check with my dad, but despite all his experience as the Head Librarian of the Delver's Guild, he doesn't recognize the poem. He also wonders why I never come home for dinner any more now that I've got my own place.

8TH OF BLOOM

Without any solid leads about the tiefling murders, we leave Kanagi with Seanus for safe keeping while we head off to the Slave City to seek Tharn's and Charnoth's litorian tribemates. We are joined by a champion of freedom from the south whom we met a couple days back (he rescued Calista's moneypurse from a thief after the brawl at the Docks)—his name's Karaal Kavor. He said that in his homeland, slavery is common, as are other injustices. After seeing these things happen over and over again, he took it upon himself to champion the cause of freedom. He was following some Ennin led by Vanum Vaal from his homeland here to the city (that's the same Ennin member that Rill of Castle Shard told us she knows), but the trail dried up, so he seems eager to seek out the Slave City with us. Karaal is quite a driven fellow in serving his cause. What must it feel like to believe in something so strongly?

After breakfast, we set out. The entry to the tunnels leading to the Slave City, Salsan said, is at the site of an enormous crater in the Guildsman District. This hole one thousand feet across is all that's left after a part of the Undercity collapsed during the Chaos Days three years back. People now call this the Delver's Hole, and it's a really popular area for explorers. We enter a trap door in the ruins and descend a shaft. There are gricks ahead! These things are tough (and, strangely, not as afraid of fire as I remember from dealing with them in the Delver's Guild).

We make our way down some stairs and past a number of intersections, but Salsan knows the way. We hear guttural voices and then a cry, “Children of Ravvan, we seek you!” Clearly we are not the people these bugbears are looking for, and we attempt an ambush. “Ravvan decrees that your civilization will fall!” the leader cries. Apparently, this Ravvan person is some sort of beast-god. The bugbears have with them a strange creature we call a “peely-faced cat-dog.” It's extremely tough, and so are they. By the time they fall, the battle has dropped both litorians and Karaal. We limp back up to the city to heal our wounds. I take the weird creature's carcass with me, so I can get someone at the Guild to identify it for me.

I don't seem to be faring too badly, so I go with Barbatos back to the Dreaming Temple of Phoebul in the evening. The black, star-covered temple doors stand open. Within, the temple is maze of small rooms surrounding a central domed chamber, with soothing stars twinkling above (regardless of the actual weather). All around, dozing people (mostly elves) lie on padded mats, on divans, or on large pillows amid soft clouds of incense or smoke.

The priestess, an elf named Saneris, welcomes us. We make a small donation to the temple and show her Kanagi's poem. She studies it carefully and eventually says, “If this is the description of an actual dream, I would say it tells us two things: that the dreamer is deeply disturbed about something regarding a past relationship — perhaps the death of a spouse or lover — and that he is extremely violent.”

When we try to explain the poem, she says she doesn't know anything about the tiefling murders. She seems very sympathetic toward the victims and possible victims-to-be, however. And being around all these sleeping people is making me tired. I'm going home to catch some dreams of my own.

SESSIONS XIII & XIV—AT LAST, THE SLAVE CITY

9TH OF BLOOM

Today is a healing day. It's also an anxious one: Seanus is missing! He was supposed to find a safe place for our forlaran friend Kanagi. Hopefully he found one. With nothing else to do for the moment, I go to work at the Delver's Guild, where my mentor tells me that our “peely-faced cat-dog” is actually something called a krenshar. Gorti Jurgen doesn't know where I can sell the carcass, though.

Barbatos is off studying magic today. Some of the others try to sell our loot from the bugbears. Myraeth tells them that the bone ring we found on one of them is a means of tracking a member of the Pactlords of the Quaan. We destroy it. However, we decide to go ahead and sell the leader's evil magical staff. Morals are all well and good, but we need the cash if we're ever going to buy this shop!

10TH OF BLOOM

Thank heavens, we receive a message from Seanus today. He and Kanagi are safe. Our friends are recovered, so we head back to the Delver's Hole. Calista's wearing shiny new ultralight armor (it's hard for her to wear something as heavy as my heavy brigandine). We retrace our steps to a grand staircase going down. I mark our trail, just to be on the safe side. Something's been eating the bugbears' corpses, we can tell, but we try not to dwell on the thought.

Following Salsan, we come upon an old festhall partially blocked by a wall of rubble and debris. Looks as though the residents of the Slave City are trying to keep people out. We quickly clear a path but soon reach another blockage. Attempting to clear it, we meet a huge snake with sickening eyes. It's huge! We battle it in a chamber beyond the rubble, but it grievously hurts Tharn. It was wrapped around a statue of a dragon. We see dwarf runes here, rusted tools, and hammer reliefs. Nearby is a door into what must be Dwarvenhearth, the ancient dwarven fortress. We can't get through, however.

Our path onward leads us down a side staircase and through a burrow to a huge chamber with checkered floor tiles. Large wood and bronze war chariots stand here, unused. This place looks quite different from the dwarven area we passed. A mural here shows charioteers in battle with dragon-men who stand eight feet tall. There is lots of silver décor here. Salsan says we're getting close.

We reach a gravity-free chamber where volts gravely wound Archinemus and Tharn with their wicked bites and electrical tails. We pass through a curtain of sparks that removes magic. A boat made in the style of the war chariots lets us cross this gravity-free area. At the other end, the checkerboard pattern picks up again. Peering into the next room, we see some sort of haze or distortion. It's an invisible barrier! Exploring a little more, we find we have entered a labyrinth with invisible walls of force. After I bash out a section of the wall, we realize we can test the outer wall, and we find a hollow spot with a secret door. There we enter a humid passage with statues of two beautiful, regal women wearing silver-plated jewelry. The pedestal of one says "Karanosin" and the other says "Karlada." They look like sisters—twins, in fact. We pass through a sigil-marked door into a cavern with a lake of steaming water. Four little towerlike structures connected by a narrow walkway emerge from the lake. Lightning spheres give us plenty of light to see.

"Thissss iss it!" exclaims Salsan. "The sssteaming lake!" Where do we go now, we ask our guide. The lizard man points straight down.

11TH OF BLOOM

We are faced with the challenge of crossing a narrow catwalk across a steaming lake. As we begin, a woman approaches us. Introducing herself as Taevel, she warns us that half a dozen guards are approaching. Taevel looks half starved. She just managed to escape from the Slave City, she tells us. She has extremely poor vision. She tells us that two people have all the power in the city: Eyvind, a human wizard, and Ssethenus, the city's lizard man leader. When we explain our mission to find our friends' tribemates, she tells us that the only litorian there is a woman. Taevel was once an Ennin slave, so she's spell-marked now. She's afraid to return to the city, because if they ever find her again, they can identify her easily.

We describe for Taevel the place we just passed through, with its large war chariots and statues of sisters in silver-plated jewelry. She says she knows a story of these Silver Sisters, Karanosin and Karlada. Long ago they imprisoned dragon-men here beneath the steaming lake. This whole area was their stronghold. The dragon-men came here long ago looking for something under the city called the Black Grail, but the sisters beat them off.

The actual Slave City is built within a column that juts down into the lake. She said it used to be a good sanctuary for escapees like her, until the coming of Ssethenus. Then came the wizard, who arrived to look for the citadel's magic. Taevel gives us a rundown of the city's security forces: a dozen unwilling ex-slave guards and eight eager lizardfolk. We're at the citadel's back entrance now, she says. It looks very defensible, with its four towers. A former slave named Moondros, a druid captured in the city, has heard of a way to teleport up to the city from the lowest level of the citadel. We make a plan to sweet-talk our way in. Taevel casts spells on us to help. Our story: We are mercenaries interested in freeing slaves to send here in exchange for a bounty. We hope this can get us in to see Ssethenus.

Wishing Taevel well, we advance to a gallery with a big glass wall. Through it we can see a globe with electricity and a prisoner inside it. Is this one of the dragon-men?

Ssethenus, the "King" of the city, arrives in armor to greet us. We soon see for ourselves that this so-called city of freed slaves offers no freedom at all: only a new sort of servitude. Ssethenus (Salsan's former chieftain) rules this place with an iron fist and doesn't seem inclined to let anyone leave. We offer him our "mercenaries" story, hoping that flattery will get us in good with him. The king seems interested in the idea, then introduces us to Eyvind, whom he calls his advisor. The wizard, not liking the looks of us, suggests to Ssethenus that we should be killed! The king holds off, though (mostly thanks to Salsan's presence), and tours us around town instead. We pass an obelisk filled with lots of leftover magical remnants, as well as more murals of the Silver Sisters, of the sort we saw on our way here. We emerge at an overlook where we can see the city and its residents. It was beautiful here once, but no longer. And everyone seems cowed by Ssethenus.

Then Eyvind departs, and we manage to work out an arrangement with Ssethenus. Meanwhile, Calista and Tharn follow the wizard, hoping to turn him into an ally. Calista later explained to us that he was studying to find the secret to this place. This wizard really seems to be the one in power here, not the king. Calista told him our real reason for coming here: to speak to the litorian woman in the hopes of tracking down our friends' tribemates. When she implied that we'd be willing to battle Ssethenus to leave the wizard in full control of the citadel, he agreed to let the litorian woman go with us, if we can locate her.

The rest of us do indeed locate her, but she is gravely ill. Diethan said he can heal her, thank goodness—it's only a mundane disease. The old litorian lady, Norba, confirms that eight litorians from the tribe of Malethar were about to escape the slavers a while back, but the Shuul bought them before they could. The Shuul buying slaves? That's odd. Slavery's illegal, and the Shuul technologists are adherents of law and order. Perhaps the old lady's delirious with fever. As we depart with her, we're amazed at the size of this place. We pass many doors, and go down many grand staircases. This Slave City is huge! On our way, we have to dispatch two lizard man bodyguards.

Meanwhile, Eyvind has learned of our "deal" with Ssethenus, and warns the king that we haven't been honest with him. That doesn't really matter, though, because by now we've raised an alarm among the Slave City residents and have armed many of them for a clash with Ssethenus and Eyvind. We're victorious in this clash, but it takes its toll on us: That wizard put our two litorians to sleep, staggered Karaal (our champion of freedom ally) and me, and blinded Diethan! But hoorah for our new ex-slave allies—they're willing to fight and follow us out of the city to freedom! As we're mopping up, we locate a captive druidess, Moondros, a beautiful winged fey. We free her from her bonds (the wizard Eyvind had kept her prisoner). She's blind too. However, she's willing to lead these people as free folk, making this city a true refuge once more.

We take the last three lizard man guards captive and find a storeroom of food to feed the ninety-eight ex-slaves left here. Salsan informs us that he's staying to be captain of the guard—our three lizard man captives agree to follow him. We distribute Ssethenus' gold to each slave and take Moondros back up to the surface city in the hopes of finding her healing magic for her blindness. Joining us are any ex-slaves who wish to leave the city. Some are afraid that if they return to Ptolus, their old masters will find them again. Karaal decides to stay to help protect the ex-slaves. I will miss him—I found his devotion to the cause of freedom truly inspiring.

SESSIONS XV & XVI—WE'RE REALLY IN BUSINESS NOW

STILL THE 11TH OF BLOOM

We encounter Taevel again as we're leaving the Slave City, and she joins us on our trip to the surface. (We now understand why her vision seemed so poor—she was blinded by the wizard, Eyvind, just like Diethan and Moondros were.) We return to the city without incident. While Archinemus goes to sell our loot and the litorians remove poor Norba to the Mane for nursing, I take our blinded friends to the Temple of Teun. Now, granted, I don't observe services to the Mother of All Machines as often as I should, but the place has prospered since I was here last. The machine-making Shuul have ascended in power in Ptolus of late.

In any case, a priestess here cures the blindness. Of course, she does not entertain for a moment that the Shuul could ever have bought slaves, litorian or otherwise, despite what Norba has told us. The Shuul support law and order, and it's not conceivable that they might break the law in that fashion. My friends don't appear convinced. As for me, I don't know what to think.

During our time together I'm surprised to hear Moondros tell me that she knows of my people, the Hu-Charad! At first I wonder if she merely read the name off my brooch, but no, she says they were here thousands of years ago. They excelled in rituals and magic and shepherding the land. Some minor races owe their existence to the Hu-Charad's uplifting, she adds. But long ago they returned to their land across the sea. What surprises me most is that she says the Hu-Charad were a race of giants—not simply tall humans. It's all very puzzling.

After the visit to the temple, we hit the Ghostly Minstrel for dinner. Some elves there seem happy to see Moondros. Well, her big slivery wings do draw a bit of attention.

12TH OF BLOOM

Today I go with Tharn to ferry more food to the Slave City. Meanwhile, someone sends Barbatos a vase as a gift to the publisher of *The Midtown Partisan* (his "anonymous" newssheet). More later.

13TH OF BLOOM

We return from the Slave City today. With Moondros in charge there and Karaal and Salsan to back her up, I think those people are going to be all right. I wish I'd had more time to talk to Karaal, though. When I tried to ask him how he knew his cause was worth spending his life fighting for, all he did was smile at me and say, "Don't worry, Benris, you'll know." I'm not so sure.

Anyhow, something weird happened today. Barbatos had placed his gift vase on his dining table, and in the night it fell off the table and broke. Last night he heard a strange skittering noise in his room, and when we investigated today, we were aghast to discover a yucky hand and arm trailing regenerative goo! It could propel itself quite quickly across the floor, and it even tried to strangle Diethan! Spunky thing. We manage to burn it up with alchemist's fire. Piecing this adventure together, we realize that the vase must have held what could only be a troll's finger! As it regenerated, it broke free of the vase. If we hadn't found it now, the troll-arm could have killed Barbatos in his sleep!

On a hunch, we go over to my Dad's house in the evening, and he confirms what we'd feared: Yes, a package was delivered for me, from a "secret admirer." Using a spell, Calista was able to determine that the person who last touched my vase was a dwarf named Gudmund Rockwater. We go to the Mane where the litorians stay and monitor the vase all night until Calista can cast her object reading spell again and we can find out more.

14TH OF BLOOM

Today we learn that the vase was created by someone named Salora Hail, a human, in a shop in the South Market. Its most recent owner was Gudmund Rockwater. Having learned what we wanted, we burn what has now become a troll's hand and wrist and head to Salora's potter's shop. She tells us that she sold Gudmund three or four of the vases. He lives nearby, but she doesn't know exactly where. Barbatos buys a vase from her, sans troll finger. Salora suggests we try Thyra Stonehelm in a nearby hemp shop—she might know where Gudmund lives.

Thyra's certainly happy to help by passing along Gudmund's address. She says the dwarf is quite an unsavory type, but that's what shivvel will do to you. When we arrive at Gudmund's doorstep, Barbatos charms him into revealing the name of his employer: a low-ranking member of House Abanar named Zorin Sar. This "businessman" works through the lawyer Denoss Firth. Aha! That's the lawyer who tried to pay us to drop our attempt to buy Myraeth's Oddities! Gudmund tells us that couriers are coming next week to pay him the balance of what he's owed for sending the last batch of troll fingers, which he buys from the Dark Market under the city. I've never been to the Dark Market, but I've heard that slavers are there a lot. Gudmund tells us that you get there through the Undercity Market (via a mercenary guildhall) after giving a password.

Back home, we write a sharply-worded letter to Zorin's lawyer, telling him to back off. Then the door opens: It's Seanus returning with Kanagi, and they're really hurt!

STILL THE 14TH OF BLOOM

Seanus and our forlaran friend Kanagi explain that the man who sent her the threatening note found them in their Warrens hideout. The guy was tall with a magic sword. He was dressed as a knight with a white hood and cloak . . . and the symbol of Lothian on his shield. He seemed to be working alone but said he'd dreamed of Kanagi's death and wanted to make it real. They ran. We ask Kanagi to put his picture in an image crystal so we can all see what he looks like. Then that very night we spot him outside my rooms. He seems to be speaking to his sword. Weird! What kind of radical is this, who wants to kill all creatures with even a drop of fiendish blood?

15TH OF BLOOM

The next day, Calista, Diethan, and Archinemus visit St. Gustav's Chapel, but Brother Fabitor (the only priest of Lothian we know) tells them he doesn't know the guy in the crystal. However, he can see that the knight doesn't belong to a particular order. Their next stop, thanks to an idea from Calista, is the Siege Tower, where they meet a member of the Keepers of the Veil named Phadian Gess. She recognizes the knight as one Arad Pallamach. He worked with her order a few years ago, she says, but he left. She called him a fine and upstanding knight. Humpf. She says he has no special sword that she knows of, and no mental problems either. Seems that he's acquired both in recent months.

Seanus and Kanagi are still over at my place. We set up a watch that night in a neighbor's apartment and across the alley. Pallamach approaches invisibly at midnight. He bursts through my window — visible now, thanks to Archinemus throwing flour all over him. We defeat him after a terrible battle during which, at one point, Archinemus and I both dive out the window. Pallamach's sword shows me horrific images of swirling flame and babies dying all around Kanagi. Horrible! I can see how such a powerful weapon could warp a man's mind.

We take the screwy knight to the Temple of Asche (god of cities) and try to see our friend Mand Scheben, who helped Barbatos with his ear-seeker malady a while back. Pallamach awakes at the temple and seems resolute in his convictions for his "missions." Mand believes he's insane. Pallamach claims a great man gave him the sword. Mand offers to sweep it all under the rug and take him away to a place where he'll be well cared for and unable to hurt anyone. We want to give the guy every chance to recover, though, so we take him instead to Phadian Gess. She says they'll care for him. We leave him in their good hands. Now Kanagi can breathe easy.

16TH TO 23RD OF BLOOM

I'm spending some time studying local knowledge with Diethan. But the other night I found myself overcome with weariness. I went to bed and slept for two days! I had no idea adventuring could take so much out of a person. The only trouble is, when I awoke, all my clothes seemed to have shrunk. Well, that's what I thought at first, but Seanus swears it's ME that's changed.

And he's right: I've grown eight inches in the last two days! This must be another strange consequence of my Hu-Charad heritage. I grit my teeth and go over to Dad's to show him my new height — over eight feet now — and tell him what I've learned about these people who left me as a baby. Dad's a good egg. He says it doesn't matter if I'm ten feet tall, I'll always be his daughter. Great Kint, can a person really *get* that tall? I'd have to move into an apartment with higher ceilings!

As it is, I have to get new clothes and take my armor in to be enlarged again. Along that same line, I decide to buy a shield as well as a great maul, in case we have to face some skeletons next time we're in the Dungeon. You can't be too careful.

24TH OF BLOOM

We venture back into the Halls of Cordaris to deal with the undead that we unwittingly unleashed on the city when we unblocked the entrances. We hear someone moving ahead of us. Following bloody tracks, we see a skeleton exuding blood. In the big battle that ensues, Calista traps eight of the undead monstrosities at once with her *eldritch web* — makes it easy for the rest of us to clean them up.

As we're finishing up our grisly foes, we spy two figures in bone armor. "What have you *done!*?" they exclaim. Just as it's sinking in that they are members of the Forsaken — as foul a group of undead-loving cretins as you'd ever want to see — Calista just sort of goes nuts. She attacks the pair, launching herself at them and is cut down before her surprised comrades can even back her up. When we've taken care of those two, she comes to again and slits their throats for good measure. I've never seen her like this! It makes me wonder what it is we don't know about her. . . .

Exploring a bit more, we find a secret panel leading to a narrow stairway down to the Blood Pool from which the bleeding undead emerged. We leave this place for later and set the shallow pool on fire. Diethan assembles the treasure scattered about the place, and I carry it out. This haul contains a pill that confers darkvision on one who swallows it — the sort of thing used by the Shuul more and more often these days. Strange. A scroll we find on the bodies of the two Forsaken calls these undead "The Lords of Blood" and urges the Forsaken agents to request parley with "Irituhl" to seek alliance. The note was signed "Shigmaa Cynric." It sounded pretty desperate.

25TH OF BLOOM

We need to spend today healing up. It takes a little time for us to get our magical treasure items identified. Meanwhile, Archinemus and Diethan go to finalize our deal with Myraeth to buy the shop.

26TH OF BLOOM

Today we take ownership of Myraeth's Oddities! I can't believe that we really managed to pull it off! We hire Seanus as our official appraiser. Taevel, our friend from the Slave City, says she will clerk for us in exchange for a salary and a place to stay in the back room.

Myraeth Tuneweaver takes us on a tour of the place — we've got inventory worth seventeen thousand gold! Of course, we still owe the elf a thousand gold every month for the next two years before the place is fully ours, plus two extra "balloon payments." Anyhow, Archinemus thinks the place should bring in two thousand gold in monthly profits. How can we lose?

SESSIONS XVII & XVIII—THE DANGEROUS LIVES OF SHOPKEEPERS**STILL THE 26TH OF BLOOM**

I take Taevel and Seanus to the market to buy some store-clerk style clothes. Not being much into shopping, Tharn and Charnoth interview bodyguards for the shop while Archinemus and Calista run the store. Customers don't seem to trust us as much as they did Myraeth — I guess these things take a while. Goldshield agents arrive to explain that the city pays them to watch out for magic-using thieves (those who would enter the shop invisibly and charm the clerk into giving away merchandise).

27TH OF BLOOM

Today it's my turn to guard the shop while the litorians interview more bodyguard candidates. Tharn and Charnoth both seem to be in love with an applicant named Dessa, a tough litorian monk. However, they instead come back with Jora Deepblade as our store's new dwarf bodyguard. She's impressive. But Tharn is pining for Dessa — maybe she'll join us on our search for the kidnapped litorians.

Some bruisers and a scary scaly guy in a cape (a troglodyte, I later learn) come in and claim that Myraeth made a deal with Kevris Killraven, which meant we owed protection money. What a racket! We learn from Myraeth himself that he never made any such deal with the Killraven Crime League. Instead, he set things up with the Sisterhood of Silence to keep criminals away. They keep tabs on all magic items owned in the city, it seems. (There's a big job!) Although the Mother Superior is spiteful, difficult, and hateful, he encourages us to renew his deal with her, for the good of the store. That means meeting with her and allowing her to investigate us. Feeling a little intimidated, we send a message to the Mother Superior at the Priory of Introspection.

INTERLUDE

The undead of the Blood Pool in Cordaris are apparently vanquished, the Dream of Death killer is safely incarcerated, and the Slave City is once again free. Myraeth's Oddities is under new management, and it's even staffed with new employees.

Now, we turn our attention to the dark elf wizard Shilukar, hiding somewhere in the city. A large bounty rests upon his head for burglaries and other unpleasantness, but we know he also holds the key to freeing Lord Abbercombe from his magical stasis, a task the lords of Castle Shard are most interested to see accomplished. That magical stasis, you'll remember, is the result of some item that Shilukar used, based on divinations performed after we liberated Lord Abbercombe.

We also know that Shilukar has a personal relationship with Biesta, the half-elf sister of Linech, a distasteful drug smuggler with a very messed-up family. She's a well-known gadabout in the local taverns and, from what we've seen, probably a shivvel addict. Apparently, Shilukar gave Lord Abbercombe to Linech, who in turn let the golden lord fall into our hands without a struggle.

We have heard rumors that Shilukar has — perhaps in disguise as a Shoal elf — been asking around about strange types of technology. Is he using all the gold gained from his robberies, aided apparently by a number of gnolls (infrequent visitors to Ptolus, to say the least), for some other scheme? We know that he has sold many of his ill-gotten gains through a human fence named Ammel Dar.

Kanagi the forlaran apparently knows a few dark elves in the city and after we helped her escape from her would-be slayer, she has agreed to take us to one named Esaer (which sounds like a false name to our ears—too Elvish).

27TH OF BLOOM

Today we go to Marin's, a bar in the Guildsman District, to find Kanagi. Not the most savory place I've ever been in, that's for sure. We find her surrounded by admirers and plan to meet her the next day at noon at the Mane to go see her dark elf acquaintance. While at the bar, we see another litorian, one by the name of Maroth. Charnoth doesn't get to chat with him, though, as he's off in the forest outside of town mediating. He really doesn't seem to like it here too much.

28TH OF BLOOM

We meet Kanagi so she can take us to Esaer. We enter the Warrens, the worst part of town, and make our way to a two-story building. Esaer is a dark elf with burn scars all over his hands. He wants to know who we are, but all we tell him is that we need help finding Shilukar. Not a friendly character, but I think he'll help us — for one hundred gold coins. He takes us up to meet Ielenna, a matron who wants Shilukar dead (apparently, Shilukar's from House Vrama, but betrayed even them). Ielenna is of House Yurganth. Three years ago, she said, the fortress of House Vrama (Ul-Drakkan) was destroyed, but Shilukar sifted through the rubble and found magic items galore, and something called chaosithech too. He now seeks even more for some scheme of his own. He found an idol of Ravvan the Beast-God, which may be a conduit to Ravvan's realm. These items make him extra powerful. The idol was likely there to appease the dark elves' bugbear and gnoll servants.

She said Shilukar lives in the Guildsman District near Delver's Hole. She said we must traverse the interior of the hole almost to the bottom to find his lair. She warns us that he has many guardians — mostly gnolls, but also some critters that he's created. Ielenna offers to show us a secret way in. What does she want in return? Shilukar's head. We agree.

Back at the shop, Killraven's troglodyte agent returns to threaten us again. What a nasty, smelly guy! He claims that his friends will put us out of business unless we pay up. Somehow, I don't think we've seen the last of him.

After dark falls, a sneaky guy in ash-grey robes approaches the shop with hell hounds, a wizard, and two archers. They wound us and even manage to poison us with those damn arrows, but we haven't spent all that time down in Cordaris for nothing. We send them packing. However, we will need to heal up for a little while before we go after Shilukar.

I never would have thought that shopkeeping could be as dangerous as adventuring!

SESSIONS XIX & XX—DESTINATION: SHILUKAR

29TH OF BLOOM

We gather to open the shop in the morning. Charnoth's back in town with his bear companion, Chrondar. Business is slow — we decide we should have some sort of grand opening event. We do get a visit from sort of a celebrity, though: the adopted son of Serai Lorenci (one of the Runewardens)! He has a rune on his face just like the Runewardens themselves do. An albino retainer came along with the boy. Diethan said he'd heard that this fellow was actually Serai's familiar *polymorphed* into human form, but that's hard to believe.

Later we hear why business has been so slow: Killraven is spreading rumors that people who shop here will get hurt. Killraven's troglodyte sends us a little gift, too: a "Going out of Business" sign. Sounds like a declaration of war to me. But who are we to fight the Crime League?

Thankfully, we hear back today from the Sisterhood of Silence. The good news is they will meet with us on the Eighth of Sun at the Fourteenth Hour. The bad news is that's still ten days away! We stand sentinel at the shop again this evening, but no one comes to attack us.

30TH OF BLOOM

We regroup at noon and are unsurprised to see that we have no customers. We plan a sale for the Ninth of Sun: 10 percent off everything, and 15 percent off for members of the Delver's Guild. I go in to work at the Guild this afternoon.

All last night Diethan sought Shim the skulk to call in a favor (we did save him from certain death in the prison of the Halls of Cordaris, after all). He hopes to meet him tonight. Meanwhile, Tharn tries to locate the assassins' lair, and I watch the shop again. No attacks.

1ST AND 2ND OF SUN

I head back to the Guild with flyers that Barbatos printed about our upcoming sale. Calista and the litorians celebrate a gathering at the Mane — she's already become quite adept at their language (it just sounds like a lot of snarls and growls to me).

3RD OF SUN

Business is still slow, and we're bored. We think the time may be right to go after Shilukar, as the dark elf priestess, Ielenna, and the lords of Castle Shard asked of us. Does he have a connection to the technology-loving Shuul? Would he know something about the litorian slaves? Does he have the "key" to freeing Lord Abbercombe?

We head over to the Delver's Hole and find the path to his lair that the dark elf priestess described, though it was fairly well concealed. On our way sneaking down, we run into carrion crawlers and gnoll guards. We arrive at Shilukar's lair, and gnolls and hyenas pour out at us. Guess we weren't as sneaky as we thought. Barbatos manages to hold them off with a *fireball*. (It was really impressive.)

As we enter Shilukar's fortress/complex, gnoll archers and axemen surround us, but we fend them off. This place is very old, with gruesome pillars that look like people holding up the beams of the ceiling. We find chaos symbols on many walls inside. This must be an old chaos temple — and one with something to hide, judging by the traps we encounter along the way.

Stairs lead up to a chamber with a beast-god motif: skins, blood, and similar trappings. Is this place for the Children of Ravvan, we wonder? "Do not enter without a beast in your soul and a howl on your lips" a sign says. We make our way into a great chamber with a swirling vortex of some kind on the far wall. There's also a huge creature in here dripping with sweat and chains. It's not moving, but it's not a statue either. Tearing and snarling sounds come from the vortex. Could that be a doorway into the realm of Ravvan, the beast-god, whom Ielenna told us about?

It looks like it. A pedestal in this chamber holds an idol of a creature that emits blood-red energy into the vortex. This definitely looks like the beast-god idol and conduit that the dark elf priestess wanted. (Of course, we didn't *promise* to bring the idol to her...) I open my *mist of divination protection*, put on gloves, and grab the idol. Suddenly, the creature and the vortex both disappear, the howling cut short. An enraged gnoll emerges — a *blue* gnoll! Clearly part demon, Calista says. The blue creature says we will die for this sacrilege to the Children of Ravvan. Great.

Meanwhile, Barbatos has accidentally closed himself into a room with a one-eyed spider-bug and a dark elf — Shilukar! — commanding a whole horde of gnolls. Shilukar says he'll save Barbatos if he surrenders. I, on the other hand, threaten to smash the idol if he doesn't let Barbatos go. The only problem with that idea is that the horde of gnolls would make short work of us all...

Calista casts an *eldritch web* spell on the blue gnoll woman, but Charnoth falls to her blows as soon as she escapes the webs. Oddly, Shilukar seems to have no interest in fighting us. They release Barbatos and the creature (clearly a projection, we realize now) returns, as does the vortex. Shilukar calls the gnoll woman "Brugul" and tells her to stand down. The gnolls surround us. We hear her call the Ravvan idol "Father" (no wonder she's so tough!).

Shilukar wants us to talk about "our masters in Castle Shard" and takes us to a side room. He does seem to want to help us — not what we expected. He has a message for the Lords of Castle Shard: He wants them to let him live there under their protection in exchange for him restoring Lord Abbercombe to his normal state. The dark elf claims he engineered our recovery of the golden statue-man in the first place, as well as our visit here today.

He needs sanctuary, he says, a place where he can pursue his chaositech and other experiments in peace. (Dark elves are illegal in the city, of course.) I notice that he's carrying some really freaky-looking tools on his belt — he calls himself a machinist, but I know chaositech when I see it. He says he'll also give us two thousand gold coins if we do him a favor against a common enemy. "I know where the captive litorians are held," he tells us.

Now what are we supposed to do?

SESSION XXI & XXII—AGENTS OF CASTLE SHARD

STILL THE 3RD OF SUN

Shilukar sends us back to Castle Shard with a message: "In exchange for the life of Lord Abbercombe, I wish sanctuary and protection from Castle Shard." Gnolls lead us out of the place (sadly, we have to leave behind a pile of loot!) through the abandoned chaos temple and gnoll barracks.

Back at the shop, things are still slow (what a surprise) so we waste no time in sending off the message to Castle Shard. Then some of us visit the Temple of Asche to heal some festering demon flail wounds. (“These wounds do not smell right,” Charnoth says, concerned for us.) I head over to the market to sell what loot we did manage to collect on this last trip into the Dungeon. Castle Shard sends back word that they will meet with us tomorrow afternoon.

4TH OF SUN

We head over to Castle Shard after lunch. Kadmus greets us at the door, gracious as ever, and shows us to a waiting room. A Shoal elf we don’t recognize is already there. He’s an emaciated-looking guy smoking a cigarette with a long cigarette holder. Kadmus introduces him as Master Autumnsong. Ah, Moynath Autumnsong, yes, we’ve heard of him — he’s one of the most powerful wizards in Ptolus! Turns out he’s one of the snootiest, too. I guess he stays here at the castle when he’s in town.

Zavere and Rill listen to our message with concern. They don’t know Shilukar, but they want us to find out more: What’s his ace in the hole? Why shouldn’t they just go down to his lair and destroy him? And is he willing to take their oath of nonviolence if he comes under the castle’s protection?

To learn more about this dark elf, we decide to send Seanus to seek Linech’s half-sister Biesta again — she was palling around with Shilukar when we saw her back at Linech’s place, where, incidentally, we first saw the “statue” of Lord Abbercombe.

5TH OF SUN

Today Tharn buys a new sword, which he names “Wolf-Brother.” Meanwhile, I have finally saved up enough money to visit an akashic to find out more about my heritage: Where I came from and why I wound up down in the Dungeon as an infant for delvers to find is a big mystery.

I have to pay five hundred gold coins in bribes to locate the akashic, who lives in a place in Oldtown. When I speak with her, she confirms that, yes, the Hu-Charad are an ancient people from another continent far away. She couldn’t learn much about them where they are — it’s as though where they’re from is beyond her reach (and that’s weird; she doesn’t seem used to the idea of any information being beyond her reach). She tells me of a ruin on the coast north of Ptolus, a place called Ar-Nampur. Most historians don’t know who built this fortress, but she knows that the Hu-Charad did. It has been explored thoroughly over the centuries so most people now ignore it. However, she tells me that there are undiscovered reaches in Ar-Nampur that might give me more information about my heritage. She also says that, unknown to anyone, the Hu-Charad returned to Ar-Nampur to visit only twenty or so years ago. Wow! That corresponds with the time of my birth! But why did they *leave me*...

Sadly, the akashic does not know. She does tell me that these people are excellent sailors, that they are wise and knowledgeable about magic and life. Hmm, it doesn’t sound like I’ve inherited anything from them.

When I go home and tell my Dad everything I’ve learned, he promises to look into those ruins of Ar-Nampur, see what he can find out about them. He reiterated that I was left in a safe place under the city, not in some faraway ruin to die. The people who found me said it seemed as though I hadn’t been there long. Will I ever learn the truth?

6TH OF SUN

Seanus sets up a dinner date for us with Biesta for tomorrow at the Ghostly Minstrel. He never lets us down! Meanwhile, Diethan checks up on Lunes, the wolf we kenneled over at Lendarick a while back. Her training is proceeding — maybe she’ll be a good addition to our band after all. Many in the group have been happy to have these last few days to rest up and train ourselves.

7TH OF SUN

Business is still poor, so I put in a few more hours at the Delver’s Guild. Biesta shows up at dinner this evening with dark circles under her eyes. Barbatos whispers that she’s clearly hooked on shivvel. (How would *he* know?) She recalls a “ruckus” at Linech’s office when the gold statue vanished, then he and Shilukar split. She still sees the dark elf, though. She trusts him, I guess.

She hears Shilukar talk sometimes about these machines he’s making. He goes about the city disguised as a Shoal elf. He hates the Shuul, an organization of technologists and machine-workers who seek to resurrect some of the classic Prustan technologies lost to us these days. She thinks the gnolls are not from around here but were brought here with magic. He uses items of magic (wands, scrolls, creepy spidery things) in his work. She calls him generous and rich and—get this!—says he knows what people are thinking! Great, powerful *and* psychic.

Biesta says he fears a group in the city here that can take people over from a distance, but he never got more specific than that. He is interested in politics: who is in control of the city, the Commissar’s doings, and so forth. He sometimes goes away for days at a time. She doesn’t know where he lives now. (We do not enlighten her.) She thinks he visits the Steam Foundry and Technicians’ Guild in the Guildsman District, but why would he go there?

In any case, we’re pleased with all the information we managed to buy with only a single dinner.

8TH OF SUN

We prepare for our Big Sale event tomorrow, then head off to our appointment with the Sisterhood of Silence at the Priory of Introspection in the Temple District. I sure never thought I’d ever be visiting places like this!

Like everyone in Ptolus, I’ve seen the Sisters around from time to time. They all wear black and white habits and carry greathammers. The priory they live in is a complex of colonnades and corridors. A eunuch ushers us into a big reception room with a screen at the far end. Apparently they won’t let us actually see the Mother Superior — she’s behind the screen, but a eunuch translates for her.

We have petitioned for the Sisterhood's continued support of our business, along the lines of the protection they extended to Myraeth himself. At first it sounds like we're out of luck. "You have nothing to offer the Sisterhood now," the Speaker translates, and our hearts sink. "But you may in the future, and we are willing to take that risk." We're told that we have their support, and that at some time in the future they will come to us with tasks they need us to perform. "We appreciate your faith in us," Calista says graciously. But I can hear Barbatos grumbling in the back about being indebted to an order of crazy, power-mad nuns who refuse to talk.

As we are about to take our leave, the translator interrupts us with a question from the Mother Superior. "What is the Legacy?" Now, where did *that* come from? Was she sifting through our thoughts all this time? (I suddenly feel very self-conscious: What have I thought about since we entered this place?) Calista replies that we don't know what the Legacy is, exactly. "That will have to be rectified," the Mother says via her Speaker. "We will be in touch." So, I guess we're not done with the Halls of Cordaris after all!

When we get back to the shop, lo and behold, we have a dozen customers! People say they were passing by and just felt like stopping in. Talk about fast results!

Later that evening, we learn from Shim, our skulk friend, that the name of the Killraven agent who attacked us and got away is Sanalin Resare. He tells us that all four of the attackers worked for Killraven.

9TH OF SUN

Our big sales event goes great! We hold a raffle for door prizes and have lots of sales. But sadly, our troglodyte friend comes back, threatening that even though he can't hurt us at Myraeth's, we are fair game when we leave the shop. "Putting a brave face on this won't prolong your lives," he hisses and leaves. We renew our desire to trounce him at some future date and go out for a celebratory dinner.

10TH OF SUN

After work at the Delver's Guild we head over to the house Shim described where Sanalin Resare resides. We call out his name and charge in. Three foes are upstairs, four are downstairs. One of them breaks my magical axe! Now this is really personal — I take his own axe, but it just isn't the same. After a prolonged battle, we lay them all low.

11TH OF SUN

Taelvel has *detected magic* and *identified* our most recent loot from our strike at our would-be attackers, and Archinemus takes it to the market to sell. He finds this dwarven weaponsmith named Gaen Cloudstone who says he can fix my greataxe — but then Calista surprises me by fixing it for free with a spell! I'm so excited to have it back, I take her out to dinner.

12TH OF SUN

Ready to deal with our dark elf "friend," we set off once more for Shilukar's lair. Before one set of stairs, the gnoll leading us down snaps his fingers twice (you know, come to think of it, we saw that done before, too). He leads us through a chamber that holds a couple five-foot-long spiders with wolf heads up on a web on the ceiling. Some of the dark elf's experiments, I suppose.

We pass from the spider room to a chamber with a chemical smell and colorful liquids bubbling in huge vats. Shilukar's waiting for us. "Tell us more about the key to freeing Lord Abbercombe," we say, attempting to take charge right off the bat. The wily dark elf says *he's* the key — if he's harmed or dead, he can't help Lord Abbercombe, who is currently frozen in stasis. He's willing to undo the freeze if we take on a mission against our mutual foes. It's hard for me to believe I have foes in common with an evil creature like Shilukar, and even MORE difficult when I hear who he's talking about. It's the Shuul!

The Shuul arrived here in town about three or four years ago, and since the defeat of the chaos factions, they have become quite powerful advocates of Law throughout the Empire — so powerful, they could even sway the decision on who the new emperor should be. It's a noble and hard-working group, and I can't for the life of me see why I should believe a dark elf when he tells me that I should work against them.

He actually had the nerve to accuse the Shuul of working in secret for the crime lord Kevris Killraven and her organization of Sorn technologies. She's growing even more powerful than the Balacazars of late, and according to Shilukar she is working with the Shuul on a machine that will wipe out the last vestiges of chaosite in town — a machine that supposedly involves dwarves and litorians.

It seems that a scientist named Doctor Feegus is in charge of this weapon and, according to the dark elf, he has the litorians from Charnoth's tribe! Shilukar will pay us twice the bounty on his own head (two thousand gold) for the head of Doctor Feegus. He doesn't know where this lab is, but he can tell us that Feegus' assistant, Nerlene Camus, visits the Healers of the Sacred Heat on the first of each month for a goiter treatment. If we want to find Feegus, we could do it through her. Shilukar claims that all he wants out of this arrangement is to be able to do his pure chaosite research and development without having to fear this new device. (But I do notice that nothing in this lab of his seems in the slightest related to machine skills — everything in here is very organic, not tech at all.)

Well, I know the Shuul congregate in the Technicians' Guild in the Guildsman District, and also at the Foundry (where they manufacture steam devices) and the Tower of Science in Oldtown, plus, of course, the Temple of Teun. I'm a member of that church myself, which makes it doubly hard for me to believe that law-abiding Shuul workers would truck with SLAVERS! These dark elves are full of lies.

After leaving Shilukar this afternoon, we send a message to Castle Shard saying we have news, and they invite us for dinner the next day. I feel kind of a cold shock when I realize that I don't have anything appropriate to wear to a dinner at a castle, but Barbatos helps me buy some nice clothes at a store for tall women. Well, actually, they also sell clothes to fit tall men — and ogres, creatures with wings, and other unusual types. Hmm, I'm not sure I'm entirely comfortable in this category of "odd-sized" shopper...

13TH OF SUN

We get ourselves all “tarted up” (Barbatos’ words) and head over to Castle Shard for dinner tonight. Something unexpected happens right off the bat: We’re given friendship bands to signify our relationship with the lords of the castle! Wow, wait till I show Dad!

The Shard at the center of the castle seems extra bright tonight, and for a minute there I could have sworn I saw a woman in the center of the enormous jewel. At dinner we enjoy aged elven wine, shrimp cocktail, and pheasant. The satyrix named Narasha is there, and she seems to really have the hots for Diethan, which makes our pal decidedly uncomfortable. Consequently, he drinks a lot — perhaps he’s trying to make her seem more attractive. Charnoth and Tharn take away Diethan’s weapons, encourage him to “acquit yourself as a warrior,” and push him toward Narasha, but Zavere warns her off, saying we have business.

After the meal, we update Zavere and Rill on Shilukar’s latest news. Lady Rill tells us an interesting piece of information: that on the night we met Mand at the Ghostly Minstrel (where he saved Barbatos from the ear-seekers), he’d been told to go to that tavern to meet someone that night. Was he manipulated by Shilukar into meeting us and having us in his debt, so he could line us up to handle the Linech affair for Castle Shard and discover the golden Lord Abbercombe?

14TH AND 15TH OF SUN

We decide to spend some time gathering information on dwarven projects, machine parts, and the Shuul. The leader of the Shuul, a man named Savane, lives in the Tower of Science. Terrel von Mitteram (the Shuul head of security) and Necent Kamara (an administrator) are also high-ups in the organization. Mand sets up a meeting with us in a few days to discuss chaositech with his friend Aprata Nachov, an expert on the subject. Tharn even asks Shim to nose around for news of this crazy “anti-chaos machine.”

16TH AND 17TH OF SUN

I return to do some work at the Delver’s Guild. Meanwhile, Calista speaks with Aoska of the Malkuth (I still can’t believe my friend shares a home with angels!). She tells Calista that she believes Terrel von Mitteram would love to see an “anti-chaos machine” created. Apparently, he’s quite the militant opponent of chaos. Aoska has seen no proof of a Shuul-Killraven alliance, but many believe there is one. She adds that the Shuul owe allegiance to the Iron Angels; the Malkuth find these celestial patrons of machining difficult to tolerate for some reason. She says the Shuul are less interested in “law” than in “order.”

Archinemus hears that Nerlene Camus was seeking litorian volunteers a while back for a special project; interested parties were to inquire at the Technicians’ Guild. Charnoth and Tharn waste no time going over there to inquire, but no luck.

Meanwhile, a message comes for Calista from Shilukar! He says that if he gets his sanctuary at Castle Shard, he will give us information on his blue demon-gnoll allies, so we can “clean them up” after he’s out of there. Interesting approach: How did he know that Calista hates demons with every fiber of her being? That dark elf knows too much, and the news about Nerlene and her “litorian project” makes me worry that some of what he knows may actually be true.

A bit more mundane news: Taavel says a customer named Methir Orth came in looking for aethel stones. He had a rather odd manner, she says, but he wants to buy a lot of them, if we can find any. Something to keep in mind if we get down to that place beneath the Fevered Moon candle shop.

SESSIONS XXIII & XXIV—WELCOME TO PYTHONESS HOUSE

18TH OF SUN

Barbatos and I go to Maran’s Odd Sizes again. Do they have any other tall customers like me? My age? (It’s hard enough to meet men in this city without scaring them off with my freaky height.) Sadly, Maran has no suggestions for me.

Meanwhile, Charnoth buys some barding for his bear companion, Chrondar. The bear doesn’t seem to like wearing it too much.

Later, we meet at the Ghostly Minstrel with Aprata Nachov, an acquaintance of Mand’s. This elf woman has many ear piercings and a bronze headpiece. She explains that chaositech’s mechanics are powered by raw chaos — neither magic nor science, but it can accomplish impossible things. But chaositech betrays, she says, so she no longer serves chaos. She knows of the Shuul’s weapon: It’s called the Prajdall.

Apparently, “Prajdall” is an old Prustan word meaning “hunters of Order.” The project involves the Shuul taking dwarf volunteers and *changing* them somehow. These changed dwarves can sense chaos and chaositech and are very powerful — but not powerful enough for the Shuul. Now this Doctor Feegus is looking for some other race to use instead of dwarves. I guess that’s where the captured litorians from Charnoth’s tribe come in. These creatures are grotesque, Aprata says, but she thinks the process can be reversed, as long as one has the proper lab and chemicals. Feegus is guarded by Shuul knights (warriors in fancy plate armor wielding strange weapons with moving parts) and the Prajdall themselves, of course. She doesn’t think the project will work, however, as the Shuul are not powerful enough yet. She advises us to use certain weapons and items (magic ones, not chaositech) against them. We pay Aprata five hundred gold to reveal more about these weapons.

She tells us to go to a place called Pythoness House in Oldtown. Long ago, two women named Maquent and Radonna operated a brothel there. But it was more than that — Maquent was a prophetess and used sex to aid her divinations, it seems. The house was a front for the chaos cults three or so years ago, but it has been abandoned since the fall of the cults. Rumors say the cult stored a secret cache of weapons and magical devices there that would prove extra useful against the forces of law and order. It’s all still there, in a vault, Aprata says. These days, some say the place is haunted, but she gives us directions anyway.

19TH OF SUN

We stop in at the Records Office in the Administration Building to get the address for Nerlene, assistant to Doctor Feegus. It's the Tower of Science — what a surprise. Next we investigate records on Pythoness House: It's officially a ruin, no one local seems to own it. When we go take a look, we see a large grounds with an iron fence around it and broken gates leading inside. The place is very old and, according to the records, has been rebuilt over and over again a number of times in its history. We notice an old woman watching us as we go in. She said the old owners all killed themselves rather than be captured. Then she gives us a vial to drink.

"When do we drink it?" we ask.

"You'll know," she says.

How mysterious!

We enter the house, which seems more like a fortress, with its crumbling towers and imposing gatehouse. It seems colder inside than outside. We see chaos cult symbols in the courtyard. "Come to me..." a voice whispers. We can't see where it's coming from.

Climbing up to a ledge, we fall under attack by skeletons! They all look like they once were women. "We were murdered here," they cried, "and now you will be!" I manage to pull a couple two-headed dogs off Barbatos while the others combat the skeletal remains of the whores of Pythoness House.

"I must feed!" a man's voice whispers in the breeze, which seems to be blowing a green mist toward us. From out of the mist, a ram-headed humanoid creature attacks me! I've never seen anything like him before! Charnoth makes a flying leap and pushes the ram-demon off the ledge; it disappears.

"Chaos is the key," the man's disembodied voice whispers as we gather ourselves after the fight. Maybe the place *is* haunted! And then we discover more bad news: a strange, invisible force field blocks off the entrance to the courtyard. We can't leave!

We climb up to a nest made of greyish hair in one of the towers of Pythoness House. Maybe it belonged to that strange ram-headed demon that attacked me. We don't think we have the weapons to really hurt this demon; it will soon be after us again.

After a while, the force field seems to disappear, and we can once again leave the house. We haven't yet drunk the old woman's potion, but as we leave, she's nowhere to be seen. We head over to the Temple of Asche, where our friend Mand Scheben checks us out. It seems that the two-headed dogs managed to give Barbatos and me a nasty disease, and the ram-demon sapped our strength as well. He works his magic on us all and assures us we'll be fine in a few days. Good. I can use a little rest.

20TH OF SUN

Today the broadsheets say that Empress Addares is beginning to gather an "Army of the Empire." According to the reports, this army includes elf, orc, and litorian mercenaries. That's never been done before. I guess she's decided to cement her claim to the Lion-Guarded Throne with force, if necessary. How will the other two "emperors" respond, I wonder?

21ST OF SUN

Today I go to work at the Delver's Guild. Pretty uneventful.

22ND OF SUN

Back to Pythoness House today. The litorian brothers are arguing over which one of them is the hunt leader. As soon as we pass through the front door, we're assailed by ratmen! Calista magically distracts one who's trying to throw a bomb — he blows himself up instead. Meanwhile, the male voice returns: "Chaos is the key," it whispers. Where is that coming from?

Behind a purple curtain we meet more undead women. As Charnoth slices the unlife out of an incorporeal woman, she cries, "Find my journal and avenge me!"

We come upon a statue of a fat, naked chaos priest in a lower level of the house. It holds powerful magic, we're certain, but we can't get the panel on its belly to open up. Paintings throughout the house depict men and women with demonic features having sex. Not my cup of tea, artwise, but Barbatos pulls a couple of them off the walls to take back home.

When we hear the voice again, saying "Come to me!" we realize it's coming from that magical statue. In a gruesome turn, when the statue once again says, "I must feed!," Charnoth and Barbatos try to feed it blood. It takes the blood, but nothing else happens. We do manage to determine, however, that when the statue says, "Chaos is the key," the force field across the entrance disappears. That's good to know. After leaving Pythoness House, we go off to sell our loot, then call it a day.

SESSION XXV & XXVI—BACK TO PYTHONESS HOUSE**23RD OF SUN**

I head over to the Delver's Guild, while the others hit the library. They learn that some chaos cults used to sacrifice a powerful cultist to bind his soul to a place as a protector. Could that be the story behind the statue in Pythoness House?

24TH TO 29TH OF SUN

I put in some more hours at the Delver's Guild this week, while the others undergo some training. Diethan passes along a bit of news he picked up: a human named Palkam Mosh has opened a new made-to-order magic item shop called the Emerald Eye in the Nobles' Quarter. Apparently he's some sort of old-fashioned wizard. I wonder if he'll give us some competition at Myraeth's?

30TH OF SUN

Today we head back into Pythoness House. A creaking sound seems to come from within the building. We wait for the statue — the house's guardian? — to speak. Meanwhile, skeletons come down to attack us! We dispatch them easily and search the first two levels of the house. We note that at one point the panel in the statue opens, but nothing else happens.

On the third level, little black winged women attack us near a figurine shelf, and we encounter some sort of mutant disruptor rats whose tendrils paralyze! (Barbatos informs me they're called "osquips.") The rooms in here are full of trash but we do manage to find a glove, ring, gem, and spell scroll in the clutter. We pass through a divination room with big (rotted) pillows to a chamber with red dust. Before our eyes, two creatures are summoned: a large rat and a red leathery-skinned rider with a double-axe. We hear the voice of the chaos statue call out to us: "Destroy them!" (Well, maybe it was talking to the creatures...)

In any case, that rat-rider is one tough foe! Nevertheless, he falls to our combined might. We continue up another level to a bedroom with a desk and papers. We look through them for the journal the former madam urged us to find, and we're in luck! This journal warns of a spirit named Taunell that haunts the gatehouse towers. Another haunting seems to involve the chaos statue and Radonna, whom we recall as one of the brothel's owners. But this isn't her journal, it's Maquent's.

Reading on, we learn that Maquent was a prisoner here, trapped by the will of the chaos cultists who used the house as their base. We also learn — at last! — that the weapons we seek to use against the Shuul are in the cellar. We can get down there using a key Maquent calls the "spiral contrivance" that's divided into two parts: one each for her and Radonna. Her half is in a tower, and the other is high up somewhere behind a secret door.

INTERLUDE

Pythoness House still holds its secrets (and its law-destroying treasures) tightly, but we've just found the mysterious journal of the prostitute-prophetess Maquent, which offers some interesting insights into the haunted nature of the place. Things moving of their own accord, even tiny statues leaping from shelves to attack — something very strange is going on. It's like we're fighting the house itself. Does it have anything to do with the chaos statue on the ground floor? Perhaps one final foray is enough to plumb the depths of the house (hopefully without another encounter with the goat-headed demon that dwells in the high tower).

Time, however, is an unkind ally. Already, tomorrow is the day that Dr. Feegus' assistant, Nerlene Camus, goes for her monthly appointment with the Healers of the Sacred Heat. This may be our only clue as to how to get at Feegus, and our only shot (at least for a month) to use it. Where is Feegus and his lab, where (presumably) he is holding the captive litorians, preparing to forge them into living weapons against chaositech? What to do, what to do...?

STILL THE 30TH OF SUN

It's now noon, and Diethan is waiting for us at the shop when we return from Pythoness House to make our plan. We know that Doctor Feegus' assistant Nerlene has an appointment at the House of the Sacred Heat for treatment of her goiter on the first of every month. This could be our big chance to follow her and hopefully find the secret Prajdall lab! Tomorrow I will wait at the Technicians' Guild for Nerlene (records show that as her address), and the others all have their own assigned stations too. We are all staking out various locations where Nerlene might go following her appointment.

This afternoon, I visit the Temple of Excellence and discover that I can pay a thousand gold to learn a new heroic feat. That's good news, but on the other hand, it seems as though I am always broke. Thank goodness Archinemus is selling our latest batch of loot this afternoon.

1ST OF GROWTH

At dawn I head over to the Technicians' Guild. Calista and Diethan are already in place at the House of the Sacred Heat. They are going to follow her from her appointment so we can trace her back to where she works — and perhaps to the captive litorians from Charnoth's and Tharn's tribe!

Calista and Diethan see her arrive in a carriage at the House of the Sacred Heat. Nerlene is a strange-looking character: big and broad-shouldered, with yellow braids, an eye patch, and, of course, the goiter. Two big Shuul Knight bodyguards accompany her. After an hour or so, Nerlene exits with her guards, apparently cured (for now) of her unsightly malady. Diethan and Calista follow them as they walk down the Temple District and turn onto the Street of a Million Gods. A shimmer forms in the air near them, and two large creatures with apelike faces and gray fur emerge from the shimmer — more like a tear, actually. They charge on all fours, weapons at the ready. These are the Grahls, demon-apes and slavers that stand between nine and ten feet tall. Nerlene and the guards are quite surprised. So, too, are Calista and Diethan. They rush in to help.

The Shuul Knights confront their foes with swords that look like scissors; one falls quickly. The terrifying ape-demons are definitely after Nerlene. One of the creatures falls in the attack, and the other threatens the Shuul woman: "We'll be back for you and your tentacle-skulled master!" (Feegus has tentacles? That'd be news. Shilukar said he was human.) Then he departs into his rip-portal, though which Diethan briefly glimpses stone buildings amid a junglelike setting.

Nerlene and her surviving bodyguard thank our friends. "We have no explanation for this attack!" she says. She adds that she's from Tarsis, "where there are no demons in the streets." The Shuul will take care of this, she feels confident. Soon there will be no more demons in the city! Calista and Diethan offer to accompany her for safety; they take a hired carriage. They let off Nerlene and her guard at a Midtown warehouse. She gives our friends her calling card (an Oldtown address), saying that if they ever need her help, they should contact her. As the carriage pulls away, they see a hole open up in the street right in front of the warehouse door. The knight and Nerlene disappear down into it and are gone.

We all gather again to exchange reports. Mine is pretty dull compared to the rest — not a thing happened at the Technicians' Guildhall! At the Foundry, Tharn was surprised to see little Linele, Linech Cran's daughter. A while back we "rescued" her from the Covenant of Blood, a group of vampires that use the *horn of blood* and work with the Balacazars. She was still a vampire, he notes, and what's more: She was walking around in broad daylight, passing by with other little undead kids. "Where's the watch?" Tharn asked her, referring to the demon-possessed timepiece that her father wanted so badly. "Ask the Six!" she said softly in reply. "Are you going to be a problem for the city?" our friend pressed. "Ask the Six" is all she would say. Then the kids started to taunt Tharn, and he nevertheless offered Linele his friendship, to no avail. We agree that the Six must refer to the Covenant of Blood, which means Linele has fallen right back into their clutches.

Archinemus, who was casing the Tower of Science, reports that many of the Shuul who entered had shaved heads. Inside he glimpsed what looked like an armored vehicle — some sort of tank. Cool! Makes me want to build something myself. Perhaps a water heater for my apartment. (It's a wet, chilly time of year.)

We decide that for now, we want to return to Pythoness House to find the pieces to the "spiral contrivance" key that will let us into the cellar where the chaos weapons are kept. We'll go in the morning. For now, we adjourn to the Mane for a celebration of Gathering Day. I learn more about the eight litorians whom we're seeking.

Also, we take inventory at the store today. We have some questions for Myraeth regarding selling off jewelry, gems, and other non-magic items. A well-dressed guy named Jatarran Tayzor came into the shop today, Taelv reports, and offered to have us sell the magic items he makes (wands and items of wonder) on commission.

2ND OF GROWTH

We return to Pythoness House as planned. In the courtyard, arrows pelt down on us as soon as we arrive. Skeletons are shooting at us! A woman's voice threatens us. We dash inside and upstairs.

When we arrive at Maquent's bedchamber (where we found the journal), we hear the voice again. Turning, we come face to face with the skeletons and an undead woman. Is it Radonna? Before we can figure it out, the skeletons converge on me, and I go unconscious. That happens twice in this battle, actually, but Calista brings me back each time. She even casts the final blow on the last skeleton. We withdraw, badly hurt.

Will we ever manage to make it to the weapons stash in time to save the litorians from being turned into mutant machines? I'm beginning to wonder.

SESSIONS XXVII & XXVIII—SUCCESS AT LAST!

STILL THE 2ND OF GROWTH

We sell our loot from our last foray into Pythoness House, and Tharn returns from the Mane to report on his brother, Charnoth, who has been off outside the city walls communing with the Great Brother (whatever that means — I think it has something to do with the Bear Spirit).

During his time of meditation out there, it seems that Charnoth received a prophecy that the enslaved litorians will remain in the city but out of our reach till the Harvest Moon. Then out of nowhere, he was attacked by black-robed humans and a half-ogre/half-troll named Durg! They killed his bear companion, Chrondar, and beat up Charnoth pretty bad. During the fight, Charnoth heard one of the humans remind Durg that they weren't supposed to kill any litorians. (Why, so they can use them as more slaves?!)

Luckily, during the fight, Charnoth's friend Mowrar arrived on the scene and together they fought off the attackers. Mowrar had come from the plains seeking Charnoth, it seems, to tell him of trouble within the tribe of Malethar; Charnoth was desperately needed back home. And so he left! Just like that! Tharn seemed sort of shocked about the whole thing. I don't blame him. But Tharn is staying in the city to see through the quest for his missing tribemates.

3RD OF GROWTH

Seanus heard noises out in the alley late at night and went out to discover a big winged creature out there. In the morning we find a footprint of a large bird. From up on the roof, Tharn notes that a few shingles are missing. Hmm, that's weird.

Later on, Diethan and others ask around about an ogre/troll named Durg. They learn that he works as an enforcer for a human crime boss named Korben Trollone, a.k.a. Korben the Keeper in the South Market. We wonder whether Korben works for Killraven. Apparently he likes to go to an exclusive club called Swordthrower's in the Nobles' Quarter. Aha, we found an invitation to that club in the house of the assassins Killraven sent against us when we first took ownership of the store. While on watch this evening, Tharn sees a giant raven flying about near our shop. Another link to Killraven. Meanwhile, Barbatos has to tend to the next issue of the *Midtown Partisan*, the broadsheet he publishes "anonymously."

4TH OF GROWTH

We meet with Myraeth to discuss the liquidation of gems, jewelry, and art objects. He tells us of a group called the Gurhorond, a clan of dwarves that operates Star Jewelers in the Guildsman District. They are always in need of gems and will pay full price. When we ask him about the giant raven, he tells us that a witch named Volius Stern has a witchraven companion. This powerful and dangerous character lives in Rivergate. Great, why's he poking around our store?

After reporting in at the shop, we visit the dwarves and sell a lot of gems and jewelry, then divvy up some of the extra cash. We also advertise for part-time appraising help at the local hiring hall, so poor Seanus can have a day off now and then.

Next it's off to Pythoness House again in the afternoon. The voice is gone as we enter, so that's good news. The statue looks the same as the last time we were here, though. We start out on the fourth level, where we fought the skeletons before. We search Radonna's low-ceilinged room. The statue resumes its cries. We can hear someone upstairs, today, too. We search the terrace garden for the lost pieces of the "spiral contrivance" key to the statue as well as the key to the square tower, but all we find are some skulls and bones. While out there, though, we see the hairy, horned goatlike demon watching us! Ignoring him, we head upstairs. We find a hatch in the ceiling that leads to the square tower. The walls of this place feature abstract carvings of people. As we investigate, skeletal rats enter the room with a skeletal rat-man, but we make short work of them. Through the hatch we find a chest (locked) and a mini-statue of the naked bald statue guy with half of Maquent's "spiral contrivance" — the key! We take it.

Exploring the higher levels, we realize that ultimately we must confront the demon. In a torture room high up in the house we meet him, catching him fairly unaware. After a heroic but traumatic battle on the ledge of his tower, we lay him low, and he disappears in a puff of red smoke — leaving behind his equipment, lucky us! Inside his tower we search his horrid nest. I even manage to remove one of the gemstones from the emblem on the tower's exterior, but I can't get at the others.

Back at the shop that evening, Seanus manages to open the chest — it contains coins and other stuff. Seanus gets his pick from the chest (a silver headband) as our thanks. Then we all head off to the Temple of Teun (or other houses of healing) to take care of these diseased rat bites. Quite a full day!

5TH OF GROWTH

Today we finish up at the houses of healing. I visit the Temple of Excellence and participate in a magical ceremony that offers me training in a new heroic feat. I feel ready for anything!

6TH OF GROWTH

What a surprise! We receive an invitation to visit Castle Shard tomorrow. While I'm off at work at the Delver's Guild, Calista and Tharn check into building onto our shop — it would be nice to add living quarters. Sadly, it's beyond our means at present.

7TH OF GROWTH

At Castle Shard, of all people, Lord Abbercombe comes to see us! Seeing the gold statue-man makes us realize that Shilukar must have received the sanctuary he sought from Lord Zavere and Lady Rill, and restored the long-lost noble as he promised. We have mixed feelings about anything where that dark elf is concerned.

Anyway, Lord Abbercombe thanks us grandly for helping to recover him. He said he's an adventurer like us and that Shilukar found him a year ago while exploring dark elf ruins. The dark elf and his men jumped him and placed him in a sort of stasis (that's how we saw him at Linech's burrow.) But at that point, he was already gold. It seems that when his house was undone by foes, he was poisoned by a magical venom. He would have died if his friends had not placed his soul in this golden body. They were working to magically restore his own body when they were set upon by the enemy and killed. His real body was destroyed, leaving him forever a living golden statue. The architects of this deed were of House Vladaam.

He makes us a standing offer to help us if ever we need it — Rill can always reach him. It's sad that he lost his noble house all those years ago. We fill him in on our current missions. Just then, Shilukar shows up in his bathrobe. He reminds us that his old lair still has a gate to a hellish dimension standing wide open. The blue demon woman apparently has a brother who's still on the loose, but he offered to give us information to help defeat them. Barbatos panders to the dark elf and tries to impress us by drinking some of that nasty dark elf wine. We warn him to watch it!

8TH OF GROWTH

Back to Pythoness House we go in the pouring rain. We still need to find all those chaos weapons that are stashed there somewhere! When we arrive, we hear something moving in the gatehouse. Is it Taunell the ghost, warning us off? We walk through the gatehouse towers. Tharn hears a whisper of, "No, no, no!" from the tower where I once saw a face. Our litorian friend cries out, "Taunell!" but there is no answer. But Barbatos can tell there's magic in this tower, an aura that fluctuates in size.

We head back down to the first level of the south tower, which we find empty and dusty. We climb a ladder to higher levels. The castle seems eerily quiet. As we ponder that, we run across a big pile of rat bones. Hmm, something's been eating rats around here — but what? Or who?

Up we climb. We find a ripped portrait of a red-haired woman (Maquent?) and precisely placed piles of stuff. Does someone live here? Opening a door, we come face to face with a two-headed man who seems to have been cobbled together out of spare body parts. He wears the other half of the spiral contrivance around one of his necks! "Don't kill him!" a new voice calls to us. "He is the last. You will be trapped if he's gone. I must go fight."

Now who is THIS? The voice seems to come from an open trap door in the gatehouse roof.

So how to get the key from this aggressive, two-headed cobbledman? Barbatos hits on a solution: He gives him a *potion of love* to drink, and the Cobbledman promptly becomes extremely fond of our wizard friend. He happily gives Barbatos his half of the key to the statue. Barbatos has to give him his signet ring to console him as we head back downstairs.

We hear the slow voice of the statue below us: "I must feed." Its pronouncements seem to come less frequently, the more denizens of this place that we slay. An hour later when it says, "Chaos is the key," Calista inserts the two pieces of the spiral contrivance into a slot in the statue. It responds by sliding forward on a track and exposing a stairway down. At last!

We emerge into a low-ceilinged room (ouch! my head!) and pass by moldy crates and supplies. We note a shaft leading down through the cobblestone floor into the solid rock. It doesn't appear to have been made by normal means. A corpse is affixed to a wall near the hole; it has a symbol on its forehead.

I climb down the shaft into an icy cave at the bottom. As the others join me, I light a magical flame, hoping to melt some of the ice down here: It's not natural! Through one icy wall, we see a frosty minotaur guardian — it looks confused for a moment at the melting ice all around it, then it bursts free and attacks us! We hit it a few times, and Calista distracts it with a spell, but just as it falls, another one bursts free of a different icy wall. In time, we drop him as well, and I'm happy to take up their giant weapons.

The minotaurs emerged from a niche in which we see a cold pool. Tharn dives into its chill waters with a rope attached to his waist so we don't lose him. He sees a blind snake in the water covered with chitinous plates. A fight ensues underwater, and we manage to pull our friend to safety as Calista boils the water in the pool and Barbatos hits the snake with *magic missiles*. Tharn resumes his scouting of the pool and discovers another cave on the other side of an underwater channel. We all join him on the icy cold swim and are rewarded in the second cave with a discovery of five frosty chests! Inscriptions on the chests confirm that we have found the chaos weapons we've been searching for!

Before we depart with the chests, we notice an iron door standing locked in the rear of the cave. A plaque on it reads: "This is the greatest of all weapons against the kings of order, created by that ancient elven champion Vaioth the Slayer." We decide to let that one wait for another day....

SESSIONS XXVIII (CONT'D) & XXIX—PLANNING OUR ATTACK

STILL THE 8TH OF GROWTH

It's still pouring when we emerge from Pythoness House, triumphant, carrying the chests that hold the chaos weapons we've so long sought. Two human men are waiting for us outside the house, plus a halfling and three tusked brutes — one with green and purple mottled skin. It's Durg and his gang, the ones who beat up on Charnoth!

One of the men has some sort of hypnotic birds on leads — they manage to paralyze me. Then Archinemus and Diethan come racing up and lay into our foes with *fireballs* and arrows. Not long after I come out of my trance, I go down under Durg's big meaty fists. So do Tharn and Calista! This is looking bad, but in the end, Diethan shoots him with a magic arrow and he explodes! As we bandage ourselves up, we note that Durg is beginning to regenerate, so we burn up all his "pieces." That was nasty work.

As we leave, we hear the Cobbledman cry, "STAAAAAYYYY!" (Barbatos' love potion sure did a number on that creature.) We return to our shop and determine that the chests we got from the house are trapped. That's something for tomorrow. We're exhausted.

9TH OF GROWTH

Last night Diethan checked out the Swordthrower's Club, the place in the Nobles' Quarter where Durg's boss, Korben the Keeper, likes to hang out. A guard there stopped him and Lunes (his wolf) from getting a really good look at the place, though.

Also of interest: Rill appears magically to Calista today to tell her she scried on Shilukar's lair and saw thirty-five bugbears and gnolls being rallied by the two demon-gnolls. With Shilukar living the good life in Castle Shard, there's apparently no one keeping these creatures under control.

10TH OF GROWTH

Last night Diethan learned that some weird mutated goblins were showing up around Delver's Hole (they could climb like spiders and had many eyes). More of Shilukar's experiments, we presume.

We try to open the Pythoness chests today using magic. Calista uses her magic to suppress the traps and open two of the chests. We find bastard swords and a runic skull and a scroll, and pouches of dust. Everyone goes all ga-ga over the stuff, but it doesn't seem as great as my trusty axe, if you ask me. I go check in at the Delver's Guild.

11TH OF GROWTH

We try again to open the other three chests. This time we discover a longsword, a spear, and a rod with a golden skull topper. Taevel helps us out by identifying the anti-law magical qualities of our new items.

We also consult with two architects (Tullen Stonestep and Noonien Chad) regarding building a second story onto the shop. Just as we feared, the cost is far too steep for our meager reserves. At least for now.

12TH OF GROWTH

A human adventurer with dragon pistols enters the shop today. Apparently he watched approvingly last week as we mopped up Killraven's agents, but today he chastises us for angering both the Killraven Crime League and the Balacazars' vampire pals. This fellow's name is Mavoy Landsmith. He says that Linele's demon-possessed pocketwatch allows the vampires to be out in the sun during the day and adds that, as we suspected, Korben "The Keeper" Trollone is Killraven's man (as is the witch Volius, the one with the big raven). Mavoy urges us to keep our wits about us when we're out and about. Perhaps if we focus some effort Killraven's way, we can keep the Balacazars off our backs for a while; they might be willing to overlook our past "indiscretions" and even lend a hand in a small way if we make a strike on their rivals. Volius is a bigger fish than Korben, Mavoy says. If we want to contact the Balacazars, we can always do so at a tavern called the Onyx Spider. Good to know, though I have to admit I'm a little uncomfortable with the complexities of existing within a city where so much is run by these two crime groups.

We decide that we want to deal with Korben, in payback for his man attacking Charnoth, but it will have to wait till we've found Doctor Feegus and freed his litorian slaves destined to become Prajdall.

13TH OF GROWTH

Today we hire Lon Mantlemor and Ander Kellin to work at the shop part time to give Taevel and Seanus some well-earned time off. Meanwhile, we rest and spend a couple days getting back to feeling normal again.

14TH OF GROWTH

Today we are staking out the warehouse we saw Nerlene enter with her Shuul knight — this is the place where Diethan and Calista saw a secret door open up in the roadway to admit them following the attack on them in the street. Diethan sees more Shuul knights enter the area, give a knock, and gain admittance through a door that lowers them down beneath street level.

Meanwhile, I am in the middle of crafting a new adventuring tool: a mirror on a little extension arm to help us see around chimneys and things. The Shuul aren't the only ones who can invent useful tools!

15TH OF GROWTH

Today at the Delver's Guild Library and Maproom I research the underlevels around this Shuul warehouse. It seems that this area contains extensive Old City ruins. I manage to find an access point a block or two off via the sewers. That should get us there.

While Tharn was casing out the warehouse today, he saw Nerlene and a couple Shuul knights emerge from the secret platform. He also spies a skulking figure knock and enter through other doors.

On his watch, Archinemus spots a figure on a rooftop across the street. It seems to be watching... him! Archinemus sees this figure climb down later on, grow birdlike wings, turn black like a raven, and fly away. Great.

16TH OF GROWTH

Today Calista sends Nerlene a note asking to meet with her on the pretense of discussing the sale of Shuul healing pills. She comes back from sending the note with a new purchase: a map to an undercity wizard's lair. As if we don't have enough going on! Still, Calista usually has her reasons.

While I'm at work at my Delver's Guild job, the wizard Jatarran Tayzor agrees to let us sell the wands he makes on commission at the shop. This evening I spend some time trying to piece together the story of my ancestors, the Hu-Charad of Ar-Nampur, a fortress north of the city.

17TH OF GROWTH

Nerlene replies to Calista's message, saying she'll stop by this afternoon, so we give the staff the afternoon off. The Shuul scientist enters with one Shuul knight to protect her and leaves one outside our front door. She seems suspicious today, wondering why Diethan and Calista just happened to be there on the street when demons attacked her. She 'fesses up that Killraven sent some people to tell her that we meant her people ill. Great.

But my friends have golden tongues. Nerlene believes it when Calista and Diethan protest their innocence and gives them contact information for a guy we can talk to about buying pills and other products for resale. As she leaves, she still seems slightly suspicious, so Tharn suggests we wait a little longer before we move on their warehouse and seek the captive litorians.

So later in the day we decide to check out a Midtown address we found on one of Durg's slain pals. A guy dressed as an old lady answers the door and immediately seems to know who we are. We deem this suspicious, so we knock him out and make our way inside. Upstairs we find lots of weapons and trunks.

When the "old lady" guy wakes up, he says his name is Kershid, and he works for Killraven. Calista reads his mind and learns that he knows Korben Trollone but does not know where he is. He says Korben's a fortyish man with brown hair who really likes animals and monsters — that's why they call him Korben "the Keeper." Trollone is into thieving rings, prostitution, and so forth in the South Market.

So we've stumbled upon a Killraven safe house here. Kershid says he personally works for Celdore Silverwood in Dark Leaf, an elven criminal network. He suggests we visit Celdore at Iridithil's Home, an elven refuge here in Midtown. Celdore can help us find Korben. We agree to let the frightened Kershid go if he agrees to leave town immediately.

It's not far to Iridithil's Home from here, so we head over right away. The guard, Aefin, seems very snooty, but then I never really did understand elves too well. After some coaxing from Calista, Aefin agrees to take us to Celdore. As we pass through the compound, we see ornately polished wooden buildings, beautiful gardens, and graceful statues. This elven quarter certainly doesn't look much like the rest of Midtown!

Celdore meets us at a tavern on the grounds; he is a Shoal elf with a long scar running down his face. He calls himself a "businessman" but seems to know enough about who we are (WHY do these criminal types all know us?) to say that Korben will not rest till he's had his revenge on us for killing his pal Durg.

Celdore can't seem to believe that this whole thing started simply over us refusing to pay Killraven protection money, but that's all we can figure. He says Dark Leaf is willing to broker peace for us as a "neutral" third party.

Strangely, he recognizes me as one of the Hu-Charad. Maybe I can talk to him more sometime about these ancestral people of mine. I definitely need to remember that.

SESSIONS XXX & XXXI—DEALING WITH CRIME LORDS

STILL THE 17TH OF GROWTH

Barbatos looks into the ownership history of Pythoness House a little more deeply. He learns that an elf named Naelyn Blueflight currently owns it; he lives north of the city in the Moonsilver Forest. The records are old, though — is this guy even still alive? Did he know that Maquent and her girls turned it into a brothel a few years ago?

18TH OF GROWTH

We got some good loot from the safe house: a *charm person* wand for Barbatos and some two-in-one potion admixtures. Mavoy helps us out with some information on where to find Korben the Keeper.

For some reason, we decide to do nothing but wait for Celdore's reply as to whether he can "broker" a treaty for us with the Killraven league. Bored with the shop, I put in some hours at my Delver's Guild job. Meanwhile, Archinemus and Tharn go to ask Shim to watch Nerlene and the secret trap door by the Shuul warehouse, perhaps reconnoiter the place a bit.

19TH OF GROWTH

Archinemus and Tharn tell us that Shim will do the job in exchange for a magical ring from our shop.

20TH OF GROWTH

Celdore arrives at our shop today with some news. He can indeed broker a deal that will get Killraven off our backs. If we refuse this deal, Sorn assassins will hunt us in our homes (apparently we've only had thugs after us before, not the mage-assassins of the Sorn). Korben likely won't obey the cease-fire, due to his need to avenge the death of his brutal thug pal Durg, but the crime league is willing to concede him to us, Celdore says. Nice loyalty in this group.

However, as part of the deal, we have to tell them what we know about the Balacazars, and we have to tell anyone who asks that we pay Killraven protection money, so they can save face. We agree to the second point only, because our info on the Balacazars is the only card we have to play against them.

Celdore's fee as mediator is 1,000 gp. He agrees to take our reply back to the crime league and cautions us to be thorough and discreet about our hit on Korben. If we are, then offering him should not violate our truce period.

With that in mind, we head over to Korben Trollone's office. I'm invisible, which is a new thing for me. We have to fight our way through the loan office he uses as a front for his criminal operations. "You shall all die for this affront!" cries a large woman in plate armor. "So says Kevris Killraven!"

What? Ah, this isn't really Killraven, we discover — it's an illusion created by a desperate mage, who in the end directs us down a trap door to find Korben's lair.

Downstairs is a menagerie of fierce creatures that come after us. We meet Korben and a great winged cat in an office down there. A dire lion bursts out of its cage at us; it's two tons and thirteen feet long. *Arggh!* It takes me down with its first attack! Just as I'm revived, a swarm of shock lizards erupts from the last cage. I slay two of them, but then I'm down again.

Ultimately we are victorious, but sadly I was out for much of the fight. I hate that. Diethan has to stabilize me twice during this engagement, and Archinemus revives me with a wand to get me back on my feet. Thank Teun for healing magic!

As we search Korben's office, a snake attacks Barbatos. Of course, he acts as though it's the worst wound anyone has ever suffered. But soon he abandons his pity-party of one to browse the books in Korben Trollone's library. Volumes include "The Basilisk's Hunting Habits," "Centaur Migration Patterns," "Dietary Habits of Goblin and Ogre," "The Giant's Skeletal System," and many books on dangerous beasts. He has some religious books too. Korben also has a parrot in the office.

In the next room we discover a torture chamber that leads into the sewer. An armored reptilian beast with a huge mouth is still left out here — it seems to be a crocodile that can spray poison! We leave with our chosen books and papers and three iron chests of coins. Not too shabby!

Back at the shop, we sift through the papers. They show a transfer of 40 gp to the Shuul for the purchase of merchandise from Ammel Dar. Included in these papers is also a contract for the slaying of ... us! (The signee is named Zorin Sar — he's the one who sent us those troll fingers a while back, because he wanted Myraeth's and didn't want us to buy it.) There's also a contract to dispose of a Forsaken cell in Oldtown.

21ST OF GROWTH

I read some of my new beast books from Korben's office and attend a litorian gathering today. The gathering is a great feast at the Mane. Tharn tells the story of freeing the slave city and finding Norba (who's still ailing, sad to say). Still, everyone seems to like the story pretty well. He makes us sound like heroes!

Seanus decides to keep Korben's parrot and teach it to say stuff.

22ND OF GROWTH

Today I work down at the Delver's Guild and spend a little time reading the basilisk book.

Diethan proudly announces that his wolf is all trained now. (We found this creature, Lunes, in a goblin warren down in the Halls of Cordaris a while back.)

Barbatos, Diethan, and Archinemus go to Castle Shard today to talk with Shilukar regarding Zorin Sar and House Abanar. The latter has offered a price on Shilukar's head as a penalty for his robberies of them. Shilukar says he doesn't know Zorin, but he has heard that you can buy a "blood revenge" policy with House Abanar if you're a member.

Recalling the demons' taunts of Nerlene on the street a week back, we ask Shilukar whether Doctor Feegus has tentacles; the demons had referred to Nerlene's "tentacled master." However, the dark elf seems taken aback by the suggestion that such creatures may be involved. He says the Killraven clan has a new scheme with the Shuul that makes it easy to bring someone back from the dead (they have machines to raise their own high-ups).

Before departing, an eager Barbatos offers Shilukar a few copies of the latest edition of the *Midtown Partisan*. Will he ever stop sucking up to this dark elf?

Back at Myraeth's, we realize that Shim was supposed to check in with us last night but never did! Tharn and I visit Skulk Alley to see what is up, but the other skulks don't know anything. One of them, named Nos, agrees to go with us to look for him.

Friends of mine at the Delver's Guild tell me about some new Shuul-built blockages in the tunnels leading from the Tower of Science all the way to the Foundry. What are they transporting so secretly, they have to do it beneath the city? Whatever it is, they don't want anyone to see.

Later we head over to the Swordthrower's Club and show our invitation at the door. We also have to check our weapons at the door — and in this case, that also means "checking" Lunes, Diethan's newly trained wolf companion.

Peliope Erthuo is among the famous people here at the club tonight; she's the half-elf head of the noble House Erthuo. At the club we hear that people are blaming Korben's murder on the Balacazars. I'm not sure if I should be offended or not. It seemed Killraven decided to cut him loose from her organization. A member of House Abanar named Mallorn tries to interest Barbatos in investment opportunities. We learn through all this conversation that Zorin Sar, our apparent nemesis, has a manor in Oldtown and has bought guardian devices from the Shuul. He also has some sort of big deal in the works.

Tharn and Calista go over to Danbury's this evening. It's a mages' bar in Delver's Square. They order a magic enchantment from a wizard elf named Lavaen Whisperblade, as well as a *cloak of charisma*. Lavaen calls our quest to free the litorian slaves from the Shuul a noble one. He is apparently a member of the Knights of the Golden Cross, a group interested in righting wrongs throughout the city. He makes magic items because his organization needs the money. For ten thousand years, he says, the Knights have been doing good and operating under wraps. Tharn and Calista tell him about the Slave City. He's interested in helping. The Knights of the Golden Cross serve the Elder Gods, they learn. The Knights apparently suffered a great loss when their leader Kaira Swanwing was murdered not long ago. They desire the assistance of like-minded people, but I don't know if we're ready to join them. We have enough on our plate right now.

Enough of this gathering of information! I'm ready for some action!

SESSION XXXII & XXXIII—BENEATH THE STREETS

23RD OF GROWTH

Well, I said I wanted action, and action I got!

After all our planning, today we headed down into the Dungeon. We were hoping to intercept the Shuul tunnel using a map from one of my Delver's Guild associates. Our goal is to find Shim (our missing skulk friend), as well as make inroads in our quest to find the litorians. Nos, another skulk, is with us.

It's a long trip through the under-realms. At one point we think we hear someone shouting for help from a well up ahead, but it was a trick, and we were all attacked by an undead water elemental. Farther on, Barbatos was drained of strength by a roper in the middle of a chamber. We try to go around it but ran afoul of a whole bunch of goblins, which almost did Diethan in. (Now he hates goblins more than ever!) A room where we sought safe shelter for a rest was trapped with foul fire traps, which also afflicted Diethan.

While we rest, Nos scouts ahead for us. When he comes back, he tells us a bridge ahead seems clear, but that he saw strange tentacled creatures with beaks floating around near there. I have no idea what they are. Getting out of our safe haven room without engaging the fire trap proves a challenge — Tharn and Barbatos get burned exiting.

In a chamber up ahead we stumble upon a shrine to Charlathan, a god with male and female aspects. We wonder whether sitting on the throne here would make you change gender, but no one's brave enough to try. Pressing on, we hear others up ahead at the bridge Nos saw—sounds like they fell. Did they encounter these strange creatures Nos told us about?

Before we can wonder too much, one of them sneaks up behind us, its horrid bulbous body (it almost looks like a big brain) covered with gross tendrils. It lashes out at us, but we drop it like a big sack of wet meat. We remain wary for more, and there are indeed two more on the bridge waiting for us. We chuck the dead one out there onto the bridge to call them out. One of the two is HUGE. I shoot my new chaos spear from Pythoness House at it, but unfortunately I miss and it goes into the water off the bridge. Damn!

We try a number of tactics to get at these new foes without walking into their trap on the bridge. Tharn makes a sneak attack, and Barbatos lets loose with a *fireball*. That seems to scare them off, so we hightail it across the bridge. But the creatures reappear as we cross! We manage to dispatch the small one and race to the center of the bridge to clash with the big one. It tries to fling Tharn off the bridge. It fails at that but it does paralyze him with its tendrils. (Later I learn these things are called grells.)

Archinemus *levitates* off the bridge to try to detect the chaos spear. He does manage to locate it in the underground river, praise the Mother of all Machines. He also finds some treasure from previous grell victims, including a spell scroll tube.

Moving along, we manage to run afoul of a horrid cold ooze monster—it came in and engulfed Diethan and Barbatos (the latter of whom was already hurt from the fire trap). Tharn pulled out Barbatos, Diethan hacked his way out, and the rest of us took care of the creature. I am certainly taking a lot of notes about monsters on this trip, if nothing else.

After dispatching the ooze, we pass through a large area of burned-out webs (and a big dead spider) into a region of intact webbing. Here we face two giant spiders. A solid group effort defeats them. But we really need a rest now, so we find a side room with a collapsed door. I manage to jury-rig it shut again, and Tharn scatters protective caltrops before the door. We enjoy a welcome respite.

24TH OF GROWTH

The respite does not last, however. Just as we're getting comfortable we hear footsteps beyond the door. Tharn smells the death and decay of the undead with spidery undertones. We hear a soft incantation, then spiders start streaming through all the cracks in the door. They swarm all over Tharn! Calista uses a wind spell to blow them all off him—they smack into the wall. I break down the door and spy our tormentor: An animated corpse covered in webbing, apparently a victim risen from being cocooned by the giant spiders. The spiders come out of its desiccated body and swarm onto me! The foe uses the opportunity of our distraction to summon up a stone monster from the earth—it goes at Diethan and Tharn, who smash it to rubble. We gang up on the webbed guy and beat the corpse to dust.

Thank the Mother there are no more of these creatures—Nos tracks it back to its lair to confirm that. We follow him and find a chamber filled with a big web and some treasure left by previous victims. We bed down in an adjoining room filled with carved wooden animals. (Barbatos takes a wooden piggy.)

25TH OF GROWTH

Back on track and into a diamond-shaped chamber our map calls the Mirror Room. Giant mirrors line every wall. We can tell that we approach the temple of Destor, the Lightning Lord, as the walls are decorated with a lightning bolt motif. Archinemus finds traces of fairly recent blood (spilled within the last twenty-four hours) at a door blocking our way.

Inside we see an enormous midnight blue-temple, painted bolts of lightning cutting across the ceiling. A group here challenges us, and we offer a tribute for the privilege of passing. They scorn it and attack! One conjures a foul-smelling bulbous monster (a dretch, I later discover), another summons two spiky Abyssal wolves. We face a wizard (Thorarin), cleric (Ibrahim, follower of the God of Dreams), two fighters (Jenna and Slav), and their creatures. That damnable woman fells me, but Diethan kills their wizard and the cleric flees. It seems they thought we were common bandits. Barbatos (from behind the door) lobes some *magic missiles* and a smelly poop-bomb he snagged from the ratmen at Pythoness House. Tharn makes a running swipe that ends their last defender, the greedy thug.

I'm sad to say I did not acquit myself well at all in this fight. Got to get in some more practice against flanking maneuvers. We revive Jenna and question her—she said they recently killed a batch of bandits and thought we were more of the same. She and her companions were out for treasure, she said. They recently killed a basilisk and she warns us of a *wall of lightning* up ahead. We return her things to her and take her with us in the hopes that she can find her fled cleric friend.

We follow a passage lined with frescoes of the god Destor and reach the *wall of lightning* in an octagonal room without finding Ibrahim. Jenna describes that, if you venture down the hall toward the wall, it moves up the hall toward you. We backtrack a bit to get around the wall and run right into Ibrahim. After a terse exchange—he was none too happy with our having slain members of his party—he departs with Jenna.

Investigating another way around, we see a room where four blue pillars generate a ball of blue light that shoots a bolt of electricity at Nos, who's scouting the way ahead. "Disturb not the First Reliquary of the Lightning Lord!" booms a deep voice from the floating orb. Returning, Nos advises, "I don't think we should go that way."

So we go to Plan B. Tharn and Diethan, our fastest runners, venture down the hallway with the *wall of lightning* and it races toward them. This gives the rest of us, standing at the junction where it used to be, time to cross to a door that the wall had blocked. Only problem is, the two of them don't have time to get back before the wall returns back the way it came. Barbatos gets around this by summoning a stone creature into the hall using a ring we got off the spider-mummy. The wall hits it as soon as it appears, destroying it, but we all get through no problem.

We find ourselves in a chamber that no one has entered in a long while, judging from the layers of dust. We follow a passage out (still in Destor's temple, it seems) to a new corridor that has been bricked up. This is it! We're very close now to the Shuul's secret thoroughfare.

SESSIONS XXXIV & XXXV—BUSTING UP THE SHUUL

STILL THE 25TH OF GROWTH

While deep in a tunnel on our way to find the Shuul's secret base, we stop to rest for the night. On my watch, a giant beetle tries to sneak into our room while everyone else is asleep — it's seven feet long! I manage to dispatch it, and Archinemus heals me of the damage it inflicted. It was alone, or so I thought. Two more of them show up on Tharn's watch. We now realize the folly of trying to sleep in an open alcove of this part of the Dungeon. Next time we'll put a door between us and the denizens of this place.

26TH OF GROWTH

We take our picks and some stone-dissolving alchemical solution of Tharn's and break through the Shuul's bricked-up wall. Archinemus covers our work with a *silence* spell. Tharn scouts ahead and finds another bricked-up wall up there. We go at the new and much thicker blockage with gusto, but our *silence* runs out. Judging silence to be vital to our efforts, we decide to wait another day till Archinemus gets that spell back to resume our efforts. This is one well put-together wall — perhaps even dwarven stonework.

27TH OF GROWTH

We break through! We emerge on a ledge. Looking about twelve feet down, we see some sort of rails set into the floor of a long corridor. It looks brand-new. So this is how they're transporting their materials. We follow along on the ledge toward the warehouse's location with our skulk ally Nos scouting ahead.

He comes back to tell us of a work area up ahead with a lot of people and noise. That's about the right location for the warehouse we were heading toward. When we are fifty feet away, we can see some of the machinery in the room. Plus there's a great big steam engine on the rails, with a large cart hooked up behind it and loading/unloading hoists nearby. We formulate a plan.

Barbatos casts *rope trick* and some of us hide in the secret compartment the spell creates. Tharn is invisible and Barbatos gets the attention of a guard. He attempts to *charm* him with a wand but it fails, and the guard sounds the alarm. Tharn and Barbatos run up and hide in the *rope trick* area with us as guards come out to search. After a few minutes, the guards go back, except for one.

Plan B. Diethan lets down the rope a tad to open the window in the *rope trick*, and I lean out and grab the surprised guard. I yank him inside with us and pin him while Barbatos tries the *charm* again. And again. And *again*. It fails a dozen times and now the wand is worthless. We now try to question our prisoner. Unsurprisingly he is not cooperative, so we try a *truth* potion. This finally works,

We learn his name is Noram and that the Shuul do indeed have our skulk friend Shim. They caught him in a trap in the elevated platform room—the Shuul can detect people going through there. He's being held in some cells or labs in the back of a big cave. Noram knows nothing about captured litorians, but he does know Doctor Feegus, whose lab is at the back of that same big cave beyond the loading dock. He says there are six other guards down there plus the captain and several constructs at work.

He adds that Doctor Feegus is a little creepy — not a large man, he shaves his head and wears goggles. He has pale skin, very red lips, and wears a long grey lab coat. Feegus created the Prajdall in his lab at the back of the big cave behind a tower. Noram says there is one iron angel here in the central structure in the big cave (a different place from the tower, apparently).

We give Diethan Noram's clothes and weapons as a disguise. Tharn invisibly goes out and sneaks down, followed by the disguised Diethan, who is also invisible. Diethan climbs a crane and manages to drop a net onto a Shuul dwarf. Calista stuns another guard, whom I subdue. Tharn slays some guards who come charging in from a corridor to blast him with dragon rifles. Diethan continues wreaking havoc with the crane, but then a worker comes in and commands a clockwork construct to attack us! I make short work of it, and Barbatos slays a Shuul guard with *magic missile*. Then a boar-riding armored dwarf charges in at Archinemus! More constructs arrive and the disguised Diethan tries to command the workers to fire up the train. Thanks to a command from my magical animal-affecting longsword, the boar lies down and goes to sleep, much to the dwarf's agitation. Archinemus and Calista finish him off. Now we're ready to find the big cave.

There are more guards here, but Shuul-Diethan confuses them and Calista distracts one. A well-timed charge takes care of them. Continuing on to another room, Diethan runs afoul of an armored construct that gasses him. We all gang up on it and turn it into slag. We wake up Diethan, then try the door the construct was guarding. In here there's a pool with a great tower of shafts and a seam in the ceiling above. This seems to be the elevated platform we heard about. Diethan pretends to be the guard's relief and takes him out. With his dying action the guard cranks the alarm klaxon. We leave hurriedly.

Through the door out of here, we descend some stairs amid a mechanical thrumming sound and an intermittent crackling. We emerge onto a ledge in a big cave. More gas lamps light up the cavern here. Copper pipes run through the place. We see a number of other ledges and two great stalagmites stretching to the ceiling, connected by catwalks. We're very far from the ground. The place is hundreds of feet across.

What have we gotten ourselves into?

"Was that an alarm?" We hear voices behind us as we survey the cave. Nos takes off to scout ahead, and we run toward the tower, trying to be quiet but headed to the back of the cave, where we believe the labs/prisons to be.

Barbatos magically opens the door to the tower and Tharn and I rush in to battle a Shuul warrior and a Shuul knight plus two awful armored constructs with blades and arm cannons. A figure on the roof drops acid on Calista but, undaunted, she rushes in to heal the dying Tharn. Disguised as a Shuul knight, Barbatos summons an elemental up on the roof next to the acid mage. Almost knocked out from transferring Tharn's wounds, Calista webs up the stairway to stymie reinforcements. A robed and veiled chaos mage enters with a Shuul guard and instructs him, "Kill — no, *subdue* the litorian." I fend off her mind control attempts. Meanwhile, the reinforcements hack at the webbing. "We're coming, Sir Corloss!" they cry, but by now their commander is dead. Archinemus takes out the last construct and Tharn savages the mage (what was a chaos mage doing with the order-loving Shuul, anyway?). The halfling acid mage from the roof, having taken care of the elemental, arrives to zap us with his wand. "Where are my people?" Tharn demands. The little wizard is surprised. "You *know* about the litorians?" he stammers. "I didn't do anything to your friends. Feegus has them in his lab!" I manage to grab the little guy and demand, "Take us there now!" But he squirms away, yelling over his shoulder, "Feegus' lab is in the back of the cave, beneath the tower! Don't worry about me!"

Nos returns and directs us to a machinery room that generates power to this place and harbors a prisoner. Then the guys down below start to break through the web, so we dash from the tower onto a catwalk and Barbatos *arcane locks* the door behind us. No sooner do we arrive on the catwalk than we're attacked by riders on flying metallic bugs. And from across the cave, some dwarves are shooting cannons at us!

We make it across the catwalk to the machinery room Nos described. We emerge onto another catwalk high up off the floor. All around us are cables and spinning cylinders, pistons, and whirring clockwork mechanisms. This, as we learn, is the Generator Room. I'm in awe. Suspended a few feet above the catwalk is a transparent cube filled with a swirling bluish gas. "Release the creature or die!" says Tharn to the worker in this place. "Okay, if you'll let me live," the worker replies. "But I'm not exactly sure what will happen." He pulls a lever, and lightning bursts from the cube. The creature isn't in the lightning. The creature *IS* the lightning!

“Destor be praised!” shouts Barbatos, referring to the lightning lord whose temple we passed through on our way here. Archinemus urges the freed creature to go out and expend its wrath on the Shuul. It starts sucking up electrical power from the spinning cylinders, draining them. Did this generator siphon the energy from the lightning creature to power this base?

Before we can figure it out, two more Shuul approach, whom Diethan parries. “They’ve released Destor’s Minion!” one cries. The minion starts sending arcs of energy at our enemies and Barbatos shoots them with his *wand of cold*. While the minion is draining the cylinders, Archinemus grabs a lightning-bolt shaped rod from the cube. Suddenly, the minion of Destor is pulled into the rod, which now pulses with energy in Archinemus’ hand. “Everything is going to be all right,” Archinemus says calmly. “Now let’s get out of here. We’ve got some friends to save.”

We can hardly argue with that.

SESSIONS XXXVI & XXXVII—THE PRAJDALL LAB

STILL THE 27TH OF GROWTH

After our inadvertent release of Destor’s Minion, we decide to high-tail it out of the Generator Room. I toss a couple wrenches into the last operational capacitors, causing the generator to spark to a halt, and follow my friends out — just in time to be welcomed by cannonfire from those damn dwarves across the way. Shuul guys buzzing around on flying dragonfly-shaped constructs continue to harass us, but Calista stymies one with a wind spell. Diethan leaps astride the dragonfly and it dives straight down toward the water below. In the nick of time he manages to pull up and flies crazily toward the ceiling far above. He leaps from the saddle moments before the bug impacts on the ceiling, and Archinemus manages to grab hold of him and pull him onto the catwalk again.

Meanwhile, Tharn and Calista take out some dwarf cannons and a boar rider and I get a cannonball in the gut. Then Archinemus shoots a *lightning bolt* from Destor’s wand at two other cannons across the way. We race toward the back of the cave, a gunman suspended from a wire above sniping at us as we go.

As we approach the tower beneath which lies Feegus’ lab — and, we hope, the captive litorians — a troop of Shuul knights runs out to meet us. Archinemus lays into them with a *chaos hammer* spell from the skull we acquired beneath Pythoness House. Barbatos uses his skull-tipped rod to speak a *word of chaos*, and they drop like flies. We run down the stairs inside the tower, following some cables. Nos the skulk returns from reconnoitering. He didn’t find Shim but he did pinch some potions and scrolls from the mages’ quarters. He thinks Shim could be in the corner of the cave, in the central castle complex, or here.

In this tower, Tharn discovers a litorian from his tribe in a cell! This guy, Vardan, looks not ill handled, but tired. He tells us they have been “changing” one of their compatriots down in the lab. We arm Vardan and head with him through the door and into the lab, protected by a powerful anti-law spell from Pythoness House.

We enter the lab. It is the strangest place I have ever been in, full of pipes and cables and mechanisms. I could really like it here, if it weren’t for the taint of slavery. A large round central chamber with glass walls holds a sickly-looking litorian (named Nothell, Tharn tells us), and more glass cells along the back hold more of them. All of them look desperate to get out. A vast machine runs along the back near the cells. However, all the devices in here appear to be inert. Aha — we shut down their power by taking out the Generator Room! I’m so glad we didn’t have to come in here when these devices were bristling with energy...

Confronting us are four creatures that look to have been dwarves once. Now they are well armored and scary, with sluglike lower bodies. Something about them reeks of formidability. Nerlene Camus is here playing with one of the machines, and standing atop the central chamber is a bald, paunchy man in a long gray coat: Dr. Feegus. “Try to leave the litorian alive,” he calls out to his Prajdall, surveying us.

The Prajdall are tough, hard to hit, and very solid. When you manage to harm one, it heals itself, and if you finally kill one, it explodes! We try to gang up on them to foil their regeneration ability. My chaos spear deals grievous blows, and together we hack at them until they detonate. Calista saps the strength from each with a magic ring, and Barbatos strikes at them with his *wand of cold*. Feegus cries out in denial when each one falls.

We push through to the stairs leading up to the cells and best a dwarf in powered armor. Nerlene sends a cloud of black smoke at us to blind us, but Calista magically blows it right back at her.

Nerlene throws acid flasks at us as we climb the stairs to the platform where the litorians are held in their glass cubicles. Archinemus and I battle another Prajdall. Tharn, Vardan, and Diethan climb up to the platform, where Vardan starts yanking on levers to release his tribe-mates. Tharn goes after Nerlene and slays her while Diethan bull rushes a confused Feegus right off the platform. (That *cloak of chaos* spell from Pythoness House certainly has done well for us, confusing any who hit us!)

All of a sudden a new creature pops into being on the platform above: The “tentacled master” we’ve been hearing about. Like a snake sliding across our brains, its voice sounds in our heads. “So, now we know who’s been sending the shadow creatures to spy on us. I see, Feegus, that you can’t even maintain your own lab.” Feegus trembles. “These invaders have the stink of Shilukar upon them,” it says in our heads.

Barbatos casts *grease* on the floor where the tentacled creature is standing. The creature tries to command Diethan to kill his friends, but our protective chaos spell saves the day again. It then tries to probe Tharn’s mind but succeeds only in getting sliced open with Tharn’s sword, *Wolf-Brother*. Barbatos wounds the creature grievously with his wand. Calista drinks a *potion of levitate* and floats up to obliterate it with a *coldscream* scroll. “Cephalyx” is the last thing it thinks before it dies. What do you suppose that means?

Meanwhile, Feegus clutches a syringe and mutters crazily to himself, “We’ll rebuild the lab and get some new subjects, and then everything will be all right again.” Tharn seizes the opportunity to break through the enormous glass cylinder and free the pitiful litorian subject inside. She’s covered with boils and purple patches of sick-looking flesh. She can only crawl toward her rescuer.

I finally manage to take down a demoralized Prajdall (“Master? What should I do? There are so many of them, Master...”), and then we — with the help of some of the freed litorians — finish off the deranged Doctor Feegus. His final word, looking at me, was, “Titan?” Hmmm....

The litorians go medieval on the bodies of the fallen Shuul. They are definitely not the same people who went missing some months back — slavery has changed them. However, one litorian is still missing. The group has not seen that one, Sallam, since the slave pens, we learn.

We cripple Feegus’ Prajdall machine with a stolen Shuul detonation device and strike the evil doctor’s head from his shoulders, since Shilukar once promised us a 1,000 gp bounty for it.

Nos returns. He didn’t find Shim, but he thinks he is inside a large structure in the center of the cave. He also located a place where we could rest. More Shuul are on their way here, so we gather up a bunch of tools and other supplies from a storage room and head out with the former captives.

The skulk takes us through a small door in a quiet office, where Barbatos swipes Feegus’ journals. We pass through a low corridor threaded though with large pipes. We emerge into a massive natural cave, almost at the level of the water. We can see the lights of the big cave far above. We rest on a safe ledge by the water, and the litorians tell their story. They are Vardan, Barris, Nothell, Wayvor, Keth, and Mowran. They were all part of a hunting party ambushed on the plains and brought to Ptolus. The slavers who took them were the Ennin. They’ve almost always remained underground since arriving in the city. The six of them (the Shuul only wanted six — they didn’t buy Sallam) were purchased by a human man, and other humans brought them through underground passages into a new place, where they first saw the bald, black-garbed humans with strange things on their eyes and dragon pistols. Since arriving here, they were kept in the cell where we found Vardan, but one by one were taken into the room with the glass cells. There, lightning bolts and strange lights were used to change them. Something led the Shuul to think they’d get better results from the women. This went on for weeks. They hope Sallam has met a better fate than they. They had feared no one would ever come for them.

Barbatos learns from the purloined journals that Feegus was paranoid but very smart. He was one of the Farrowers, a group of Shuul interested in creating new living things. Other groups within the organization are Gearsmiths and Lightningsmiths. There are also four political groups of Shuul:

- 1) The “let’s destroy chaos and all Galchutt remnants” group. They are partially backed by more of the mind-reading tentacled creature s we met earlier; apparently they rebelled against their former Galchutt masters eons ago. Feegus lists a bunch of info about their life cycle and variations, as he does not trust them. He cites a long-term war with the dark elves and a long-term hatred for the Hu-Charad, also called the Ancient Titans (!). The creature we fought was named Xilaranatak. We’re still not sure what “Cephalyx” means. It appears to be the name of someone who has another lab, and Feegus really seemed to fear it.
- 2) The “let’s control the Empire” group. These guys work with Kevris Killraven’s people (particularly one Terris Brunchart) to get their slaves and accomplish other stuff. They also work with the Sorn, a mages’ guild (some members work as assassins).
- 3) A group of religious fanatics who ally with outsiders called the iron angels. These Shuul do anything the angels tell them.
- 4) The largest group wants to bring rationality and justice to the world in the name of progress and science. They want to bring ease and comfort to the world but seem ignorant of the other three groups. This group doesn’t include anyone in a position of power, unfortunately.

None of the groups are all that interested in law and social order. They just want to further their own goals.

On his watch that night, Tharn hears an organized search going on for us far above. Barbatos uses a wand to create the image of a rock shelf over us to shield us from the eyes of the searchers. They come within thirty feet of us, but they don’t see us. “Let’s get out of here before those oozes show up,” says one of the searchers as they depart. I keep a weather eye out for oozes with Tharn until it’s Archinemus’ watch.

In a little while, Archinemus spots a grey ooze on the water making its way toward us. We head up to the passage above again, defending ourselves from it as we go. We rest for the remainder of the night uncomfortably in the passageway. We awaken ready to go out and find Shim and then get out of this wretched place.

Back in Dr. Feegus’ office, all is quiet. We silence a workman on his lunch break outside the lab and head upstairs to the bridge that will take us to the central castle....

SESSIONS XXXVII (CONT'D) & XXXVIII—EXIT STRATEGY?

28TH OF GROWTH

We’re on our way out of the Shuul underground enclave with our litorian friends, newly rescued from that awful Prajdall laboratory. But first we still have to locate Shim, our skulk friend. Still dressed as a Shuul agent, Diethan attempts to bluff our way past the first batch of guards we see. It only works for a minute, though, then the battle is on! We dispatch a Shuul knight and a boar and its rider, then pick the lock into the central castle while being harassed by a clockwork dragonfly and rider.

Inside, a couple dwarves defend the main castle level. There is another capacitor in this level, like the ones we saw (and destroyed) in the Generator Room. But it is also a big magnet, as we discover to our chagrin. A dwarf flips a lever, and Tharn slams into the magnet. Calista, Diethan, and I slowly get pulled into it as well. Being unarmored, the litorians remain fairly unaffected, and Mowran is able to get in there and flip the lever off again.

We head upstairs, seeking the cell that holds Shim. A captive dwarf confirms that the “shadowman” is here. Upstairs we find a horrid machine with a human corpse strapped to it. Cables run from the poor fellow to the magnet/capacitor that reaches up through the ceiling from the lower level. We see poor Shim unconscious hanging from manacles chained to the wall, and on the steps, Nos lies unconscious, too.

A nine-foot-tall black-gloved and masked figure in a long grey coat stands next to him menacingly, watching us enter. Could this be an iron angel? Tharn smells the same greasy, metallic odor that he smelled back in the shop when an invisible bodyguard entered with Nerlene Camus. “All intruders into my sanctum die!” the figure says.

We charge in, and our foe summons four blade-skinned monsters to aid him. They can shoot knives from their bodies as projectiles! I’ve never seen anything like these things, which I later learn are called bladelings. The iron angel has two hand cannons and can shoot two targets at once! His blood runs like quicksilver under our assault, but we take heavy casualties at the same time.

And then another one appears as though summoned — it looks just like the one we’re fighting! Calista stabs him with a *silent scream*, and when his head explodes we learn that the iron angel was in fact not wearing a mask as it first appeared: The metallic veneer was his own flesh.

The second iron angel doesn’t seem as tough as the previous one, but its blows seem made to hurt the humans in our group. When we finally bring him down, he just fades away.

We take down the unconscious Shim and try to heal him and Nos, but they don’t wake up. I take the hand cannons from the first iron angel—each one has only one round in it, because he was able to reload from ammo *in his arm*. The body has started to shrivel already. This is like no other creature I’ve seen before. He’s all desiccated and lumpy and bizarre looking. But I do like his long leather coat.

Our exit strategy is not fancy: Run for it toward the elevator. Let’s see how that works.

STILL THE 28TH OF GROWTH

We burst out of the central castle, the litorians bringing up the rear while carrying the two skulls. We confront some Shuul agents outside the door and lay them low (the hand cannon from the iron angel serves us well—it’s got anti-human ammunition). But more of them are waiting for us on the bridge. Barbatos creates a magical image of the iron angel that diverts some of the Shuul. A fighter-construct jumps into the battle and attacks Barris, one of the rescued litorians. The construct, a guard, a dwarf, and a Shuul knight and halfling we’ve fought before battle us fiercely, but with the litorians’ help, we win through, even under constant cannonfire.

We emerge onto the last bridge before the tunnel that leads back to the elevator room. A guard astride a mechanical dragonfly aims a searchlight at us and cries out a warning. We can’t take too much more of this armed resistance—the cannonfire has wounded most of the litorians, and we’re almost out of spells. We race up a long staircase and back into the room with the pool, where some workers have just finished disabling the elevator. Archinemus takes out another construct by shooting a blast of lightning from his rod. How long has he been able to do that?! We hear him murmur under his breath something about “Destor,” the lightning lord. Then Tharn and Archinemus compel the worker to repair the elevator he just disabled.

“Wait a minute!” Archinemus shouts as the worker gets the elevator operational again. “I need to go back to the temple of Destor. There is something I must do there that’s very important. If we achieve it, great rewards will be ours—perhaps even a divine *wish*.” We’re not sure how much of this is Archinemus and how much is the lightning creature that went into the rod he carries, but we assure our friend that we will go there with him after we see the skulls and the litorians to safety. He agrees, and we head up the elevator back into the welcome starlight.

The platform stops at the level of the cobblestone street and the surface magically merges in appearance with its surroundings. We have emerged in the southern part of Midtown. No one is near, as it seems to be roughly midnight.

“Ah, the stars!” sighs one of the litorians. “Even here in this accursed city, they look sweet.”

And with that, we head for the Mane and a welcome rest. The litorians thank us for saving their lives and their honor, and Tharn and his people begin to make plans to urge the litorians here at the Mane to leave the city. We decide to stay here for the time being. Diethan takes a good look at the unconscious skulls and thinks they suffer from a magical or supernatural effect that will wear off in time. Meanwhile, we want to look through the papers that we took from Feegus’ office, seeking evidence of his lunacy to show the rest of the Shuul. We want to make it clear to them that we have no further argument with them—our conflict with them stops with Feegus.

But more immediately, on the morrow we plan to accompany Archinemus back to the temple of Destor—and whatever awaits us there.

SESSIONS XXXIX & XL—ARCHINEMUS GONE ROGUE...

29TH OF GROWTH

Archinemus is gone! His note said that he didn’t want to draw all of us into his own personal quest in the temple of Destor. Shim and Nos are awake now and say that he left six hours ago. They’re very appreciative and want to repay us for rescuing them, but first we have to catch poor compelled Archinemus — but that won’t be easy, because he took the map with him! As we contemplate shortcuts, we receive a summons to Castle Shard for later today. It seems Barbatos wrote them yesterday to tell them we were back and to seek aid in ending Archinemus’ compulsion.

My dad helps me research a shortcut to the temple of Destor in the Delver’s Guild Library (it helps when your father is the head librarian!), but we conclude that the river route is risky due to underwater rapids and likely longer than the way we went before. I tell him what little we discovered about the “Elder Titans” and he promises to see what he can find out about them.

Meanwhile, Barbatos visits a temple of Inurath (goddess of war) and gets a priestess named Shendra Dir to help him speak with dead Doctor Feegus’ head. He learns that Cephalyx is “an outsider focused on human brains and the mind.” The head adds that no one else can continue the Prajdall project now that it (Feegus) and Nerlene are dead. It didn’t know (or doesn’t remember) the dark elf Shilukar. It says Terris Brunchart is a Shuul merchant in the city who helped them buy the litorians. And finally, it says Xilaranatak is an “elder brain” from deep below the city with whom Cephalyx was allied from ages past.

And then, out of nowhere, the head finishes, “Evil Titans...”. Wow. Before yesterday I didn’t even know of the Titans, and now I discover they were evil!? My people?

Anyhow, Shendra said that if she'd had the whole corpse she could have gotten complete sentences. Barbatos promises to bring the entire body next time. This aspect of the adventuring life I can do without.

We all meet up at Castle Shard, still worried about our obviously mind-controlled sibeccai friend. We bring Lord Zavere up to date on our visit to the Shuul and Destor's temple. We ask Lady Rill for help in getting to Archinemus. She can scry him because he's wearing his Castle Shard friendship ring. She can tell that he's unharmed, but walking in complete darkness. He's already at the passage that leads to the beginning of the bridge where we met the grell. (It took us almost two days to get to that point! How'd he do it so fast?) She allows us to watch his progress.

Archinemus continues to move carefully but very fast through the maze of chambers we passed through not even a week ago. He enters a room whose floor is covered in bones. He's very cautious here. He reaches a big iron door, which he unlocks with his lockpicks and reaches another door with some levers, which he starts pulling. When nothing happens, he starts talking to his magical lightning rod, to no avail, apparently. It seems there's a riddle to the order in which you're supposed to pull the levers, but it's too much for him. He finds another path instead. He encounters a number of traps and takes a leg wound from some spikes that jut out from the floor. He swipes some heavy platinum idols from a chamber he passes through and some jewelry from another chamber.

He finally makes it into the room he sought: in it, hanging from a chain dangling from the ceiling is a small building. It looks like a tiny temple. He has to pile some tables up on top of each other and climb them to reach this temple. He knocks at its little door and says something. It opens, and we can see a tiny figure who resembles the statue of the god he passed in another room. This tiny figure is a bit paunchy, not too handsome. Could it be Destor? "Appearances can be deceiving," Rill says. The guy and Archinemus converse for a while, gesturing at the rod a bit. With a flash, the little guy leaps from the tiny temple and transforms himself to a fifteen-foot height! He takes the rod from Archinemus, points it at him, and a lightning bolt strikes him. Our friend vanishes!

Lady Rill casts another spell, and we see Archinemus again — he's just appeared in Delver's Square amid what appears to be a shower of rose petals! We thank our friends from Castle Shard and race back to our store. Out of the corner of my eye as we depart I spy Shilukar watching us leave.

Our carriage driver explains that there's a party in Delver's Square today to celebrate some adventurers who saved the city from being sucked into hell through a gate in the lair of some gnolls. Aha! Shilukar's old lair! Wow, we had no idea there was such danger from the Children of Ravvan.

When we arrive, we see someone dropping rose petals down from a hot-air balloon floating above. There's a big wagon parked in the square. On it we see an elf woman dressed in leather waving to the crowd. Next to her is a serene woman carrying a staff and a guy in green. A man in plate armor is accepting a basket of flowers from some children. Some gnoll heads are stuck on spikes on the wagon, too.

At the shop, there's Archinemus waiting for us, all safe and sound. And he talked to a god! Seanus and I are very impressed. Of course, he tells us that Destor was a greatly diminished demigod sort of fellow, but still! Apparently Destor wanted him to become his high priest and rebuild his church here in Ptolus. In return, our friend would get the rod back. Archinemus said he'd think it over for a week and then return. He thinks it might be interesting to be able to set the direction for a new church, but we're all very wary. Calista doesn't trust gods that compel your presence at their dollhouse-temples.

Barbatos and I venture back to Castle Shard to deliver the head of Dr. Feegus and collect our reward. Shilukar claims not to be familiar with the doctor's outsider backers. He is very interested in Feegus' notes and wants to hear more of the Shuul's various energy sources. He rubs the whole Ravvan thing in our face a bit. "I do hope that those adventurers really took care of things," he says. "One can never be sure, can one?"

Tharn asks Barris, one of the rescued litorians, to protect Charnoth when he returns to their tribe. He also asks Barris to take anyone from Slave City who wants to leave out to the Central Plains.

Shim and Nos return to the shop and offer Archinemus a gift in gratitude. It's a tiny ebony toy horse and carriage. We gasp in wonderment as he chants a magic word "Alash" and the carriage grows into a full-sized grand black carriage with gold trim and four black horses and a driver. "To help you make your way around the city," Shim (or is it Nos?) whispers, "in thanks for your unprecedented kindness. We are friends forever." Then both of them, we realize, become a little bit easier for us to see. Isn't that odd?

30TH OF GROWTH

The next day Tharn and I head off to the Slave City. We meet up with Moondros and Salsan. Karaal Kavor and I have a nice talk about the role of freedom champions in the world. Tharn finds about eight people who want to leave with the litorians, and he offers them some of our captured (forged) Imperial identity papers. We return to the city the next day.

31ST OF GROWTH

We have a grand send-off for the litorians. Tharn has provisioned them all for their long journey. Vardan gives a nice speech of thanks to us. "Stories will be told of you for generations," he says and declares us all honorary members of the tribe. "Should you ever come south to our people, you will be welcomed as brothers and sisters." We tearfully bid them farewell.

1ST OF BLESSING

We divide up our most recent loot and take stock of how business is going. Myraeth's is doing well, we're glad to see. For the rest of this week we train and rest. I work hard to perfect my skill with the greataxe.

5TH OF BLESSING

At lunch today, we're shocked to see Archinemus disappear in a flash of lightning. He later tells us that he found himself in the lightning god's presence. Destor commanded him to go to his old temple in the city, clean it up, and make it acceptable for worship. Then he was supposed to find someone to be his priest and ensure the safety of his temple. The temple must be operational by the end of the year — that's five months. In exchange, Archinemus may use the lightning rod to further these aims. In addition, he grants our friend a wish: that the rod be joined with the form of his magical skivver as one weapon. "Do not be lax. I will be watching," the deity warned him.

When he returns to tell us the news, Calista asks, "Isn't the temple of Destor illegal? Isn't that why they were forced underground?" Hmm....

Celdore of Dark Leaf comes over to join us at the Ghostly Minstrel. The Killravens were not happy that we did not care to share with them the location of the Balacazars' secret hideout. However, after our recent foray down to Feegus' lab, they now consider everything to be equal, with no further debts to be paid — only a favor. Kevris would like to know how we found out who to eliminate and who not to eliminate in our recent activities with the Shuul. It seems as though we have unwittingly taken out Kevris' enemies and left her allies alone. We're a little puzzled as to this coincidence but we simply say that we are glad to have reached this understanding.

I then ask Celdore about the Hu-Charad. Can he teach me of them, of their language and their history? (He spoke their tongue last time we met.) "You will find, my friend, that there are no better keepers of history than the elves," he says. He advises me to go into the forest north of the city if I want to seek the elf lorekeepers. He tells us how to reach the elves of the Moonsilver Forest: Follow the roads north along the coast then inland to Faelasith village and speak with Sael Wintersong. Celdore cautions that using his name won't help us much, except maybe with Sael himself.

Celdore can tell me a few things, though. He says the Hu-Charad stayed along the coast to the north when they came here thousands of years ago. Ptolus didn't even exist then. When these Elder Titans came, the Natharl'nac'na were asleep, but some of their servants were not. Some of the Titans who came here became corrupted by these ancient evil forces. Some think these Evil Titans still live under the Spire, Celdore says. He tells us a story that one of them allied himself with Ghul when he tried to conquer the world, and though Ghul fell, the Titan himself remained, unliving. He'd still be in Goth Gulgamel, if the story's true. (Calista later tells us that her cousin Aliya and the Runewardens encountered a giant undead Titan in Goth Gulgamel and, in exchange for their bag of bones, he let them through and into the chamber of the Entropy Sphere. Wow.)

Celdore's not familiar with the fortress of Ar-Nampur, but he thinks the name means "Home away from home." We pay Celdore for his mediating service, and he says we can seek him at Iridithil's Home if we have any more questions.

SECOND WEEK OF BLESSING

Calista meets with Taera, one of the heroes who destroyed the gates to the realm of Ravvan, and tries to find out how final their victory really was. She leaves still not knowing for sure. She hopes to meet with another of their group, named Neles, soon to ask more questions. These guys don't really look any more powerful than us. How in the world did *four* people go down there and kill all those blue gnoll demons?

I look into Terris Brunchart, who helped Feegus buy the litorian slaves, and learn that he is a well-to-do merchant. He does a lot of work in the North Market in the "importing and exporting business." Right. Perhaps he can lead us to our last remaining litorian slave. The group has not seen that one, Sallam, since the slave pens, we recall.

15TH OF BLESSING

Calista learns that Neles and Taera and their demon-gnoll-slaying friends (Carter Dune and Chalderic Noramin) were killed this morning at their home. It was very grisly, apparently, as though they were torn apart by animals. I guess it's not over.

Thuma Peun, a friend of the adventuring group who found them dead, is at the group's house when we arrive in our magical carriage (a gift from the grateful skulks). We also meet her friend Jerit. The heroes' bodies are as we heard: ripped apart, as though by animals. We find strands of long animal-like hair near Chalderic's body.

Archinemus, Tharn, and Barbatos search the bedrooms upstairs and determine that, while it doesn't look as though anything was touched, there also appears to be nothing of value left in the rooms (no potions, gold pieces, etc.). A note in the wizard's (Carter's) spellbook says: "Still owe ten thousand gold for (Brother) Admar's rescue." We see that they are all members of the Delver's Guild.

Calista uses magic to determine that Neles was slain by a werewolf. Further spells tell her, shockingly, that the animal-like hairs near Chalderic's body belonged to a werewolf, and that the werewolf was Thuma, who is still there with us! With no hesitation, Calista tries to trap the deceitful friend with an *eldritch web* spell, and before our very eyes Thuma transforms into a half-wolf, half-human creature! With a roar, she launches herself at Tharn and stuns him, but then becomes *distracted* by Calista. Meanwhile, I manage to grapple Jerit, just as he begins transforming into a half-wolf, half-human creature too. We struggle in the hall and in the melee, I find myself shackled to the Jerit-wolf figure. "Let's take him downtown," Diethan says after applying the manacles. With friends like these...

In desperation I try to bash the creature into the wall, but that move and all our weapons seem ineffective. Only Calista's and Barbatos' magical attacks seem to do any good. Frustrated at his continual (successful) bites at me, I attempt to toss Jerit over the banister of the staircase while everyone else continues pummeling Thuma, hoping to subdue her with magic and smoke bombs. Even though Calista *distracts* him magically, I'm foiled when he breaks the manacles.

Meanwhile, Thuma escapes out the window and Tharn and Barbatos *fly* after her and bring her down with one final barrage of *magic missiles*. (Wow, I didn't know either of them could fly!) Diethan's pet wolf Lunes starts dragging the dead body back — now looking like a human woman again — up the street to the house. Some neighbors become agitated at the sight. "Call the Watch! Get the constable! A wolf has killed a woman!" Diethan urges them to get to safety. "Go back in your house, you morons!" he cries.

Finally I manage to tackle Jerit just as he's about to jump out the window himself. In a cloud of smoke from the smoke bomb, we all wind up piling onto him, trying in vain to subdue him. One last bite knocks me out. But Barbatos smacks the creature with a *lightning bolt* that unfortunately also takes out Diethan from his position at the window haranguing pedestrians. Calista revives me just in time for me to see Jerit leap out the hole in the wall where the *lightning bolt* broke through. Flying, Tharn and Barbatos give chase, the wizard pelting the fleeing lupine with *magic missiles* from his wand. The werewolf ducks into a building as Tharn catches up. The litorian catches sight of him skulking out of the house, once again in human form. He fires an arrow at Jerit from the air, crying, "He's a werewolf! Murderer!" hoping to attract attention.

The rest of us take off after them (with Thuma's body) in our carriage and finally reach them just as Jerit ducks into a warehouse. A crowd is forming outside. "These werewolves just murdered the Saviors of Ptolus!" I cry, racing inside, only to be cut down again by the foul lycanthrope. Some well-meaning locals race in with hatchets and for a moment seem to think Archinemus is the werewolf. Jerit cuts down Archinemus and has the gall to cry out, "I have slain the werewolf! You may all be at peace." Not so fast... Tharn, Calista, and Barbatos harry him with blows and a last few *magic missiles* as Diethan and his wolf deal the final blows at him.

In the carriage later, taking the bodies back to Barbatos' place, Diethan slugs the wizard in thanks for the *lightning bolts*. Calista and I stay to talk to the City Watch. How we're supposed to explain the missing werewolf bodies I'm not sure, but I leave that up to Calista. She handles the Watch gracefully and we gratefully depart.

I make my way to the Temple of Teun to have all my wolf bites looked at, and Tharn does the same thing at the Temple of Ashe. Calista goes to inform the Order of the Fist that one of their members (Thuma) was a lycanthrope. They say that it must have happened to her only recently — they would have known, otherwise.

Barbatos takes the werewolf corpses to the temple of Inurath, Mistress of War, to speak to the bodies (good as his word, they are whole). "We must find the idol," Thuma's body says, "we" meaning the followers of Ravvan. "We are everywhere." Ah, yes, the *idol of Ravvan*, whose effects made Barbatos want to attack me with tooth and claw when we were down in Shilukar's lair. The body of Jerit reveals that they did not steal any items from their house and explains that the missing Admar is the group's priest of Lothian friend. Barbatos asks: To whom do you report? "The mountain temple of Nerugar in the land of Nar," the corpse says, adding that he knew Shilukar because he "helped the siblings but then he betrayed them. We hate him now."

The main lesson I take away from this whole episode is this: ALWAYS wear my new plate armor, even on social calls. I go home and collapse into bed.

SESSIONS XLI & XLII—GNOLLS GONE WILD

16TH OF BLESSING

I have definitely had better mornings. What a beating I got in the fight yesterday! Definitely wearing my new armor today. I visit the Delver's Guild office to see what I can find out about the slain adventuring group. The group recently celebrated its one-year anniversary (Brother Admar Gend, cleric of Lothian, was the fifth member, in addition to Taera Newsun, Neles, Carter Dune, and Chalderic Noramin). Meanwhile, Barbatos learns that they recently sold their valuable equipment for cash (to rescue Admar, we presume). Calista casts some spells on the body of Thuma — their friend-in-werewolf's-clothing — and learns that her last goal was to recover the *idol of Ravvan*.

We go in search of Admar. Brother Fabitor of St. Gustav's Chapel said he hadn't seen Admar in three weeks. He urged us to go to St. Valien's rectory and see if he was at his rooms, but when we do, we learn that the people there haven't seen him in three weeks either. Back we go to Brother Fabitor's chapel to have him cast a divinatory spell to help us determine whether Admar is okay. Unfortunately, Fabitor's spell range doesn't extend out of Delver's Square. We need to find out where he is.

Nosing around town, we learn that Admar wasn't at the celebration following the group's "success" in routing the demon-gnolls. That seemed weird at the time. We get the definite impression that Admar went down into the gnolls' with the rest of the group but never came out. Admar always hated Carter Dune's weasel familiar, folks say — it tormented him. But we didn't find the familiar at the house where the others were slain! Local shopkeepers confirm for us that the group was selling a bunch of possessions, not just the treasure they gained underground. No one knows why they were trying to raise money, just that they needed to buy something at the Emerald Eye (a competitor's magic shop). It seems that they engineered their own celebration to encourage the townsfolk to give them a reward (a few thousand gold pieces).

17TH OF BLESSING

We deduce that Admar's most likely location is somewhere down in Delver's Hole, so in the morning we take Brother Fabitor over there to work his magic. Sadly, he was still not in range. Hmmm...

Off to the Emerald Eye magic shop to try to scare up a lead. Pompous jerk "Lord" Palkam Mosh (decked out in old-time wizard robes and pointy hat) there tells us that the group commissioned a special item: a *planar breach*. It seems that poor Admar got sucked into the Beastlands, and this item can take its user there. They told him they had to rescue their friend. We agree to give him a final payment so we can take possession of the *planar breach*.

Then we go to see Brother Fabitor again with an update. But he has an update for us: Admar's friends already learned where the cleric was: in some small extradimensional space created by magical backlash. Hm, he's not in the Beastlands of Ravvan after all. Could he be in this pocket dimension with the idol? Brother Fabitor urges us to go after Admar and bring the idol back to St. Valien's Cathedral for destruction. We agree and plan to go tomorrow.

We return to the Eye to pay for the *planar breach*. We speak to Mosh's coworker, Una Sar — hey, I wonder if she's related to Zorin Sar, the guy who sent us troll fingers because we were buying Myraeth's? She simply smirks at our recognition.

From there, we head off to investigate Thuma's spartan residence, but we find nothing. We head back to the shop and assemble the *planar breach* in our back room next to the vault. The thing looks to me like just a bunch of pipes. When assembled, though, it forms a doorway that serves as a two-way portal between our world and the destination world. We discuss the ins and outs of planar travel — this, after all, is a fairly new science, as our world was closed to the rest of the cosmos up until three years ago.

18TH OF BLESSING

Fabitor tells us that all is in readiness at the cathedral for us to bring in Admar and the idol. He gives us a description of Admar so we'll know him when we see him. We return to the shop and head through the magical doorway.

We emerge someplace so dark, our light sources make no noticeable difference. The ground is sticky and gives a bit, and all around us we hear growls. Calista's *darkvision* spell doesn't work. It's even hard to find our way back to the doorway. We tie ourselves together and tie off the end of the rope to the vault door, then venture back through into the chill blackness.

With a spell, Calista detects the presence of the idol one hundred feet ahead. Then we hear amid the growing growls, a voice: "Is someone there?" It's Admar! We explain who we are, but he warns, "Be careful, the gnolls and demons can hear you!" We reach him and tie him to us and turn to leave, but the growls are much louder now — they seem almost to be forming words. Then I hear one right in front of me, and I manage to mow it over. It feels almost as big as me!

"Unhand us in the name of Shilukar!" shouts Barbatos. I don't know what he was trying to do with that, but of course this enrages our foes. "SHILUKAR!" a voice howls. "The betrayer!"

Then I emerge back into the shop. Behind me come Archinemus and Barbatos. We get ready for the gnolls to come out with the rest of our party. Diethan and his wolf come through next. I yank on the rope, then Admar makes it out. Poor guy, he looks like hell in his tattered robes. He's clutching the idol, but appears terrified. As soon as he emerges with the idol, surprisingly, the blackness in the doorway disappears, and we can see straight through the portal to the other end of the room. And there, looking perplexed, is Calista with a whole bunch of haggard-looking gnolls. They must have gotten shunted out of the pocket dimension when it closed up after the idol left it.

We launch ourselves at the gnolls. None of them are the blue-skinned demon-gnolls we dreaded so. Archinemus casts a spell of containment on the idol. Seanus comes running in from the front of the store to see what's going on and gets whacked by a gnoll. "Where are we? We can't let them have the idol!" shouts Admar. Not to worry, we dispatch the creatures in short order.

But before we can congratulate ourselves too much, we hear screams and cries coming from the outer shop and the street beyond. Oh no, when the plane closed, these gnolls popped in all over the place! "Whatever you do, do *not* admit responsibility for this!" shouts Archinemus. More crashes and screams come from the front of the shop. Three gnolls are making mincemeat of the store. Taevel is terrified and injured, but Jora and Seanus together manage to dispatch one. When we're through with them, we dash outside to Delver's Square to find more of them: dire hyenas, giant spiders with great batwings, two dozen gnolls, and two blue demon-gnolls. Lucky for us and everyone else, Delver's Square is always full of adventurers, and they've all engaged the enemies.

With things well in hand there, we summon our magical carriage and dash off to St. Valien's Cathedral. Well, everyone else does except me. I stay to tear into some gnolls in front of the shop, hacking them to pieces with Rastor (owner of the shop next door) and many other citizens. Never let it be said that the owners of Myraeth's are cowards when things get hot! The carriage barrels off, with Diethan next to the driver crying, "Out of the way! Coming through!" People launch themselves out of the road in a panic as they go by and soon they pull up to St. Valien's.

On the ride over, Admar tells my friends the whole story of his group's attack on the demon-gnolls' lair. "We managed to get to the central temple area, but the magic of the idol affected our minds. They overwhelmed us, and the only thing I could think of was to get rid of this idol." So he engineered a magical backlash that shunted him off into that extradimensional space, along with the idol and the foes around him.

A priestess of Lothian meets the group as soon as they arrive at the cathedral. Two acolytes open up a golden chest, which emits lovely golden light and place the idol inside. They wheel the box away, and the priestess congratulates us all. Admar slumps in relief — the group can see the indentations in his arms from his tight, weeks-long grip on the idol. My friends leave him in the capable hands of the priestess.

By the time the carriage returns to Delver's Square, we've taken care of all the invaders. The City Watch is doing one last sweep of the alleys with nets, and frightened locals are creeping out into the square again.

Then we go back inside and take stock of our shambles of a shop. And we wonder what we're going to do with a *planar breach* that no longer has a plane to attach itself to.

19TH OF BLESSING

Today Diethan gets a mysterious message from his sister, Alivia, asking him to find someone named Spyncer Coil, but he's not sure why. After some digging, Diethan, Archinemus, Barbatos, and Tharn discover that this guy's some kind of blacksmith. He had an episode a few years ago and spent some time in an asylum. He has a shady past, Diethan says — he knew the man a long time ago. The group learns that Spyncer has been working with a well-known weaponsmith named Kalbert Nom to forge three magical *Swords of Ptolus: Insight, Deceit, and Power*. They learn this from a guy trapped in a cage — but wait, I'm getting ahead of myself.

Some of their information they learn from Veda Medaris, head of the Ironworkers' Guild, whom Barbatos has a crush on. Another fellow gives them information as well. This man, Hadrien Runihan (related to the famous delver Abesh Runihan), is also looking for Spyncer Coil. They decide to seek the man together.

My friends trace Spyncer and Kalbert to their old foundry in the city, a strange, underground, metal-lined subterranean workshop of four rooms. Examining the workshop, the group finds a bedchamber and a square room with a circle carved on the floor (odd magical symbols are carved all around it). It seems as though it was made to focus power or a creature or something into the circle. But it's not a common summoning circle.

They find some creatures imprisoned in cages in the foundry's main chamber: a fiery dwarflike guy, a fiery salamander, and a fire elemental. The dwarf guy says that Spyncer went to the Pale Dogs for protection for some reason, and that Kalbert was dead. Sounds like Spyncer killed him. The freed fiery dwarf disappears as soon as the guys let him out of the cage — seems like it must have been preventing him from teleporting away. It and many other items here radiate magic.

This whole place looks as though someone has packed up and gone. Under the bed is a note with some random words on it. Barbatos can make sense of some of it: the part that refers to some degenerate skulls. Not nice guys like Shim and Nos, but shady customers (pun intended) who inhabit the shadows of the city, go about in disguise, have strange motivations, and really love magic. It also directs us to a specific corner in town.

SESSION XLIII & XLIV—THE TROUBLE WITH SPYNCE COIL

20TH OF BLESSING

A guy named Hadrien Runihan is helping my friends find Spyncer Coil (forger of the magical *Swords of Ptolus*) and Hadrien seems interested when Tharn brings up Calista's name. But how could he know her? Calista keeps to herself more than any of us do. But Tharn doesn't trust him. They decide to part ways with him, and in parting Hadrien offers to help us get in touch with the Pale Dogs, a local gang of street toughs who are supposed to be harboring Spyncer Coil.

Calista and I have spent the last two days working to find someone to teach us the Hu-Charad language: the language of my people. Sadly, no one in town seems to know how to speak it. No one has any books written in Hu-Charad. The only ones who even knew what we were talking about told us to seek the elves. Sounds like we'll have to visit that Moonsilver Forest village north of the city that Celdore told us about after all.

We reunite again back at the store around noon, where Diethan fills in Calista and me on their adventures of the last day. When Diethan shows us the letter he got from his sister asking him to find Spyncer, Calista takes note of some musical notes imbedded into it. Diethan explains that his sister is a musician sponsored by House Kath. He adds that this letter seems a little stiff — he's not sure it's really from her. Did she write it under duress? He says the notes form a tune called "Trouble Is My Birthright," and Calista reports that the style of a variation in the song is called "second child." Hmm, Alivia IS the second child in Diethan's family. Barbatos thinks the stilted tone means that she was writing the letter at someone else's command — someone who wants us to find Spyncer for them.

Before we can go any further, Diethan takes off with the letter and some previous letters from her and visits a forger. This dwarf, who runs a print shop as his legitimate business, confirms that they were written by the same hand, but that the newer letter was written more slowly with pauses in between words. Next stop for Diethan is House Kath. There, he speaks to a lady of the house, Miss Leeyalla Wort. She confirms that she saw Alivia at breakfast that morning and that she's fine, but that now she's off at her studies at the Conservatory. He thanks her and leaves for the Imperial Academy of Music, where he asks to see his sister. When the gatekeeper gives him trouble, he grabs the guy and throws him into our magical carriage, instructing the driver, "Myraeth's Oddities, on the double!" With the protesting man out of the way, Diethan is free to look around. He finds his sister and she appears fine, so he leaves and returns to the shop (where we have by this point managed to calm down the quite irate gentleman from the school).

That night, Hadrien arrives at the shop. He's a tall, slight man in a charcoal grey coat and wide-brimmed hat. When Calista sees him, she goes pale. It seems that while she was held prisoner in the Dark Reliquary years back (she's had quite the interesting life!), he came to see her with the marilith Drusii. He asks to be invited into the store—twice. He has not aged a day since Calista last saw him years ago. He says that at the time he visited her, he was looking for "an apprentice," but he won't give us a straight answer about what he wanted with Calista. Barbatos asks whether his interest in the blades of Spyncer Coil and Kalbert Nom has anything to do with the Covenant of Blood vampires. "I'm afraid I have *no* idea what you're talking about," he said with a slight smile. He checks his pocketwatch—the demon-possessed one from our experience with that little undead girl, Linele!—and departs, saying how sorry he was we couldn't do business.

Do the vampires want the three *Swords of Ptolus*? Did Hadrien want to make Calista a vampire? Thank goodness no one invited him into the store! And how did he get that demon-possessed watch from Linele anyway? Is she dead now for real?

We decide we don't need Hadrien to help us find the Pale Dogs and we set off first for the intersection noted on that piece of paper we found under Spyncer's bed. This is a residential area in Midtown. One of the houses here has a plaque that says "Orth, Second Floor." Hm, Methir Orth was the name of a guy who came to the store a while back seeking aethel stones! Sure enough, the name is on the note as well. After some debate over whether we should be prepared to beat up this fellow or just ask him why Spyncer Coil had his name and address, we head up to his door.

Methir Orth is tall and gaunt with a thin face; he's wearing a lot of clothing. When Barbatos tells him we know where he can find a lot of aethel stones, he invites us into his junky place. After a bit of intimidation from my litorian friends (and me, I guess), he admits that he has been working to acquire the *Swords of Ptolus* for a group of evil skulls. He confirms that he knows where Spyncer is and will trade the info for the location of the cache of aethel stones the members of the Order of the Legacy told us about some time ago.

He divulges that Spyncer is with an centaur named Tarkus in the Pale Dogs' refuge. Methir adds that Spyncer owed him money for item creation—*sword* creation—using aethel stones. Aha, he helped forge the *Swords of Ptolus* that everyone seems to want! We promise not to tell anyone he told us about the aram or that he's working for evil skulls, and we agree to return with the info on the stones' location once we've confirmed Spyncer's whereabouts. Diethan thinks it's weird to be sent to find an aram among the Pale Dogs — they wouldn't have such a high-profile creature as a member.

So we set off into the Warrens to look for him. Call us fools for walking through the absolute worst part of town at midnight—even the City Watch doesn't come into this maze of narrow filthy streets. There are no street lamps here, so it's very dark. With our *everburning* torches going, we are real marks. Some foul-mouthed kids try to spit on us from the roof of a nearby building, but Diethan shoots an arrow at them. "I hate everyone I've met today," Barbatos gripes.

That's when the toughs jump us. We make short work of this pathetic band. Barbatos *charms* one of the thugs (name of Scrud) and gets him to take us to Tarkus. We arrive at a well-lit building where people are gathered, and Scrud points. "That's Tarkus' place," he whispers, then scrams.

We see a number of grey-robed figures with iron staves in front of the building. "You don't have the right to say no to me," one of the robed figures tells a young man with dark circles painted under his eyes and black nail polish. "Out of my way, now." Diethan thinks the guys in robes are members of The Eight Shadows, a spellcasting group that works exclusively for the Balacazars. We hide in the shadows while Diethan goes off to reconnoiter the house and the grey robes go inside. Tharn sneaks in after them and finds all the Shadows threatening a centaur in the front room. "I'm your only hope of getting out of here alive," our friend says to the centaur, having quickly sized up the situation. "All right, then," says Tarkus.

A melee ensues, with us and Tarkus fighting all the grey robes in tight quarters. Tharn starts chopping off mage heads to make it harder to raise them from the dead — harder for them to tell the Balacazars what we did.

When it's all over, we ask for Spyncer. The centaur tells us he isn't here, but that he knows where he is (apparently Spyncer's a friend of a friend of his named Lyrian Voss). Since we saved Tarkus' life in the attack against The Eight Shadows, he agrees to give him up to us for 2,000 gp.

Tarkus warns that Spyncer may no longer have all three swords on him; he's been gone from his house a week now. These magic swords somehow manage to draw upon the essence of the city. "This guy's not all there," Tarkus says. "I don't know what he's planning. One minute he wants the swords, and the next minute he wants to get rid of them. It's like he wants to get them in some people's hands but not others." But that's all he knows.

Tarkus agrees to dispose of the bodies. "If there's one thing we know around here, it's that." So off we all go together to find Spyncer.

21ST OF BLESSING

Spyncer Coil has created three magical swords tied somehow to the city—*Insight*, *Power*, and *Deceit*—and everybody wants them. Apparently he thought the Pale Dogs could hide him from all who were looking for him (even the Balacazars). But we're onto him now.

It's late at night as Tarkus leads us through the Warrens. We come upon the place, but the guards see us coming and attack! While Tarkus sneaks away, we engage a bunch of Pale Dog thugs and their mangy hound. Diethan hears that they're about to take Spyncer out the back, so Barbatos sneaks back there and *arcane locks* the door. The ramshackle building catches fire thanks to a *burning hands* spell by the Pale Dogs' resident wizardess.

A man escapes out along the cliffside, but I use my Shuul potion injector and *ring of potion sharing* to grant myself and Tharn the ability to levitate, and we go after him and bring him back. When we return, the others have found Spyncer Coil: an old man lying on a bed, drooling and insensible. After Calista has healed him a bit, he sees Diethan and says, "But no, you're not the important one. Where's your sister?" Calista moves him out as flames from the house fire begin to lick at his bed. Meanwhile, I question the guy we pulled off the ledge of the cliffs. He says his name is Lizalle, and that he just took a sword from the overdosed-on-shivvel Spyncer. Where are the other two swords? He won't answer, but Diethan thinks they might be in the hands of Pale Dog leaders.

Spyncer was holding a poem when we found him, a sort of prophecy about three daughters (natives but not born here) for whom the swords were made. Sounds as though Diethan's sister is supposed to wield one! We recall that while Spyncer was mad, he supposedly had some sort of religious vision. The sword we recover from Lizalle is named *Insight*. It's not steel but some other dull grey material we can't identify. When Tharn holds it, he feels as though everything around him—even us—is being pulled into the sword. He quickly wraps it up again.

By the time we return to the shop, it's four in the morning. We offer a pill to Spyncer to keep him alive and we tie the wizardess to a chair. Then I keep watch out the shop window for the rest of the early morning, and Seanus keeps his eye on the old man. The rest of the predawn hours are uneventful—until Spyncer awakes. He sees Diethan and starts screaming. "Lord Asche, is that you? What's going on?" He seems to have gone mad again. Diethan pretends to be the god of the city. "Who are the native daughters?"

"Alivia?" he asks, then realizes it's her brother. "No, NO, not you! Oh Lord Asche, please tell me what to do next! Once again I have the clarity of mind to hear your words!" This must be the gist of the religious experience he had back when he was in the asylum.

The wizardess awakes and tells us that Spyncer hid *Deceit* and that a band of malevolent skulks have *Power*. "They haven't activated it and won't be able to do anything with it unless they have a whole bunch of aethel stones." (Oh, no! We promised to give their agent info about a cache of stones!) She says the swords are made of marlite, a naturally occurring material that appears near aethel stones; they absorb all the magic from it and make it totally unable to be affected by magic. She adds that Spyncer was totally insane and begged for shivvel while in her care.

"I don't know what happened to him, but it really messed up his mind." In his moments of lucidity he would talk to her of the swords. She says she knows the Balacazars are after the swords, as well as the Ironworkers' Guild and a couple different orders of knights (including the Knights of the Golden Cross). She doesn't know how many people know of Spyncer's poem's prophecy. She says he believed Asche told him that poem and taught him how to make swords out of marlite. Spyncer didn't trust the skulks, because they turned on him and stole *Power*. They wanted something—the Legacy of something or other. You needed a magical sword to get at the Legacy (the sword's name started with a Z or X, the wizardess thought), but they hoped to use one of the *Swords of Ptolus* instead.

Power is the only sword that is not activated now, the wizardess explains; the other two have their abilities engaged. They magically draw on the essence of the city. The longer they're in your possession, the more they allow you to do. And in certain people's hands they are more powerful still. *Insight* is supposed to give you great wisdom, she said. As she is leaving, she said Spyncer also told her the evil skulks have been putting some sort of pressure upon a girl at the Conservatory to do something—she doesn't know what. Ah, like maybe to get her brother to find the swords!

Meanwhile, Barbatos goes to visit the Temple of Asche and speaks with our friend Mand Scheben. He said the poem is written in typical meter of the hymns of Asche, but it is not one he knows. He wonders whether Spyncer has indeed had a revelatory experience and agrees to come to the shop with Barbatos and take a look at him.

At the same time, Diethan goes to the Conservatory to wait for his sister. She doesn't want to see Spyncer (bad memories, or so I'm told). She's creeped out that Spyncer is only lucid when he thinks about her. "But I have to know where he is," she says. "Some people want... oh, just take me there." When Diethan demands the full story about the note, Alivia explains that a couple of her instructors told her she had to find Spyncer Coil or she'd fail in her classes—and that means House Kath would throw her out. She adds that she's lucky she wasn't expelled over that whole incident with the Conservatory's doorman in our runaway carriage.

When Diethan and Alivia arrive, Mand and Barbatos are already at the shop. When Spyncer sees Alivia, he touches her face and says, "It's you again, finally, after all these years, I knew it was you. You're one of the three, a second-born daughter. The swords, they're for you. The daughters, they're all here! Asche, my work here is done! I've done it!!" and he begins raving again. Barbatos gives me the sword to hold and I feel a sort of clarity of thought, along with what Tharn described earlier.

Then Barbatos recalls something that had been nagging at him ever since the wizardess spoke of the Legacy and the sword that started with an X or Z. *Zelambrast* was the name of the sword that guarded the Legacy, he remembers. It was placed in the lintel of the doorway in the fortress of Cordaris, the location of our first adventures together. Oread, a celestial, was supposed to protect *Zelambrast*—was Oread the angel in blue from the *Book of the Legacy*? This is getting really confusing.

(Later, Calista's friends at the Pale Tower tell her of ancient legends about the birth of the world that deal with a power even beyond that of the Creator, a power that had to visit the world and judge whether it was a worthy creation. The legends say that when the Gilded Angel came to the world, one of the Vested of the Galchutt, Mrathrach, attempted to slay her, so the creation would be judged unworthy and be destroyed, but some ancient heroes saved her. This being, called the Gilded Angel, might very well be the same creature as the Angel in Blue, as the stories say she wore long flowing blue garments. According to the *Book of the Legacy*, the Angel in Blue is said to have judged the world and, in a place now called Mrathrach's Pit, given someone named Timonius Creed a secret and a power. Later a woman named Cordaris discovered the secret and went on to form the Order of the Legacy and build a tower to protect it. As for the sword, one of the Malkuth recognize the name *Zelambrast* as being the name of a holy sword and Oread as the name of a powerful solar who is gone now but was here—not one of the Lords of the Seven Chains, but almost that powerful.)

Wait a minute.... Spyncer said that all three daughters were here now. The only women in the room are Alivia, Calista, and me! The prophecy (if that's what it is) seems frighteningly appropriate to my friend and me. It goes like this:

*Three native daughters
But none from here
Second born of their fathers
But none held dear.*

*This city, this year,
The City by the Spire.*

*A weapon for each
But none desired.
No lust for blood, nor skilled reach
But none required.*

*The city conspired.
The City by the Spire.*

We try to catch Mand up on what's been going on. When we get to the part about promising to give the skulk agent directions to the aethel stones, he seems to recognize him, because he asks, "Did he read your mind?" *What?!* Oh, how were we supposed to know that he could read minds? He's probably already been to the candleshop and found the way to the cache by now!

And how did Spyncer manage to create a magical sword out of marlite anyway? Diethan holds the sword and feels a flash of insight: Although the prophecy is not about him, it *almost* is.

We decide to take Spyncer to Castle Shard with Mand, as Alivia is compelled to tell her unethical instructors the old man's location and that's the safest place for him when his foes come calling. When we arrive at Castle Shard, Kadmus helps Spyncer Coil be a little more at peace. (I think that butler has powers we don't begin to understand!) Zavere agrees to shelter the ceaselessly screaming Spyncer for the time being. He also warns us to avoid any further encounters with Hadrien Runihan, the vampire—and if we can't avoid them, to get Linech's demon-watch away from him. (That watch, along with all its other powers, taught humans how to refine shivvel.)

SESSIONS XLV & XLVI—THE CATHEDRAL OF HARMONY

STILL THE 21ST OF BLESSING

We see Archinemus at the shop and fill him in on what's been going on the last two days. We're a bit concerned that a bunch of evil skulks are so interested in the *Swords of Ptolus* that they are likely to come after *Insight*, so Diethan had better never be alone with it.

At dinner we decide to follow the map Calista bought a while back to a reputed cache of song magic deep underground. With all the vampires, skulk agents, and who knows who else after us, it would be good to boost her available magic resources. And Archinemus has Seanus make a sign for the shop saying "No Vampires Allowed." Just in case.

22ND AND 23RD OF BLESSING

I work a couple days at the Delver's Guild—gotta pay the rent, you know (the shop isn't always guaranteed to do that, after all our expenses). Meanwhile, Calista goes to Alivia's Conservatory to apologize to the headmaster for the whole runaway carriage incident. He offers to introduce her to some resident song mages. A couple different times as we're making our way about town, we have the feeling that we're being watched, but it never seems to amount to anything.

24TH OF BLESSING

We head over to the access point shown on Calista's map. We venture down into the sewers to find a shaft about eighty feet deep. A hallway at the bottom leads us to a series of Undercity rooms of different construction than the previous sewer. One room has a mosaic floor depicting hideous women with brown-feathered wings and claws for hands: harpies. We try to pass through a magically locked door here—our attempts cause strange markings around the lock (musical notations?) to light up, and we each hear a strain of music repeated in our heads. I hear a suggestion in the music as well: "Free the satyrs." But Calista heard "Ring the chimes" and Diethan heard "Unite the musicians." We press on down a long hallway on whose walls is painted a procession of life-sized musicians. We reach a doorway enchanted with a compulsion that prevents us from going down the stairs. We have to withdraw.

We next enter a room of life-sized statues each depicting a different musician. Perhaps these are the ones Diethan is supposed to unite. They are all linked by cleverly concealed tracks. When he has moved them all together, he hears the strain of music again and receives no admonition when he returns to the staircase.

In the next room we see a pair of decorative stone pillars. Hanging from a wire suspended between them are a variety of different-sized chimes. When Calista picks out the tune she heard in her head before on the chimes, a secret door opens here and she is freed of the enchantment. Beyond the secret door is a hall and rooms with arrow slits and other traps. Some of them have been disabled already, as the map indicates. We find another secret door that leads to a three-way junction. Down one hall is a perfectly round room with a great drum, which Archinemus just *has* to strike. It deafens Diethan and creates a shimmer on the circular walls. Now we see paintings on the wall previously invisible, and the people in them are all screaming with their hands over their ears.

Where are my satyrs that need freeing? In another room we find broken ceramic shards. We think it was one solid large clay man, painted and carved with symbols like the musical notation we saw at the first door. Another chamber holds boxes and sacks (open and empty) and three chests behind a wall of flickering sonic energy. *Wall of sound*, it says on the map. The wall seems to be malfunctioning—perhaps it used to sweep the room. Calista cast a *silent sheath* spell on me to allow me to go back and forth beyond the wall to retrieve the three chests. Archinemus opens the chests (triggering a couple traps as he does) and discovers 2,000 Imperial gold coins, a couple of vials, and ten song magic scrolls. Hooray!

Opening another magically locked door, we see a swirling vortex of opaque violet energy that gives off a sonic pitch. Archinemus is keen to go in, and Diethan seems to think the sword suggests that he will be safe. We tie him to our winch, Calista casts her good ol' *silent sheath* spell on him, and he ventures in. Archinemus says he can't see anything in there and can feel solid walls all around him. As we attempt to winch him back in again, he feels a sense of displacement, as though he has just moved. Calista manages to dispel the vortex magically, but when we look into the tiny room now revealed, Archinemus is gone! In a few moments, the violet vortex returns and Calista cries out, "We have to go after him!" She rushes in and I follow her into the humming purpleness, leaving Diethan behind to go fetch Barbatos and see if they can follow us.

24TH OF BLESSING

Calista and I find ourselves on a stone platform with Archinemus, a lantern lighting the area. The platform seems suspended above the floor, and there are bars all the way around the edges of the platform. There's an iron ceiling above and a wall beyond the platform on all sides; we can't see the floor. There's no sign of violet energy, but we do see a small bamboo flute by Archinemus' feet (no response when Calista plays it, but inscribed on the back of it is the message "Jazzix was here."). It seems that we're in a cage in a shaft. Calista uses a spell to burn one of the bars with acid, and Archinemus and I manage to break the bar. Enchanted with *spider climb*, Calista crawls out onto the top of the cage, then heads down to the floor. Two helmeted and armored figures—they seem to be simply empty suits of armor—confront her menacingly. She evades them and hears a slight hum emanating from them. (A musical connection?) At the same time, Archinemus and I bend another bar so we can climb out, too.

Meanwhile, still deaf from the mighty drumbeat, Diethan grabs the chest of coins I dropped and heads out to find Barbatos. On his way out he runs afoul of an acrid, many-legged, and many-eyed serpentine spiky creature, which was able to sneak up on him, since he's deaf. After a short and furious battle, Diethan decapitates the monster! However, he feels as though the creature's awful spikes may have poisoned him.

Archinemus and I climb out of our prison and join Calista down on the floor, where we immediately are engaged by the suits of armor. They seem only to be trying to subdue us, not really hurt us. We dispatch them and discover a chime that activates these musical spirits to inhabit the armor. Near a door leading out of the shaft we find a panel that slides down. There's another chime. It makes the platform start to rise, and it goes all the way up to the ceiling. Hm. Another ring of the chime brings it down to the floor. We decide to ride up and see if there's a door at the top of the shaft, so Calista and I return to the platform. Archinemus ties himself to us, then rings the chime. After a hairy moment or two with him swinging around as the platform ascends, he regains his position on the platform and we ascend *through* the ceiling. The bars drop down and we emerge into what appears to be some sort of arena. All the seats are empty.

Two lumbering creatures approach, accompanied by a piece of music that sounds like a march. They are nine or ten feet tall, and they appear to be made of clay, with musical writing all over them. As we attempt to flee, a blond woman appears, flanked by a destrachan. She calls out for us to stop, saying she won't let us leave. She does halt the approach of the musical golems (they stand and wait, and their

musical accompaniment changes to something that sounds like “waiting” music). The woman, who introduces herself as Chartrene, tells us we’re no longer in the place we started out from. When Calista explains that she came here hoping to meet other song mages or learn song magic lore, Chartrene informs us we are in the Cathedral of Harmony. Calista says she hopes to apply for membership some day (her mentor told her about this group). Admitting that the arena is not the best place to talk further, Chartrene casts healing spells on us (*quite* powerful) and offers us some tea. She sends Archinemus back up to the Nobles’ Quarter via another violet swirling vortex to find Diethan, then leads Calista and me further into the Cathedral.

Diethan finally makes it back up to the city with his burden of two hundred pounds of gold coins. On his way to the shop he runs into Jenna, the woman we released from the Temple of Destor. She offers to give him a hand with the chest. By the time the two of them make it back to Delver’s Square with their heavy load, Archinemus pulls up in a carriage. Diethan glares at him, then they all head off to the Temple of Asche to help Diethan regain his hearing. Afterward, they discuss our coming plans with Jenna and invite her to join us on our next mission. She explains that while she can hold her own in a battle, she’s more an “obtainer of things.”

“That works out well,” Diethan says, “since we are sellers of things.” She leaves them her calling card and departs, thanking them once more for sparing her life in the Dungeon.

Meanwhile, Chartrene offers Calista and me some tea and cake in a cozy room and interviews my friend. “Music contains the secrets of the universe,” she tells us, “it’s not just something pretty to listen to.” She offers to let Calista become an initiate, but she must start immediately and go through a two-week period of indoctrination. After some debate, Calista decides to stay. We bid each other farewell and I step through the vortex as Archinemus did.

After updating Diethan and Archinemus about Calista’s decision, I head over to the Pale Tower to inform Calista’s mentor, Ravena, that she was accepted to study at the Cathedral of Harmony. Diethan was kind enough to volunteer to take Calista’s message over to the Conservatory—I guess she won’t need to meet with the headmaster’s contacts now!

SESSIONS XLVII & XLVIII—GETTING OUT OF TOWN

8TH OF TOIL

It’s been a few weeks since last I wrote. Since then, I have sought and earned a promotion in the Delver’s Guild. I’m now a Guildguard, responsible for administrative duties. I report to an administrator named Udalaag, a fascinating individual who seems to be a dragon crossed with a burrowing creature of some sort. But all this means I have to work a few more hours a week at the Guild.

Our shop hasn’t done too well this past month. Archinemus seems concerned and is trying to come up with some tactics to use, especially considering the competition the Emerald Eye is giving us.

Tharn, meanwhile, is home on the Plains for the Days of Memory and will return on the 20th. We decide that our next mission (when Tharn returns) will be to travel north of Ptolus to Ar-Nampur and meet the forest elves and inquire about my ancestors. Also in that direction, Barbatos hopes to discover more about the last known owner of Pythoness House.

9TH OF TOIL

Barbatos gets some unusual visitors this morning—well, unusual in that no one ever visits Barbatos. A man named Thavis Ro and his ugly friend come to demand the map to the aethel stones we had promised to give Methir Orth as payment for Spyncer Coil’s whereabouts. (The key to the location of the cache of aethel stones is a candleshop called the Fevered Moon. But we thought Methir Orth had mind-read that from us when we visited him...) Prevaricating, Barbatos instead gives the two directions to Myraeth’s Oddities. Well, we figured we’d eventually hear from Methir Orth or his friends.

Back at the shop, we debate how to proceed. I make a copy of the map to the stones and replace the original in the vault. Calista and I visit our skulk friends to ask what they know of this malevolent faction. Shim cautions us that there is a rift among the evil of their kind, and neither faction is to be trusted. One side, the keu, is willing to use the dark arts—in days past, they worked with the Fallen. But the other group, the harr, is no better; they feed on magic. These factions are no friends to other skulks, and no friends to humans either: They are killers. Shim says some of the keu have been following us all around the city. He advises us to lay low for a while, as the Shuul are also keeping their eye on us, perhaps out for revenge (but he thinks we need not fear in the immediate future). We agree to come see Shim again in a week.

We think the keu have *Power* and seek the aethel stones to activate it to get at the Legacy. We think the harr want *Deceit*, and they seek to learn its hidden (buried) location from crazy old Spyncer Coil.

We wonder why Asche wanted the *Swords of Ptolus* created now. We think back to the prophecy from Spyncer, and it stresses “this year.” Is something happening about the Legacy this year? Diethan concentrates on this idea while holding *Insight* and gets an unclear response. It’s all very puzzling.

10TH OF TOIL

A hairless man the color of ash dressed all in black meets us in the Ghostly Minstrel at breakfast and tells us our presence is required at Castle Shard. We arrive, are greeted by Kadmus, and are escorted by our strange companion to a dining hall where Zavere awaits. (The ash man bows to his master and dissolves into particles that blow away after we are delivered.) We learn that Menon Balacazar visited Zavere here last night to congratulate him on acquiring Spyncer Coil. The crime lord, thinking Castle Shard had dispatched us to find Spyncer on his behalf, offered Zavere a huge sum in exchange for the man. The Balacazars desire the *Swords of Ptolus*, and Zavere warns us that they will not give up their search. We should expect Menon’s minions to attempt to get *Insight* from us. He assures us that he will keep Spyncer for as long as we desire it. In addition, he says Castle Shard will cast an eye toward our shop for the two weeks we are out of town.

We depart and head over to the Temple of Asche to see Mand. (I wonder whether the *keu* are following us.) In his discussions with Spyncer, during the madman's periods of lucidity, he again mentioned Alivia (Diethan's sister), for whom he seems to have a strong fondness. Spyncer referred also to the Crystal Tenders, and didn't seem to be referring to *keu* (or *harr*) but instead to the creatures who helped him activate two of the swords. The *keu* were spying upon this process and may have posed as Crystal Tenders... these people are rare dwellers in the natural caverns deep below the city. They may know the locations of troves of aethel stones. Mand confirms that the sword named *Deceit* is hidden away, but unless we can get the location from Spyncer, no one will likely find it, since obfuscation is part of its power. When activated, *Power* can be granted the power of another sword known by the user. Oh, no! The wielders can indeed open the Legacy if they can mimic *Zelambrast*!

Mand does not know of any event this year that will put the city in particular peril, despite the prophecy's words. Barbatos brings up a name we encountered back in Cordaris: Allitem, Lord of the Mystic Flame, one of the Nine Secret Sons. Mand tells us that these ancient gods could be the sons of the Elder Gods—they are very old deities going back to the days of the Wizard-Priests of Ni-Gorth, almost to the time of the new gods' arrival. We recall that the Knights of the Golden Cross (yet another group seeking the swords) worship the Elder Gods. Mand says he's never entirely trusted the Knights of the Golden Cross because their aims (fighting evil) seem *too* benevolent and because of their extreme secrecy.

I have heard of the Crystal Tenders, humanoids who live underground and can coax powers from crystal. These people are enigmatic and aloof—almost like subterranean “mineral druids.” I learn from the Delver's Guild that there are a number of strange concentrations of bizarre ores and crystals under the city; the closer one gets to the Spire underground, the stranger these concentrations become. No one seems to know why, but the Crystal Tenders are always spotted near these concentrations. The Guild has maps to some of them, but they are mostly tapped out. Their symbol appears on our map to the aethel stone hoard, and this same symbol (two crescent moons with an orb in between them) is one that Spyncer Coil has been carving into his bedframe at Castle Shard.

Meanwhile, Barbatos researches the works of Phenon DeRegasti, a philosopher who has written about the Legacy. He learns that the Legacy may be a psionic entity of some kind. Calista, now back from the Cathedral of Harmony, enrolls in the Conservatory for some music classes—there is no charge, as she is now a song mage, a rare and powerful figure around here. She obtains mad Velator Timerian's notes from Barbatos and from them determines that he believed one could use music to tap into some potent power that was normally unreachable—he sought to manipulate this sonic power for his own Legacy-related ends. And Diethan confirms that, indeed, the Shuul are following us.

17TH OF TOIL

We've spent the last week doing research and the like, and now it's time to meet up with Shim once more. He says he's been watching the Shuul. He believes that certain radical Shuul factions have delved into advancements that incorporate forbidden magic—both illegal and immoral. They might be the ones we will face. Specifically, we should beware Nichala Golnath (human) and Buelan Silvertooth (elf). We have the advantage, however, because they have to remain secret. They might be seeking allies against us as they near readiness to strike at us.

As we discuss what we've learned back at the shop, we receive a visitor: Malkeen Balacazar (the crime lord's son) and his vampiric bodyguard. They're supposed to be dead, by the way. Rumor has it that Malkeen was assassinated by one of his sisters back on the day three years ago when magic disappeared; but though many of those who died on that day were unraisable, he somehow made it back for revenge. Malkeen offers Diethan twenty thousand gold for Spyncer Coil. He claims to care not at all about the *Swords of Ptolus*—he wants Spyncer because his father wants him. He'll give us a day to think it over. What does he want to do with Spyncer? Hand him over to Dad? Use him as bait to lure his father into a trap? But before his death, Malkeen and his father were very close. Nevertheless, Diethan's connection to the sword *Insight* gives him the distinct impression that Malkeen is working *against* his father.

Well, we certainly aren't in the business of selling people, so that's not an option. But we hate to have to act without really knowing what's going on. And when we say no, we'll have to warn our employees and our families to watch out for the Balacazar vampire—he could come after them to get to us.

18TH OF TOIL

We spend a difficult day wrestling with our decision, and all too soon night falls. Malkeen and his vampire bodyguard arrive for our decision (the bodyguard pulls down our “No Vampires Allowed” sign and breaks it in front of us). We respectfully decline the offer, explaining that we know he is working against Menon and we have no wish to run afoul of his father's organization. Malkeen coldly accepts our decision, but holds us to a promise: that Spyncer Coil not fall into anyone else's hands. Then he pulls out a brass plate with arcane markings and four attached leather straps. “There's an oddity for you,” he says dryly. “One of you should be wearing that the next time Hadrien Runihan comes to call.” Then he turns and leaves.

A present from the dead heir to a crime family? Calista and Barbatos think it's a ward that one wears over the heart. The runes seem to suggest something about blood.

I guess Hadrien is coming for us. We mend our sign and put it back up.

19TH OF TOIL

Taevel tells us the item from Malkeen makes the wearer immune to the special powers of a vampire. But not just one vampire, a particular group of vampires: The Covenant of Blood. I put it on, just in case. And we agree that it's probably time to buy some *potions of protection from evil*.

I stock up on supplies for our trip from Ebbert's Outfitters. Ebbert asks us to drop off a package for a guy named Turgis Nullid in Larth, the first village north of Ptolus, four or five miles from here. We should ask for him in the Mud Hen, Larth's only tavern. (People from here refer to Larth residents as “mud farmers”—low-class.)

When I buy the map, I'm told that if you're going through the Moonsilver Forest, stick to the road. We can ask around about the elves in villages off the road. However, to seek the elf lorekeepers, Celdore advised us to follow the roads north along the coast then inland to Faelasith village and speak with Sael Wintersong. (He added that using his name won't help us much except maybe with Sael himself.)

20TH OF TOIL

Tharn has returned from the plains, where he had gone visiting for the Days of Memory festival. He said his brother Charnoth is well and wanted him to stay with the tribe. "But I love the city," he said. Funny, he's arrived just in time for us to pack up and leave in the morning. I tell Dad that we're leaving town and warn him to be careful—there may be someone watching him.

We decide on a plan to increase sales at our shop: to sponsor a series of dungeoneering lectures here in conjunction with the Delver's Guild. I spend some time today lining up speakers from the Guild. I plan to do a session on dangerous beasts.

21ST OF TOIL

As we set out in the morning, it's a little cloudy. Some of us—including me—have never even left the city before now! We pass through the shantytown surrounding the city walls and then some outlying farms before turning onto the main road north. After a couple hours we turn off toward Larth. It doesn't smell too good here: like part fishing village and part livestock farm. And there's mud EVERYWHERE. Barbatos is very unhappy to be here. We meet some locals who aren't very helpful. A youth named Carvel made some reference to "flying things" in the area lately—he figured we came from Ptolus in one of these airships, but the fat barkeep hushed him up quick. We have to deliver Ebbert's package, but there's no sign of Turgis in the Mud Hen. We search the docks where we're told he's fishing, but no sign of him there either. So we have to wait till he comes in with his catch. While we wait, we learn from Carvel that the Shuul were here in an airship not long ago. He thinks they left something for someone. Carvel says that someone called Sethirk is the most important man in town—he might know more about the visitors.

After a bit of time spent goofing around on the docks, we see Turgis approaching through the mud carrying a heavy sack. He's confused about the package—he wasn't expecting anything. It's a warm cloak with a message inside it—he said it was payment for an old debt. "Did anyone know you were coming?" Turgis Nullid asks. He asks because the day before yesterday a human and an elf in an airship were here looking for travelers. Ah, these must be Nichala Golnath and Buelan Silvertooth, the Shuul that Shim warned us about. Turgis confirms that they did talk to Sethirk and may have left something behind before they moved along.

He takes us to Sethirk's barn, where we see a couple deep depressions in the mud, as though from an airship's landing. Inside the barn are oily spots and footprints leading out: one from a human, one from a skeletal human, one from square-toed boots, and one from some spiky metal animal-like object. From our investigation, it appears that some constructs were left in the barn for some time, then taken away. We'll have to be on the lookout for Shuul constructs wandering around here.

We make it back to the main road, and by the time we reach the next fishing village, Balleton, it's almost dark. The two-story stone building with its warm fire and lamb stew is a welcome change from the cold, dirty road. We see a couple Viridian Lords in the common room, recognizable by the vines that wind all over (and into) their flesh. We ask one of them for advice on dealing with the local elves. "Stick to the road," he tells us. If we run into trouble, we should keep in mind that the elves don't recognize Imperial law. They have their own rulers and their own law. He urges us to keep to ourselves.

While on watch that night, Archinemus spies a strange hunched armored figure glowing in the starlight. The flesh not covered by armor appears to be dead, greenish, and mottled. The figure's head is a bare skull. Archinemus comes to warn us, and we all go down to confront it. We spot the creature, in addition to a metal-shod skeleton. Battle ensues, and in the melee we accidentally catch the stables on fire. More of the armored, steam-driven undead emerge, as does a decayed human encased in a metal platform with insectoid legs. But Archinemus blasts the undead to pieces with his Destor-granted *lightning bolts*. And then come the horned and armored dog-constructs...

When the smoke clears, the constructs are all dead, and Balleton is short one oak tree, one outhouse, and half a stable. A Viridian Lord comes rushing out. Looks like we've got some explaining to do.

SESSIONS XLIX & L—ON THE ROAD

21ST OF TOIL (LATE AT NIGHT)

The Viridian Lord inspects the stable and tells us that the horses were dead already, even before the fire. It seems the creatures we just fought killed them three or four hours earlier (the horses would have made noise and given away their presence). We tell the Viridian Lord that Archinemus saw them while he was outside and called us to help defend the inn. A note on one of these mechanical creatures' body said to wait till one hour before dawn, then kill us at the inn. These must be instructions from Nichala and Buelan, the Shuul who are after us. There is also a note with the same instructions regarding the inn in Farris (one town up the coast from Balleton here). That's interesting to know—clearly the Shuul don't know we plan to veer away from the coast road before we reach Farris.

I inspect the mechanisms on these construct creatures and determine that the creatures were merged with machines at the time of their creation. These mechanisms seem to run on negative energy. They rely on the fact that they are installed upon an undead creature in order to work. Meanwhile, Calista casts a spell on one of the bodies and discovers that their secret mission was to find and kill us. She also learns that it laired in the Necropolis in Ptolus.

The Viridian Lord says he's heard that the people in the airship have gone farther north, looking for mercenaries to hire. He doubts the craft could go into the Moonsilver Forest. We offer the innkeeper recompense for the destroyed buildings and retire for the rest of the night. I keep watch.

22ND OF TOIL

We sleep in and rest today, then help with repair efforts at the inn.

23RD OF TOIL

We leave at dawn, heading for Ashenburg. It's overcast and chilly. In midafternoon, Tharn feels an unusual wind that seems to be isolated on us—just for a moment, then it's gone. Hmmm....

We arrive in Ashenburg around sundown. It seems to be a little larger than Balleton. The tree cover is much thicker here than in Balleton, too. We get two rooms and dinner at the local inn, Vanity's Mirror. The clientele here is equally divided elf and human. One elf guy seems to be giving me the eye but won't acknowledge that he was looking at me. I wonder if he's seen other Hu-Charad. This is so exciting! I feel very close to finding some answers about my heritage on this trip.

Calista spends a little time this evening at the inn teaching me some basic Elvish phrases. It might help when we meet Sael Wintersong and I need to ask the way to Ar-Nampur. (I think I got "thank you" and "goodbye" mixed up when I tried it out on the waiter. Not cool.)

The night is uneventful. During my turn on watch, I sketch some of the strange Shuul mechanism from the undead creatures. Perhaps one day I can design something this brilliant, and use it to *good* ends...

24TH OF TOIL

When we ask about local customs, the innkeeper suggests that when we see a shrine to Tashandra, elven god of the road, we should stop and make an offering in thanks for a safe journey. He tells us the airship was here three days ago; Nichala and Buelan were looking for sell-swords. He also suggests that Barbatos can make contact with the Blueflight ("Vaenaris" in Elvish) clan in Faelasith, our next destination. He's hoping to meet Naelyn Blueflight to ask about the ownership of Pythoness House. I think our wizard friend actually believes he can buy the place!

We set off into the thickening woods, warned to keep to the path. After a few hours' walk, we're about to cross a stream when Tharn spies a humanoid hiding in the trees and cries, "Ambush!" A giant cougar leaps up and claws at Barbatos. Another one runs at Tharn. Meanwhile, arrows fly at us from across the stream. An elf tries to sic us with magic from the other side of the bridge, and a water sprite giggles from a rock by the stream after catching Diethan in a swell. A five-foot squirrel, conjured by some spellcaster in the trees, leaps out at Archinemus. Meanwhile, the now-invisible Barbatos runs afoul of a dragon! Another one appears on the other side of the stream, and they both clearly see him. And they're bronze colored. Why are they attacking us when metallic dragons are supposed to be good guys? As no one seemed to have told them that, I open fire on them with my hand cannon.

A massive *fireball* sways us all, and an elf woman spellcaster comes into view. Barbatos attempts to hide in some magical fog, but a dragon follows him. When he offers to pay the dragon twice what the Shuul were paying him if he'll switch sides, the creature seems intrigued. But he hears my shot and a squeal from his brother and takes off after me, crying "Treachery!" in Draconic. Even though I merely winged the dragon with the gun, he flies off.

Archinemus continues to be plagued by magically overgrown fauna—he's only just dispatched the squirrel when a huge robin swoops down from the trees and attacks, amid elfin giggles from the trees. Never have we had such an unusual band of assailants.

The elf woman, whose name is Jaera, lays Barbatos low with a magic wand, and Archinemus falls to a *sleep* spell cast by his unseen assailant (not the overlarge robin). When another wildcat fells Tharn, Calista races forward, heedless of danger, and heals him back to consciousness.

It gets even stranger after that. Following an ill-fated attempt at a truce, battle continues, and the awakened Archinemus charges in, his head having been turned into a big yellow ball bearing a clown face by the giggly spellcaster. The water sprite nails Barbatos with a spell that sends him off in peals of uncontrollable laughter. Then Tharn charges the sprite and bites her head right off. (The action seems to surprise him as much as it did all of us.)

In the aftermath, we are able to heal most of our elf attackers and the water sprite enough to stabilize them. We're told that the Shuul told Jaera we were evil and out to attack the town of Faelasith. So naturally they lay in wait for us.

24TH OF TOIL (LATER)

Well, *now* what do we do? We let the water sprite (name of Aestra) go and awaken one of the elves. He fears Shuul reprisals for the failure of the ambush, but we try to reassure him that they won't find out—their airship can't penetrate the forest, the Viridian Lord told us a few days ago. We explain that we are merely seeking Sael Wintersong or elven lorekeepers regarding the way to Ar-Nampur.

A tiny sprite named Phial appears and undoes the enchantment on poor Archinemus' balloon head. Eloias (the remaining lead elf) agrees to accompany us to Faelasith to explain the situation to the Sisters of Vaerimor; apparently they run things there. We resume our journey and arrive at Faelasith just before nightfall.

The village is made up of clusters of buildings in a couple clearings. The branches of the ash trees merge with crystal lattice to form a dome over the top of the village. Eloias speaks for us, and some guards escort us out of the dome and into a round stone tower to see the Sisters. The tower's top seems to disappear into the sky! We arrive in something of a throne room near the top of the tower. Seated here are two seemingly identical elf women whose gaze lingers a little longer on me than on anyone else.

One of the sisters, Iokaelis Vaerimor, asks us our business. After hearing our story, the other, Iapheramon, welcomes us and offers us a fine meal. Then they tell us they will help us if we perform a service for them: the ruined elven city of Kaelist has been overrun with bugbears and goblins, and they want us to reconnoiter: find out why they're there, how many there are, and what they intend (kill them if possible). We are to find their leader, Swordthresher, and question him. Oh, and it seems Kaelist also is haunted; its inner sanctum was sealed by magic long ago.

A woman named Lyosa the Hivemistress (a hostile elf who lives in a hive with giant bees the size of horses) can tell us how to get into this sanctum. They don't know how the bugbears and goblins got inside. She orders Eloias to take us there. He does not look happy about this.

25TH OF TOIL

After a good night's sleep on pillows stuffed with flower petals (which Tharn refuses to use), we're ready to face the bees. We walk quite a ways until we see running water and hear a droning noise. Looking up, we see a lake and waterfall. Across the lake is a gigantic hive somehow affixed to a stone cliffside. A boat is waiting to take us across. But before we can all even board, two very large bees approach us, their stingers as long as lances. And—Great Kint!—Diethan decides to ride one of them! Miraculously, he gets it to cross the lake toward Lyosa the Hivemistress and we watch, stunned, as he gets it to fly him right into the hive. The rest of us in the boat battle our way across the lake as well. (Barbatos falls out of the boat twice.)

After flying through various honeycomb chambers, the bee deposits Diethan in a chamber before Lyosa, an elf druid wearing a gossamer gown and a headband with an amber stone. Giant bees are everywhere. "What, exactly, do you think you're doing?" she demands. He offers her a gift in turn for help reaching the inner sanctum of Kaelist (a Shuul-made spyglass). Eventually, we all manage to join Diethan in the honeycomb chamber. Impressed with his bee-riding skills, Lyosa tells us of the *Quill of Illustraya*. There were once a dozen such quills; now it is the only one left. She explains that the sanctum was sealed one hundred twenty summers ago during a time of war with the dark elves who had come up from their vault. The dark elves' victory was short lived, however, and they were driven out of Kaelist again. The dark elven items that were left behind corrupted the city and those who came to live there. Those elves turned to darkness and slew themselves, lingering on as undead remnants of their former selves that haunt the city. Once we reach the great red stone on the shore of the lake, we must use the *Quill* to write our own true names on the stone. Only then may we enter the inner sanctum. She thinks the goblins and bugbears were able to enter the inner sanctum from beneath, same as the dark elves did. She loans us not only the *Quill*, but also a silver necklace called the *strand of Aestor*, which will allow Diethan to sense undead creatures, become invisible to them, protect himself from their horrid touch and slaying effects, and restore one who has been drained.

Thanking her, we return to the boat and depart. I don't know what the Sisters were talking about, I thought Lyosa was great!

SESSIONS LI & LII—A CURSED CITY

STILL THE 25TH OF TOIL

Eloias leads us along a hard-to-see path to the ruins of Kaelist, where we are eager to combat the encroaching bugbears and goblins. He seems worried. He says the corruption that befell the folk of Kaelist remains a threat to all elves who enter. We decide to camp outside the ruins within Barbatos' *rope trick*'s extradimensional space (sleeping in that place gives us all odd dreams—especially Diethan. He dreamed that Lyosa made him the Bee King).

26TH OF TOIL

As we emerge from the *rope trick* space, we all feel a bit uneasy under the canopy of trees, but we're not sure why. Nothing seems amiss.

We head off toward the city, which is built on the edge of a lake. Our goal is to reconnoiter the bugbear and goblin invaders and question their leader, Swordthresher, killing them if possible. But first, we must find a great red stone on the shore of the lake, where we are to use the *Quill* to write our true names on the stone to gain access to the inner sanctum.

As we approach, we can see the ruined city easily because the trees surrounding it are all dead. The woodland sounds are all silent around us. We come upon an elf corpse, a couple weeks old. His face is twisted in a grimace of horror. This unfortunate is carrying some magical items helpful for fighting undead—perhaps that's what he was doing here. We don't think he'd mind lending them to us. An owl appears in a nearby tree and warns us away, telling us to beware of evil. (Talking owls! What next?)

We ignore the owl's wisdom and enter Kaelist. The rotting and faded elven buildings here are connected by second-story walkways. As we enter the town, Diethan is struck by a vision of Barbatos and me hanging from a gantry, dead. Diethan detects overwhelming undead creatures around us. Chilled but undaunted, we move forward.

Coming at us we see six skeletal horses and riders. We hope we can parley. "We're here to try to lift the curse from this village," Calista says to them.

A shadowy, menacing figure on horseback emerges from the gantry. "Curse!" it says, "There is no curse here." This figure appears to be an empty suit of armor surrounded by an aura of night. Then they begin charging us. A *lightning bolt* from an invisible Barbatos weakens them considerably, but their unholy natures unnerve us. After a debilitating force attack from Calista, the wraith orders all the skeletal undead to kill her. Tharn valiantly serves as her bodyguard, until she and he are both sorely wounded. When the wraith launches himself at Barbatos, Diethan jumps in to take the blow, and his *negative energy protection* slays the bastard. We manage to slay the rest of the skeletal warriors and afterward stand in the street panting with exertion.

After we collect ourselves a bit, we advance and spy a glowing circle of green energy in the street. Glowing runes in Dark Elvish offer an invitation to knowledge and secrets. It gives Calista the feeling that she should find something called the Master Circle and enter it. Hmmm... perhaps it's in the inner sanctum.

We press on, cleverly avoiding some carnivorous climbing rose vines. We pass into an area of many buildings under a large tree-dome, much like the one we saw in Faelasith, except the roof has a great hole. Jagged shards of glass have imbedded themselves in the ground. We dispatch one bugbear sentry along the way and are disquieted by fleeting sights of the elven walking dead. Eventually we come to the edge of a pool beside a C-shaped dais. On the dais there's a graceful statue of an elf woman; the statue is not painted, but the woman's lips are

bright red and don't seem to be stone at all. Barbatos hears a voice from the statue asking him to kiss it, so he does. Then we realize the truth: She's a statue of a dark elf! But before we can think any more about it, hoofbeats thunder their way toward us. Racing around the corner is a wooden chariot pulled by a gigantic, stony-plated bull and carrying an armored goblin and a bugbear.

What a time to have been playing with statues...

At the sight of the formidable war chariot barreling toward us, we dash up to a nearby balcony for cover. Before we can begin shooting at the goblin driver or the bugbear passenger, however, the bull—a gorgon—breathes at us and we begin to slow. I realize that we have to hurry and neutralize the magical congealing effect before our blood turns solid in our bodies and we die! While the unaffected Tharn, Archinemus, and Barbatos continue attacking our enemies, the rest of us are forced to let our own blood to rid ourselves of the gelling influence, then heal ourselves again with potions. (In our zeal to help our friends, I accidentally critically injure Diethan, and Tharn manages to bleed Calista unconscious, but it all turns out okay in the end.)

Still nursing our wounds, we move indoors only to find ourselves in the thick of a nasty fight with a mess of goblins and bugbears. For most of this battle, at least one of our party was unconscious at any given time, but at last we are victorious. Diethan and Calista relate their near-death encounters with an elf woman representing death who beckoned to them. We hear the gorgon outside waiting restlessly for us on the steps below the balcony. Barbatos loots the goblins' porn: books of pure evil that originally belonged to the debased elves of this town. Those of us who look at them find these books the most nauseating and depraved things we've ever seen.

After we rest, we spy (using a periscope) some bugbears trying to corral the gorgon. We decide to charge out, Barbatos' *unseen servant* going to pick up the weapons we dropped on the stairs leading to the balcony. There are a LOT of bugbears out here, more than we thought. A couple spells from Barbatos and Calista slow some of our opponents as we wade into the fray. Some goblins arrive on the scene in the company of a strange goblin-faced wolf creature. It seems able to command the gorgon, telling it to breathe on us again. We came prepared this time, though, wearing our breathing masks, and the breath affects more bugbears than us. Barbatos takes out that whole clump of goblins with the *chaos skull* he found in Pythoness House. Now the gorgon is mad! It charges up the stairs amid a bunch of bugbears slowly dying from their own congealing blood. I manage to halt it with my longsword of animal *suggestion*. Archinemus jumps up onto the gorgon's back and finishes it with a mighty blow from his skivver, and Tharn subdues the last bugbear (which Diethan kills when Tharn's not looking). We don't see anyone else about.

In our search of the bodies we find some gold, gems, a ring, potions, scrolls, and so on. The mage-shaman bugbear was wearing a magical symbol of the Beastlord Ravvan. From a vantage atop the roof of the building we're near, Diethan can see a couple towers and the lake we seek, with an elven structure rising out from the middle of it. However, we're uncertain whether we should proceed—our spells are expended and we're tired. We decide to withdraw and return in the morning. Hopefully we won't have to fight our way through again tomorrow.

SESSIONS LIII & LIV—PERFECT ONES AND DEMON-BUGBEARS

26TH OF TOIL

Those goblins and bugbears took a lot out of us, so we make our way back through the ruined city beneath the shattered dome. We spy what appears to be an elf within a crystal, but it turns out that it might have been simply an image. He paid us no attention before we destroyed the crystal. We continue to see his moving image even in the broken shards. Whoever he is, he's in a wooden building that resembles the lab of someone who creates and identifies magic items. He stands before a table working with a violet glass globe upon a tripod—some sort of crystal ball, Barbatos says. The moving image repeats after a while.

We don't allow ourselves to get distracted, though, even when Barbatos finds a wooden building he thinks is tied to the vision. Out in the woods again we find Eloias in a clearing, where he's made camp. We heal a little and pass an uneventful night, which is all we could hope for.

27TH OF TOIL

Returning to the city the next day, we meet some other explorers in the ruins, including a couple clerics of Lothian. They look cut up, bruised, and drained. We offer some help to them: Kerr (a fighter), Maldek and Zeld (dwarves), and Denaeroth Vess and Lynessa Koran (a human cleric and paladin, respectively). All these folks give Archinemus a strange look. They managed to destroy the undead they encountered on their way into the city. They have come to parley with the bugbears, because they have the means to get into the home of dark elves here, their "vault." The group is looking for a relic of Lothian (*the Teeth of the Saint*) stolen by dark elves long, long ago. This band is from Carper's Bay farther north, and they seem a bit naïve to me. For instance, they think the bugbears will help them access the dark elf vault out of their mutual hatred for dark elves. Chaldesh Delano (grandfather to Shurrin, one of the famed Runewardens) learned long ago that it was dark elves who stole the relic, they say.

We lead the team back to our camp and discuss the possibility of joining forces once they have rested. This group received help getting here from some local elves. They reached the lake but could not get to the sanctum beyond—a ward there is too strong. They tell us they learned of the bugbears through a pair of roguish brigands who call themselves the Perfect Ones. (Someone in Ashenburg asked us whether Archinemus was a Perfect One—they must be sibeccai, too.) The goblins and bugbears were once slaves of the dark elves. Recently, the dark elves have suffered major setbacks and have weakened. And working with the Perfect Ones, the goblins and bugbears came up here hoping to establish a home of their own away from their captors. But the clerics think the dark elves are still down there somewhere.

On the sly, Maldek nods toward Archinemus and asks Calista, "Is that one of the Perfect Ones?" She assures the dwarf he's been a good friend to us, that he has no roguish dealings. The dwarves, it seems, are paid mercenaries accompanying the Lothianites.

We bid farewell to the Lothianites, telling them we'll return to camp later this afternoon with a report. On our way back into town, we hear a baby cry. Although we fear a trap, we decide to investigate nonetheless. Diethan comes upon a snakelike shadowy monster with long arms and fingers and no lower body. It is making the baby noise, but it doesn't hear him, and he slinks away. We move on.

The wrecked chariot from the battle yesterday is still there, but the goblin and bugbear bodies are gone. Some of the trees on this end of town are still alive, which makes us feel a little better. Then we spy the red rock by the lakeshore and head over. Within the lake rises a great fortress. Between us and the fortress is a tall tower, and a glass bridge connects them all. Tharn, meanwhile, spots a green woman by a tree surrounded by an iron fence. We disregard her for the moment, because Diethan spots a bugbear guarding the stone. Fearing he will try to warn his allies, we attack. More bugbears join the fray but are no match for us.

The green woman is trying to signal us. After the battle, we unlock the gate that secures the fence. She tells us her name is Faestra. Long, long ago the dark elves put her in there and also trapped her sisters. She says the iron fence is trapping her and her tree; if it were gone, she and the tree could both leave. Sorrowfully she recounts that the bugbears have already taken many of her sisters and burned them—her people burn like wood but last longer, she says (the dark elves burned her kind as well). She explains that the bugbear leader is part devil, with scales and horns. “He is the cruelest of them all,” she said, adding that the bugbears and goblins have been here for perhaps a year.

Faestra says that some of her sisters may still be alive—they take a long time to burn and they've only been in the fortress for a month. With renewed vigor, Tharn and I attack the fence confining her. Meanwhile, Faestra explains that the bugbears are afraid of the tower at the top of the orchard nearby, but she doesn't know why. She recognizes our description of the elf we saw in the shard of glass: Aelhan Whiteblade, Kaelist's most powerful sorcerer. “The residents of Kaelist are still here, all around us,” she whispers.

She confirms that the dark elf statue with the living lips was a tool of corruption—the dark elves left behind many similar tools that promised their victims great things but instead brought them to evil. But the red stone was put here by the original builders of Kaelist, she explains; it manages the wards around the sanctum. She says the bugbears came from within and so could bypass the wards—once you enter the sanctum, you can always enter it.

It takes us a couple hours to remove the fence and free Faestra. (I rigged up a rough winch arrangement, while Tharn attacked with a crowbar. If only I'd had more tools with me, I'm sure I could have managed a better device...) While we work, she frees a creature from the tree: a rainbow-colored lizard with fluttering wings. He talks to Faestra in Draconic in a squeaky voice. He smells like apple blossoms and looks like a pink and purple dragon with butterfly wings. The two-foot-long creature settles onto Barbatos' shoulder. It's a garrulous fairy dragon named Rathondhir, he says. I try to speak to him, but he speaks only Draconic and Elvish, so all I manage to do is say hello and count to ten in Elvish for him. (I think it confused him.)

In gratitude, Faestra hands us a gourd and says it contains the Green; it will restore any living creature to health. The dryad asks us to seek her sisters in the steam furnace in the lower levels of the fortress in the lake. Suddenly the sound of a gong comes from the fortress, and we can see a drawbridge lowering. Bugbears have been watching us, and they're starting to come across to the middle tower between us and them. After a few minutes more, goblins riding wolves start making their way from the fortress to the tower; Diethan manages to pick off a couple of them while they're still on the glass bridge.

We position ourselves on the tower on the shore to await the inevitable attack. The bugbears lower the bridges between the two towers and launch themselves at us from the tower in the middle of the lake. Three barghests pop into being on the tower with us, but Barbatos unleashes a powerful *chaos hammer* spell upon them. I manage to grab one and fling it off the tower, and Calista shoots it dead with her sonic spells. Tharn and Diethan send arrows singing across the bridge at the bugbears. Barbatos seems to command unusual power in his *magic missile* spells. “Wild magic!” gasps one of the goblin-faced wolf creatures—but we don't have a lot of time to wonder how Barbatos learned to use that. Our attackers keep coming.

The goblins and their dire wolf mounts and bugbear troops hurl themselves at us from the tower in the middle of the glass bridge. A goblin in blue body paint carrying a staff with a gem appears at the top of the middle tower. Barbatos slays him with another bout of wild magic—*where* did he learn to do that? Diethan, meanwhile, takes delight in slaying goblins, his particularly hated foes, and Calista takes out a good-sized area of the bridge and everything on it with a spell of wind.

Then Swordthrazer, the bugbear leader, stalks out and we gape in horror: He's sixteen feet tall and even more ferocious than we thought! Small winged creatures circle his head and from time to time whisper suggestions to him. Then the horrid demon-bugbear conjures up (in a nasty way using his violet spittle) a new bridge between the middle tower and the one we've taken. A deathweaver floats out to meet us: It's a round, floating creature covered with many tentacles each with a mouth at the end. It obeys demonic creatures—like the bugbear leader, from what Faestra told us—and eats like there's no tomorrow.

Thankfully, we take out the deathweaver with a round of attacks, only to be faced by another mess of bugbears charging at us from across the leader's purple spit-bridge. The leader hawks up another magic purple loogie on one of his minions, which seems to strengthen the creature. He makes another violet bridge from the middle tower out to the shore, and more of his minions set off toward the red boulder.

Just when it seems we will be overwhelmed, from the forest come a brigade of walking trees and their green-skinned companions called thorns, summoned by Faestra. They take on a formation of bugbears led by two identical sibeccai with ornate plate armor and black bastard swords. These must be the Perfect Ones we've heard about. With one touch of the sword, the sibeccai's opponents blacken and turn to dust. They spot Archinemus and speak in tandem:

“Is that—”

“—who I think it is?”

Yes, it is, they agree. “We must report this to Nicodemus,” they say in unison and disappear through a black magical portal. Who is Nicodemus? Who do they think Archinemus is?

Meanwhile, back at the purple bridge, we learn a horrifying fact about the spew that Swordthraser uses to coat his minions: It keeps them up and fighting even after death, sustained by the violet energy! Disgusted, I knock one of these unnatural opponents off the violet bridge. Calista conjures a sonic ape that wreaks havoc on our foes.

Another barghest comes out and tries to take mental control of me. Diethan pelts Swordthraser with magical arrows to devastating effect, but sadly the demon-bugbear's quasit advisors give him healing potions and he's quickly back in action. Barbatos targets Swordthraser's quasits.

The battle, which seemed to be turning in our favor, suddenly goes south as the huge Swordthraser comes in striking distance. In almost no time we are all reeling from his blows and he has sundered my axe. Brave Tharn, who had been fighting alongside the thorns and magical trees, dashes up the bridge and calls out the demon-bugbear. Swordthraser rises to the bait, giving Calista just enough time to share the magic of a healing gourd Faestra gave her with unconscious Diethan, Archinemus, Barbatos, and me. After taking one massive wallop, Tharn turns and runs, drawing Swordthraser into melee with the woodland creatures he has oppressed for so long. The thorns die valiantly, at which point the magical trees flee back into the woods.

Faestra moves in to join the battle, joined by the faerie dragon Rathondhir, whose rainbow breath weapon has no effect on the demonic bugbear. Barbatos expends two wands on the creature. After taking out the rest of his bugbear minions, we manage to gang up on Swordthraser, who gets his revenge by thrashing Archinemus' skivver of Destor. It crumples, and from it emerges the lightning creature we saw imprisoned in it 'way back in the caverns of the Shuul. It grabs the broken shards of the skivver, turns itself into a bolt of lightning, and arcs away toward the southern horizon. "I curse you, Destor!" cries the outraged Archinemus. Hmm. Wonder if we'll see that lightning guy again.

With our last efforts we dogpile on Swordthraser and take sore wounds but eventually bring him down. A shout of pure joy erupts from Faestra at the tyrant's death. The dryad pulls from her hair a strand of vine for each of us in thanks, then promises to visit the Vaerimor sisters and describe the situation to them as we'd asked. Then she steps into her tree and is gone.

I turn to thank Barbatos for the *displacement* effects he cast upon me that saved my life during the battle, but I'm dismayed to see him looking wasted and drawn—quite sick. Was his wild magic was somehow sapping him? Barbatos doesn't know. We give him a restorative potion and turn our attention to the fortress before us.

SESSIONS LV & LVI—THE STORY OF THE CHARAD TITANS

STILL THE 27TH OF TOIL

We have beaten all our foes, and now we take a bit of a breather to regroup and write our true names on the red stone with the Hivemistress' *Quill*. With Swordthraser dead, the magical bridges have disappeared, so we rig a rope across the gaps in the glass bridge to the fortress' great door. The last surviving thorn warns us that he hears a few bugbears inside the fortress here. Tharn and Diethan decide to go in through the roof. They stumble upon a horrid charnel room with dozens of bloated dark elf corpses, perhaps a week dead. The room is so hot and steamy, a sort of haze prevents them from seeing all the way across it.

Meanwhile, Archinemus and I bust through the front door and find the interior to be unseasonably hot. I start to seethe with anger at the thought of Faestra's dryad sister burning in the furnace. We meet three more bugbears inside but make quick work of them. One of them does reveal that to find the dryad we must take an elevator down to the furnace. We find the elevator (a glass bubble suspended on a rope in a column of boiling water), but it's guarded by some strange floating black pyramid etched with Draconic and Dark Elvish runes—it shoots blasts of magical cold and other effects. Calista manages to dispel it, thank Teun, and while its magic is suppressed we pound it to pieces.

We come upon a well-kept tower bedroom with some valuable silver and paintings, even some Elvish books. We presume the Perfect Ones have been staying here. Hidden in this chamber, Archinemus finds a box holding a golden idol in the shape of a ceremonial sibeccai. He is quite stunned by what has happened, as he has never before seen another of his kind. He and I have that in common.

After searching the rest of this level of the fortress to no avail, we decide that the only way down is, in fact, the elevator. I use the elevator's control levers to ratchet Tharn and the thorn down the tube, which is surprisingly cool. At the bottom level of the fortress, they discover a large bronze boiler and hear crackling flames and a low moaning from that direction. An oversized, almost hairless bugbear is sleeping with his back propped up against the furnace. When Archinemus gets down there, he and Tharn and the thorn *coup de grace* the sleeping sentinel and open the furnace. Chained inside it is a woman who may once have looked like Faestra. Now she's blackened and writhing in agony. She is the only fuel burning in the furnace.

Tharn takes a gold ring off the dead guard's finger and discovers it protects him from the heat. He slices right through the red-hot chains as the woman notices him and stares at him with eyes that themselves seem to be afire. Just as I arrive, Tharn frees her and rushes her, still burning, to the elevator. Archinemus puts the magical ring on her, and she stops burning, looking like nothing more than a charred, vaguely woman-shaped piece of wood. We give her all our curative potions and she finally comes around. The thorn speaks soothingly to her in her own language. We send her and the thorn back up to the others, knowing that she will need far more healing than we have.

Meanwhile, we quickly search the furnace level for any more prisoners. Archinemus and Tharn find a chained-up creature that seems to be half misshapen elf and half spider—a drider, I recall—and a bound dark elf woman. We put the drider out of its misery and take the dark elf with us so we can hand her over to the elves of Faelasith.

When we're all back on the main level, Calista speaks to the dark elf prisoner, who explains that she was from the vault, and that the bugbears brought her here against her will. She says the vault is accessible via the Master Circle—a teleportation circle—at the top of this tower. Calista thinks that if we break this circle we might be able to end the curse on this city. While Diethan and I and the thorn take the dryad in

the boat back to shore, Barbatos falls under the spell of the dark elf prisoner and feels compelled to take her up to the roof to the Master Circle. Calista also feels that compulsion, and Archinemus and Tharn have to restrain them both. It all ends with Barbatos staggered by a few punches from Tharn (he very nearly sent the prisoner up in the elevator) and Calista tied up and out of spells.

This is the sight that greets those of us in the boat when we reach the shore and turn to look back. While I try to help with this crazy situation, Diethan and the thorn bathe the poor burned dryad in the lake, then take her to her tree, which catches her up in its embrace, and she's gone. The thorn takes his leave then, thanking us for our aid and presenting to Diethan a carved wooden unicorn head. He points to the tower on a hill behind Faestra's tree and warns, "Demon," then runs off.

We trudge back to camp, each of us carrying a companion or prisoner. The Lothian priest and paladin are still there, but the dwarves and barbarian are gone. The priest explains that the ones who remain still desperately want to get into the vault to find their relic. Our elf friend Eloias wants to kill the dark elf prisoner right now on general principle, but we urge him to allow the Lothianites to question her.

The cleric, Denaerth Vess and paladin, Lynessa Koran, learn from the dark elf how to get to the Master Circle that will take them to the vault. She asks that they take her back with them, but before we can dissuade them, Diethan surprises us all by leaping in and killing the dark elf woman. Terse words lead Lynessa and Diethan to blows, and ultimately the two Lothianites depart. Their hard feelings seem to linger after them, however, and we quarrel over what is best to do: leave now for Faelasith to get the compulsions removed from our friends, or stay here so we can visit the Master Circle in the morning. The majority of the group decides to keep the afflicted group members confined and return in the morning to Faelasith. Diethan burns the corruptive books that Barbatos couldn't resist taking from the city.

28TH OF TOIL

We make our way back to Faelasith today. When we arrive this evening, elf guards welcome us—quite a different story than the last time we were here. They seem impressed by the leafy circlets we're wearing, which we got from the dryad Faestra. We again enter the tower of Iapheramon and Iokaelis Vaerimor and are the guests at an elven banquet. Faestra is here, too, and she thanks us for rescuing her sister dryad from that awful furnace.

The elves are very grateful for our cleansing of Kaelist but seem dismayed to see that two of our companions, Barbatos and Calista, are restrained—tied up due to the enchantment that seized them in the ruined city. So as not to allow the corruption of Kaelist to spread, the elf rulers summon their priest to rid our friends of the taint. A shaft of silver light bathes them and the compulsion is lifted from Calista, but they have to take Barbatos to their temple overnight. (He doesn't look too pleased, but we assure him it's for the best.)

The elves bestow upon us many gifts in thanks for what we've done in Kaelist. My gift is a greatsword called the *Starsword*, which long ago was a gift to these elves from the Hu-Charad! I'm sure Barbatos was sad to miss the scrumptious elven banquet. From our reports, they believe the bugbear threat is now over—they will just have to keep the undead and the rest of the evil in Kaelist contained as before.

Eloias agrees to take the magical strand and *Quill* back to the Hivemistress for us while we stock up on supplies here in Faelasith.

29TH OF TOIL

We visit the marketplace to sell some of our loot and restock our dwindling supplies. We send next month's payment for Myraeth down to Ptolus with an elf messenger.

THE NEXT TWO WEEKS

We spend the next week training with our new weapons and learning various elven skills.

The following week, Sael Wintersong arrives in Faelasith. We explain that Celdore sent us to him as someone knowledgeable about the Hu-Charad. He has made a study of it and is willing to teach us the language and history.

The Hu-Charad are also known as the Charad titans (by the elves) and the Elder Titans (by humans). They came to these shores in huge ships made of stone thousands of years ago, well after the terror of Eslathagos Malkith but before the blight of the Half-God Ghul. Before, in fact, the building of Dwarvenhearth, before the Dreaming City of Dreta Phantas was stolen away. They were a noble people, and solemn. They wielded both magic and craft beyond the skills of the Elder Elves then. They were powerful and different. They crafted the *Starsword* as a suitable gift for the local elves. It's hard to identify an item of Hu-Charad make, Sael says; it takes a trained eye.

These titans said they came from "the North," but the only place north across the sea now is the Endless Sea of Ice. They brought with them their companions, the sibeccai, who apparently were beholden to the Titans and stayed for centuries. A lot of the sibeccai even stayed after the Hu-Charad left; many went to the Plains of Rhoth. Sael knows only a little of the Perfect Ones, a pair of sibeccai rogues that works with low-lives and bandits up and down the coast.

The Hu-Charad spent only a brief time here, just to explore. They had a real affinity with the land — they seemed to bear the responsibility of caretaking on their shoulders. Sadly, they were drawn to the Spire, at first because it was the result of such an abomination as the Dread One. As they studied it, a few of them were corrupted by it, and when the Titans finally left, the corrupted ones remained. They delved deep into the earth around the Spire, seeking knowledge of the ultimate power that lay beneath it. (According to the elves of Dreta Phantas, this power was the Galchutt.) From that point on, there are no further records. A few Titans surfaced again as allies of Ghul the Half-God, and there are story fragments of the dwarves encountering them later. Tales even tell of pacts between the Elder Titans and dark elves, which the Titans betrayed in favor of alliances with the zaug (hated enemies of the dark elves). Sael has heard there is still one Dark Titan left in Goth Gulgamel, undead.

As for Ar-Nampur, it is a citadel at the very tip of a peninsula to the north. It remains almost always hidden in the mist — very hard to find, even for sailors. It is the site of the original landing of the Hu-Charad, who built the fortress as their temporary home. Their talents were such that it still stands pristine today. It is difficult to enter, but perhaps I can do so in a way others cannot.

An elf named Nilovas Haetharys is the expert on Ar-Nampur. This strange hermit lives near the fortress in a crude home and calls himself the guardian of the place. (Sael thinks he's a little mad.) The citadel is magical, and entering it is a magical process.

Sael has heard a rumor that the Hu-Charad returned twenty years ago to Ar-Nampur—the akashic also told me this was true. “If they did so, they moved in secret,” he said. “I would love to know more.” He points out that the Hu-Charad often knew of things before they happened. Their intuition or tie with the events of the world was very strong. If they returned twenty years ago, it might have had something to do with the removal of the dark powers of the Galchutt.

“So, how big is she going to get?” Diethan asks him. What a thought! I never imagined I might grow *more*. Sael said that there were some Charad titans much larger than me who were great people; others were my size. Sometimes height was an indicator of status. He thinks I couldn't grow any larger without taking some purposeful act. I should hope not — I'm already more than eight feet tall!

Sael has studied texts that the Hu-Charad left behind and he tutors Calista and me in the language. At the end of the week, I craft him a gold magnifying reader for his studies as thanks for all he has shared with us. He wishes us good luck in our trip to Ar-Nampur, and asks that we visit him in Vioth sometime to tell us what we find. He thinks the fortress is three days' travel from here.

Barbatos is fully recovered, thank goodness, although he's still a little cranky about the whole bondage issue. Rathondhir the faerie dragon hangs around him a lot, peppering him with questions. He tries to pawn the little guy off on Calista, with only limited success.

An elf woman arrives this week to talk to Barbatos about Pythoness House. Helene Vaenaris is her name; Barbatos was seeking her grandsire, Naelyn. “He owns some property I'm interested in,” he explains. She tells Barbatos that he will sell the property for two hundred thousand silver pieces (payment must be in silver). Or he can choose to wager the amount of four hundred thousand silver pieces' worth of goods in a match of Gold Dragonscales—an extremely complex game of wit—to be played at the night of Kayhocameus (the Festival of the Cold Moons, a little over a month away) at a location of his choosing. The elf won the property in this fashion. Barbatos agrees to the wager and sets the location as the common room of the Ghostly Minstrel in Delver's Square. Helene looks disappointed at his choice. “I do not approve of my grandsire's gambling,” she says, shaking her head.

I don't think *I* approve of Barbatos'!

SESSIONS LVII & LVIII—THE SECRETS OF AR-NAMPUR

11TH OF HARVEST

A messenger arrives with a note from Seanus, replying that he received the money we sent and handled the monthly payment to Myraeth. He said the Emerald Eye had three guys out in Delver's Square directing our customers to *their* store, but Seanus managed to get a rune-covered guy named Araki Chipestiro to get rid of them by telling him they were saying bad things about *him*. We've heard of this guy — he's got a real scary reputation as a powerful mage of dark magic. He has occasionally worked with the Balacazars. Hm.

A guy named Zart Skoyter wants to talk to us. The Sisters of Silence also sent a note saying they want to see us as soon as we return. Seanus said that word on the street is that Kevris Killraven wants to use the Shuul to make a major strike on the Balacazars before the end of the year, so our enemies are preoccupied for now.

12TH OF HARVEST

The sisters Vaerimor thank us again, tell us that Faestra's sister is recovering slowly, and that they are glad the situation in Kaelist is no longer a festering wound. They bid us have a good trip.

We depart with Sael, dropping him off near his home on the way through the forest heading north. We promise to send him word of what we discover in Ar-Nampur.

13TH OF HARVEST

More traveling through the woods. It's chilly and rainy. We stay the night in a roadside inn near Caeralith, but it is likely our last for a while. From here we go east, and there are no towns between here and Ar-Nampur.

14TH OF HARVEST

The road meets the coast today. Lots of sea mist covers the whole area, and it's colder here than in the woods. It feels desolate. We travel north along the Old Coast Road until it veers inland, then we stick to the coast. We're now on the peninsula where Ar-Nampur is located. The mist closes in around us as it grows dark. It's slower going off the road. We camp for the night.

15TH OF HARVEST

The terrain is very rough around here. We traverse a ravine, spy a bear, and arrive at a wooden shack. As we walk up, we see two owlbeats lunging at a humanoid figure in front of the shack. Before we can do much more than shout a warning, one of the creatures fades away. The figure turns and looks at us. He is an elf with dirty blond hair (weird for an elf these days—only the Solarr elves were golden haired). He has ugly features: balding, bulging eyes, a protruding forehead, and a stooped stance. “You're early,” he mutters as Diethan shoots arrows into the remaining owlbear.

This is Nilovas Haetharys, the elf hermit and resident Ar-Nampur guardian that Sael told us about. Nilovas insists that I was expected and am early but won't say why or who expects me. “When they came back here after going to your city, they had a couple of them in tow—the ones they'd left behind: the corrupted Titans.”

We discover that he's deaf: Nilovas has to be looking at you while you speak to understand what you're saying. "You have never been there before. You'll have to go through the sanctuaries to get where you need to go," he said. My people came here twenty years ago to take care of things, he said, to collect the ones they'd left behind. They also had left behind some sibeccai that had been corrupted. "And that's the problem." He makes Archinemus promise to help me and stick close. I feel as though I understand only about half of what he's saying.

He tells us that the remnants of the Hu-Charad's ancient menagerie still remains in the fortress. "Not everything you find there will be an enemy," he warns. He wonders whether we are prepared but won't tell us what we should do to get ready.

He takes us through the back wall of his shack to stand in a circle inscribed in the floor. "Make sure you watch out for the dragon," he cautions. Then he lifts his arm and we all vanish.

We appear again somewhere wholly different, but we can still hear Nilovas' voice. "Air, earth, fire, water—remember!" These elements seem to match four shapes inscribed in the floor (we saw them also near the transport circle in the hermit's shack): white circle, black triangle, blue square, and red pentagon. Nothing happens when Archinemus touches them.

Looking around, we see we're in a marble corridor. A new voice sounds, a woman's voice, speaking in Hu-Charad: "You heard the clarion. Welcome. All is well." We move forward, past the bones of a behir, and hear the howl of wind. The ceilings are decorated with pictures of clouds. The air sanctuary must be up ahead.

Inside, the sanctuary is decorated with pictures of whirlwinds, and we feel a wind kick up. Standing on the dais here and uttering the word "air" in Hu-Charad creates a breeze around us but that's it. We tie off Archinemus and he tries to make it all the way through—it's very slow going against the wind but he makes it to the end around the corner. We all make it through with the aid of a very long rope. (Rathondhir the faerie dragon has a great time playing in the wind.) In the next windy chamber Archinemus finds giant-sized steps rising up in midair, but he gets stuck on them, and the faerie dragon gets blown to who-knows-where. Calista casts *flight* on Diethan and he goes after the two of them. He latches onto Archinemus and the two of them swirl upward in the whirlwind. They discover that the giant-sized steps end at nothing in the exact center of the room, near a hole in the air. There's an invisible shaft with a staircase going down, but it can be seen only from the top. They investigate down to the bottom and find a large chamber with exits. I climb across the ledge and up the steps to join them, and we lodge a grappling hook and pulley system at the lip of the invisible shaft. Then Diethan flies back down to the rest of our group. Ignoring the plan, Barbatos ties himself to Tharn and casts *fly* on the litorian. Then Tharn leaps off the ledge. After three revolutions around the whirlwind, he and Barbatos manages to land in the shaft. Dropping off the wizard, Tharn goes back for Calista (for a litorian, he sure likes to fly), and we pull Lunes the wolf over on the pulley system. We call out for the faerie dragon, but no response. We hope he got safely away.

Thankfully, we make our way down the stairway in the shaft and into a new series of chambers. We hear loud footfalls on this level that sound as though they're heading our way. As they draw close, we hear a screaming roar from an immense, fearsome creature. Oh no—the dragon!

But it's not. It's a massive shaggy creature with a big horn—like a giant wooly rhino—but we find it trapped on the other side of an invisible barrier. We decide to go the other direction, toward some hissing. Big dark blue snakes paralyze me and Tharn almost before we know what's happening, then Archinemus and Diethan as well. Fortunately the spellcasters take them out from a distance with magic.

The halls of Ar-Nampur are filled with alcoves and faded spots on the walls, as though the place used to be a gallery but all the display items have been taken away. One chamber beyond another invisible barrier is full of display items, however: works of art like paintings and sculpture of the Hu-Charad. There's no way through, however, so we take some stairs down.

In the center of the hall there lies a black triangle, the symbol of earth (we think). We hear a woman's voice speaking in Hu-Charad again, but her voice seems to catch. "You have heard the c-c-c-clarion. Welcome. All is— You have heard..." As we proceed down the hall, I'm crushed by a falling stone weight but luckily no one else is hurt. The earth sanctuary here has another dais, but we can't come upon the proper words to use to deactivate the earth effects (tremors). Then Calista hits on the idea of magically creating candles to place in the empty candle holders on the dais. However, when I attempt to light them, I begin to feel a bit queasy. Instead, we sprinkle dirt over them and the candles "light" not with flame but with shards of earth. Then I stand upon the dais again and repeat the word "earth," and dirt and earth rains down on me from little holes that erupt in the air all around me. I am healed of all damage and feel refreshed with renewed clarity. I'm so excited about this that I convince Tharn to get up and try it. However, all that happens is he's cut to shreds by the rain of stone and rocks. Guess it only works for the Hu-Charad.

We emerge into a stoneworking shop, but it's been closed down, and it seems someone has already been through it. Farther down a corridor lies a cage area with a large column rising up from a pit of churning earth in the center of the room. As we watch, red stones come out of the pillar and congeal to form earth elementals. "Crush, destroy, pulverize!" they cry in voices that sound like chalk screeching on a chalkboard. More elementals form from the stone and rubble on our side of the cage wall and attack us. Commands in the Hu-Charad language do nothing to dissuade them. While we battle off the new elementals, Diethan and Barbatos cut down those first two with magic arrows and *fireballs*.

We withdraw to Barbatos' *rope trick* to lick our wounds and rest for the night.

16TH OF HARVEST

Today we start out searching the earth sanctuary for exits, which we finally locate in the ceiling. No sooner do we get through than the noise of our coming attracts the giant wooly rhino. Using all my newfound clarity, I point at it with the longsword of animal *suggestion* and compel it to flee. It rears back in apparent fright and turns and runs! We find our way into a room still filled with Hu-Charad artifacts, portraits, and statuary. I am in awe to be so close to such works of my people. Some of the people named in the portraits include Ao-Storan, leader of the expedition (a warrior woman); and Ka-Nadar, regent (a noble man).

Sadly, the wooly rhino doesn't flee for very long. Just as we resume our trek down the hall, it returns to trample us. Calista manages to distract it with a spell so we can get in a few good attacks, but we quickly see that we are no match for it. We run down some stairs too small for it to follow us. But when we get down there, we step into water over our heads. It's not the water sanctuary, though—at the

bottom of the steps under water we see the red pentagon of fire. The water feels strangely warm. The malfunction we detected before earth must extend out to here.

Calista saves the day again by offering us *water breathing* spells so we can enter the “fire” sanctuary. We run smack into some sort of lobsterman with a glowing light that transfixes Tharn and tries to carry him off, but Barbatos finishes it with his *magic missiles*. The current seems to pick up right around here, and it washes the lobsterman off down a side passage.

We decide to make our way around the current toward the fire sanctuary, but the dais has no candle holders (and even if we wanted to light candles, doing so underwater would be a challenge). It would take an hour to get through the collapsed passage here, so we retrace our steps, only to have Tharn get caught up in the current and swept into the room where the lobsterman’s body floated. He sees a crevasse with water pouring through it, but we doubt that is the proper way through the sanctuary. So back we go to the dais chamber and clear a path through the rockfall.

We find double doors marked with the Hu-Charad message “The scouring of fire.” Ironically, the flood of water we experienced is coming in here through a pair of iron double doors. Using a complex set of ropes we all manage to pull our way into this new chamber where we see a column of magma. Whereas the water was warm before, it’s really hot in here. (Barbatos gets some nasty rope burns in the process.) In the air-filled area atop the column, Diethan discovers a pool of lava with a horrid-looking, three-armed, large-mouthed creature bathing in it. There is also a crack in one of the walls where water is pouring through—it’s the source of all this flooding. We surface and hear a moaning coming from within the pool, but we can’t see the poor creature trapped inside. A xorn bathing in the pool attacks us. Why does it seem interested in us, and why is an earth elemental in this water-filled fire room? We seem to be getting the better of it, but then it sniffs out *Stoneblade*, Tharn’s latest sword. Luckily, Calista blows it away. By chanting the elemental words engraved on the pool, we manage to drain the lava.

After the pool drains, we spy an exposed staircase going down. But we also see an eight-foot-tall humanoid figure trapped inside the pool. Strangely, he doesn’t look burned. He rises up from the pool and thanks us in Hu-Charad! He says his name is Sha-Bonel, and he has been trapped here in this sanctuary for years. “You must continue on through the water sanctuary,” he tells us. “She waits for you there.” He adds that the dragon dwells within the water sanctuary and cautions us to beware of it, for he believes it engineered the corrupt elementals that have wreaked such havoc within the fortress. I ask whether there is a secret here that we can use to fight the dragon, but he says he’s not allowed to say. He does reveal that the one who awaits us is my mother. As he fades away, I slump down onto the stairs in shock.

We spend the afternoon recovering in Barbatos’ *rope trick*. Diethan is on watch when he spots a great green reptilian head looking through the gushing water in the crack in the wall. While he gets in a good initial hit with an arrow, the dragon breathes a cone of corrosive greenish mist at him. The wounded Diethan scrambles back up the rope again and fills us in. So much for the element of surprise.

SESSIONS LIX & LX—HOME WITH OPEN ARMS

17TH OF HARVEST

This morning the *rope trick* unceremoniously dumps us out onto the stairs, at which point Diethan and I take up guard duty while the rest try to get a little more sleep. As I head down the steps, suddenly a gout of flame jets up in front of me. It seems the dragon now knows we’re awake. Peeking in through the crevice again, he disturbs those sleeping atop the platform and fries poor Diethan and Barbatos with acid. I hear him whispering something about invisibility and I get off a shot, to no avail. The creature lands on the platform and breathes down on us; Archinemus stabs it. I guess all our battle plans are for naught—we waded into melee.

As we hurry down the stairs away from the chuckling dragon, we run smack into an invisible lobsterman, like the one that grabbed Tharn yesterday. We sustain more wounds before vanquishing the creature and sealing the lava pit shut again. We explore another empty gallery. Along the way, we argue about whose job it was to remember to buy the curative magic wand. We find what we hope is a safe alcove for the spellcasters to get another quick hour of sleep.

Thank Teun, nothing more disturbs us for that hour. When the spellcasters awaken, we pick our way up a new staircase that takes us to a water-filled passage with the square emblem for water. The recessed floor here is covered with munched-on animal bones. Then we spot the slinky dragon sliding through the water behind us! It breathes its terrible acid breath again, but Calista casts a spell against it that sends a gout of sonic energy right through its innards, and Tharn uses his *Stoneblade* to create a *wall of stone* right behind it so it can’t try any more of its hit-and-run tactics.

Tharn and I manage to flank the creature, while Archinemus stands bravely before it. Barbatos cleverly uses his *chaos skull* against this lawful beast and we others gang up on it in melee. We can see in the dragon’s eyes that he’s starting to worry and hunger for escape, but Tharn’s stone wall holds and Diethan gives it an arrow in the eye. With a final blow from *Stoneblade*, Tharn severs the dragon’s head, and it collapses heavily into the water.

We decide to take the dragon’s head as a trophy. After an hour’s recuperation, we press on toward the chamber beyond the water sanctuary where, according to Sha-Bonel, my mother awaits us. I’m so excited and nervous, I hardly even feel the wounds from our dragon battle.

Making our way down the hall, we find a door labeled “The Menagerie,” but we decide to avoid it till we know more. Instead we go searching for the dragon’s hoard and a passage out of this sanctuary. We find our way into the heart of the sanctuary, where four magical buckets in all corners of the room continually pour out streams of water that flow down and out the door. Diving, Tharn and Diethan locate four drains in the floor, three of which are stopped up with debris. They also find what appears to be a sealed staircase down. There below the surface lies the dragon’s hoard as well: gold bars, jewels, a magic chest, and so on. Calista casts a *water breathing* spell on us so we can all go down to help transfer the hoard into Barbatos’ *rope trick* extradimensional area. While we do all this, the room continues to drain—hopefully, by the time we’re done assessing the haul, we will be able to access the sealed stairway.

We occupy our time by telling stories of the Hu-Charad. After a time, though, we see a flaw in our plan—with the drains unclogged, the room's water merely fails to spill over into the passageway. So we haul up the hoard prior to attempting to open the sealed staircase (we don't want the treasure to accidentally get washed down when we open it). Exhausted, we lay down to rest.

18TH OF HARVEST

Today we embark upon a new search of the sanctuary. At last we find a concealed lever in the floor near the sealed stairway. Barbatos and Tharn discover an airlock of sorts. With the benefits of *water breathing* again, we all go down there with the dragon's treasure and search until we locate the hidden switches that operate this sealed tube. When the lower door opens, it reveals a spiral staircase.

The stairs open up into a passageway decorated with reliefs of regal-looking humanoids. A female voice says, "You have heard the clarion. Welcome. All is well." Could this be my mother's voice? Before I can ponder that question any longer, two noble giant figures in beautiful armor approach. They don't seem to be living people, though. When I introduce our group and request passage, they attack!

We make quick work of them and discover that they are nothing but empty suits of plate armor. We pass into a diamond-shaped chamber and see a stone table, on which rests an enormous axe. As I approach, a woman's illusion appears on the other side of the table. She's twelve feet tall, and my friends say she bears a strong resemblance to me. She speaks.

"Io-Regalas, welcome. I wish I could have prepared a different greeting for you. The four sanctuaries have been damaged by elementals but hopefully you have scoured yourself as Lanasal instructed. Clearly, you have already found Lanasal and the Chosen Dusk. That also means that Nicodemus has the *Nemesis Stone*. Take up the *Di-Vissal* and awake the sleeping Ossitorus. When you are done, return and we can speak in truth."

I am stunned. What does she want of us? Nicodemus was the ally of the Perfect Ones we encountered during our climactic fight in Kaelist. We recall that the *Nemesis Stone* is another word for the big purple crystal in the middle of Castle Shard. Nilovas was the elf hermit, so who is Lanasal? Calista thinks the name Lanasal sounds human (Palastani). If we're truly early, perhaps all this hasn't even happened yet.

And is my name really Io-Regalas?

Archinemus uses his magical helm to send a mental message to Zavere at Castle Shard to warn him that Nicodemus intends to obtain their shard. Then I approach the table again to pick up the axe.

The *Di-Vissal* is not made of normal metal. It's far, far heavier than anything I've ever held before and doesn't reflect light as metal would. The extreme weight is so surprisingly unnatural that I drop the weapon in shock. With a crash, the great axe embeds itself in the stone floor, cracking the floor tiles and causing a flash. Suddenly, we find ourselves back in a cave with circles drawn on the floor. Nilovas is there, looking uninterested. I'm in shock, not only from my failure but from the sudden separation from my heritage. I feel like weeping.

My friends have a lot of questions for Nilovas about the Hu-Charad and what we learned in Ar-Nampur. "Lanasal is their agent," he tells us. "You'll find him back where you come from." The Chosen Dusk as well. Beyond that, he doesn't say much, except to reiterate that we were too early. When will the time be right? I wonder. "Did you hear the clarion?" he asks by way of an answer. Ah.

We help out the old man, bringing in some more water and firewood, but all he does is complain and putter about with some vile stew. As we leave, Nilovas' last words to us are: "When you come back, I'll send you through the sanctuaries of energy."

19TH TO 21ST OF HARVEST

The return journey is a hard one. We decide to go via the Old Coast Road. Our carriage takes us up to three hours a day—the rest we walk. We stop in a number of elven towns along the way but it's wonderful to see the gates of home again at last. We have to pay a toll of a silver shiny to enter the city, plus a tax on the goods we're bringing in.

We return to our shop this evening, and all seems well. Business has been a little slow, but that should pick up when I start by series of dungeoneering lectures. Seanus and Taewel seem eager to hear our stories. The dragon head, when mounted, will look great in here. And luckily for Barbatos, Seanus says he can teach him how to play Dragonscales.

Our adventures beyond the city walls have been thrilling, and I feel closer than ever to my mysterious heritage. I know so much more now than when I first embarked upon my life of adventure. But the journey to Ar-Nampur has given me even more questions than I had when I started. If my people came back here twenty years ago to collect those who stayed behind, why did they leave me? Who is Lanasal, and when will I hear the clarion? And what do Nicodemus and the Perfect Ones have to do with anything?

All this will have to wait, I suppose—a lot's been happening around here in our absence. For now, we've got vampires, crime lords, and evil skulks to deal with. Not to mention a crazy swordsmith, a high-stakes Dragonscales game, and some unscrupulous competitors in the business of magic item sales. But what do you expect? That's life in Ptolus.

—Io-Regalas

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