

# The Complete LARP Saga

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## Part 1

In our hobbies, you sometimes end up meeting people you regret. Not just regret meeting, but regret that you are forced to live in the same world as them. Regret that you both can somehow share some joy in the same activity, regret that you both have shared the same air.

I managed to stumble upon a gathering of these types. With circumstances keeping me from fleeing, I ended up spending a weekend with them.

My friend makes bad decisions. He's a good guy, just as long as you don't let him decide anything. As long as someone is deciding things for him, there's no problems, but the second he's left to his own devices, he will almost always come up with the absolute worst ideas. His exploits are carved into his body, with burns and scars from the dumbest of accidents, and he's even missing part of his ear thanks to an infection he got from trying to pierce it himself. Sadly, I'm not too bright myself, and often forget that I'm never supposed to listen to any of his suggestions.

So, when he decided we should join a fantasy LARP, I agreed.

We, my bad-decision-making friend, one other, and myself, had gone LARPing in the past, way back in high school. It was pretty bad, but we were too young to know that. We ended up going to six of the monthly events, which was how long it took for us to understand the LARP and to figure out just how bad it was.

The way it worked was that it really only made sense to go if you had already been going there for years. We stopped going once we realized just how slow the character progression really was, and that it would take us roughly three to four years before we'd be above peon status, and another three or four before we'd be a little below average. While this may not be a problem at other LARPs, it meant that we would be doing nothing but running for help whenever there was a problem for all that time.

While the other friend and I had abandoned it, my misguided friend continued a bit, going to events every once in awhile, still chasing the dream of eventually gaining enough power to be able to go outside the inn without having to ask people to come along and protect him. Eventually even he stopped, mostly because he didn't want to keep paying the fee.

A few years later, he managed to catch wind of a new LARP that had launched, an offshoot of the original one started up by disgruntled members who were tired of the bullshit of the first. He was excited about it, and kept talking about how they were going to change things and make it better. I knew it was just going to be the same old problems in a new packaging, and decided not to go.

While at first I was adamant about my refusal, his enthusiasm was rather contagious, especially because each month he'd come back and would not shut up about how awesome it was. Eventually, my memories of the previous LARP started to blend with both nostalgia and wishful thoughts on how I had hoped things would have gone. The other friend, the who had gone before with us, ended up giving in first and agreed to go to it, about a year after it had started up. With no real reason not to go beyond a bad previous experience at a different LARP, I decided that we might as well all go.

As we drove to the camp site where the LARP would take place, the three of us slowly converted back into our young high school days. Filled with innocence, optimism, and that childlike love of fantasy and pretend, we decided to "get into character," starting off with only referring to each other by our character names. The friend who had been going to the LARP for the past year was Hardule Nightwater, a mage. The other friend friend planned on reviving his old character, Lith Cloud, who was a hardy warrior. I decided on reviving my old character as well, Nephem Festiva, who would use both magic and weapons.

Hardule kept telling us about this and that, and how awesome everything was. He gave me tips on what the good magic spells were, and explained little nuances about the way combat was handled. Since the system was still fairly new, not everything had been really ironed out, and even Hardule said he didn't really think he had figured it all out by now. Lith kept discussing plans on reviving our old adventuring party, Cerberus, and maybe even spending enough time and effort into eventually turning it into a noble house or clan.

When we arrived on Friday afternoon, things seemed pretty good. In fact, the camp grounds seemed awesome. They were some distance away from the closest town, and had plenty of wooded areas as well flat fields. I was still filled with optimism, and barely could wait to go out and adventure and roleplay. I lost a lot of that optimism very quickly with the very first person I saw.

High Lord Ulcik.

Or, at least, that's what he called himself at the old LARP. An overweight man in his late forties or early fifties, he would braid his hair and beard in a way I assumed he thought was very medieval/fantasy looking but instead looked like he had just come back from a teenage girls' sleepover. He always looked like he was scowling, except for when he made eye contact with someone, when he would open his small eyes wide and give the most unnatural smile a person could give.

He was responsible for some of the worst, including the very worst, memories at the old LARP. He had been a noble, and enjoyed ordering around people, especially during the big battles. Disobeying him was apparently a huge offense, and he had actually incarcerated Lith in the little fake jail room for leaving his position during a big battle. Lith had rushed out to help out Hardule, who had somehow been left out in the open, which created a gap in the line that the enemies took advantage of. He spent two hours in that little room before I managed to convince another noble to release him, and even then only after he took almost all of our gold.

As High Lord Ulcik ambled over towards us, I cast a sideways glance at my friends, with Lith appearing rather passive, while somewhat disturbingly Hardule seemed rather happy about seeing Ulcik. With his loud and forcedly gruff voice, Ulcik greeted Hardule and then asked who we were, having forgotten us in the many years since we had last met. We introduced ourselves anew, and while I did it so I wouldn't appear rude by saying we had met before and he had simply forgotten us, Lith did it because he had completely forgotten the man.

Rather quickly, Hardule changed. Talking with Ulcik, his voice and mannerisms became more and more exaggerated, until I could barely recognize him. Using lofty and often silly-sounding language with complete seriousness, I had to stifle a somewhat mean-spirited chuckle at his earnest roleplaying. I then realized that the event hadn't actually started yet, and that neither Ulcik nor Hardule were actually in character yet.

Lith seemed to be paying attention to their conversation, but I was more interested in the other people that were arriving. A parade of various outcasts, most of them were male and in their thirties. A handful of teenagers kept together in clumps here and there, and eventually people in their twenties began to appear. Most were overweight, while the exceptions were exceptionally thin. Judging purely by appearance, it didn't seem like either me or Lith would have any real athletic competition besides each other. Even Hardule, who was somewhat out of shape, could probably challenge most of the people there to a fist fight and have a good chance at winning.

After everyone (a large amount, probably over a hundred people) had gathered around the parking lot, we made our way to the large main cabin. It had already been decorated with candles and various fantasy materials probably taken straight out of a Halloween store, and we

went through the registration process, which included being assigned our cabins. Lith and I had to make our characters, and I was pleased to see that we had a fair amount of options.

With the amount of points you started with, you were able choose different abilities. Lith made a straightforward warrior, specializing in a one-handed sword and large shield style. He went mostly for raw statistics, increasing his HP all the way to 22 and spending a fair amount of points to raise the damage of his sword to the next level, from 3 to 4. Overall, it seemed solid, if a little generic.

I tweaked around, and ended up with primarily a mage that could also use a two-handed sword. 14 HP seemed like it was a bit low, but it was better than the 10 HP other starting mages typically had, and the two-handed sword dealt a solid 4 damage even without raising it to the next level.

As for my spells, I decided on two offensive fire ones, one that dealt 1 damage but I could use as much as I wanted, and one that dealt 7 damage that I could use once a day. I also picked an ice one that made my target forced to stand in the same spot (he could move his arms, but not his feet), and a healing spell I could use 3 times a day to cure 4 hp. To use a spell, I would say the spell name and then throw or touch my target with small bean bags of various sizes, some only an inch long and wide while others were the size of my hand, while most fell somewhere in between.

When we had the characters finished and registered, we went over to Hardule, who was with three other people, including Ulcik. The event had not started yet, so everyone was still in their everyday clothing and they were discussing the game itself. I listened in, and discovered a few things that I probably would have liked to have known before I had come here.

As told by Ulcik himself, he had played a vital role in starting this LARP, and wasn't merely a player, but a partial owner and one of the three head "Plot Masters." Also, it seemed that during this event, Hardule was actually going to become a noble, a count, who would serve beneath the Archduke Ulcik (who was using the same name as his character from the last LARP). Lith was very happy hearing this, because it meant that the adventuring party Cerberus had already taken its first step towards becoming a full fledged noble house.

The event started after an hour, with dinner. By that time, everyone had changed into their costumes. While me and Lith wore what could barely could be called costumes, and there were some teenagers who shared our shirt-and-pants fashion sense, everyone else had elaborate costumes and makeup. Robes, capes, frilly shirts, full body paint and there were even two

people who wore wolf fursuits (they were playing a werewolf type race). I barely recognized Hardule, dressed in a purple robe with a full cape and hood and odd rune-like shapes painted on his face. He also must not have recognized us, as he walked past both of us as he headed towards a different table.

Feeling somewhat miffed about the cold shoulder, we walked over to him. He told us that he and his noble house had some plot-related things they needed to discuss, and that he wasn't allowed to tell us. This was understandable, so Lith and I walked back to the other table, and started chatting with the people around us.

It was odd at first, and I could hear myself matching the rough, low, and unnatural voices everyone was using. Lith seemed to get the flow of things faster than I did, and I guess I was being just a little too judgemental at first. But, soon I was just talking normally to them without any odd accent, expressing my opinion as my character would. I think I started to get the hang of it when me and Lith were ushered into the new player training.

Besides the two of us, there were eight teenagers and two other twenty-somethings. Among them I noticed something that clearly stood out. Among the women who I had seen so far, all were borderline grotesque. Even with layers of heavy makeup and robes they still required a moment to get used to them after the initial shock of their appearance. This one, however, was rather cute. She was stand away from the two clumps of teenagers and the other twenty-year old, looking nervous and confused, which calmed me down for some reason.

Eventually, an old man walked up to us. He must have been over sixty, judging by his wrinkles and white hair. However, he was in surprisingly good shape, enough that made me wonder whether he was in better shape than Lith or me. With a calm yet commanding voice, he started to explain the rules of combat as we walked towards the "Cave."

The Cave is a cabin where the monsters would spawn from. Monsters were people who either volunteered (and didn't have to pay the event fee) or were conscripted from the players for a few hours if there weren't enough. It was also the place they stored the monster costumes and a huge collection of foam, duct tape, and pvc pipe weapons.

Combat had very simple rules. Avoid the head, try not to hurt anyone, and that you had to call out your damage each time you swung. When we finally reached the Cave, he explained that we would now spend the rest of the night as monsters as a bit of practice, and then the next two days we'd play as heroes.

Stepping inside the cave, I felt my blood boil with excitement.

Apparently, all the athletic people spent their time as monsters. When we entered, there were two of them wailing at each other with foam weapons, hitting with enough force to make the old man tell them to stop setting a bad example for us. Beyond them being athletic, they also almost universally had the same evil smirk on their face, which was noticeable enough for even Lith to whisper to me that he thought they all looked like sadists. When the two of them didn't stop, the old man stepped in between them and shouted an order for them to stop, at which point they went into another room.

We then got outfitted as "grunks," which the old man described as rat-like humanoids. Wearing brown furry cloth and wielding foam daggers, the thirteen of us went out. The old man led us skillfully, sniffing the air at intersections and directing us with short barks and hand signs. In moments, we were all grunks, searching for unprepared heroes ready to slaughter.

The first group we met was a lone warrior, who was absolutely shocked to see us. The old man motioned for me and Lith to surround him, and the three of us stabbed the warrior several times before he managed to run past the old man, right into the waiting daggers of the rest of the group. We continued on, all of us fairly pleased.

We stumbled into Ulcik.

Ulcik had an entourage of five people with him, which was still less than half our number. Even so, I knew that we were all going to die. Though, when we died, we would just lie down, wait until all the heroes left, and then get back up. Thinking it a good chance to at least take down one of these nobles, I was more than ready for the old man's order to rush in.

I ran in, trying to get around the warrior with the shield protecting Ulcik. Just as I broke past him, Ulcik threw down a bean bag, shouting "Fire Storm, 10 damage." Unsure what just happened, I continued to move, until Ulcik shouted "Every enemy within a fifty foot radius of me takes 10 fire damage."

With all of us having 5 HP, we simply laid down. I couldn't help but feel somewhat pissed, but the old man seemed rather happy about the outcome. He explained that a monster's job wasn't



to kill players, but to be killed by them. And, it was a good lesson about just how powerful one of the strongest people in the game was, especially compared to one of the weakest creatures.

We got up, and journeyed around for a few more hours. We mostly ended up getting killed from a distance, but occasionally we managed to get killed in melee. Though I could dodge and block fairly well, each dagger dealt only 1 damage, meaning even against a weak caster I'd need 10 hits before he dropped, and it took one or two hits to take me down. I started to get foolishly frustrated, even though I knew I was just playing a really weak monster. It was a strange sense of futility I received from that experience, and I definitely didn't want to repeat it.

Afterwards, we went back to the Cave, but away the stuff, and then went to our assigned cabins. Once I arrived at Lith's and mine, I realized that Hardule was in a different cabin. Lith asked me why Hardule wasn't in ours, and I could only reply that it must be because he's part of a noble house. We then went to sleep, exhausted from having been rats for so long.

When we got up, we looked for Hardule. We found him in the main cabin/inn, talking to a noble. He told us that yesterday he was officially granted his title as a count, and now he could initiate us into Ulcik's noble house. Lith was very excited about this, while I guess I was less than enthusiastic. Hardule said that we should go adventuring right after breakfast, which I guess I was very excited about.

We went out, and I quickly realized I didn't serve much of a purpose. Hardule had been part of this LARP since it had started, and his character was several times stronger than either mine or Lith's. Lith would stand between a monster and Hardule, and Hardule would lob a spell he could cast at will that dealt 10 points of damage, often killing our enemy in 2 shots. We found three monsters after two hours of walking around, which apparently was a pretty high amount, especially during the morning hours.

When lunch came around, Hardule said he had something he needed to do, so he left us in the inn. After talking to a few people, Lith and I decided to go out and adventure on our own. Leaving the inn, we set out on the same path we had taken with Hardule.

We met our first monster, a troll. I hadn't really seen any of the monsters get a chance to fight while Hardule had been with us, and though the three of us had taken out a troll earlier, I only had a vague idea of how strong it was. Of course, it dealing 8 damage with its foam club at least told us that it was much stronger than we were.

The man who was playing the troll was skilled, but not cleverly so. His attacks just kept on getting caught by Lith's sword or shield, while I kept cutting at him with my two-handed sword, using its long reach to keep me at a safe distance. After ten hits, he dropped, and we went on our way. Lith had taken a hit, but with 14 HP remaining, we decided to save my healing spells for a more dire need (because I could stabilize a person brought to less than 0 hp so that they wouldn't die).

On our route, we encountered one of the werewolf people. He was accompanied by a fat woman dressed like a warrior, and when we told them we were just going around looking for adventure, they told us that they were actually looking for help. They wanted to go to a field where they had been told there was treasure, but they also knew that it was guarded by trolls. When we told them we had taken down a troll only minutes ago, the woman stopped and asked us what level we were. When I explained it was our first event, she couldn't believe it. Either way, the two of them decided to let us come with them.

When we arrived at the field, there were three trolls (I assumed) standing beneath a tree, a small box between them. As soon as they saw us, two of them moved out towards us, the last remaining behind. Lith and I moved towards one, while the wolf and woman moved towards the other.

This one was more skilled than the last, and quickly scored a hit on Lith for 9 damage. With only 5 HP left, Lith was in a bad situation. As he moved back, I moved forward attacking more carelessly, just trying to get as much damage in as possible. I pressed the troll back, but just when I thought I'd get the last few hits in, I took 9 damage in the back.

Moving quickly to the side, I turn to see both the wolf and woman lying on the ground, the troll they were fighting now attacking me. With the situation turning against us rapidly, I did some quick calculations.

These were definitely stronger than the troll we had faced before, but hopefully not by much. If the first troll had about 40+ HP, then the troll we had been fighting was probably a hit or two away from dying. Pulling out my bean bags, I began to throw them at him, calling out my weak fire spell. After 4 hits, he dropped, just as the other troll managed to land a strike on Lith, dropping him. Lith had done fairly well against it though, and as I hit the troll with my strong fire spell, it dropped as well. I learned later that trolls take double damage from fire spells, which is probably the major reason we managed to take them down.

I quickly healed up Lith back to 4 HP (one heal spell), but as I moved towards the werewolf and woman, the third troll started running towards us. As he neared, Lith shouted "What do I see?" at him, since the rags he was wearing could mean anything. He replied "A troll much bigger than the rest!"

With both of us being one hit away from death, we had to make a hard decision. In a way, I ended up not having to make it. Lith ran first, and I immediately followed. Looking back, I saw the troll begin chasing after us. Seeing how fast he ran, I suddenly realized something.

Spinning around, I began running towards the troll, a bit slower than I'm fully capable of. He continued to run at me, until he came close enough to swing at me. He swung hard, but I just ran right past him, at which point he realized what I was after. Sprinting now as fast as I could, I reached the small chest and managed to pick it up just before he reached me. He swung again, but I managed to dodge and start running, sword in one hand, chest in the other.

I managed to get out of the field and ran down the path, all the way to the inn, where Lith was trying to get a rescue crew together. I showed him the chest, and opened it to find 30 gold, an absolute fortune, along with two magical rings. I was rather happy with myself, not realizing just how much I was going to regret my actions later.

Within the inn was a healer, and both Lith and I were healed back to our full HP. We then led the crew of six people to the field, where both the werewolf and woman were gone, and the lone troll under the tree. The six surrounded the troll, but even then it was a hard fight, as it probably had well over 200 HP, though I quickly lost count. Eventually, it dropped, and when I asked where the werewolf/woman was, I learned how death works in the game.

After your HP goes below 0, you have five minutes where you can still be healed by normal healing spells (like mine). After that five, you have ten minutes where you can be healed by advanced healing spells. After that, you are dead, and need to be ressurected, which means you lose both money and experience. More than fifteen minutes had passed for the wolf/woman, which meant they simply stood up, and walked back to the inn to get resurrected.

I felt bad for those two, but it meant that both Lith and I would be the only ones to split the treasure. To explain how much a single piece of gold is, you typically might be able to get 3 pieces of gold an event, if you work hard. Getting 15 (split between me and Lith) on the first day meant we could basically buy excellent gear for ourselves and still have some gold left over.

Thinking about our good fortune, I didn't even suppose that I have any sort of problem immediately as I returned to the inn, especially not because the woman had, somehow, while she was unconscious, managed to see me run past a troll to get a treasure chest as opposed to come over to them and heal them, an ability I had only shown I was capable of after she had been knocked unconscious. And her being part of Ulcik's noble house didn't help matters.

The woman had been telling her story in the inn while we were out trying to save her, and as we returned she pointed me out as the guy who cared more about gold than people's lives. At first, the six who had come with us supported me, saying that I was new and didn't know how death worked and that I still went back out to help her. This was quickly drowned out by her mentioning that I had not even bothered to offer any portion of the chest's treasure.

Things immediately turned even more sour.

No one in the rescue party had even known about the treasure chest until they had heard her story, and they suddenly became very interested in why they, the people who had managed to kill the troll, did not deserve the treasure. The woman who had died, realizing that everyone was now caring more about the treasure than they did about her dying, began to harp even louder about just how terrible of a person I was.

I quickly offered them each 5 gold pieces (thinking to keep the two rings for me and Lith), but they were more curious as to why I hadn't offered this to them before they had set out. I was in a very bad situation. If I explained that I had felt that I had earned the entire treasure, and would have been completely content leaving that troll alive and the two corpses where they were, there was no way that would have gone over well. However, my silence as I tried to piece together what to say instead didn't really help my case.

Especially, because during that silence, Archduke Ulcik decided to make his appearance.

Another person from his house told him what had happened, and he listened calmly, silently, making an odd head bobbing motion every once in awhile. As the story finished, he walked over to me, and told me to step outside with him.

He's an easy man to dislike. He started out by telling me what exactly had happened, what everyone didn't know. The huge amount of treasure, an extraordinary amount, had been placed especially for the werewolf and woman to receive. They were actually waiting in the forest for

two NPCs, who unbeknownst to them, were going to use nothing but an infinite amount of heal spells, and let them fight the trolls until they won.

I stood, listening to this, and I guess somewhat angrily asked what any of that had to do with me. He explained, calmly, slowly, that I had snatched away something that I didn't deserve, and that I could potentially imbalance the game if I used that gold. I said that wasn't going to be a problem, because I had already promised to give the gold away to the six people who had come with us.

He grew furious.

He asked me if I knew what I had done. How I had taken the gold and now made it so that it could no longer be easily returned without upsetting all those players. How this would cheapen the entire gold economy, and how I had singlehandedly devalued every magical item in the game. I said he must be exaggerating, and he said that there was no way I could understand.

He then stood silent, apparently thinking hard, until he gave me the absolute worse smile I've ever seen in my entire life. He told me that he had a solution. Being an absolute idiot, I smiled back, thinking that the man would just magically smooth away the problem.

As he went inside, he said that I was being convicted of murder. That through my negligence, I had let two people unjustly die, and that for my crime, I would be executed through decapitation.

Absolute silence followed. So he continued. He said that leaving a nobles of his house to die was the same as leaving him to die. I would be an example to all, so that anyone who claims to be a hero will never make the same mistake of being overcome by greed. And, as a lesson to all, the state would seize all of my assets.

I looked out at the crowd, waiting for a reaction. Waiting for someone to scream "FUCKING BULLSHIT" or "He's a brand new player!" or "YOU'VE GONE MAD WITH POWER." Instead, the first one to say something was that fat, disgusting woman who I'm glad I had inadvertently killed and only wished she would stay dead, who shouted, "Long live the Archduke!"

The crowd slowly erupted in that chant, and to my horror I realized that Hardule was among them. I looked for Lith's face in the crowd, and was equally dismayed to see a look of absolute indifference, one that said "It's just a game. This might actually be fun."

I could only shoot him a pleading glance, followed by an angry one at Hardule. He actually paused, but one look from the Archduke was more than enough to get him going again. The Archduke, with a look of utter triumph, simply picked up the chest and walked away, leaving me to the other nobles.

I was then led into the "jail," an unused closet with barely enough room for me to stand. I was told that I was supposed to wait in there until my execution, the time of which would be decided by the Archduke. They then closed the door, leaving me in the cramped darkness..

END OF PART I

## Part 2

I waited in the darkness of the small closet, collecting my thoughts, trying to come to terms with what was happening. In a way, I was actually fortunate to have that little time-out, as it gave me time to think and question. I began to question what my next line of action was. My first option, and the most obvious one, was to just accept the sentence. Being executed meant that I would be permanently killed, in a way that prevented resurrection. I was a first level character, and starting up a new character wouldn't really change much. More importantly, it was the only choice that was presented to me, as neither negotiating for a fair trial nor escaping really seemed like options.

But, every fiber of who I was did not want to be executed, even if it was just for pretend in a pretend world. Even if the circumstances around it were all make-believe, my innocence was real. Every ounce of rebellious spirit that I had in me said to find some way out of this mess, to oppose the tyrannical decision of Ulcik and the apathy of the populace that enabled it.

Even though I had found my resolve, I still could not find any way to remedy my situation.

Hardule and Lith came to visit me, leading me out of the cramped closet. They tried to convince me that all I really could do was accept the execution, and try to make it a fun roleplaying experience. I told them that they could have a fun roleplaying experience in helping me escape.

With a rather downcast look, Hardule explained that there was no way he could oppose Ulcik, especially because it was because of him that he had finally become a noble, not to mention that Ulcik was possibly the strongest person in the game. Lith simply said that it would be easier for me to just make a new character, rather than try to iron out all the problems this one had. He even said I could make him identical to Nephem, except I'd have to change his name.

We argued a bit more, until it became clear that they wouldn't help me willingly. I then asked them why they had even bothered to come see me, if all they were going to do was tell me my only choice was death.

At this point, Hardule actually became somewhat angry, telling me that it had not been easy for him to come see me, and that he actually had to use his rank as a noble to get this chance. I responded with the question of whether he had actually bothered to take me out of my cramped cell.

Looking at the closet I was no longer in, Hardule, calming down slightly, said that it was obvious that he had, not realizing my intention.

I bolted.

I was almost out the door before either of them realized what I was doing. They began to shout, but by the time someone took notice, I was a good, safe distance. A low level mage tried to throw spells at me, but his throws were short and a moment later I disappeared into the woods. Running far, deep into the middle of the camping grounds, I found a small ring of dense bushes in a wooded spot that was well away from the main roads. Moving into the center of them and feeling rather secure about not being spotted within them, I sat down and began to think of what to do next.

Before I decided anything else, I realized I needed to get myself prepared. In order to be a fugitive, I needed to get three major things: Food, a place to sleep, and perhaps the most important, a weapon. Once I had those three, I could decide on what to do next.

Food and a place to sleep were a problem. Meals were purchased at the Inn, which was also the place where I was sure to find plenty of people who could kill me with a glance. Beyond that, I had brought a fair amount of snacks with me, probably enough so that I wouldn't have to buy

any food for the weekend. However, all these snacks were in my bags, which were in my cabin. That was also the place I was expected to sleep, which meant it was the place I was expected to go, which meant it was the place I expected they would try to catch me. If I was to even try to go there, I wanted to at least be armed with more than just a few bean bags.

My character could only use a two-handed sword. Other mages typically could use daggers and small swords, but I had taken those points and added to them just so I could use a two-handed sword. My choice was made under the assumption that I'd never need or want to use a smaller sword, but now I was in a really bad situation.

In order for me to get a new weapon, I had three options. Stealing an unattended one that a person owned meant that I had to get a specially sanctioned witness, which I knew was a stupid idea. I could always just break the rules, but that was grounds for being kicked out of the game itself. If I was going to do this, I was going to do this without anyone being able to condemn me for opposing the spirit of the game. If I broke a rule, nothing I did would matter, since they would just retcon everything. I had to beat them at their own game, with their own rules.

That left either taking one from a fallen person, or I could just grab one from the piles at the Cave. Neither of these options seemed very practical. There were very few players who used two-handed swords, and beyond just finding them, I'd have to defeat them unarmed. Going to the cave seemed smarter, since players avoided going near it and there was undoubtedly weapons there, but I also had an enormous chance of running into a monster, who'd be more likely to be able to outrun me, considering the monsters I had seen were more athletic than the players.

While I considered my options, I heard voices coming close. I knew that I was fairly safe within these bushes, invisible unless they decided to force their way through them, but I was still extremely nervous, holding my breath with the amateur thought that it would keep them from hearing me. As I listened, I realized that they were three teenagers, one who I remembered quite clearly because of his awkward, cracking voice that was an absolute challenge to respond to with the mindset that he was playing a gruff and strong warrior.

Peering out from the bushes as they passed some distance away, I was very glad I had chosen neutral grays for my outfit rather than the flashy colors that seemed to be in fashion here. The three of them, all warriors (though none with a two-handed sword), wore bright colors that encouraged me to think of them as targets.



Without a plan formed, I slowly slid out of the bushes, then cautiously, silently, I moved after them. While I was still a good distance away, I threw my ice spell at the closest one, calling out the spell's name in the most intimidating voice I could. Hitting him squarely in the back, he froze in good faith of roleplaying, while the other two wheeled nervously around. I hit the second before he had a chance to move, and the third kept close to his friends while I brandished another bean bag.

Counting down the thirty seconds in my head, I had very little time before the three of them tried to rush me. While my aim was solid, I doubted that I could hit them all without the element of surprise, especially since I only managed to hit two while I had it. I asked them first what they were doing, and with a strange obliging obedience the lone mobile one answered curtly. Apparently, I had a 30 gold bounty on my head.

This was an obscene amount of money for just catching such a weak fugitive, and I didn't blame them for trying to hunt me. I, however, was not going to just lie down and let them take it without a challenge. With the thirty seconds almost up, I knew that I'd have to run. Looking back in the opposite direction from them, I realized my cabin was in that direction.

With a burst of inspiration, I ran directly at them.

The three teens panicked (with no real reason, considering I didn't even have a weapon), but I kept well out of their swords' ranges, running around them in the direction opposite my cabin. I made an emphasis of my speed, running with the intent that no sane person would try to keep up with me, until I was a good distance away from the encounter. Seeing that I had no pursuers, I stopped to catch my breath, wondering whether I could keep up such a pace all day. I continued on a little further in that direction before I looped around, with the guess that the three were heading towards the inn, telling everyone where they had spotted me and where they thought I was going. If I had any chance at getting my stuff from the cabin, this was it.

The camp grounds were pretty large, and it could easily take more than an hour to walk from one end to the other. With a floating map fuzzily drawn in my mind, I tried to predict where people would be and where'd they be heading, thankful for the extensive travelling I had done on the grounds as a grunk. This may sound like a pretty impressive ability, but it was me mostly trying to figure out how to avoid the main roads while taking all the smaller paths.

I did fairly well for myself, using a few paths that were practically hidden that I would never have known of had I not been shown by the old man who had led us, and managed to get close to my cabin with only hearing people in the distance. However, just as I neared it, voices surprised me

from just beyond a bend in the path I was taking. I dove into the woods, glad that the road was somewhat elevated and that I had basically dropped into a ditch.

A large group appeared from beyond the bend, and I nervously knew that I had no chance of staying undiscovered if they continued down the path. Thankfully, they took an earlier fork and moved away on a different, larger path, but I managed to catch snippets of their conversation. My guess had been correct, and they had been waiting for me at my cabin. And while they agreed that 30 gold was way too much just for capturing me, they however were not complaining.

As soon as they had gone a good distance, I moved out of the ditch, dusting myself off. I didn't waste any more time, and rushed into my cabin. With haste, I gathered my snacks together into my small sleeping bag, downing a candy bar and a bag of chips in the process. While it wasn't the most nutritious meal, it at least satisfied me. What was the greater satisfaction was that I had managed to outwit everyone into thinking I was elsewhere.

Everyone except Lith.

Lith stood at the entrance. Blocking it. His sword and shield were readied, and the look on his face said that this was not going to end well. Even so, I greeted him, telling him I planned on being a fugitive, and that I could use all the help I could get. He responded simply, telling me that Hardule was no longer a noble. That he had been demoted because he had let me escape. And that now there was very little chance that Cerberus would become a noble house.

I told Lith that it wasn't my fault. That it wasn't Hardule's fault. That all of this was because of Ulcik. I even wanted to tell him about Ulcik's whole plan with the original treasure, but I realized that wouldn't sway him an inch. He just looked at me, knowing that I was unarmed, and calmly said that I should have just made a new character.

I replied, slowly, knowing that I would regret the scene that followed. I said that I was just doing what my character would do, that all I was doing was roleplaying, the thing we came here to do.

Lith agreed. He said that was what we came here to do. And that what he was going to do now was just what his character would do. That all he was going to do was roleplay.

He lunged forward.

Hardule and Lith had both been giving me advice while I made my character, and both of them knew I had built him wrong. Compared to a pure warrior, I had lower stats across the board. Compared to a pure spellcaster, I had only a fraction of their spells and the amount of times they could cast them. Worse still, I had decided to not specialize in a single school of magic, which meant that I had only the weakest of all three schools (except for the 7 damage fire spell, which is the second weakest of the fire school). In the end, my character could not be a mage because he could not rely on his spells, and he was far weaker than any other fighter.

However, in this exact situation, to both Lith's and my regret, I was invincible.

As he lunged forward, I hit him with my ice spell. He was still blocking the lone exit, so he began to count to thirty aloud, trying to show me how futile that spell was.

I then hit him with my 1 damage fire spell. I then hit him again.

It then dawned on him what my plan was.

Combining the schools of fire and ice, I had no chance of losing. He had no ranged attacks, no defenses, nothing he could do. As the thirty seconds expired, I hit him with another ice spell, and then continued. His 22 HP dwindled away rapidly, until he was left with a single hit point. I renewed the ice spell, and then told him that he should run to the inn and get healed. He was furious at first, but he seemed to realize just how terrible it would be for me to be the one to kill his character. As he nodded in agreement, I put down my hand, glad that this had not turned out worse.

As the ice spell expired, he lunged forward at me.

He would have hit me. He had actually surprised me, shocked me to the point where there was no way I could have consciously reacted. Had I not been casting the same fire spell over and over again for the last five minutes, I probably would have been captured right there, unable to defend myself against him after he had closed the gap between us. But the spell had been drilled into my mind, and I reflexively acted, tossing the bean bag at him before I came within his reach.

As he dropped to the ground, defiantly silent, I panicked. I needed to get a healer to him quickly, but there was no way for a fugitive to do so. Were I to go to the inn, I would simply be captured or killed, and even then there was little chance a healer would reach Lith in time. Finding one by chance on the road was a long shot as well, and I was very much more likely to just run into a group of bounty hunters or monsters.

With a glance at my watch, I saw that he had very little time before his first five minutes were up, meaning that he would require advanced healing, not just basic healing like the spell I had.

After realizing how stupid I was, I found myself debating whether I should use one of my two remaining healing spells on a person I myself had damaged. I knew that I was going to need them later if I was expecting to survive as a fugitive, and there'd be no other way I could get healing. Knowing Lith would never forgive me if I was the one that killed him, it became a very easy choice.

I kicked aside his sword and shield, well out of his reach. Grabbing my sleeping bag, I knelt down by him, apologizing that things had had to turn out like this. As soon as I healed him, before he could get up, I hit him with an ice spell. I then ran out of the cabin, food and sleeping gear triumphantly in tow, but wondering if it had been worth it.

By now, it was late in the afternoon. With food obtained, I decided I'd do the next easiest thing, which was to find a place to sleep and to leave my stuff. That may be one of the better things about LARPing, I think. When playing a tabletop roleplaying game, carrying gear and sleeping meant absolutely nothing, to the point where I wouldn't even keep track of it. At a LARP, you learn to appreciate being able to ignore those things. Here, I would have a hard time escaping any pursuers if I had to carry a sleeping bag filled with food while doing so. And while sleeping in the woods with just my sleeping bag was a possibility, I wasn't going to do it if I didn't have to.

Besides the cabins that were scattered about the camp ground, there were other small buildings and sites, like picnic grounds with tables, that might be better to sleep at. My first choice would be to find a cabin that had been left unassigned, but this was also the most risky. It would be a really bad scene to think a cabin was unoccupied and then to find out it wasn't. Even so, the exciting prospect of sleeping in an equipment shed or outhouse wasn't enough to dissuade me from taking that risk.

Travelling far away from the inn to the cabins I assumed they would assign last, I found myself encountering less and less people and having to hide less and less often. The people who were pursuing me, who I assumed was everyone (considering the size of the bounty), really didn't seem keen on doing a good job looking for me. They were just patrolling around the main roads, not bothering to poke around in the smaller ones, let alone the woods. With the whole camp grounds to look over, I realized that within the outskirts reaches, I could basically move around without really having to fear being found.

I stalked several cabins, watching them from a distance. When it seemed like no one was around, I'd run up, check to see if there was any signs of people staying there, and if I saw bags lying around, I'd go to the next cabin. Finally, just as it was getting dark, I found a cabin that was well detached from all the others. Peering inside, I saw that there was no sign anyone had been in there. As I tried the front door and found it locked, I began to wonder if what I was about to do was going to be considered unlawful entry. I tried one of the windows, which were almost rustic with their simplicity, and opened it without difficulty.

Inside, it was fairly bare beyond wooden bedframes with plastic wrapped mattresses, but there was a small kitchen and bathroom. After relieving myself and getting a nice drink of the tap water, I located a closet. Inside, it was not very large, but there was enough room for me to sleep in it if I slept in the fetal position. While sleeping on a mattress would be infinitely more comfortable, I wasn't going to be taking any more chances than I already was. But now was not the time to even consider sleeping, so I just downed a few more snacks, put my gear in the closet, and left through the window.

It was getting fairly dark, which was to my advantage. I've always had good night vision, meaning the poor light would only serve to hide me from my enemies. While I never prided myself on being stealthy, I guess that might have been because I had never had the chance to test myself. Even now though I still wouldn't consider it to be one of my skills, considering that the people I was sneaking around were often obviously not looking for anyone. It seemed that most people had given up on actively searching for me, which made my life all the easier. However, it didn't solve my major problem.

I had decided to take a weapon from the Cave. Moving towards it, I determined my earlier fears had not been misguided. Were it not for the darkness, I probably would have been quickly discovered and attacked by the monsters that wandered around near it. They were constantly actively searching for people, not just for me, as it was common for weak players to hide from the monsters at night.

I pressed my luck, and was rewarded as I reached the Cave without being found. Stepping inside the large cabin, I was relieved to find the main room empty, and the large piles of weapons exactly as I remembered them. Perhaps taking my time more than I should have, I looked through all the two-handed swords, until I found one I considered to be the best. It was the maximum length for a two-hander, but was light and simple, without any senseless decorations beyond a thin foam cross guard. Though I knew my major tactics of running and hiding would remain unchanged, I at least felt like I now had the opportunity to fight.

Just as I was leaving, the old man appeared from one of the back rooms. My first instinct was to run, but I just slowly turned around and left, as normally as if I was just any old monster ready to set out on patrol. A moment passed before he called out to me, but by then I was already sprinting towards the safety of the dark woods, sword in hand.

Now, it was time to plan. The entire time I had been gathering and preparing, I had been thinking of what exactly it was that I wanted to do. There was no point in trying to clear my name, and just surviving until I was caught wasn't really much of a plan. Thinking of what Nephem, my character, would do in this situation, I realized that I didn't really have the choice to get out of this land, especially if you took the real world consideration that Hardule had been the one to drive us here. I then simply asked what it was that I really wanted to do.

I really wanted to kill that fat woman warrior. Archduke Ulcik also really deserved to die. In fact, I wanted to see just about every player who had sided with Ulcik in hunting me suffer a bit, but I was more than willing to just watch the noble house of Ulcik crumble. Fantasizing about seeing everyone have their precious characters killed, I quickly realized the difficulty, if not impossibility, of me being able to accomplish something like that. Setting my sights low, I decided it would be best to just focus on having the woman warrior get killed, while antagonizing the Ulcik house whenever I could.

This didn't leave me with much of a time frame. It was already Saturday night. The event only lasted until Sunday afternoon, giving me only a few hours to do anything. Every second now had the utmost importance, especially because I planned on never coming back here again.

With such a small amount of time to work with, I needed every edge I could get. While just having the sword with me felt comforting, the tiny bit of damage I dealt with it didn't really seem like it would let me accomplish my goal within the time allotted. Though I was certain I could kill the woman in solo combat, I doubt there ever was a time where she'd be alone without some manner of backup. Combined with my spells, I might have a chance against two people, though not if one were a mage.

Magic in this game was definitely overpowered, and I think I could understand why. Almost every top-tier noble was a wizard, including Ulcik himself. All the most important battles would be fought between mages, and warriors really only served the purpose of standing between the wizards, creating a nice wall for them to cast over.

What scared me most about the mages was abilities like Ulcik's Fire storm. While dodging beanbags wasn't easy, you still had the chance. With undodgeable area attacks, the only hope you had was that your character was strong enough to survive.

Thankfully, mages typically dressed like poison dart frogs, making it easy to not only see that they were dangerous, but easy to see from a distance. In order to kill the woman warrior, I'd have to attack her at a time when I could tell there wasn't a mage within running distance, which I doubted would be an easy task.

Wondering if there was anything I was overlooking on my character sheet, I fished into my pockets to retrieve it. As I did, my fingers brushed against two things I had completely forgotten about.

I had removed the two magical rings from the treasure box, and never returned them.

This was undoubtedly a cause to celebrate. While made out of cheap plastic and set with cheap plastic gems, the real worth of the ring could be determined by a chart that revealed what each type of ring did. Unable to remember the whole chart, or even more than a small part of it, I was at least able to determine that the gold and blue gem ring was undoubtedly powerful, but also that the silver and three red gemmed ring was most likely unique. Unique rings were ones that were not on the chart, at least not on the chart in the rulebook, meaning that in order to find out what it did, I'd have to ask a plot master. My joy quickly fading, I realized that without knowing what they did, these rings were just cheap pieces of plastic.

Even so, I was still glad I had kept them. Slipping them back into my pocket, I began to review my character sheet, only to realize that it was far too dark to make out a single word. Taking a bit of a risk, I moved towards one of the major paths, which had large streetlights placed sparingly upon them.

Reading my statistics beneath a light, I found nothing I didn't already know. Even so, it was good to actually see what I could do, and I began to formulate what kind of strategies I had available to me.

In a somewhat ironic sense, while I mused over how to be tactful and strategic, I was standing out in the open beneath a street light. This may have been bad because I was clearly visible and vulnerable, but it was even worse because my eyes were adjusting to the light. As the two monsters approached me, I didn't even notice them until it was far too late.

They saw me, and didn't even hasten their pace. I called out to them, asking what I saw. One replied that they were murdagrunks, and seeing my confusion, the other simply explained that they were "stronger grunks."

As they walked towards me, their short swords ready, I felt a strange calmness. It felt like a proper, gentlemanly duel, rather than an ambush. I felt like we were all on the same wavelength, understanding that what we were about to do was a battle that would test our physical skill and ability, rather than what our stats dictated. It was to be an honorable, feel-good battle, where no matter who was slain we'd all congratulate each other on an excellent fight.

Just as they leapt to attack me, three more of them leapt out of the woods.

Cursing, I quickly struck one twice, relying more on the reach of my sword than any actual skill. He fell, making me take the guess that even though they were stronger than ordinary grunks, they were not stronger by much. The other four stopped advancing, and spread out to surround me.

Were the circumstances different, my principle thought would be to shout and delay them until help arrived. With that being a more deadly option than trying to face these four, I decided on a plan that may have been even more foolish.

Calling out to one, I challenged him.

A direct, clear challenge. The other three seemed indifferent, ready to just swarm and kill me, but I had chosen the right one. This guy was tall and fairly muscular, very unlike the rat-like



creature he was supposed to be. With a few short words, he told the other three he could take me, and with a bit of reluctance, they moved away from the two of us.

He leapt at me, in a way that you were not allowed to do at this LARP. Within the rules, combat was expected to be two people standing a few feet away from each other, tapping their weapons at each other until the person who dealt more damage or had more HP won. Jumping at your opponent was not allowed, as it was considered dangerous, and getting too close to a person was likewise prohibited. In that moment, and probably every moment like it, I simply didn't care and was glad that someone was willing to actually give me a fight.

He had charged in close, but too short for the reach of his sword yet within the reach of mine. I slashed at him, forcing him to block, and tried a second slash before he leapt back. He was skilled, perhaps even more than I was, but both my weapon and my statistics were superior. As he tried to figure out how he could actually strike me with his short sword, I interrupted his thoughts by rushing in at him. He was far too good with the short sword, blocking every strike I tried, but the difference in reach kept him from returning any attacks. Finally, I bent down low, striking his legs. It was a solid hit, too low for him to block with his sword, and I quickly followed it with another, felling him.

The other three had remained silent spectators, but as they saw their comrade fall, they began to make odd, rat-like sounds.

I turned to face them, ready for them to swarm me. Instead, another one took a step forward, and with a bit of relief, I challenged him as well. This fight was short, as I likewise discovered he was a skilled fighter and that he could block my attacks with leisure, but two strikes to the legs was enough to defeat him.

The third didn't even wait for me to properly challenge him. And I didn't even wait to find out if he was good at blocking. I kept attacking his feet, forcing him to leap back each time, unable to find a counter. As he reached the edge of the path and his foot fell into the small ditch that was beyond it, I struck him squarely on the shoulder and followed it with a hit on the other side.

The last one approached me in a low stance, and I at first thought he was just acting like the rat-creature he was supposed to be. It didn't take me long to realize he had figured out the counter to my low attacks, and from his low stance his short sword guarded his legs with ease. I was also pressed with a different difficulty, in that the one target that I had access to was also the one I wasn't allowed to hit. He didn't even bother to guard his head, in a strange form of faith, and I was left trying to slash his sides, only to have my efforts wasted by his blocks.

While his stance was good for defense, he had no real way to attack me. His crouch kept him from being very mobile, and we fought in almost the same position for far too long a length of time. Seeing that he wasn't even breathing hard, I suddenly felt all the exhaustion the last battles owed me. Gasping for breath, I continued to attack, knowing that each passing moment was just to his advantage. The second I'd stop my attack, he'd rush in, dealing damage that I could not risk to take.

With a final, wild swing, I gave up. Too tired, and too unskilled, I realized I had no chance of beating him in this manner of fighting. As soon as he saw the opportunity, he leapt forward, his sword flashing out at my shoulder for 2 points of damage. I responded in kind, however for 4 points. With no skill, no effort, nothing but raw statistics, I took his next hit and returned it with my own. There was a mutual feeling of disappointment, but I just could not let myself be killed by a bunch of random rat people. As he dropped, I asked if I found any treasure on them. They handed me 5 copper pieces, a fair amount of money, and then left them as they went to respawn somewhere else.

The two hits I had taken were bad, but I still had 10HP left. A bit low for a warrior to have, but I was quickly realizing that I might just not have what it takes to be a melee fighter. Knowing that I had to rapidly learn the style of fighting that took place here or I didn't have a chance at accomplishing my goals, I began to wonder if it was time to start seeking fights.

I didn't have to, as it was all too easy for the fights to find me. Like most nights, that night had a special theme. Every monster that was out there was either a grunk or a murdagrunk, and they were out in full force.

The side roads were now just as deadly, if not more so, than the main roads, something that took me a few encounters to determine. Fighting against the people who played the monsters was a rare treat for me, and after taking down six two-man groups, I realized I was over-extending myself in order to keep fighting them. Keeping to the small roads, I kept fighting and fighting, ambushing one group or being ambushed by another. I went out of my way to pick fights, enraptured by what probably was some form of bloodlust. With each enemy carrying a single copper piece, I had a good way to keep track of how many I had been fighting, as I would have lost count otherwise.

I at first pitied my enemies, for having low HP and dealing only 1 or 2 points of damage. I quickly got over that, as my own HP dwindled and I saw that they basically all had infinite lives. I would fight a group only to fight them again within the next few minutes, knowing full well that I would

see them again soon. The battles slowly became easier as I began to recognize people and how they fought, and the monsters seemed to slowly get used to the nature of having infinite respawns. As the night continued, they grew less and less defensive, more willing to do suicidal rushes and risky maneuvers, knowing full well that they'd just return in a matter of minutes.

As time flew by, I began to wonder what exactly I was doing. With only 6 HP left, I had collected over 50 copper coins, half of a gold piece, but not having accomplished much else. With the large amount jingling in my pocket, I eventually asked a lone murdagrunk I had ambushed and slew if he had any silver pieces he could exchange for my copper. He asked me how many rat people I had defeated by then, and I started counting. Amazed, the murdagrunk introduced himself, and then told me that when he wasn't a monster he'd play a character named Vlaine. Vlaine explained that the Cave right now was basically empty, with every monster running about.

They were actually supposed to be assaulting the inn, where all the players were gathered together. However, I had chosen a fairly inconvenient hunting ground for the monsters, as I was right in between the inn and the Cave. With only a handful ever actually reaching the inn and being killed almost instantly by the high powered people that guarded it, most of the rat-people were actually preferring to find and fight me then to journey all the way to the inn.

Realizing that I was ruining what was most likely Ulcik's planned event, I couldn't help but feel proud. Thanking Vlaine for the information and for exchanging my copper for some silver coins, I made my way back onto the small paths, reinvigorated thanks to having found a purpose.

The ratfolk changed their tactics. Rather than moving in two-people groups, they moved around individually, searching for me. While they could have easily defeated me by just moving around in groups of four or more, I think I came to realize that their goal wasn't a collaborative one. Each monster wanted to be the lone one who managed to kill me. This made my life much easier, as ambushing them became almost too easy and the subsequent battles were over in seconds. The encounters were now paced closer together, but I grew less tired as the night continued, having found a style of attack that worked almost too well.

The legs were my favorite targets. The only way they could be defended was from the crouched position or by moving backwards. What this meant was that anytime they wanted to move forward, their legs became perfect targets. I would wait for my opponent to take that step forward to attack with his short dagger or sword, and with a step back of my own I would strike his exposed leg. With my "fading strike" working every single time, no matter how often I used it against the same person, I thought about just how frustrated all the monsters must be.

They continued to keep to the small paths I was on, a nearly continuous assault of battles. As soon as I dropped one grunk, I would spot another who had heard the sounds of battle, and I would rush to meet him. With adrenaline surging through me, I continued to fight, slowly learning how to use my sword until I felt that I really could match the monsters in actual skill, not simply cheap tactics and an abuse of my reach advantage.

After exchanging coins a few times with Vlaine (who told me that the monsters were glad I did so, as they would probably have run out of copper coins), in the five hours I had spent fighting I had managed to collect two gold coins and three silver ones, an impressive haul by any standard. But, the five hours had taken their toll, with no healing spells left, only 3 hp, and I could barely move. Thankfully, it seemed that the monsters too were exhausted, and their numbers slowly dwindled until finally I was certain that I was all alone in these woods.

Trudging back to the cabin I had commandeered as my own, I opened the door, too exhausted to think. The inside was very dark, far darker than the moon lit night outside, but I didn't want to risk turning on the light. I moved towards the closet that would be my personal sanctuary, ready to pass out.

The lights suddenly flashed on, and I wheeled around, adrenaline knocking aside any fatigue. Standing by the light switch was the young nervous girl I had met many hours before, startled and surprised by someone she was clearly not expecting. She must have been either sleeping or waiting in bed, as she was dressed in simple pajamas. With the rules of the game dictating that we were both still active players, I looked at her as a threat. She had no weapon on her, but if she were a pure mage, that meant nothing. With only 3 hp, a single spell would be more than enough to take me out. Not wanting to take that chance, I moved towards her, sword ready.

She surrendered, throwing both hands out wide, showing that she didn't even have a bean bag to throw. She then told me that she didn't even have any spells remaining, as she had used them up already. Perhaps somewhat foolishly, I trusted her, telling her to get back to her bed. I quickly turned out the lights, and locked the door, only realizing now how stupid I was for not noticing it had been unlocked earlier.

She knew who I was. At least, she knew how I was a fugitive murderer with a 30 gold bounty on his head. I told her that all I wanted to do was sleep, and that the closet was the only safe place I had found. I asked if I could trust her to not tell anyone, so that I wouldn't have to kill her. When I said it like that, she told me that there was no doubt that I could trust her. Slumping down into the closet, I waited for my heartbeat to slow, the last bit of excitement having roused it into a

rapid tempo. Feeling hungry, I offered her a bag of chips as I opened one for myself. As we ate, she asked me what I had been doing for the last day, and I felt the strange need to tell someone what I had gone through. As soon as I finished, I asked her what she had been doing, and if she had any news that could help me.

Her character's name was Selenia, and she had come here with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend, much like Hardule, had been here since the very beginning, and was one of the most powerful warriors. He had convinced her to come, though she admitted she was very reluctant. He had built her character for her, telling her that he planned on working with her as a team. She was a mage, but could not use any weapon and had only 7 HP. All her points had been spent in healing spells.

He had made her into a pocket mage.

These two words may not mean much to non-LARPer, because it may be something that can only exist in a LARP. While a warrior may be powerful, there was a way that they could be practically invincible. While they fought, they would have a mage with a hand on their backs, constantly healing them. This two person combo was so effective, it ended up being the sole tactic use by the most powerful players at the last LARP I had gone to. Fighting against a warrior who had a pocket mage was at best like chopping at a tree, trying to get the mage to expend all their spells so you actually had a chance to damage the warrior themselves.

She had followed her boyfriend around all day, healing him and others when necessary, until it came to the big battle that had taken place at the inn. He had underestimated the grunk swarm, running into the center of one, and ended up having Selenia use all her healing spells. Without her spells, she was effectively useless, and opted to go to their cabin. Her boyfriend also wanted to leave with her, but Ulcik kept saying that more and more ratfolk were on their way. Since he had to help defend the inn from a massive swarm that would never actually reach it, the boyfriend had stayed behind.

Reaching into my pocket to take out a piece of gold so that I could give her something in exchange for her silence besides a threat, I realized I still had the two rings. I quickly asked her if there was a rulebook inside this cabin, and she went over to her boyfriend's bags and pulled out a copy. Reading with a flashlight, I found the page with the ring chart, was impressed by what I had. The gold ring with the blue gem was a ring of minor spell reflection. What this meant was that I could block spells with my sword.

Ordinarily, one of the reasons why mages were so powerful was because both the shield and the weapon of a warrior were viable targets for their spells, forcing them to dodge if they wanted to avoid the spell. With the sword and shield being the most popular weapon combo, the shield served mostly as a giant target for the spell casters. However, with either a sword, shield, or ring of minor spell reflection, neither the sword nor shield counted as targets, meaning you could block spells that came towards you.

A major ring of spell reflection actually let you bounce back any spell you blocked right back at its caster 3 times a day, but the minor ring was still much more powerful than someone like me deserved. I also determined that the ring with three red gemmed was in fact a unique one, which was at least better than being unsure about it. Placing both rings on my fingers, I thanked Selenia, gave her the gold piece and explained that I was using it to buy her silence, and then dug into my small closet nest.

An hour later, her boyfriend marched inside, waking me from my light sleep. He seemed rather angry, and I quickly learned why. He and the rest of the nobles had been staying at the inn, waiting for an ambush they were expecting to come, but only a handful of ratfolk ever made their way to the inn after the first initial wave. Ulcik eventually ended up breaking character, calling the Cave, and finding out that all the monsters were too tired to go and attack the inn.

All the players who had stayed up all night at the inn were furious, having been denied what was supposed to be a fun and easy battle. Selenia explained that it had been me that had been fighting hundreds of ratfolk, and he quickly demanded to know how she knew. She explained that one of the monsters who was going back to his cabin had told her what had happened, and her boyfriend ranted and raved for a little longer before he collapsed into his bed.

I returned to sleep, but with the urgency that comes from understanding I only had the rest of the day to complete my goals, I woke up after only another three hours of sleep. If my guess was correct, most of the players would still be sleeping at this time, especially since they had practically spent the entire night guarding the inn. After eating a pathetic breakfast, I looked out of the closet into the cabin. Selenia and her boyfriend were sleeping, in what I noticed were separate beds. Looking at the gear her boyfriend had carelessly tossed to the ground, including a clearly magical two-handed sword, I wished vehemently that you didn't need a sanctioned witness in order to steal things. Just as I was about to leave the cabin, a dirty little rule suddenly entered my mind.

With the rulebook within reach, I went ahead and made sure I had read it correctly. I read it again to make sure that I had not ommitted anything. I then struggled slightly with my decision.

Available to all players was the ability to deliver a finishing blow to a fallen enemy. Dropping a monster or player to 0 HP meant that it had only fallen unconscious, and that it would still take the fifteen minutes for it to die. However, by delivering a coup-de-grace, a declared attack that you had to wait five seconds before you delivered it, you bypassed the whole fifteen minutes and just instantly killed your opponent. And, the rules made certain to say that this finishing blow could be used on sleeping people, making it possibly the best way to assassinate someone.

I wondered at first if I was betraying Selenia's trust by murdering her boyfriend while he slept, but knowing that he was from house Ulcik made my decision very simple. With sword in hand, I declared my attack, counted the five seconds out loud, and gently tapped his shoulder.

I then gently woke him.

He did not awaken gently.

He knew full well what I had done even before I told him. He threw a fit, loud enough to wake Selenia, but I calmly showed him the rules I had followed, and told him that he had died in his sleep, not even knowing who had killed him. He had no choice but to accept his character's death, but I knew for certain that when he went back to the inn to get ressurected, he'd tell everyone that I had killed him.

I then almost ran right out of the cabin, before realizing something very important. I turned to the guy, and told him I was taking his stuff. With him being a fallen enemy, he would act as the witness as I looted his gear. He turned to Selenia, and he knew better than I did that she had no way to stop me. Emptying a pouch that held over fifty gold(!) and grabbing the two-handed sword, I felt somewhat reluctant about parting with my old sword. I asked him if he wanted to keep the physical weapon, an overly ornate and tacky piece, and he agreed that he'd prefer it if I just took the two ribbons that told people that his sword was both +3 and made of enchanted silver.

Hoping my tiny bit of revenge against the noble house would not backfire on me, I ran off. Keeping to the smaller paths, I briefly considered going into other cabins and killing other people while they slept. This plan dissolved rather quickly, as within the half hour I managed to find two people talking at a crossroad. Moving off the path, I listened and discovered that the boyfriend and not even waited to tell people at the inn, but had warned a fellow noble, who was now rousing everyone awake. At first I felt bad that potential victims were now gone, but I realized

this was better for me. They'd be weakened by lack of sleep, and more importantly they'd be active, giving me something to do.

The two people then parted and ran off in opposite directions, leaving me to figure out a plan. Attaching the two ribbons to my sword, I could now deal 7 damage, and double damage against creatures weak to silver. Since it was a brand new day, I had my full 14 HP, along with my one 7 damage fire spell and my three 4HP heal spells. I felt ready to take on the world.

While feeling pretty good about my newfound and restored power, I spotted Vlaine heading towards the cave. Seeing that he wasn't a monster just yet, I went up to him, and asked him what he was doing so early in the morning. Vlaine explained that all the monsters were gathering together in the cave, preparing for a huge battle.

Questioning him further, he explained that this battle was somewhat unplanned, and was basically being cobbled together because last night's big battle didn't go as planned. While the monsters had had their share of fun, the players in the inn felt like they had just wasted their time. The funny part was that they couldn't really complain, because in a way I had been defending the inn, and would be considered a hero in the game. I explained I definitely would not be seen as a hero, especially since I had just killed a noble this morning.

Vlaine found this news very amusing. He, and most of the people who played monsters, all really hated the nobles, and this was only good news to them. My gears turning, I asked for more details about the upcoming battle.

This time, they wouldn't just be weak little ratfolk. They were going as various types of giants, including trolls and ogre mages. Vlaine was one of the few monsters who was actually good at casting spells, so he knew that he'd be chosen to play the part of an ogre mage. Since he was a mage, he'd probably be put in charge of a small squadron, probably of younger monsters.

I then told him what I was planning. He stopped me short, telling me that most of the monsters would not agree to doing anything like that, because they knew that a monster's role was not to kill, but be killed. I felt disheartened for a second, before Vlaine also explained there were definitely a few monsters, if not a few players, who would want nothing more than to help me accomplish my goals.

We planned quickly. The huge battle would take a lot of preparation, about two hours or so. During that time, Vlaine would talk to some of the younger monsters that he thought would be



on my side. He said that was a pretty easy step, since I had managed to get a lot of respect through killing so many ratfolk by myself. After that, he himself would go on patrol, using the freedom of being a monster to look for players. He would then lead them to me.

Within an hour, there were six teenagers sitting around me inside a wooded glen. Asking them a few questions, it became quite clear that they hated the nobles, not just the ones from Ulcik's house. They told me themselves that they had heard I had defended the inn despite being a fugitive, none of them realizing that all I did was stop the nobles from having a chance to show off. Thankfully, whether or not they were trustworthy didn't matter, I explained what I wanted them to do. Handing them each a gold piece, I promised them another if things went as planned.

I met up with Vlaine fifteen minutes before the big battle was supposed to start, and he said that everything was ready. He even said that he had gone one step further than we had planned, and managed to convince a particular person to join us. It was the guy who I had been forced to resort to relying on statistical advantage in order to defeat. After that first battle where he had figured out to use the low stance to counter my attacks, I recieved the chance to fight him several more times. He was easily one of the most skilled fighters that was here, and it was only towards the end of that night that I felt like I had grown to be able to fight him purely with skill. Even by then though, I felt that had we both been outfitted with the same weapon, I would have lost each time.

Vlaine then explained that that man was going to be playing a summoned air elemental, a creature that could walk right past a shield wall just by saying that he was flying. This meant that the battle could very quickly turn into the perfect situation for me.

As he ran back to the cave in order to get his costume on, I ran towards the large field where the battle would take place. I moved into the woods that lined the field, preparing a makeshift blind to conceal my position. What I needed to do now was just watch and wait, until the perfect moment presented itself.

The two armies soon gathered at opposite ends of the field. The giants were organized in loose squads, and were clearly out numbered almost two-to-one. However that was only in reality, while in the fantasy world there were more giants than there were players. When a giant would fall, he would go to the edge of the woods, wait a few seconds, and then come back as a new giant.

Typically, they had a set number of times they respawn, depending on how strong of a giant they were, with weaker giants respawning more times than stronger giants. However, this

number would likely change as the battle went on, as the old man (the battle coordinator) would see how many mages still could cast spells on the players' side. If there were only a handful of mages left, the coordinator would just tell the monsters to stop respawning, and the battle would soon be over. Everything was geared in the player's favor, and there was absolutely no chance that they would lose.

The players were organized by noble house. Those who were not part of a noble house were conscripted into one for the duration of the battle. Their strategy was simple. The warriors would form a shield wall, with the mages behind them as support. A few of the noble warriors were already in the front lines, with pocket mages already behind them. They would just let the waves of giants crash onto the shield lines, which would undoubtedly hold (the strong warriors would never fall because of their pocket mages, while the weaker warriors would just be replaced as they fell). Everything about the battle seemed to have already been decided.

I spotted Ulcik, safely in the back, with a large entourage. Among them, I spotted Hardule, Lith, and even Selenia and her newly resurrected boyfriend. Knowing that that could turn into a very complicated situation, I hoped that the battle would press the entourage to spread out.

As the battle began, the air quickly filled with shouts. The nobles shouted orders at the other players, while the giants simply shouted. I watched intently, seeing the players shift around, until I saw what I was looking for. Six players, with shields forming a line, were directly in front of Vlaine's squad of giants.

I stood up, and walked out of the forest, behind the players' forces. Vlaine, who had been fighting lazily, spotted me, and with a great shout, lifted his staff into the air with both hands. Responding to this signal, the six players moved out and to the sides, forming a massive gap directly in the center of the shield wall formation. Ignoring those six, Vlaine and his squad marched right past the shield wall, striking down mage after mage.

It all happened in an instant. The scripted battle, with its foretold conclusion, turned into absolute chaos. The players tried at first to close the gap, but the other monsters knew an advantage when they saw one. They poured into the gap, striking the almost completely defenseless mages, dropping one after the other. With no healer support, the front line began to crumble and a complete rout seemed likely.

That was, until Ulcik and the other nobles decided to step up.

With a single spell, Ulcik obliterated Vlaine's entire squadron, stopping the spearhead formation that had managed to create such a large gap. As he continued to throw spells with abandon, the other nobles began activating their special abilities. Some became invincible, others exploded in damage, and one managed to revive ten of the mages who had fallen. The battle quickly turned against the giants, who were pressed back until the shield wall reestablished itself.

I watched all this with anticipation.

No one seemed to notice me, or at least, they didn't seem to care about me. No one except Lith. As soon as he spotted me, he knew my intentions. He moved towards me, away from Ulcik, and confronted me.

There was no point in words. This wasn't a matter that concerned House Ulcik or this game, all that mattered was that this was a rematch, a moment for Lith to restore his lost honor. As he moved towards me, I threw an Ice spell at him, hoping to pin his legs. Without flinching, he simply replied "Minor Immunity" and continued forward.

This was fine by me. Being immune to all low level spells (which were all of my spells) made this into a straight sword fight. The only thing that irked me was that it was most likely Ulcik who had cast it on Lith, but even that meant one less spell Ulcik could cast today.

We were a bit of a distance away from the rest of the battle, and while I desperately needed to pay attention to it, I couldn't afford to. Lith was earnestly trying to kill me, and this time I was ready to respond in kind.

He had not been through what I had been through. His sword was slow in comparison to the daggers I had faced, and his shield seemed to trouble him more than me. My sword sang, slicing through the air and then into his leg, and again into his shoulder. He was shocked when he heard me call out 7 damage, and now he was at best two hits away from dying. He didn't say a word though, and charged forward, slamming me with his shield.

I fell back, not expecting the illegal strike, but complimenting him on his willingness to use it. He wasn't holding anything back, and I was glad he had decided to take this so seriously. As he tried again to slam his shield into me, I used all of my strength to whip my sword into his, disarming him and tossing his sword away. I followed the blow with a light tap to his shoulder, before letting him pick up his sword.

Three times seven was 21, while he only had started with 22 HP. With his single HP left, I decided to remind him of our earlier battle, by telling him to run off to the inn to find a healer.

These might have been some kind of magic words. As soon as I said them, he shouted, threw down his shield, and leapt at me with his sword.

Leaving his front leg exposed.

With a perfect fading strike, I dealt the 7 damage to his leg before stepping out of the way of his blow that was assuredly aimed at my head. As soon as I delivered the damage, he just smiled.

"That was a good fight," he said simply, before dropping ceremoniously to the ground.

Moving past him, I saw that our fight had not gone unnoticed. Selenia, attached to her boyfriend, were heading my way. This was not a fight I wanted to deal with, especially not when I was supposed to be paying attention to the bigger battle. But the boyfriend was not going to let his assassin just walk away.

He came swinging, and I wondered how he had survived in this game. He swung his two-handed sword almost as if the sword was swinging him. Realizing that he was the first "player" I was going to fight after going through all the monsters and even Lith, I didn't feel as much joy as I did a sense of tedium. I struck him, again and again and again, wondering how he expected to hit me. He was calling out 12 points of damage with each strike, but I was not worried in the slightest.

After hitting him ten times, he called Selenia to come heal him. As she did, I asked if she could save a heal spell to heal Lith. As she agreed, her boyfriend grew furious, which made his attacks all the wilder. Ignoring every rule, he seemed intent on chopping off my head with his silly looking sword.

I kept attacking him, until I had hit him another ten times. After Selenia healed him again, she then ran off towards Lith, leaving the two of us alone. Without restraint, I whipped my sword into him, literally shifting him left and right with each blow, until he simply dropped. Picking up his sword and seeing no ribbons on it, I just tossed it away from him, to give him a little trouble

if someone decided to revive him, but not wanting to use a finishing blow on him to kill him outright.

As I surveyed the battle, it seemed like the player's shield wall was doing its job, and the giants were in a bad situation. Spotting Vlaine, I waved my sword at him. With another shout and a raise of his staff, the shield wall once again parted, and chaos returned. Looking on in satisfaction, I turned to look at Ulcik, who now had a worried look on his face. As I stood there, basking in his moment of despair, I was struck hard in the back of my head for 12 points of damage. Turning around, I saw the boyfriend standing there, and I looked around for any sign of a healer.

With none that could be found, I realized what he had done. He had dropped to the ground while he still had HP left, only pretending to have fallen. Thanks to the naivety that allowed me to fall for such a simple trick, I only had 2 HP left.

I don't think I really cared all that much about how much HP I had at that moment.

With the back of my head throbbing slightly, I struck him hard in the hands, not even bothering to call out damage. As his sword dropped slightly, I began to rain down hits on his shoulders. He dropped after only four, but I continued to poke his body until I was sure he had taken over 300 points of damage to make sure he wasn't faking this time. I then performed a coup-de-grace, and watched as he stood up and ran off the battlefield.

Looking around, I saw that everyone was preoccupied with the giants. The hole in the shield wall was no longer closing, and it was hard to tell if there were any mages left standing besides the strongest of nobles. Looking towards Ulcik, I saw Hardule standing close by him, fending off trolls with his fire spells. Finally, I saw what I had been looking for.

Ulcik made a very specific motion. A sideways chop that he continued to do until the old man in charge of the monsters began to move around and issue new orders.

Ulcik was low on spells.

As soon as that signal was sent out, I sent an identical one at Vlaine. Rather than raising his staff with both arms, he raised it high with one and shouted, calling forth the air elemental.

Even when dressed and acting like a rat person, he had been intimidating. Now, dressed in a tattered gray cloak, dark gray make-up, and a grizzled gray wig, carrying two huge foam sickles, his appearance was more than enough to drain what little hope the player's had. The air elemental ripped people apart, carving a line through the players as they dropped before his sickles.

The nobles panicked. The warriors had long lost their pocket mages, and were relying on their own HP. The mages had used all their most powerful spells, and were using up their items as if they actually feared for their lives. Ulcik, though looking somewhat stressed, appeared to be still capable of flinging spell after spell, dropping down giants. Finally, as the air elemental drew near to him, he called out a death spell, slaying the elemental instantly.

With that, he stopped casting.

I moved forward, knowing that now was my chance. Using my three healing spells, I returned to 14HP. I looked to see what was left of House Ulcik, and was pleased that only Hardule and Ulcik himself had not fled back to the inn or were lying facedown in the grass. The other noble houses were preoccupied with the remaining giants, leaving me and them apart from the rest of the battle. As Ulcik spotted me, his tiny eyes grew wide. Looking at my hands, he pointed to the shouting, "The ring! He has the Ring of Wish!"

Looking down at my finger, at the piece of cheap plastic I had completely forgotten about, I realized why he had placed such a large bounty on my head. Ulcik probably didn't care in the slightest about me being free, what he cared about was the unique ring I had taken from the chest. And if he cared about it that much, my only guess was that it was obscenely powerful.

Putting that matter aside, Hardule stepped in between us. Throwing his ten damage spell at me, I blocked it easily with my sword. He looked at me strangely at first, until I showed him the other ring I had.

He continued to throw spells at me, forcing me to dodge and block, with a precision I did not expect from him. Though I tried to get close to him, he kept forcing me back, with a nearly endless amount of spells. As I tried to follow his eyes, I suddenly saw him glance behind me. Turning around slightly to see, I saw Lith, his sword ready.

Sandwiched between my two friends, with my truest goal just beyond them, I realized everything was for nothing. As Lith attacked me, Hardule threw spells at my back, forcing me to dodge and roll just to stay alive. Finally, as Lith managed to catch my sword between his sword and shield, Hardule hit me with a spell for 10 damage. Even so, I knew that if I could just drop Lith, I still had a chance.

Ulcik stole that chance from me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him throw a bean bag at me. Instinctively, reflexively, without a single thought in my head, I batted it with my sword. As I connected with it, I could only scream with rage when I realized what that terrible, horrible man had cast.

"Shatter."

It dropped my no longer existant sword, the sword that had brought me all this way, just as Lith swung at me for 4 damage. I dropped, slowly, painfully, wondering if they would just let me bleed dry or if they'd finish me off. My face in the dirt, I could feel tears welling up, knowing that I had been so close, yet I couldn't even hit Ulcik once.

Ulcik was hysterical. He ran up to Lith and Hardule, hugging them and complimenting himself on his brilliant final spell. He laughed at me, telling me I had been foolish to oppose him, and that he had saved that spell just for someone like me. He promised both Hardule and Lith peerage, even joking that after this battle there'd probably be a lot of vacancies.

Hardule, overjoyed, asked Ulcik if it really had been his final spell that had finished me off. Ulcik laughed, saying that he was bone dry out of magic, and was right now nothing more than a walking sack of HP. What luck, he said, that it was his last spell that had taken me down!

With the truest ring of happiness in his voice, Hardule said he had waited seven years for this.

Hardule often made bad decisions. That's who he was. Left to his own devices, he will almost always come up with the absolute worst ideas. And, thinking reasonably, logically, this probably was his worst one.

He started casting spells at Ulcik. Lith didn't miss a beat, swinging his sword in a flurry. Ulcik, absolutely bewildered, first tried to understand what was going on. When that failed, he tried to run, but I doubt the man had ran in the last thirty years. Hardule and Lith chased after him, but didn't have to run far before Ulcik dropped.

As I watched wide-eyed in shock from the ground, I suddenly felt a hand at my back. Selenia healed me for 4 hitpoints, and with a word of thanks, I leapt up, rushing over to where Lith and Hardule were standing over Ulcik. Mouth gaping open, I looked at Hardule as if he had gone mad.

He looked at me as if he had planned this for years, smugger than a cheshire cat. I knew full well that he had spontaneously decided to kill Ulcik when he realized he no longer had any power. Lith as well, who's true allegiance remained unknown, if he ever had one, tried to act like he had been the one guiding me through all this.

Selenia walked over to us, smiling for a reason I doubt I'll ever understand. Beyond her, it seemed like everyone was still more interested in killing the remainder of the giants than to notice that we had just slain one of the most powerful players in the game. One man did notice though.

The old man in charge of the monsters ran over. Looking down at our feet, he asked how much time had passed. Lith, with a sudden realization, bent down and began the coup-de-grace procedure, as normally as if he were just bending down to tie his shoe. The old man just stared in shock, before he noticed the ring on my finger. Ignoring the pretend murder happening right in front of him, he gasped as he asked what I was doing with the Ring of Wish. I told him how I came across it, and then asked him what it did.

He said it was one of the most powerful items in the game, with the power to grant its bearer a single wish.

I knew what my heart desired. Or at least, what my character's heart desired. I doubt anyone in the circle (ommitting Ulcik) would have stopped me. I guess the one good thing about people that were easy to hate was that you were rarely alone in hating them. I asked the Old Man if I could wish someone's character to be dead forever. The old man laughed, saying there was no need, as characters could only die a certain amount of times that decreased each level, and Ulcik was the highest level character in the game.



With a bit of disappointed, I removed the ring, tossed it at Hardule, and went off, back into the woods to be a fugitive.

A little while later, it was time for the event to end. Ulcik, who was supposed to preside over the closing ceremonies, could not be found. Instead, the Old man told us what an amazing event it was, and how the players had just barely managed to turn back the most fearsome hoard to ever attack. Solemnly, he then began to list the people who had died permanently, sacrificing themselves for the good of all. Fourteen people, an astonishing amount, had permanently died. Twelve had been nobles, and six of them had been from House Ulcik, leaving only one alive.

With a grave tone, he also said that Archduke Ulcik had mysteriously been killed by assassins, though everyone shot a glance at our table. After a moment of silence, he continued on with the ceremony.

After everything was cleaned up and packed into the cars, we chatted with some of the people before we left. Very few approved of what we had done, but that was more than fine, since it helped us know which people were miserable and which one's weren't.

Vlaine said he really hoped to see us here again, or perhaps we could start a tabletop campaign. The guy who had been the air elemental also was fairly cool, saying he really wanted to fight against me again. Every teenager there thought that we three were the coolest guys they had ever met, and all of them wanted to be part of the newly formed House Cerberus. Selenia seemed interested in joining in on Vlaine's tabletop campaign, and we managed to exchange e-mail addresses before her boyfriend (who's character could never be resurrected) grumpily dragged her away, berrating her for hanging out with regicidal maniacs.

Ulcik, or the man formally known as Ulcik, when he finally appeared, tried to smile and laugh and accept his death in a noble fashion, but our grins were almost too much for him to take. He ended up finding consolation in the fat warrior woman, who I had completely forgotten about until I heard her name in the list of people that had died. She looked at me with absolute disgust, and I relished her revilement.

As we drove home, Hardule explained that he had always hated Ulcik, and half the reason he wanted to be a noble was so that he could eventually kill the man. I half-believed him, but was more willing to believe that he just had a "wouldn't it be awesome..?" thought and ran with it. Lith was glad that Hardule had wished to start a noble house, and was more than happy to remind me that he had been the one that dropped me in our third and final battle. They then asked me my story, which took the entire rest of the car ride to tell.

I don't know if I'll ever go back. More likely than not, Ulcik would use every bit of his power to just try to ruin my day if I ever returned. But I would be lying if I didn't say I had fun, and while there may have been more bad times than good, I was still glad I had gone.

Maybe if the other two decide to go, I'll tag along.

## Part 3

### Part 3 - I

Terrible people are exactly that. They irritate you, they frustrate you, and they might even anger you. And sometimes, they bring you to a point where you discover something about yourself that you didn't want to know. Thanks to a group of people that can only be described as absolute villains, I realized that I could actually hate someone. A pure, absolute hate that would shame anyone that harbors it.

And I still carry this shameful hate, with my memories of that weekend keeping it alive.

It came as a surprise, though I should have been expecting things to not go the way I wanted them to. All I was hoping for was a fun weekend with my friends, running through the woods pretending to be in a fantasy world. Of course, I erred terribly thinking that would be the way things went, and I have no excuse because it wasn't my first time at this particular LARP.

The first time I had gone was a bit of an adventure, and while things worked out in the end, I think I managed to make more enemies than friends. I don't really regret anything I did, and am even proud of some of it, but I wasn't in a rush to repeat it.

I'm not a fan of LARPing. It's probably because I'm never on the same page as everyone else. Actually, I think it's because no one is ever on the same page as everyone else. Everyone has their own ideas on how things should be, and when all these little individual universes collide, it's inevitable that conflicts occur. At best, it's just people getting into small arguments out of confusion. At worst, we get huge battles filled with anger and malice that leave everyone scarred in one way or another.

While I'm not a fan of LARPing, I have some friends who are. One goes running through the woods nearly every month playing a mage named Hardule Nightwater, and he's the one who managed to convince me to go once to a new LARP with him. While I'm sure I could find plenty to complain about him, we've been friends for too long for me to even bother pointing out his faults, and I guess the reason we've been friends this long is because he has a way of exceeding my expectations every so often in spectacular ways.

I also went with one other friend, who played a warrior named Lith Cloud. While neither of us are going to be trying out for the Olympic team, we're still both fairly athletic, and we usually end up competing against each other a fair bit. My first time at the new LARP was his first time as well, but he went a few more times afterwards with Hardule. Dedicating a whole weekend for something like LARPing isn't as easy as it was in the past, and I usually had more than one excuse to not go with them.

I'll admit I do somewhat regret not going with them during those times, for a wide variety of reasons. One of them being not being able to see the friends I made at the Larp the one time I went. I met up with two of them a few times after that event, since one invited Hardule, Lith, and I to play some Dungeons and Dragons with him. He had helped me out a fair bit at the event, and while he spends most of his time playing as a monster NPC, he sometimes plays a mage named Vlaine.

Vlaine also invited one other person from the LARP, a guy some 5 years older than the rest of us and one of the most skilled warriors I'd fought at the LARP. He always just played as monsters, though he admitted that he did start a character named Rhend that he had played once. Often, before we'd start playing D&D, he'd challenge me to a little foam weapon sparring outside, and everyone would end up joining in for a few rounds.

I'll admit that I really like the fighting aspect of LARPs. There's something about fighting with foam weapons that's a little bit different from a sport like fencing or an attempt at recreating historical techniques. There's this level of childish innocence to it, something that makes adults fighting each other seem ridiculous. While we all end up taking it more seriously than we should, our little battles would end with all of us in pretty good moods.

Vlaine is not a bad fighter, a little better than Hardule, but both of them are better casters than warriors. Lith managed to learn quite a bit at the events I missed, mostly on how to use his shield better, but that just meant I quickly learned new ways of getting past his shield. In the end, I think it's fair to say in a straight one-on-one fight, I can defeat him four times out of five, but he works better as part of a team with someone. Rhend is definitely the most skilled out of

all of us, but that doesn't mean I don't beat him on occasion. He seems to really enjoy fighting with me, and has often said that I'm an entertaining fighter.

Sometimes, during our D&D games, the topic of the LARP would spring up, and while I felt a little out of the loop, I didn't really feel any urge to go. I still kept it pretty low on my priorities, which meant that I usually had an excuse not to go when they tried to convince me. While hanging out with my friends was great, work and school would often cut into one of the three days of the monthly events, and that would be enough to discourage me from going at all.

Finally, Hardule told me something that made LARPing rocket upwards on my list of priorities. It was after an event that Lith had not gone with him, and he came back both angry and depressed.

He and Lith had started a noble house, which had grown fairly large, with nine people within it. With only something over a hundred people at each event, this made House Cerberus pretty influential, especially since Hardule's character was one of the strongest mages in the game.

House Cerberus made it a point to reach out to new and younger players, and Hardule would often negotiate with the LARP directors, the "Plot Masters," to send out monsters with stats that these players could handle. Vlaine was the one who suggested he do this, and by this method the house had grown rather quickly, though its members weren't particularly strong.

At the last event, House Cerberus had been destroyed.

By Archduke Ulcik.

It shows how weak my control of my emotions is, in that I'm angry just remembering this man. Perhaps it's not a matter of weakness in control, but just how much hatred I have towards that foul bastard.

He was a partial owner of the LARP, and one of its plot masters. He had played an extremely powerful mage named Ulcik, who had decided to fix mistakes he made by trying to have my character executed. Through the combined efforts of a group of people, his character was permanently killed, along with almost the entirety of his noble house. In fact, the only survivor was Hardule, who also happened to be the one to deliver the final blow that killed Ulcik.

I didn't think Ulcik would take things gracefully, but Hardule had reported for the last few months that Ulcik had kept quiet, only performing plot master duties and not much else. Not caring too much about the Larp to have paid attention to Ulcik's inactivity, I realize now that I should have known he was scheming something.

Hardule told his story bitterly. Through some bullshit ritual, the Archduke Ulcik was resurrected as a Lich, and he and a group of LARPers sought revenge against House Cerberus. They simply kept killing the weaker members over and over again, until they were either permanently dead or had professed that they no longer were in the House.

Hardule was the only one who had remained alive and in the house, having stayed in the woods running for the majority of the event. Lith, having not been there, was the only other remaining member of the house, and it didn't seem like the two of them would be able to restore their house while the Lich Ulcik wanted to kill them.

I knew Ulcik was a petty person, but I didn't think he would take his character's death so poorly. He had probably waited until House Cerberus was nice and big before he decided to crush it. Hardule kept padding his story by telling me just how impressively he hid in the woods, but I pressed him for details on Ulcik and his followers. Hardule only knew vague rumors, and himself had not even seen the Lich, having run into the woods the second he had heard that a group was hunting House Cerberus members.

Lith was furious. He really only cared about one thing at the LARP, the Noble house he had started. He swore with every second breath, and he started planning his own revenge. While he and Hardule both had stronger characters than when I had been with them, remembering that it took almost an entire army to weaken Ulcik the first time he died made most of Lith's plans seem foolish.

Ulcik as a Lich was something I didn't want to deal with, but something about that didn't seem right. If I knew the man as well as I thought I did, he wouldn't be content with being an undead monster. He was definitely either planning something further, or there was something that Hardule didn't know.

Lith's final plan ended up being not much of one. With a month before the next event, we would train and then we'd go and restore the house. This was probably my last chance to avoid everything, to just tell him his plan was stupid and to just go and cut his losses, but the thought

that I'd be the one to finalize Ulcik's revenge was just too strong. I knew it was just a silly LARP that didn't mean anything, but that man deserved no victories.

Lith's idea of "training" was badgering me to fight with him whenever we had a free moment. While he was enthusiastic during the first week, he lost all motivation during the second and third, only regaining it during the last week before the event. Hardule likewise participated in the training, though he definitely spent more time just feeling hopeless and depressed.

I knew that expecting the three of us to defeat Ulcik and his crew just by training for a month was ridiculous, but I also knew that Ulcik wasn't a very clever man, and that there had to be some way to foil his plans. There had to be something I could do to make him regret ruining my friends' goals.

Vlaine was a great help. He filled me in on details Hardule had not heard, and information that gave me a starting point for my own plans. With his promise to help us out from the monster side, I felt a little more confident, though I still had no real plan.

The month passed, and Hardule was wondering if they should abandon House Cerberus. Lith steadfastly refused, offering no reasoning behind his conviction. I don't think I simply wasted the month, but I didn't feel like any of us were prepared for what we were going to have to do.

In part, my major plan was to first find out what was going on, and the best way to do that was to start off as monsters. Every player had to do a scheduled shift as a monster for a day of the event, and our plan was to be monsters on Friday, learn as much as we could, and then do what needed to be done on Saturday and Sunday.

It was a start, but it meant that if we didn't come up with a decent plan by Saturday, we'd probably all be permanently killed before we had a chance to do anything. I had considered staying as a monster for the entire event, but what I needed was complete freedom, something only players had, which included being able to kill whoever I wanted.

Hardule, Lith, and I packed our gear into the car and drove towards the camp grounds where the Larp would be held. There was a little bit of nervous tension, none of us certain what would happen. While the last time I had packed with the idea that we'd be doing some light camping, this time I was prepared for war. Earth toned clothing, energy bars, canteen, triple layered military sleeping bag, trail running shoes, and more, just so I could get even the slightest

advantage. When Hardule had seen what I packed, he slipped in a ninja halloween costume into his bag, which I could only hope he'd never have to use.

When we arrived at the grounds, they were just like I had remembered them, though it was a fair bit colder. Some distance from anything else, the campground was fairly large and secluded, with cabins spread out throughout the grounds. The largest parking lot was not far from the largest cabin, which was used as an Inn during play and was the major center for player activity. We had arrived a little early, just so we could make sure we'd be able to sign up for the Friday monster assignments before they got filled up.

Unsurprisingly, Ulcik was already there, a broad grin on his face. Seeing him again was exactly what I needed. There's nothing like a poorly aging, overweight man with ridiculous braids in his beard and hair walking towards you with a shit-eating grin on his face to provide you with motivation. Any doubt I had before was wiped away, and after he greeted us, he seemed very happy to see that I had returned to this LARP.

There was a brief moment where we both wondered whether or not we'd express hostilities right then and there. We both wondered whether it would be better to pretend being friendly towards each other, whether there was any advantage in that.

That matter was settled quickly. We both knew that we had in turn earned each other's hate, and that there was no need for pretenses. He asked if we still planned on continuing with House Cerberus, and I asked if he planned on having his character live through the weekend. He snorted, before ambling off towards another group that had arrived.

We registered ourselves, receiving our character sheets in the process. Nephem Festiva, my character, remained unchanged from the last time I had played him, with even his inventory just as I had left it. Hardule explained that as it was my second event, I wouldn't be leveling up, which seemed to catch the man in charge of registration's interest. He said that I might be affected by changes in the rules that were going to be announced once the event started, though he wasn't entirely certain.

The three of us waited inside the Inn, occasionally exchanging words between us while people passed us. We received a fair amount of scowls and most people didn't bother greeting us, something I hadn't been expecting. Had Hardule and Lith done something to make House Cerberus so hated? I considered this for a moment, then realized that our low popularity was likely a part of Ulcik's schemes. There were still a few people that cheerfully said hello to us, though I had no certainty of their sincerity.

When most of the people had gathered in the inn, I remembered most of them, or at least remembered the archetype they belonged to. This wasn't a particularly combat-oriented LARP, with most of the players either significantly overweight or underweight, and we had a good variety of the classic types of geeks and outcasts. With most in their thirties and looking a little too excited for their age, there was a general feeling that this LARP was their attempt at clinging to their youth, even if it was an imaginary one.

There were a few more teenagers than there were last time, among them a cluster of girls dressed entirely in black who seemed like they were all friends. Some of the older men kept walking over to talk to them, but they seemed content keeping to themselves.

Finally, at 5 o'clock, the three Plot Masters took their places at one end of the large hall. Ulcik stood in the center, smiling so much that it should have been outlawed, flanked by two much older men. One I recognized as the man in charge of the monsters, who despite his age (probably his early sixties) was in great shape. The other man seemed even older, short and wide with a white beard that reminded me of a garden gnome. The two of them stood silently as Ulcik spoke, greeting everyone and announcing the start of the event.

His foremost announcement was that big changes were being made to the rules, to help make things more fun and exciting for new players. To start, every player who had been to less than three events would immediately receive bonus skill points, and new low level skills would be available.

This announcement was met with hoots and shouts that came from the back of the room. Everyone turned to look, though before I turned around I had a good idea of who it could be.

There were seven men, still obnoxiously cheering while all of us looked at them. They were all probably within one or two years of my age, and all were wearing different suits of armor. Compared to the rest of the people in the Inn, they were far more imposing, each of them looking at the crowd like wolves surveying sheep. Ulcik grinned at their interruption, letting them cheer for a moment longer, before delivering the rest of the announcements.

Vlaine had told me about these seven, and I ignored the rest of what Ulcik had to say just so I could observe them better. They were from a medieval combat recreation society, and had been invited by Ulcik himself to join this LARP. Under his banner, they had been the ones who had chiefly dismantled House Cerberus, and it seemed like Ulcik was allowing them to pull favors.



One of them noticed me, but he simply kept grinning even as I realized I had started to scowl at the group.

Thankfully, it wasn't just them who would be receiving bonus skill points, since I and a fair amount of the teenagers had only been here for one or two previous events. If Ulcik was letting us all get this bonus, it probably meant he wanted an excuse to boost up his new little squad and ensure their favor, as well as the favor of all the new players. He had probably not considered that I would be returning this event, and I was going to make sure the bonus skills I received went towards making him regret his oversight.

After the announcements, I went with my friends over to the registration counter, and was impressed to see what kind of new abilities were available, and which I could get with the few bonus points I had recieved. They almost all were for warriors, which suited me fine, as Nephem Festiva was a warrior mage. Most of these new abilities were much stronger than other beginner skills, and had odd requirements like needing to use specific weapons or having a certain amount of HP. After finishing, my character was still several shades weaker than Lith, and much, much weaker than Hardule, who was one of the strongest people in the game, but I felt content.

I increased my HP to 18 and had sworn off all other weapons to specialize in two-handed swords. I had two fire spells (one I could use as much as I wanted and dealt 1 damage, and one that dealt 7 damage that I could use once a day), an ice spell(the target had his legs frozen, which meant he couldn't move his feet from where they were), and a weak healing spell (I could heal 4hp three times a day), which I had from the previous event. With my bonus skills, I chose two that seemed ridiculously powerful, at least to me.

The first was the ability to swing my two-handed sword with one hand. Ordinarily, without the ability, I would not be allowed to call out damage unless both of my hands were on the sword. The second ability complimented with the first fairly well. Simply called "Bracers," it allowed me to block weapons with my hands and forearms. I didn't intend to actually actively block with them, but preventing them from being a target was definitely worth the points I put into it.

When I had finished, we made our way towards the Cave, a special cabin where the monsters had their headquarters. Some of the other players were also headed towards it, but they kept their distance from us. When we arrived at the Cave, we were greeted by the old man in charge of the monsters, as well as by Vlaine and Rhend, who had rather anxious looks on their faces.

The rest of the people in the cave were the people who were going to play as monsters the entire event. Compared to the players at the inn, they were all rather athletic and many of them were fairly skilled in foam weapon combat. I recognized a few, and they greeted me rather warmly, as I had managed to impress them a little at the last event I had been to.

I began to discuss things with Vlaine, telling him about the bonus skills and my opinion of Ulcik's little squad, but a large group suddenly entered the cave, which became rather quiet. These were the new players, who would be spending their first day as monsters so that they could learn the rules of combat.

There were several teenagers, including the group of goth girls, but there was also two older players, and one man who looked like he didn't really belong here. He must have been well over seventy, and unlike the Monster leader, age had taken its toll on him fairly harshly. When the Monster Leader told the new players to choose some weapons from the piles that were against the walls, he hobbled rather than walked, and it looked like he had trouble lifting even one of the smaller swords.

After the Monster Leader led the new players out, the rest of the monsters began moving out, wearing a variety of costumes. Eventually, one of the monsters saw our group, and assigned us to head out as bog trolls. Looking at the stat card I was handed, I was glad to see that they were decently strong (35HP and dealt bonus damage), but more importantly that they could use any two-handed weapon.

I scanned the weapon piles, daring to hope. After sifting through some, I found what I was looking for. The two-handed sword I had used last time was still in great condition, almost no different from when I had returned it here. Sadly, it no longer had the ribbons that signified it as being magical, but that was in a way alright, because the magic weapon my character had been carrying had been destroyed last event. Even so, just having the same physical weapon was heartening.

After putting on a large furry vest and draping myself with plastic vines, I went over to where Hardule, Lith, Vlaine, and Rhend were waiting. The others were similarly dressed like trolls, except Vlaine was dressed in odd robes and had a bushy white beard. Vlaine explained he'd be going to the inn as a wizard NPC to get people to go out (and he'd try gathering information there as well). He also said that bog trolls were solitary creatures, but we'd rush over if we heard another bog troll roar. I was then handed a copper piece and we all headed out in different directions.

I was back.

My shoes gripped the ground perfectly, launching me forward into the forest with admittedly un-troll-like speed. I'll admit it now, though I hope you won't go around telling anyone, but after the last event, some of the motivation for me to work out came from the smallest seed of a desire to come back here. While Lith had only really tried to train himself over the last month, I had been improving my condition for the last several. Running just to see how quickly I could charge through the patches of forest and the occasional open field, I was surprised to see just how much of the place I remembered.

I occasionally saw a group of three or four people, but I ignored them, and none seemed intent on trying to fight against a monster who was willing to attract attention to himself. I had two missions right now, though the first was just to see what had changed in the last few months. The second, which I considered much more important, was to find Ulcik's crew and to see just how well they fought.

From Vlaine's accounts, they weren't simply good. Though it had been their first event, they had managed to easily defeat people who had much stronger characters, and had proven to know how use small-scale tactics pretty well. This isn't what made them scary, Vlaine had said, though it definitely made them threatening. What made them scary was that they had managed to hunt down eight members of House Cerberus several times.

In order for a character to be permanently killed, they had to die a certain amount of times which decreased with what level the character was. A 1st level character could die twenty times, a 5th level could only have had 15 deaths, and 20th and higher level characters would die permanently if they died once. House Cerberus had, outside of Hardule, only low level players in it, which meant they were killed time and time again until they abandoned the house or were simply permanently killed.

To catch a person who didn't want to be caught in the huge campgrounds wasn't easy, and the fact that they had done so reliably made me wonder what kind of skills they had outside of being able to fight well. With a good part of the half-formed plan I was creating relying on being able to fight them on our terms instead of theirs, I needed to know what they were capable of.

While running, trapped in my thoughts, I was abruptly sprung from them when I heard a roar from a good distance away. I stopped, listening hard, until I heard it again, though I was still not sure who it was that was roaring. I ran in the direction it came from, leaping over stumps and bushes that might have given trouble to me before.

I reached a small clearing, and was shocked to see Rhend lying on the ground, with two armored men standing over him. One was wearing thick, detailed and shiny plate armor that didn't seem to restrain him at all, and he was carrying a long polearm that ended with a hammer at its tip, a bec de corbin. The other wore black leather scaled cloth, with thick pads on his shoulders, elbows, and knees, and had a simple yet very high quality two-handed foam sword. I recognized these two, and would have been more than eager to fight them if I hadn't seen Rhend on the ground.

I had made too much noise for them to not have noticed me, but they were content to continue talking amongst themselves over Rhend. Cautiously, I stepped into the clearing, and the two of them finished their discussion, with the hammer wielder remaining where he was while the other stepped towards me.

He didn't ask me what I was, and I doubt he would have cared even if I told him I was a five-year old princess. He wanted to fight me just as much as I wanted to fight him, and this was the perfect chance for both of us to see how we measured up to each other.

I swung first, a deliberately short strike just to see how he'd react. He didn't miss the opportunity, flashing out his sword and catching the tip of mine. He took advantage of my surprise, and as I pulled my sword back out of his reach, he stepped forward, cutting in for eight points of damage. Before my mind even registered the number, he hit me twice in rapid succession before I managed to back up out of his way.

He didn't let me. Sticking close to me, matching my movement, he continued to land strikes on me, until I dropped with the 5th hit. As I sank to the ground, he gave me a look of disappointment before turning back to his ally.

Lying on the ground, I tried to figure out what had just happened. At first, I thought about the eight damage he was dealing. Ordinarily, a first level character (like Nephem) only dealt four points of damage with a two-handed sword, or five if he sank most of his skill points into increasing that damage, but for this guy to be dealing eight meant that he was using magic items, and rather powerful ones. After I made this conclusion, I felt a little ashamed, because I knew I was looking for excuses and trying to avoid what had just happened.

He had beaten me before I had even landed a single hit. How much damage he was dealing didn't mean anything if I couldn't even hit him once, and I slowly realized that I hadn't even

blocked any of his attacks. He had beaten me completely on near equal terms, and I didn't even know how strong he was compared to the rest of his group.

They left after a minute or so, not even bothering to search us for the copper pieces we had, and Rhend sat up after three minutes of silence. I'm sure there was something he wanted to say to me, but we just got up and headed back to the cave, the scene all too vividly emblazoned on our minds.

Only once I sat down on one of the couches in the cave did all the frustration I was supposed to be feeling hit me. Who the hell were these guys? How were they so good? Up until then, my half formed plan was to kill them, and then I thought the hard part would be taking down Ulcik. Having now fought one of his lackeys, I started to think it might be easier to take down the undead version of the strongest player in the game rather than to face those seven.

Still wallowing in my defeat, I waited in silence until Lith and Hardule returned, each of them looking enraged. They began to curse at Ulcik, for having brought those seven. They had been soundly defeated, just as Rhend and I had been, and it had been barely half an hour since we had gone out.

The two of them kept discussing how they were far too strong for first level characters, while Rhend and I kept silent, thinking about the battle. Was there any chance of getting through this event with Nephem alive? Maybe I just had to spend the rest of the weekend as a monster?

I should have felt ashamed, but my brain was too overloaded to be concerned about that. I had come with the idea that Hardule, Lith, Rhend, Vlaine and I would be more than enough to take down Ulcik and whatever pathetic followers he had grouped together. I had even had visions of pitched battles, pushing me to the limits of my abilities but I would always come out on top. Now, I needed to figure out how to keep House Cerberus from crumbling while I felt like there was nothing I could do.

When Vlaine returned, he didn't return with good news. He had asked people for the full story of Ulcik, and I realized just how unpleasant the weekend was going to be.

Ulcik had returned as a lich, but a "good" Lich. He had been brought back to life by a group of ten people in a ritual, and had saved the entire town in an important battle almost single-handedly. After his resurrection, he sought to destroy the evil house that had assassinated him, while restoring his own house, House Ulcik.

With this as the story, it now didn't seem so odd that most of the other players weren't too happy with us. When I asked who the ten people were, Vlaine said it was the seven new players, along with three old members of House Ulcik. One I didn't know, but the other two I remembered well. One had been an fat woman who had tried to convince everyone that I had killed her because I was late in saving her, while the other was a miserable two-handed sword wielder who I had killed twice, once by killing him in his sleep and a second time on the field of battle. When I told him I was certain that these two had permanently died at the last event, Vlaine explained that they were playing secondary characters, each nearly identical to their old ones.

I let this all sink in. Not only were we fighting against Ulcik, we were fighting against popular opinion. It had been my hope that I could get a fair amount of players to rally behind us to kill the Lich, but him managing to produce some bullshit about being a good Lich who only wanted to help people and to have revenge against his killers was just too much.

Still, something didn't sit right. Why go through the trouble of being a Lich? Why not simply be restored to life as he had been, why bother coming back as an undead? Knowing him, he'd consider being an undead a painful reminder that he had been killed, and he wouldn't have settled for that if he could have helped it.

Slowly, a potential ally started to appear in my mind. Ulcik, while being a Plot Master, was not the only one. The other two Plot Masters must have restricted him from being simply resurrected, and he had to be content with coming back as a Lich. While I'm certain that Ulcik would have had no problem bending the rules about permanent death just to save his character, the other two Plot Masters had at least enough sense to stop him from just revising his own death.

I didn't know how useful this idea might have been, but it at least kept me sane, since I at least knew that Ulcik wasn't in complete control. He was powerful, yes, but not omnipotent, which at least gave us a chance. I didn't share these thoughts with the rest of my crew, because it really did feel like I was grasping at trivial things while we had much larger problems to tackle.

Realizing just how pathetic I was starting to sound, even to myself, I decided that sitting around wasn't going to help us at all. Just as I stood up, the group of new people arrived at the cave, chatting loudly. The old man smiled as he explained to them how to get assignments from the other monsters and that tomorrow they'd be playing as their characters, but his face fell into a grimace when he had finished, obviously upset about something.

The Monster Leader left the Cave, moving like he had some urgent business. Most of the new players seemed angry about something, slumping down onto the couches grumpily, but the group of goth girls were looking around for something. They spotted me standing, and the tallest of them, with long, bleached white hair but a somewhat unflatteringly wide face, asked me to give them an assignment.

I asked Vlaine what to do, and he said to lead them over towards the records room where one of the veteran monsters usually was. After showing them a room with a large desk and a number of cabinets, the guy inside decided to ask me to act as their leader and that we'd be going out as skeleton knights.

Once we got back to the main room, Vlaine explained the costume to me and the five girls, and we quickly dressed in bone patterned robes with black cloth masks and picked up a variety of weapons. Sadly, skeleton knights couldn't use two-handed weapons, so I grabbed two swords instead.

Just before we left, the old yet new player came hobbling over, saying that he had been assigned to go with us. After waiting the five minutes it took for him to get ready, the seven of us set off.

In truth, I had wanted to go out alone and explore more of the campgrounds, but with these people as potential allies, I sought to be as friendly and as helpful as I could be. I might have been a little overly nice at first, and the way the girls returned smiles that were just a little too happy for my taste curbed my enthusiasm rather quickly.

While skeleton knights were usually supposed to be silent, the teenage girls were asking question after question, most of them not at all related to this game. The tall girl in particular had a habit of asking questions that worried me, like my thoughts on the afterlife and whether I believed in "real" magic. Reminding myself that I might need their help later, I answered her questions vaguely, knowing that I didn't want to be wrangled into a conversation about life and death with a teenager who seemed obsessed with the latter.

The old man made our journey last far longer than I would have liked, but I couldn't blame him. When I grew tired of the girls immense interest in an older guy who lacked the proper sense to tell them to be quiet, I would hang back and chat with him. He had come to this LARP because he wanted to spend time with his grandson, but his grandson had his monster shift on Sunday.

He was a little depressed that his grandson had not decided to take two monster shifts so that they could stay together, but he hadn't come here so that he would be a nuisance to him.

Eventually, we spotted a group of three players, none of which seemed particularly strong, Skeleton knights also weren't too great in regards to stats, but we outnumbered them by a fair bit. The girls stood still, looking towards me for directions, and I merely nodded before I raced forward.

The three players saw the six of us, and two seemed intent on running away. One however remained, calling back to his allies to stay and fight. This one lunged forward at me, with a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other.

It felt good. I didn't even bother attacking him for a good long time, savoring the feeling of being able to block and react to his strikes with ease. He was a player, one of the unathletic, unskilled, undisciplined combatants that was so bad that he probably thought he had the advantage since I wasn't returning his attacks. After the other two players had moved forward and had begun to fight against the girls, who had moved to surround them, I began a simple pattern of blocking and striking.

I would never have fallen into such an obvious pattern if I was fighting someone I considered a threat, but he was unable to break the rhythm, getting hit each time he tried to attack, and he kept trying to attack. When I finally dropped him, two of the girls were also sitting down on the ground, and I rushed over towards my next opponent.

After dropping him in seconds thanks to the aid of two of the remaining girls, I checked to see if the last of our opponents had enough sense to run. He did, and as he sprinted away at full speed, I motioned for the girls not to follow him.

When we had put some distance between us and the fallen players, I told them it was only courteous to give him a chance to run back to the inn and get some healers to save his friends. The two girls who had been killed seemed a little depressed, but the rest were rather pleased with themselves. Even the old man looked rather happy just to have survived, though he hadn't even gotten close to any of the players.

The girls seemed rather impressed with how I fought, and they even badgered me for lessons for a few minutes. After I gave in and started to explain things to them far more seriously than I should have, they quickly lost interest.



We continued on, following a mental path I made that would give me a good chance to see all of the grounds, and I saw something I knew had not been there the last time I had been here.

I first was simply dumbfounded, because I thought I was staring at a real castle that must have been built in the few months I had been gone. Upon closer inspection, I realized that it was mostly made of painted plywood, and had a very amateurish construction, more of a giant playground fixture than a real building. Even so, I was impressed, and as I was admiring it, a tall man emerged from one of the few entrances.

A fellow monster, he greeted us out of character, and after I explained it was our first time seeing the place, he invited us inside to look around.

The interior was mostly bare, though some of the walls had been roughly painted to look like stone. It was rather dark, with only a few battery-powered lights that dimly lit the passages. I was surprised by the sheer size of the thing, though as we explored further into it we saw that most of the rooms were just walled patches of dirt without roofs or floors. The layout was almost maze-like, and without our guide we could have easily gotten lost inside.

He explained that the core of the castle had been built by a legitimate construction crew, while the extended additions had been made by a group of volunteer players, which included himself. They had only used it once so far, two events ago, but it was still open for any brave adventurers to come in and try to find some of the treasure that was hidden inside. Of course, they'd have to fight him, and if they him he'd let them inside before using his radio to summon up a crew of monsters from the Cave to help him out.

While the girl's enthusiasm in the castle quickly mellowed out, the old man was rather disappointed when I decided it was time to leave. He said he couldn't wait to bring his grandson here, though I warned him against it, considering that our guide had explained it was basically a trap for overconfident players. He said it wouldn't matter, since as long as they got into the castle, his grandson could probably take on anything that was sent their way.

When we finally got back to the cave, it was already dark, and everyone seemed tired. I went into the records room, and asked the guy inside if it would be alright for the old man and the girls to end their monster shift early. He said it wouldn't be a problem, and I stepped back into the main room to tell them.

The old man was pretty grateful, and he went off to find his grandson, who I suggested might be in the inn. The girls also decided they'd rather go and play their characters than be monsters, and they decided to head back to the inn as well. About five minutes after they had gone, one ended up coming back, announcing that she'd rather go out as a monster with me a little while longer.

I hadn't paid much attention to this girl, and in fact had a bit of trouble telling her apart from her friends. She had enough make-up that I couldn't tell if she was pretty or not, and her only really distinct characteristic was the way she shuffled her feet as she walked, with rapid, little steps that I knew she was doing on purpose but I had no idea why. Though I really would have preferred going out by myself, or at least with one of the other guys in my crew, she didn't seem interested when I suggested that she go back to her friends.

We went out again as skeleton knights, though we moved a lot faster and somewhat more quietly than we had in the larger group. We would have moved in complete silence if it weren't for her odd manner of walking, though I'll admit she showed some perseverance by managing to keep up with me as I hustled along the roads, her feet moving at a ridiculously fast pace to make up for her tiny steps. Though it was dark, I could pride myself on my night vision, and I led the young girl expertly through the forest and along the roads, picking paths she could get through relatively unobstructed.

When I offered that we take a rest, she gladly accepted, and I realized that she was far more exhausted than she appeared. As she sat down on the grass, she was breathing somewhat hard, which had been drowned out while she was walking by the sound of her feet. I offered her the cup portion of my canteen as I drank straight from it, and asked why exactly she had decided to come with me.

She drank too quickly, coughing slightly, before answering that she really wanted to fight well, and she thought that she could learn from watching me and that I could teach her. The other girls had planned to spend the rest of the night in the inn roleplaying as fortune tellers and bards, and she herself couldn't really sing too well and she didn't play an instrument. She just wanted to be able to protect her friends if she needed to.

I wasn't much in the mood to try and teach anyone anything, but I had no problem with her tagging behind me if that's all she really intended to do. After it seemed like she was well rested, I started off at a brisk pace, with plans to head towards the castle once again.

Before we arrived, there was a brief moment where I felt something. It might sound like I'm speaking purely from hindsight, but there was definitely an odd tension in the air, something that made me alert and anxious. The moment passed as I heard branches snapping as three men stepped out of the woods, each moving towards me with the intent to battle.

The goth girl moved backwards, her shuffling feet announcing that she wanted to run. While I knew that I couldn't take on all three of them at the same time, I still had some distance between us before I had to make my fight or flight decision.

In a deep voice, I announced myself as Tibia, a skeleton knight, and that I challenged them to honorable combat. The sound of feet shuffling behind me stopped, just as the three men likewise halted their approach. They seemed to whisper between themselves, giving me a good chance to see who I was facing.

Two of them were typical players, one clearly a thief while the other a sword and shield fighter. The third was wearing armor beneath a white surcoat that I recognized, him belonging to the gang of warriors Ulcik had procured. He had a small shield and sword, both of them much better quality than the ones his ally carried.

They finished their discussion rather quickly, and the man in the white surcoat stepped forward, announcing in tones I could fairly call haughty, that he accepted my challenge despite me being unworthy of his time.

I was nervous. The last battle I had against one of these guys started to replay in my memory, crushing any good feelings I had been starting to regain from my recent victory against the players I had fought with the group of new people. My opponent seemed confident, his shield prepared in front of him, his eyes focused on me.

I approached cautiously, but he wasn't going to let any more tension build up. He rushed forward, faster than I expected, but I was still able to maintain my distance and flash out with one of my swords. He blocked it easily with his shield, ready to press the attack, but I had learned enough from his friend that I had to keep attacking to teach him to keep his distance. I swung my swords without finesse, simply trying to move them as fast as I could, with most of my strikes being blocked by his shield but enough of them being near misses, forcing him to retreat backwards.

With distance between us again, he called out to me, asking if I played the character named Nephem. I replied without the deep voice, telling him I was. With a grin that bordered on a sneer, he said that he and some of his friends were going to have fun tomorrow hunting me, and that this would be a prelude to what was going to happen.

I didn't bother to reply, my mind too focused on the battle. We had only exchanged a few blows, but I could tell he wasn't as strong as the other member of his gang that I had fought. By my estimate, he wasn't even on Rhend's level, which gave me some hope. While I would have preferred a two-handed sword, I at least felt that I was good enough with two swords to not be able to use them as an excuse if I lost.

He moved forward again, but he moved with less confidence, not rushing to attack as eagerly as he had before. I kept a little distance between us, realizing that his movements were very atypical, not at all like the way other people at the LARP positioned themselves. As I shifted to the side, he was slow in turning, and I saw that his feet were positioned like a fencers, his left behind him and pointing out to the side. An odd stance for use with a shield, since while he was well protected with his shield in his right hand, he couldn't attack very well with his sword behind him in his left.

While this stance may have worked against novices, I wasn't the kind of person who'd get hit by sword work that required him changing his entire stance just to reach me. Moving forward, I lashed out at him, again and again, and without having to worry about counterattacks I was able to land several strikes on him. Just as I started to feel like the battle was won, he punched out with his right arm, his shield crumpling one of my arms before slamming into my chest, tossing me backwards.

While the shield had its edges covered in a thin, dense foam, the face of it was just painted wood, and after playing around with foam weapons all day, it felt like getting hit by a hammer. We both knew it was an illegal strike, something that might be permitted at his historical combat society and that he had instinctively performed. He eyed me for a moment, seeing how I would react, his face expressionless. With the shock and pain of the blow being washed away by a surge of adrenaline, I chose to ignore what must have been a mistake, and moved forward to resume my attack.

After blocking my sword on his shield, he once again punched out with it, catching me by surprise again. This time, he followed with his sword, striking me for 6 points of damage before I had the chance to recover.

This must have been the style he had mastered at his society, and while part of me wanted to call him out as a cheater, another part of me was growing excited at the prospect of fighting a new type of opponent. His two allies had gasped loudly, but neither of them seemed willing to say anything about the illegal attacks, and I wasn't even sure if the goth girl knew that what he was doing would ordinarily be enough to have him kicked out of this LARP.

He advanced towards me again, his shield leading the way. Even though I was expecting it, he simply pressed forward with his shield, impossible for me to block with the flimsy foam and pvc pipe swords I had. It was no wonder he had adopted this style as his own, as it was ridiculously effective, his shield preventing me from coming close and then delivering painful blows that would let his sword sink in.

Before I could figure anything out, I was down to my last 3 hp, and I hadn't landed a single blow since he had adopted his shield bashing strategy. Thinking hard, I realized he was also breaking another rule, though it was one that most people, at least the ones who came here to fight, ignored, myself included. He was "charging," or moving forward after he had come within five feet or so of me. Charging was prohibited as a safety concern, to prevent people from colliding into each other, but it also made most battles a silly display of two people just standing within sword range of each other and just flailing until the damage accumulated enough to drop one of them. Both of us had been charging at each other, but now he was the only one on the offensive.

Moving backwards as quickly as I could, I forced him to run after me, his shield leading the way, trying to get close enough to slam it into me. As he caught up and pulled his shield back in preparation, I stopped suddenly, turning to the side in a low crouch.

The bottom of his shield slammed into my back awkwardly, thrusting upwards into himself as his legs collided with me. He tripped spectacularly, falling over me and landing in a crumpled pile. Cautiously, I asked if he was alright, and he groaned an "I'm okay." Checking to see that all the witnesses had heard and not feeling obligated to be any more courteous, I delivered several strikes to him as he began to stand, after which he simply laid down again.

I turned to the two remaining players, my body aching slightly, hoping and praying that they would just run for help. They seemed confused, and I almost thought that the thief was about to try and reprimand me for what I had just done. The fighter, however, seemed to understand that what he had just seen was not something that was tied to the rules of this LARP. Without a word, he started to head towards the inn, his friend soon following him.

Staring down at my fallen opponent, I wondered for a moment whether it was worth trying to talk to him, to ask what his plans were, what methods they were going to use, and why they were doing everything to begin with. There were so many questions I wanted to ask, that they all just blurred together until a wave of pain hit me. I had taken a lot more damage than I had thought from this single battle, and it might have been that I harbored some resentment towards him, or it might have been that I just didn't feel like putting in the energy to question him. I left, the shuffling girl following behind me.

I headed back towards the Cave, surprised at my fatigue. Thankfully, there were still a few more hours left in the night, a little more time where I could remain as a monster without having to worry about being hunted by Ulcik's gang. The girl seemed likewise tired, and though I'm sure she must have been disappointed that she didn't get a chance to fight once while the two of us had been out, she hid it well.

After I slumped into one of the couches in the cave, she said she was going to head back to the inn to her friends. Once she had left, Hardule and Lith, who had both been lazily reclining inside the cave, started to question me about her while making vague implications. I cut their questioning short by asking them whether they had any plans yet to keep House Cerberus from being completely destroyed, and Hardule muttered that hiding had worked last time for him, so he thought he'd try it again.

I told them of my encounter with the man with the white surcoat, and they wondered if the man I had described had actually been one of the seven we were supposed to look out for, since neither of them remembered any of them that well. Dismissing my story, Lith explained how he and Hardule had asked to be powerful monsters so that they could go out tonight and kill some of them, but they had been flatly refused. They instead went out as murgarunks, weak little rat people, and had been repeatedly beaten by groups of six or more players.

While Lith told me about his adventures, Vlaine arrived, and I realized just how much I had grown to depend on him. He immediately began telling me information he had gathered, including ideas he wasn't sure about but sounded plausible to me.

To start, he had gathered a lot of information about the seven people Ulcik had brought to this LARP. Though it was mostly rumor, Vlaine said that only four of them were really exceptional fighters, while the other three were just above average, and had already been defeated by some of the people playing monsters (which included the guy I had been so proud to have defeated). However, all of them were part of a patrolling system which covered the entire grounds, and were being assisted by several other players. They were organized, with all information leading back to Ulcik.

Vlaine, and most of the players, had no idea where Ulcik was. He had made a few appearances, but kept disappearing to some place. He said that Rhend was out currently trying to see if he could find Ulcik by chance and follow him to wherever he was hiding, but he hadn't had any luck so far. Since my ultimate goal involved making sure that Ulcik died so hard that he wouldn't even want to come back, I was certain that we'd need to find his hiding spot eventually in order to get through this weekend.

When I asked Vlaine about Ulcik's Lichhood, he had no information at all. My big fear was that he had a phylactery that needed to be destroyed in order to kill him, and I also wanted to know whether he had new abilities that no one knew about. Worried slightly, I pressed on with my questions, asking what the players thought about Ulcik's return.

There were varying shades of opinion. There was a small group that couldn't be happier about his resurrection, though this was definitely a minority composed of sycophants and people Ulcik had bribed with power and favors. Most of the players had characters that acted pleased, and would side with him if there was any conflict, but in reality they had correctly assessed that Ulcik was simply taking his character's death in the worse manner possible. Many of these people had come to terms with the permanent deaths of their own previous characters, and felt somewhat miffed that Ulcik was unwilling to accept his.

Yet, there was a small group, perhaps only sparse individuals, who knew that something was horribly, terribly wrong, and that trusting a lich, even if he was a "good lich," would be disastrous. This sadly was an unpopular opinion that had only been confided privately to Vlaine, but it was still good to hear that there were some players who weren't going to blindly follow the plot that Ulcik had written.

Many of the players felt intimidated by the one's Ulcik had brought, and while Ulcik, even as a lich, was in good standing with the other players, his little squad was openly disliked by everyone except Ulcik's sycophants. They were reputed to be arrogant and to be rather brutal with their fighting (which I felt was a fair assessment), and their gear and stats were definitely unfair.

Vlaine continued to talk while I was deep in thought, trying to piece together something that resembled a strategy. There had to be some opportunity, some overlooked detail, something that could lead to Ulcik's defeat and the return of House Cerberus to greater glory than it had even started with.

Closing my eyes, I began to list what needed to be done. While I tried, I realized that I had never truly determined what was more important to me, killing Ulcik or restoring the house. I had simply lumped them together, though I came to realize that there were important choices that needed to be made. In order to restore House Cerberus, Hardule and Lith needed to remain alive. Could they be asked to fight Ulcik if it meant risking the existence of their noble house? Did we have a chance to defeat him without their help?

The reason I had decided to come to the LARP had almost solely been just to have a chance to truly kill Ulcik, thinking that saving House Cerberus would be a nice added bonus. As my mind poured over the details, I realized there was a good chance that trying to kill him would actually lead to the end of the house. But what other options were there? Leaving him alone, having Hardule hide until Ulcik finally grew tired of trying to kill him, keeping the house alive in name only? Perhaps he and Lith could recruit people secretly, creating a hidden society that would eventually undermine Ulcik?

They could take their time, going to events and only playing as monsters, recruiting people out-of-game and only reemerging once they had enough strength and information to be certain of their victory. Ulcik, though he would be deluded into thinking he had won, would eventually be overthrown.

I stopped myself. I was running away again. If Ulcik forced them into hiding, that would be a victory in itself. As I zoned in and out of listening to Vlaine, I confirmed with myself what was necessary.

Ulcik needed to be defeated. But either Hardule or Lith also needed to survive. These were two goals that had to be maintained.

Ulcik's squad of fighters, along with his other supporters, did not need to be destroyed. If we could avoid them and strike solely at Ulcik, we might stand a chance, except for the problem that it had taken a small army to deplete all of Ulcik's spells the first time we had defeated him, and sneaking a small army past Ulcik's defenders wouldn't be easy, if at all possible.

I knew I was thinking too much. I couldn't help it. My mind was trying its hardest to figure out how we even stood a chance against Ulcik, while I knew I should have been trying to figure out just how to survive the next two days.



After Vlaine finished telling me all he had learned, I decided to head out again as a monster. If luck was with me, I'd be able to figure something out while I was out.

Lith came with me, Hardule and Vlaine being too tired to go out again. We were assigned to be bog trolls again, and I was glad to have the chance to use a two-handed sword again. Lith chose a long spear, since trolls could not use shields, and we went out, without any real direction.

We stayed together, ignoring that bog trolls were supposed to be solitary, and after only about five minutes I heard someone calling me. It was the old man who had traveled with me and the girls, who seemed to have forgotten that as he was a player now and I was still a monster, I was supposed to try and kill him. Lith seemed intent of reminding him, but I greeted the man out of character, and he was soon followed by a man who looked slightly younger than I was. The man greeted us, and introduced himself as the old man's grandson. He thanked me for looking after his grandfather and for getting him out of monster duty early, and I received a rather different impression from him than I had been expecting from a guy who had left his grandfather alone at a LARP. I explained that we needed to get back to being monsters, and Lith and I headed off again.

We encountered a few players, though neither Lith nor I seemed intent on chasing after them. There was a somewhat melancholy feel to the air, and I started to wonder why we had bothered to go out.

There was the crunch of a twig, and the slight jingle of mail armor. Turning around, I saw two people, both that I remembered quite well. It was the hammer-wielding plated warrior, and standing next to him was a shorter, miserable looking man I was very much not pleased to see. It was the man I had killed twice at the last event I had been to, and his face contorted with rage when he realized who I was. The rage passed quickly, and with a smile pointed to the two of us. With the air of someone ordering a dog, he told his ally to kill us.

The plated warrior looked reluctant to follow what sounded like an order, but he didn't seem reluctant to fight us. Lith looked nervous, but I at least knew this would be a two-on-one battle, since the man I had killed before couldn't even be called a distraction.

I moved to flank the warrior with Lith, who didn't look too comfortable without his shield. Before Lith got into position, the man swung his hammer, and I saw that the pole it was attached to was longer than even Lith's spear. He struck Lith hard, calling out ten points of damage, and with a slight flick struck him again for another ten. With Lith under half his health

in only the first few seconds, I realized why this man was considered one of the four strong members.

While he tried to strike at the retreating Lith again, I circled towards his back. I slashed with my sword, expecting him to be unable to do anything from his position.

The butt of his polearm struck me hard in the gut. While it was padded, it had hit me with unexpected force, and I nearly crumpled to the ground from it as he called out ten damage. I moved backwards away from him, and was hit in the back by the man I had chosen to ignore, him dealing me another twelve damage just from that single hit.

With only 13 HP left, I didn't even bother to listen to him gloat, moving out of both of their reaches and heading back towards Lith. Lith was having a hard time, not used to wielding a spear while his opponent had not only better reach but more experience. He fell after two more hits, leaving me alone against the two.

Under equal circumstances, I might have had a chance against the plated warrior. He knew what he was doing, but the tip of his weapon was heavy, heavy enough that I had a decisive advantage in speed even though he had longer reach. He actually shortened his grip to try and keep up with me, but it didn't take me long to see that he was just fighting defensively, letting his ally get into position.

Choosing the shame of death instead of running just so that I had chance to land a hit on him, I fell quickly as soon as he caught and pressed my sword with his hammer, allowing the man I killed to freely carve up my back.

Once again I wasn't checked for any coins, our opponent's probably having weapons and gear better than money could purchase. I ignored the man who was gloating and boasting, turning my head to look at the plated warrior. He looked disappointed, but not at me, but his ally.

They left eventually, and me and Lith slowly got up. He began to curse about overpowered characters, but I didn't encourage him to continue, so he eventually became silent. While this defeat was rather humiliating, I was feeling surprisingly optimistic. Though I hadn't landed a hit on my foe, he only landed one himself, and I knew that I could at the very least keep up with him. Though I admit he had defeated not only me but Lith as well, and rather quickly, I didn't feel as crushed as I had before.

I knew I was being stupidly proud, looking for pride within a defeat, but something in me wasn't allowing me to feel depressed. He might have been more skilled than me or even Rhend, but he wasn't as skilled as the one in black scaled armor. I couldn't keep obsessing over my losses, or I'd end up simply giving up hope.

After we returned to the Cave and ended our monster shifts, we were both almost too tired to make it all the way to our assigned cabins, almost nodding off on our way there. Hardule was asleep inside when we arrived, and I restrained Lith from waking him up. After we got ready, Lith fell asleep almost instantly, while I remained awake despite how tired I felt.

These were the last few hours before I would don the costume of Nephem Festiva. Ulcik had a grudge against me as deep as the one I had against him, and I knew he'd do everything to try and kill me. While I had managed to evade a fair amount of players, albeit disorganized ones, during the last event, this time I wasn't the only one who had to avoid being caught. My great fear was that if I went out and hid alone, Hardule and Lith would be caught, ending our plans right there. I had a feeling Hardule had only survived the last event because Ulcik wanted to kill him last, and Hardule only had to be killed once and he would be permanently dead.

Wondering just what exactly I could do to keep my friends alive, when I didn't even know if I could keep myself alive, I drifted into an uneasy sleep, my body aching from the shield bashes I had received earlier. I needed to get rested, as tomorrow was shaping up to be a very exhausting day.

I awoke early, a little after 6, and it took me a moment to remember everything. I was surprised to discover that I was a bit sore from the day before, but there wasn't any serious pain. I woke up Lith, who grudgingly got up and tried to rouse Hardule, who seemed intent on having a lie-in. When I reminded him that all our enemies knew where we were and were probably going to kill us if we stayed any longer, he sleepily started to get dressed.

My costume had improved a bit from the last time I had been here. My clothes were chosen to help me blend in with the trees and ground, with a broken pattern to help break up my form, but it was still medieval enough to pass as a costume here. Slipping on a baldric over my shoulder and hanging my canteen on it, I then slipped my two-handed sword through the loop on the back, which had a snap button for quick removal. I then put on the one magic item I had.

It was a cheap plastic ring painted gold with a plastic blue gem, but it was something exceedingly powerful in this LARP. A ring of minor spell reflection allowed me to block incoming spells with a sword or shield, which usually still counted as targets for spells. I had unwittingly taken it while it was intended for one of Ulcik's lackeys, and I had gotten good use out of it when I fought to kill him.

When I finished grabbing a few energy bars, Vlaine rushed into our cabin, not bothering to knock and catching Hardule in nothing but his boxers. Vlaine ignored his protests, eager to tell me that he had both good news and bad news. The good news was that he knew a way for us to survive the day without encountering any of our enemies. We would go on quests.

It was such a simple yet brilliant solution, and I only excused myself for not coming up with it because I wasn't too familiar with the LARP. Quests here were handled very simply, with players either putting in requests at the Cave and then be lead off on a crafted adventure, or waiting until an NPC arrived at the inn and gave them a quest. The brilliant part was that quests took place in "distant lands," which meant that if you were on a quest, other people were to pretend you didn't exist and try not to get in your way. With the quests tailored to the level of the participants, there was almost no chance that Hardule or Lith would die while we were on a quest. While it wasn't really a solution to our problems, it at least gave us time for an opportunity to appear before we were hunted and killed by Ulcik's gang.

As he promised to meet us in a particular part of the grounds as an NPC to send us on a quest, I was once again glad that Vlaine was our ally. Before he left, I asked him what the bad news was.

Hesitating, he answered that some of the seven, he did not know which, had their monster duties today. While going on a quest meant we wouldn't be hunted by remainder, it also meant that there was a good chance we'd meet some of them as monsters on our quest.

Having to face one of them when they didn't have to care about dying and we did was an excellent example of bad news. He asked me if going on a quest was still a good idea, and I stopped to think a moment. In the end, I decided it would be better for us to try and survive the quests than for the three of us to try and hide for the entire day. If things worked out, we could possibly even get some good treasure, something to help match the ridiculous power we were going to have to face.

When Lith and Hardule were finally ready, we set off for the part of the forest Vlaine had instructed. Having Hardule and Lith survive the day was our most important goal right now, but I couldn't help but wonder if we were heading towards an adventure we weren't going to be able

to handle. Pushing aside my worries, I launched into a run, my sword bobbing gently against my back.

End of Part I

## Part 3 - II

When the three of us arrived, Vlaine was already waiting, wearing a robe and white beard. He looked rather worried, though it might have been him playing the character. He explained in-character that he was a wizard who had heard rumors of a spell-eating monster, and that he wanted some adventurers to see if they were true. If they were, we were supposed to kill it and bring back its head as proof.

Not exactly the most exciting scenario, but I wasn't really in the mood to be picky. At least we weren't fighting some demon king in order to save the town or having to save a princess from a castle. Hardule and Lith seemed only vaguely interested in the plot of this quest, and from what I had heard about the other quests they had been on, the plots never really mattered.

A typical quest involved walking to one spot where a group of monsters was waiting, killing them, and then being told to go to another spot and to fight more monsters. There would occasionally be a special challenge, like fighting the monsters in a limited amount of space or having to solve a riddle found on a piece of parchment, but those were a rarity.

The Plot Masters had written most of the quests some time ago, which meant that they were often reused. I asked if either Hardule and Lith had "searched for a spell-eating monster before," and neither of them seemed to remember going on such an adventure. Considering that this plot wasn't exactly memorable, there was still actually a good chance they had done this adventure already.

After Vlaine told us where the rumors were, he handed us orange and green striped pieces of cloth, which we were to tie around our heads or arms to signify that we were on a quest. We then headed off, and for a good long while I started to feel like we were just an ordinary adventuring party without a care in the world.

We took the main roads, and were spotted a few times by people I could only guess were part of Ulcik's network, as they quickly ran off after seeing us. We ignored them, as we were expected to, since we were hundreds of miles away from them as far as the game was concerned.

Before we arrived at where we were supposed to be, a middle-aged woman who was rather tall and was wearing an ordinary shirt and jeans walked up to us, a radio at her hip and a clipboard in her hand. She introduced herself as the Quest Master for this quest, and told us that the monsters weren't ready yet. While we waited, she read the quest notes on the clipboard to herself, occasionally glancing at us while we sheepishly waited.

She had a slight frown which would diminish slightly when she looked up at us, but returned when she looked back at the notes. After about five minutes, her radio gave a short beep and she took it to her ear, then told us we could go now.

Ahead of us were three people dressed in black robes, shambling around aimlessly with foam clubs. Whatever they were mustn't have been very important, because Lith and I slew them without much trouble while Hardule stayed towards the back, tossing over a spell every so often. These must have been players on their monster duty shifts, since full time monsters would have given us a bit more trouble. With the monsters slain, we looted them for a few coins, and then the Quest Master told us we found a trail that led further into the woods.

The three monsters got up and went ahead of us, and when we arrived at where the imaginary trail was supposed to end, they were waiting for us, shambling around again.

We killed them more quickly this time, looted them, and then waited as they got up to go further down the imaginary trail, which was back the way we had come. Walking back, we met them, killed them, looted them, and then watched them go to the place we had just been.

I looked towards the Quest Master suspiciously, but neither Hardule nor Lith seemed concerned, and I guessed that this was just the way quests were done. I had expected a little less repetition, but I had probably just been overly optimistic.

When we had killed our 30th shambling, club-wielding whatever they were, I started to get worried. The same three monsters were getting more and more tired as we continued to fight them, and each battle got easier and easier for us. Lith had taken a few hits, but neither me nor Hardule had taken any damage. With Lith between the monsters and Hardule, while I would

flank the ones who tried to attack him, we worked exceptionally efficiently, with Hardule only having to cast the 10 damage fire spell he could cast at will.

Hardule asked the Quest Master what was going on, since quests rarely lasted longer than an hour or two, and it had already been almost two hours. She replied that she was simply following instructions, and I started to wonder if we weren't doing something that needed to be done. Looking at her clipboard, only three sheets had been turned upwards, leaving still several pages of quest notes.

While fighting the next batch of monsters, I kept an eye on her, trying to see if I could gleam some sort of hint from her expressions. She maintained a slight frown, though she kept glancing at her watch every now and then. When we had started, it had barely been 7, and while this LARP was considered to run continuously throughout the weekend, it was a little too much to expect many people to be awake at this time.

I started to suspect that the reason we had been facing the same three people again and again was that there simply had not been that many people awake. However, by 9 o'clock, that was no longer an excuse for us to be continuing this cycle of fight, walk, and fight. We were definitely not advancing the "plot" in anyway, and I could tell I wasn't the only one who was getting bored.

Finally, while we were fighting our 15th batch of the same three monsters, the Quest Master's radio gave a short beep. She had a short conversation I was unable to overhear thanks to everyone calling out their damage, but when we had efficiently finished off the monsters, she walked over to us, saying we had managed to clear the long trail, and found tracks leading to a large cave.

We walked to where she directed, and when I saw what was prepared for us, I simply stared, consumed by confusion. Hardule and Lith likewise seemed dumbstruck, and for a brief moment I wondered if we had won some strange kind of prize or were receiving some kind of punishment.

The large cave, which in reality was just a clear field with borders that the Quest Master pointed out, was filled with monsters. Most were wearing black robes, though some were wearing red or brown. The Quest Master explained to us that the thirty people we saw were in fact several hundred monsters, and that we should plan accordingly.

I didn't need to ask my friends to figure out that this wasn't a normal quest. Most quests would just use the same six or seven people as monsters over and over again, and there would never

be a huge battle like this one, especially for just three people. While Hardule had one of the strongest characters in the game, Lith wasn't even above average and this was only my second event, which made the thought of us fighting all of these monsters a laughable one.

Trying to remember the plot, to see if there was any other way to accomplish our mission without fighting everyone, I realized that we didn't have any real motivation to even go into this cave. As far as my character was concerned, he didn't care at all about a spell-eating monster, and he certainly hadn't signed up to fight against a small army of monsters.

Though it would be somewhat mean to all these monsters who had assembled just for us, I needed to keep Hardule and Lith alive, and keeping myself alive would be a nice bonus for not going into the cave. My cowardice nicely rationalized, I was just about to explain my safe and cautious plan of running away when Hardule tossed a spell at the closest of the monsters.

Forgetting that one of your friends has a habit of making the worst possible decisions at the worst possible times will inevitably be your downfall, you can take my word on that. Hardule was looking at the monsters with the glee of a child watching dominoes topple over each other, enjoying the effect as the other monsters pretended to be alerted to our presence, moving towards us with malicious intent.

The monster Hardule had hit with the beanbag for 10 damage had fallen from just that, which meant that they were at least weaker than the three we had been fighting before. This was good news, because my two-handed sword only dealt 4 damage while Lith's sword dealt 5. Even so, I only had 18 HP and Lith had been reduced down to something in his 20's, and the monster Hardule had killed was already running back to the edge of the clearing in order to respawn, representing one of the many hundred monsters we'd have to kill.

I am a man that likes plans. For this, I had none. Thankfully, the monsters were not following any orders or forming lines. If we could keep them moderately spaced out and not having to face more than two or three at a time, we stood a chance. If we spent too much time fighting one, they would end up being bunched up together, which wasn't something the three of us could handle for long.

My brain burning inside my skull, trying to come up with some sort of strategy, I watched as Lith started to panic. After shouting at Hardule for being who he was, he turned to me, yelling that we should retreat. Hardule, a look of dawning comprehension, as if he had just noticed to small hoard of people intent to kill us, also seemed intent on simply running away from this clearing.



Thankful that the two of them had managed to discover possibly the only strategy that would leave us alive, I also motioned for us to run.

But then I saw her.

A group of monsters had been encircling her, but as they had moved forward, I could now see what was at the very rear of the cave. Lying on her back on a table covered with a brown cloth was a young woman, dressed in light colored robes and feigning to be asleep. She seemed familiar, but from the distance I couldn't truly say who it was. It would be too much of a coincidence if it was who I thought it was, but something, perhaps hope, kept me thinking it might just be.

I pointed her out to Lith and Hardule, and simultaneously the three of us stopped edging backwards, looks of deep determination grafted to our faces.

Sometimes, people had asked why I counted these two as my friends, and I will admit that I sometimes wondered that too. But the fact that the three of us, without words, knew exactly what needed to be done even if we were not sure that we could do it, and were moving towards it without thinking of the possibility of failure, was possibly the only reason I'd ever need to consider them the best of friends.

The monsters stopped their slow advance momentarily, perhaps realizing that we no longer intended to retreat. These were the full-time monsters, the people who came to this LARP for no reason other than to fight. They were made of the same material that I was, prideful, solitary, and obsessed with challenging ourselves, to see what we could do. They knew that a single unified charge would overpower the three of us easily, and they hadn't come all the way out here just for a battle that would last under a minute.

The first one that came near me leapt, his club swinging wildly. I parried the blow, delivering one in turn, and then striking him again with a rapid whip of the tip of my blade. He seemed amused, smiling as he sat down from just two hits, before standing up and moving towards the back. I lost sight of him as another came speeding towards my side, two clubs swinging.

I did not want to get hit. This single thought screamed in my mind, thrashing even the elite group of thoughts known as common sense. I forgot, perhaps consciously, that I would only be hit by pvc pipes wrapped in foam, and rolled to the side, out of my assailant's reach. My move

surprised not only him and myself, but the monster who I had just rolled next to. Before he had a chance to react, my sword flashed out, a strike to each knee.

Two, I counted to myself, two out of what was an undefined number that could have been infinite. Lith's shouts suddenly slammed into me, and I saw that he had tried pressing forward, resulting him in being surrounded. The monster's odd sense of chivalry kept only two attacking him at once, but he was still in trouble.

Spells from Hardule started to rain down. Unlike me, who only carried two pocketfuls of bean bags, Hardule had three sacks of them, and it looked like he was intending to use all of them. He was casting spells with lightning speed, his mouth twitching rapidly as he muttered the incantations before calling out the damage he was dealing.

While his haste kept his aim from being perfect, the sheer amount of monsters meant that nine out of ten hit their mark. Soon, a wide circle had appeared around Lith, and this circle continued to expand. The monsters had now started to appreciate the power of Hardule, and some of them were no longer simply walking towards the edges of the clearing, but jogging or even running.

Hardule seemed to be focusing on the monsters that were attacking Lith, leaving me to fend for myself. I knew I was making a fool of myself, leaping around and moving without any sense of style or rhythm, but I was starting to feel good. I made sure that every blow that landed counted for two, moving the tip of my sword in a tight circle to get a second hit in. While some tried to block, these monsters were few and far between, most caring little if they died since they would respawn almost immediately.

After it seemed like we had managed to kill each of the monsters at least once, the tone of the battle shifted. The monsters were no longer just playing around, but actually getting serious, realizing that we weren't just three players they could defeat any time they wished.

They started to form small groups, taking advantage of openings that appeared as I attack their allies. I received a hit for four points of damage in the back before I managed to cut my way out of being surrounded, and it wasn't until I had managed to put a little distance between myself and them that I realized just how much the battle had shifted.

Lith's character was stronger than mine, and in some ways his sword and shield were better suited for this kind of fight than my two-handed sword, but he had never fought for so long,

against so many opponents. He had fallen back towards Hardule, who was digging into his second sack of beanbags already, a look of worry on his face.

I worked my way towards them, cutting down the monsters between us. My memory was working hard in the background of my mind, and it wasn't until I reached Lith that I realized just how much my body was reacting purely based on the memories of the last event.

I had fought most of these people before. Though it had been dark, and they were dressed differently, I was starting to consciously recognize them from how they fought. Many had distinct styles, betraying that they were more comfortable with other types of weapons, unsurprising considering the unwieldiness of their clubs. The clubs didn't seem to move where they wanted to, and my sword must have looked like lightning to them in comparison.

Lith almost struck me in surprise when I reached him, but he simply smiled an apology, glad to see me instead of another monster. While it took two blows from either of us to take down a single monster, we were now delivering them in turn, monsters being slain at a pace faster than they could replenish. With Hardule softening each wave before they reached us, only three or four monsters reached us at a time, allowing me and Lith to kill one or two before Hardule finished the rest.

The monsters no longer sat down when slain, simply turning around and running to the edge of the clearing before sprinting back. In truth, this was working against them, as they grew more and more tired. Though the three of us had been fighting the entire morning, only Lith seemed to be slowing down from fatigue, both Hardule and I still attacking as fast as ever. As our opponents slowed down, our attacks often hit them before they even had a chance to swing once at us before being forced to turn around and run back to where they had come from.

There was no way to keep count. We had easily slain over a hundred, with Hardule alone having killed no less than fifty. I didn't have the time to steal a glance at the Quest Master, to see if her expression could betray the purpose and reasoning behind this battle. Having established an equilibrium of killing and respawning, it was starting to look like a question of endurance. The monsters seemed to understand this, and began attacking and taking breaks in shifts, something we didn't have the luxury of doing. Hardule's incantations started to become mumbles, and Lith's shield was starting to sag.

While half, or perhaps more of my brain was dedicated to nothing but making sure my sword kept striking monsters, the remainder was trying to make sense of the situation. Perhaps we had to fight against these monsters for a certain length of time, like we had in the endlessly recycling

battles we had before? This didn't seem right, as I was almost certain that the earlier battles had just been a large stall for time, so that this large crowd of monsters could be assembled for us. But why had they been gathered just for us?

I ruled out Ulcik's schemes rather quickly. He wouldn't want us to simply die by a herd of monsters when he could have the satisfaction of having his cronies kill us, or to even kill us himself. That left the other two Plot Masters, or perhaps someone I still did not know about who had the power to write quests. One of us, or perhaps all three of us, had done something that made someone want us dead.

As I almost instinctively parried an attack and delivered two of my own in response, I began to wonder if this was a quest designed to kill us. It was challenging, yes, and I doubt anyone in the history of the LARP had ever had to face such skewed odds, but we had not been killed yet. In fact, we had survived for well over an hour, something that no one could have expected.

As a group of three monsters attacked me, one managing to lightly hit me in the back of my leg for another points of damage, I realized there was another time a person had fought against even more unreasonable odds. Alone in the woods, I had intercepted an army of monsters intended for the Inn, ambushing them again and again until I had slain over two hundred in the course of five hours. While the circumstances had been in my favor that time, I wasn't alone in this battle. This battle may have been unreasonable to place against ordinary players, but it almost seemed as if someone was recognizing my previous feat and providing another suitable challenge.

The three monsters defeated before the next small group arrived, I looked towards Lith, who was fairing poorly. He was no longer attacking, allowing his enemies' clubs to slam into his shield while Hardule threw spells at them. I didn't know how much HP he had left, but I knew he wasn't far from dying. Monsters were going around him, striking at Hardule, occasionally landing a hit before a spell finished them. I realized I had moved away from the two of them again, and I moved back to help them, not realizing the mistake until I had. The monsters clumped together more now, a near endless stream of them, and Lith, his heavy shield having drained him of his endurance, was breathing heavily as he willed himself to keep blocking.

We would not survive as a group. Though we had slain more monsters than we'd ever know, it would mean nothing if we died here. We had done nothing to advance ourselves, remaining in the tight bottleneck of the entrance to the cave while the monsters maintained their relentless march. We had to do something, something we should have done long ago, but our naive thought that the monsters were not truly endless, our one hope of victory, had kept us pinned.

Accepting that the monsters would never stop coming, I looked upon the only clue of what to do next.

Not even bothering to announce what I was going to do to my friends, I bent down low, wondering if my legs still had it in them. Summoning all the energy I had left in me, I sprinted forward, heading towards the woman on the table.

I had run past several of the monsters before they realized my intent, but these were the monsters who weren't taking a break. The rest of the monsters, some of them sitting down on the grass in order to catch their breaths, allowed me to sprint up half the field before they moved to surround me.

Ignoring the ones that circled around my back, cutting off any chance of returning to Hardule and Lith, I lashed out at the ones between me and the table, perhaps harder than I should have. Clubs flew out of people's hands, my own ferocity surprising me, and most of the monsters had enough sense to get out of my way. Ducking under a swing aimed at my shoulders, my forward momentum carried me into a roll, allowing me to rush past my assailant before I leapt back to my feet.

I reached the table, not taking the time to look behind me to see how the situation had changed, and was greeted by a most welcome face. She had been watching from her lying position, but returned to pretending to be asleep when I reached her, and it was only then that I realized I had no idea what to do. In fact, I didn't even really know why I had come all this way, other than to see if anything would change.

Looking back at the clearing, nearly everyone had turned to look at me, the Quest Master staring at me particularly intently. Some of the monsters were edging towards me, looking back at the Quest Master as if they were waiting for instructions. Some monsters continued to attack Lith and Hardule, and to my horror I saw Lith drop to the ground, as four monsters swarmed him.

Knowing that Hardule would soon follow, I turned back to the woman, asking for her to wake up. She stirred slightly, and I tried calling out her character's name, Selenia. She pretended to wake up slowly, and feigned surprise as she sat up to look at me.

Not in the mood to die for the sake of roleplaying out a dramatic reunion, I simply asked if she was alright. Catching the hint of urgency in my voice, she quickly said that we had to escape this

cave, and that she would explain everything outside. As she got off the table, the monsters seemed to take this as some sort of signal, moving towards the two of us.

I looked towards Hardule, who was being spectacularly beaten by a group of monsters with clubs. He killed several before his HP ran out, dropping to the ground with an unnecessary but nevertheless dramatic yell. The monsters, finished with my two friends, now all focused their attention on me.

I knew Selenia could not run as fast as I could, and even I doubted that I could just dodge and weave my way through all the monsters. Realizing that my stupid idea of charging all by myself was going to result in all of us simply dying, I prepared myself for the most glorious death I could muster. As I tried to think of some sort of final words to shout out as I died, I felt a reassuring hand placed upon my shoulder.

This wasn't just a gesture to restore my confidence. Selenia's character had originally been created as a pocket mage, a spellcaster that specialized in healing and protective magic that would stay with a warrior, ensuring that the warrior could fight without fear of death. While I disapproved of this kind of team since it was often used by warriors who had no real skill and would just rely on their pseudo-invincibility, I wasn't in the position or mood to deny that it was an extremely effective strategy.

I asked her how many spells she had, and she simply replied that she had enough, smiling.

The first group of monsters didn't know what hit them. I simply rushed forward, swinging my sword like a machete, just trying to clear a path towards Lith. I didn't care about defense, not bothering to block simply so I could hit more often. Each time I would begin to drop to one knee, a hand on my shoulder and a few words brought me back up again to continue the assault.

There was an odd look of panic on the monster's faces, and they were running towards me, all of them trying their hardest to kill me. It seemed like they would be humiliated to have so few people manage to succeed against them. A few tried to circle around and strike at Selenia, but the speed at which we were moving and the confusion that the fallen monsters caused as they rushed towards the edge of the clearing in order to revive kept us well protected.

We reached Lith, and with a single word from Selenia he stood up, revitalized in more ways than one. His shield and sword looked light in his hands as he moved to protect Selenia's back, a wide smile on his face. The three of us moved as a perfect unit, with me cutting our way through

while Lith guarded us from the monsters who were returning after being respawned. When Selenia restored Hardule, and he began to fling spells from within our formation, a simple truth became known to everyone within the cave.

The four of us could take on an army.

We cut through the monsters and out of the clearing, cheering triumphantly at making it out of the cave. We collapsed on the ground, laughing at the absurdity of what we had just gone through. The aches and pains of the battle decided to remind me about themselves, but I ignored them, knowing full well that I had just taken part in another legend.

Selenia who was easily nowhere near as tired as the rest of us, stood up after awhile, retrieving a folded piece of paper from her pocket. She glanced over it, and then explained that she had been looking for a spell-eating monster but had been captured. However, she knew where it was located, and was willing to serve as our guide.

As she finished, the Quest Master ran up to us, asking if Selenia had explained her part. Selenia replied that she just needed to give us our restorative potions, and then we would be ready to go. Lith simply muttered that if they took a fifteen minute break, the spell-eating monster wasn't going to be going anywhere. Hardule and I agreed, and the Quest Master said that we should take a half-hour break so that the monsters could prepare for the next encounter. As she left, We took our restorative potions, simple slips of paper with the name of the potion on them, and ripped the slips in half, restoring ourselves to full HP.

While we waited, I asked Selenia why I hadn't seen her at the opening ceremony. She first said that she was glad that I had been looking for her, and then quickly explained that the reason she had been late was because she had been held up by her ex-boyfriend in the parking lot. He had started an argument with her about how even though they had broken up in reality, they were still supposed to be a couple inside the game.

I laughed, misreading Selenia's tone, and she exasperatedly said that it wasn't funny at all. She paused for a moment, perhaps realizing that it was actually pretty ridiculous, and I could see that she was fighting a smile.

I changed the subject, asking what she had been doing lying on a table in the middle of a cave filled with monsters. She replied that Vlaine had gone up to her dressed as a wizard while the three of us had been fighting the repeating trio of monsters, and explained that the quest

needed someone who could cast healing spells. Selenia had always been an honorary member of House Cerberus, just like myself, and Vlaine had thought she'd be the perfect person for the job.

She then started to explain how it was rather funny, in that the quest was written with the expectation that the three of us would simply rush over to her, wake her up, and escape within a matter of minutes. No one had expected that the three of us would try and kill hundreds of monsters, and even fewer would have expected us to have been rather succesful on that point. Had the monsters not had infinite lives, but only three or four, we would have managed to shock everyone by succeeding within an hour.

Hardule's chest swelled, taking the chance to remind us that he was responsible for most of the kills. Lith interjected by reminding him that without anyone protecting him, he had fallen within thirty seconds.

The four of us chatted pleasantly until the Quest Master returned, her clipboard under her arm. She seemed rather happy, though she didn't offer us any new information other than that everything was ready for us to proceed on our quest.

With Selenia leading the way, we arrived at another field, this one with a gentle slope uphill away from us. We were greeted by the tall man who had guided me through the castle the night before, dressed in a gray cloak and carrying a sword and shield. He seemed very happy to see us at first, but then switched into character, grimly announcing that he was Crovak, a member of the Stone Well order of knights. He gestured towards a group of similarly dressed and equipped men and women, some who I recognized as monsters I had fought less than an hour ago. They explained that they were here to defeat a terrible beast that had gained the service of another race of monsters, having them terrorize the countryside.

After I simply agreed that we'd help them, Hardule and Lith continued to talk to him in character, giving me a chance to take a better look at the Stone Well knights. There were only 6 of them, but the four that didn't have helmets I knew to be some of the better fighters among the monsters. These were the ones I was glad that my sword was well over a foot longer in regards to reach than their clubs, as I exploited this fact rather than having to meet them on equal terms.

After Hardule had finished a rather long-winded speech about noble duties, Crovak asked if we had any plans. Lith asked what exactly it was that we were facing, and Crovak explained what he said a scout had reported to him.



At the edge of this clearing would be the monster, surrounded by his servants. These monsters, the shambling, black robed club wielders that he called "Seshniks," were monsters that only listened to the strongest creature they knew, and the beast was strong enough to have become their master. As if explaining it to a child, Crovak said that we didn't need to kill all the Seshniks, we just needed to defeat the beast.

While I wanted to say that this point was obvious, we didn't exactly have a great record of taking the easy and intelligent route. Agreeing that we should focus on killing the beast, I asked how he thought we should do this. He proposed a simple plan, where a larger group would bait the Seshniks away from the beast, and a smaller unit of two or three people would strike at it directly.

Hardule quickly suggested that he be the one to fight the beast, since he was the strongest person present. Lith shook his head, saying that he was only strong as long as he had several people in front of him. Crovak said that he would like his lieutenant to be part of the unit, and that I should be the one to accompany him. I tried to figure out a way to tell him that it was only my second event without breaking character, and I ended up just saying I wasn't as experienced as Lith or Hardule. The two of them quickly agreed, but Crovak said that speed would be the most important factor, and I looked the fastest.

I knew that was shoddy reasoning, and that he had some other purpose behind suggesting me, but I think at that point I had started to learn that it was sometimes better to just let the people behind the quest make the decisions. I agreed to this plan, and was introduced to Crovak's lieutenant, one of the men in helms.

My eyes widened as I realized who it was. The Monster Leader himself, one of the three Plot Masters, stared at me from beneath his helmet, and I knew very well that this was not just a coincidence. He seemed to recognize my little epiphany, but he said nothing beyond his greeting, an abnormally serious look on his face.

The other eight were lining up, a solid formation of six warriors in front of Hardule and Selenia. The Monster Leader and I moved behind them, a sort of rear guard. We began to march forward up the slope, until a large group of Seshniks came out of the woods at the edge of the field. I stared at them as they ran towards us, looking for the person who was the beast.

He was unmistakable. Wearing a werewolf mask and bright blue robes, he was carrying a sword and shield I knew I had seen before. Before I could point him out to the Monster Leader, I saw another man wearing a werewolf mask, this one in bright red and carrying a bec de corbin that I knew could not belong to anyone but one man. Finally, a man dressed in white, with a white-furred werewolf mask, emerged from the forest, carrying two small daggers.

I had not been told that there were three beasts. My assumption was that there would be one, and he would be the same spell-eating monster we had started this quest to find. Glancing at the old man next to me, I realized that he was observing me carefully, watching for my reactions. I frowned, not bothering to hide my mounting worry, especially since I knew this would not be an easy battle.

The blue and white wolfs stayed towards the back, but the red wolf marched forward with a group of Seshniks, colliding with the shield line we had formed. The clubs of the Seshniks slammed futilely into the shields of the knights, but the hammer of the red wolf sought and found gaps, striking for ten damage.

I watched at first, surveying the entire battle while the old man surveyed me. The red wolf, the same man who had been playing the plated warrior the night before, was being hit again and again by the swords of the knights and by Hardule's 10 damage fire spell, but didn't seem to care in the slightest. As he dropped the knight in front of him and the others had to close the gap, I began to wonder if he was invincible.

No. If he were invincible, he would have broken through the shield wall by now. Ignoring the rest of the battle, I focused on him, watching his movements carefully. He did care about the swords, though only at certain times. He would take a few hits without hesitation, but then suddenly back off, just out of the knights' range, keeping his distance until... until something, before he'd rush forward again, take a few hits, and then move back.

His health must have been regenerating. That was the only explanation. But the sheer logistic nightmare of having regeneration based on time in a LARP ruled that kind out. Looking to see who was around him, I saw no Seshniks that were casting spells, and neither he nor the other wolves looked like they were casting anything either. How was he healing? What was the trigger?

Then he did something that betrayed the secret. He had backed up, striking and blocking carefully, which meant his HP must have been low. Hardule threw a bean bag, a wild toss that wouldn't have hit him had the red wolf stayed where he was.

With obvious intent, he stepped into the spell, and the red wolf then moved forward once again.

It was so obvious. A spell eating monster? If I was right, the wolf was healing from getting hit by spells, which meant that Hardule was acting as his personal pet mage.

Hardule hadn't noticed, nor had Lith or any of the knights, too focused on fighting to make sense of the situation. With Hardule just about to cast another spell, I shouted at him, telling him to stop.

Hardule looked at me as if I had told him to stop breathing. Shouting that the wolf was healing from his spells, I moved forward, intent on entering the battle. Hardule's jaw dropped slightly, and he stopped casting spells altogether as the old man grabbed my shoulder, asking me where I was going. I told him I had something to settle, and he released me.

The red wolf, having seen me shouting at Hardule, started to fight cautiously, but was still a degree more capable than the knights in front of him. Striking with the reach of his hammer polearm, he dropped another knight, and Lith edged over to close the gap.

I could feel Lith's fury from behind him. As one of the people who's beaten him before, I knew that he had a way of holding terrible grudges. He blocked the blows from the red wolf's hammer with such ferocity that he was slamming his shield into the knights that were to his sides, who moved quickly out of the way. Soon, there was enough space on either side of Lith for a Seshnik to rush past, but none dare tried. The red wolf's hammer was swinging with a similar ferocity, preventing anyone to get close to either him or Lith. The red wolf was probably wondering why he wasn't having as easy a time as he had the night before, each of his attacks, clever from my point of view, being deflected by Lith's shield.

Things were different this time. Lith was using his favorite weapons, weapons that he had trained almost exclusively with. More importantly, he had just been through a gauntlet of battles, harsher than he had ever experienced, and thinking he was the same person he had been yesterday would be the Red Wolf's 2nd worst mistake.

His first would be not paying attention to me.

As much as I'm sure Lith wanted to fight him alone, he wasn't the only one with a score to settle. Though Lith was blocking each attack, he wasn't scoring any hits himself, and the gap between their skill wasn't something that could be overcome within a day, no matter how difficult that day was.

Moving in beside him, he bumped his shield into me before Lith realized I was there. Though the battle had only been going for a few minutes, he was already breathing hard. As he looked at me, I was surprised to see him smile, a wordless acceptance of my help.

With the red wolf's next attack, Lith trapped the hammer between his sword and shield, preventing the wolf from pulling it back. The opening created, I stepped in, my sword a dizzying blur as I struck at his arms and legs. He pulled at his hammer while I landed blow after blow, but Lith's arms trembled with the force he was exerting to keep the hammer where it was.

With a blow to his hands that was perhaps harder than I intended it to be, he let go of his hammer, eying us as Lith dropped it to the ground. He began to turn around, intent on running back and perhaps getting another weapon. With a sudden flash of thought, I realized this was the perfect chance to test a theory that was eating into my mind. Digging into my pocket for the first time this event, I called out my ice spell as I threw the bean bag at him, hitting him squarely in the back.

The spell's effect worked. His legs froze, and he stood where he was, confirming my suspicions. The red wolf may have healed from fire damage, but ice magic worked normally against him. Lith rushed forward, striking the wolf in the back several times before he finally fell forward, defeated. Lith didn't even have a chance to give a shout of triumph, as a swarm of Seshniks pushed him back to the line of knights.

Thanks to Selenia, the knights were getting back up after only a few seconds of healing, restoring the shield wall. I was rather happy to see that when she wasn't healing someone, she was also casting spells and the Seshniks, a step forward from her pet mage days. While I watched her, glad to see that she was having fun, a hand clasped my shoulder. Turning to the Monster Leader, he pointed at the Blue and White wolves in the distance, telling me not to forget about them.

Momentarily embarrassed, I thanked him without thinking, and he gave a small smile before returning to his expression of intense observation. Wondering why he didn't just join the shield line, I surveyed the battlefield once again.

The Seshniks were moving in small waves, dying rather quickly as they reached the shield wall but simply respawning behind where the Blue and White wolves were standing. I watched, not sure what I was waiting for, until it happened.

A perfect, clear path.

The seshniks had bunched together on one side of the clearing, unintentionally providing a direct line to the two wolves. Whether I could cover that distance before they realized was up to chance, but I didn't know if I could wait for another opportunity. The monsters had time on their side, probably with another set of infinite lives, while we were almost entirely relying on Selenia to keep us alive.

Quietly, so that only he heard, I simply said "now" to the monster leader, before stepping past the shield line. For a moment, I must have blended in with the monsters who were returning to respawn, but the manner in which I was sprinting at full speed quickly revealed me. To my surprise, the old man was not far behind me, sprinting nearly as fast as I was.

A single seshnik managed to intercept me, but I didn't even bother with a proper duel. I moved as if to just pass him, and as he shifted to block me I struck him once with my sword before continuing past him, leaving him alive. I heard the Monster Leader call out damage behind me, and I knew I wouldn't have to worry about that particular monster.

Only the two wolves were in front of me. The white wolf remained towards the back, but the blue wolf moved forward, his familiar shield held in front of him. The seshniks stopped moving towards us, creating a wide circle around the four of us, some of them even pausing to watch.

The Blue wolf whipped off his mask, revealing the face I had been expecting. Last time, I had defeated him while he had been a player and I a monster, and it looked like he intended to return the favor. He had removed the mask to prevent it from being a disadvantage, fully intending to do everything he could to defeat me.

He rushed forward, his shield leading the way once again. He moved more cautiously this time, not wanting a repeat of the last battle. He punched forward with his shield, a few of the seshniks gasping as I recieved it in the shoulder. The Monster Leader made a muffled noise, as if he had

stopped himself from saying something, but I managed to dodge out of the way of the following sword, something I had been unable to do last night.

The Blue wolf seemed genuinely surprised by my dodge, but not enough to stop attacking. He thrust his shield forward again, and without hesitation, I twisted to the side, thrusting out my hip towards the bottom of his shield while pulling my torso back. The blow was slightly lessened thanks to the padding provided by the bean bags in my pocket, but it still hurt a lot more than I had been expecting. The effect was worth the pain, however, as the bottom of his shield slammed painfully into his knee, and his follow up sword attack didn't come. I filled the pause with my own attack, striking him hard on his exposed shoulder.

The momentum mine, I kept attacking, my sword striking at his legs and at his arm when he chose to expose it. While last time I had been with two shorter swords, my reach with the two-handed sword was too long for him to reach me with his shield bash. I started to cut through his HP rapidly, panic starting to form on his face.

He leapt backwards, muttering curses at me, and I could see that he was frustrated beyond measure. I grinned, knowing full well I was prepared for whatever he threw at me.

Except, perhaps, his shield.

I don't think it's necessary for me to point out just how illegal of a maneuver this was, but I don't think he cared in the slightest. Ignoring all the witnesses around us, he flung his shield at me, giving a bark of a shout as he threw it. It raced towards me at a speed that might have seriously hurt me if it had struck my head, which he had been aiming for. I blocked with my sword, the force of the shield whipping it to the side, leaving me exposed.

There were a few shouts coming from around us, but neither of us paid attention to them. He had snapped. He rushed forward, sword in both hands, intent on bringing it down on my head.

There was no time to block with my sword. Bringing up my left arm, I received the blow on it, a sharp pain coursing through it. He looked at me triumphantly for a brief moment, before striking at my arm again and again, calling out 6 points of damage each time.

Rolling to the side and out of his reach, I turned to face him. Holding up my arm, which stung a fair bit from the force of his blows, I simply said "Bracers," wiping away his smile.

I marched forward, kicking his shield further away from him. He tried going towards it, but I stopped him with a hard blow to his side. He tried an attack with his sword, but I accepted the strike on my left forearm, delivering a one-handed hit with my right.

Standing between him and his shield, I kept delivering blows, until he finally slumped down onto his knees, frustration etched into his face. For a moment, I felt sorry for him, but as I felt a twinge of pain from my left arm, that moment passed.

The Monster Leader, who had merely watched this entire time, looked as if he had something to say to me, but he kept unnaturally quiet. The White wolf had likewise done nothing but stare at us, but it was far more unnerving considering his mask. With a deep, growl-like voice that sounded familiar but I just couldn't match because of the distortion, he requested a duel against me, his daggers in both hands.

My silence being my agreement, we rushed at each other. I swung my sword at him, but he didn't even bother to block, taking the blow and then striking me for 4 points of damage with one of his daggers.

I jumped backwards, swinging again, but he accepted the hit without flinching, his daggers flashing towards me. I was ready this time, and managed to block with my left hand. He didn't seem at all surprised, though I could not be certain because of the mask, and he continued his attack, forcing me back.

Again and again I hit him, but he didn't seem to even mind. My sword was ineffective against him, or possibly even healing him. Digging into my pocket, I fished out a beanbag, calling out my ice spell. He didn't even try to dodge, and he didn't stop moving towards me even after the spell hit him. I made the guess that my fire spell would be just as ineffective, though I cast the 1 damage one at him just to be sure. Whether he was immune to fire damage or a single point of damage didn't matter to him, I couldn't tell, since he ignored it just as he had all my other attacks.

He hit me again for another 4 points of damage before I could raise my sword to block, and I realized what I needed now was time to think. My sword was almost useless defensively against him, since he wasn't worried about getting hit and his daggers were far faster.

Dropping my sword, I blocked his next attack with my right forearm, and his next with my left. He seemed amused, pausing a moment to consider what I was doing, before launching into another series of attacks.

That brief pause triggered my memory, and bits and pieces of this man's style began to seem familiar. After a particularly fast strike that hit me squarely in the chest before I managed to block, I recognized him.

Fighting Rhend was usually hard enough, but fighting Rhend when none of your attacks work was a thought that would've given me nightmares had I been insane enough to think it up before. With only a handful of HP left, I remembered that I still had three healing spells left, and that now was probably a good time to use one.

My brain stopped at that thought.

I'm sometimes dense, I'll admit. The red wolf reversed the effects of fire magic. I'm sure that the blue wolf would have reversed the effects of ice spells had someone bothered to cast them at him. And here was this white wolf, seemingly immune to weapons and offensive magic.

I blocked his next attack with my left arm, then lashed forward with my right, grabbing his wrist. His momentary shock gave me the moment I needed to shout out the incantation as fast as I could, casting one of the healing spells through my touch.

The effect was unreasonably dramatic. Rhend leapt back, screaming as if my touch had burned through his arm. His acting, which was somewhat overzealous, unnerved me slightly, but I had more important concerns. Rushing up to him, I grabbed his arm, casting my second healing spell, trying to heal him once again.

This time, he didn't scream.

He simply fell over, silent.



The seshniks were muttering among themselves, their clubs no longer raised. Most were looking at me, grinning widely, and I sheepishly grinned back. The Monster Leader, who had watched the entire fight silently, congratulated me with a simple "well done" before turning towards the rest of the Stone Well knights, who were making their way towards us, the seshniks allowing them to pass unobstructed.

Lith was smiling, while Hardule had a stony, neutral look, as if this had been a pyhrric victory to him. Selenia looked concerned, but cheered up considerably when I told her that no one had gotten hurt, and that Rhend was simply a good actor. In truth, I think I deserved that title a little more than he did, my arms and hands in considerable pain but with me managing to not raise anyone's concerns.

The quest took time to resolve itself. The Quest Master asked us if we looted anything, and we found a unique ring on each of the wolves. She then went on to say that the seshniks now seemed to revere us. Further more, she said that the knights had something to discuss with us.

There was a brief moment where it looked like the blue wolf was going to be reprimanded for his dangerous fighting, but if it happened, it didn't happen near us. He left with the rest of the monsters, leaving us with the six knights.

Crovak explained the history of the Stone Well knights, a rather interesting story that nevertheless I didn't see the point in telling us. They were now issued with the task of defeating a terrible evil that had begun to plague the land.

The Lich Ulcik.

I must have misheard him. Somehow, my thoughts and desires had started to play around with my hearing. The idea that these people were planning on doing what I had come here to do was just too good to be true, even if they were just NPCs who would probably disappear just as the quest ended.

The Monster Leader then asked the rest of the knights to leave, which they did somewhat reluctantly. Then, dropping all pretenses, he began to address us by our real names, and asking us to keep this conversation private.

I agreed quickly, and the old man began to explain, slowly at first, but he began to talk faster and faster as he grew impassioned.

Ulcik had started off as a partial owner of this LARP, but had made a mess of the finances he had been in charge of, to a degree that could be called embezzling. The other two owners discovered this only a few months ago, but decided to pity the man. They decided to not pursue legal action in exchange for Ulcik paying the rent and bills he had been siphoning out of the other two's profits, as well as relinquishing his ownership.

In addition to this, all his work as a Plot Master had been centered solely around his character. A stubborn, miserable man who would take advantage of people's kindness and pity, his influence on the game had always been a negative one. Ulcik had always taken an interest in governing the players, and under his influence and by his invitation he had gathered people that the Monster Leader was just disgusted with. The only reason that the Monster Leader had tolerated him to begin with was because he had been an owner, but now there was absolutely no reason for him to remain.

As he talked, I began to understand why there was such a distinct difference between the players and the monsters. Still, I didn't understand what it was that the old man planned to do by telling us all this.

He continued, explaining that this quest was something he, Vaine, and a number of other monsters had discussed, late into last night. He had written it up rapidly, and he apologized for its sloppy nature, but he needed us to complete it for a very specific reason.

Turning towards me, he said he had heard the accounts of the monsters who fought me in the woods. He himself remembered the battle where Ulcik had died, and how the four of us had each taken part. He knew that Ulcik hated us, and hated me especially.

He paused. He looked guiltily away from us for a moment, before looking back. He confessed, saying that he hated Ulcik. He hated him so much, that he wanted to ruin him in the worst way he possibly could. The only reason he allowed Ulcik to resurrect was for the pure and simple pleasure of having him get killed once again by the people he hated most.

He wanted an excuse, and during the night, he had settled upon this quest as his plan. The four of us, the people who would pain Ulcik the most, would lead the monsters and the Stone Well

knights against the players, like one of the ordinary large battles. However, our goal and intent would be to kill Ulcik in such a way that he never want to return again.

But, in regards to the monsters, he didn't simply want to force them to follow us, just for the sake of his own petty revenge, but to have us earn their respect with our own skill and ability, something he had faith we could do.

Looking at me, he said, without any hesitation or embarrassment, that he thought I had the best sense for battle he had ever seen. Though he admitted he hadn't seen all that many people in battle, and that I lacked practiced skill and techniques, I had earned the respect of the monsters in my very first event, and now that respect had only deepened.

Too embarrassed to reply, I simply remained quiet as he explained to Lith his strengths, notably his desire to defend his friends and his even stronger desire to defeat his enemies. He pointed out to Selenia that she was probably the prettiest girl at the LARP, and needn't had done anything to earn anyone's admiration, though now after proving herself in two intense battles she had earned their respect as well.

To Hardule, he said that he had one of the strongest characters in the game.

After dishing out a few more compliments, ones he delivered with almost frightening honesty, the old man took a moment to look at us, and he smiled a tiny smile.

He wanted us to make this Ulcik's last event. He knew Ulcik had wronged us, as he had wronged many people in the past. This was his, this was our, this was their revenge. We would give him a memory that he would hate and pray that he could forget, but he never would.

It wasn't necessary for any of us to voice our shared agreement. I simply asked what his plans were, and how we could help.

End of Part II

[Part 3 - III](#)

We headed towards his office inside of the Cave, almost completely silent the entire way. Hardule tried to make small talk, but I was preoccupied with my thoughts. I now had a chance, a way to close the immense gap between me and Ulcik. With the aid of the Monster Leader and the rest of the monsters, I wasn't alone in my fight.

Looking around at my companions, I dismissed that thought. I had never been alone, my friends having brought me all this way. Without their help, Ulcik wouldn't have died the first time, and I'm certain they would be necessary in this new fight.

We entered the Cave, and after the Monster Leader gave a few instructions to a couple of monsters, we went into a smaller room with a desk and a few shelves, most of them filled with files. We sat in a few fold-able chairs, and the old man pulled out a few papers he had placed in his desk.

The core of the plan was simple. Tomorrow would be the big battle, where the monsters and the players would fight each other. However, unlike previous battles, the monsters this time would not be necessarily evil, and the players would have a choice between siding with and protecting Ulcik or joining the Stone Well knights and the Seshniks. House Cerberus would be leading these forces, and accepting any defecting players under its banner.

This was to be done carefully and relatively quietly, so that Ulcik wouldn't hear anything but the vaguest of rumors. The players would have to be carefully chosen and inducted, and it would be us and the Stone Well Knights who would be recruiting.

Placing myself in the players' shoes, I wondered just how many would side with the monsters. Even though it was obvious to us that Ulcik was the villain, the standard "the town is good, the monsters are evil" setup was something that would be difficult to upturn. Most would probably see it as a betrayal of the town, especially considering that Ulcik had recently saved it.

Considering our goal for a moment, I asked if our in-game reason for this battle would be simply to dispose of Ulcik. It seemed heavily targeted, and it didn't really seem like justice was on our side, since the Lich Ulcik's only crime so far was attacking House Cerberus, making it almost a private dispute.

The Monster Leader handed me a stack of papers, along with the LARP's rulebook. Glancing at the papers, I realized that he had just handed me Ulcik's character stats, including two pages detailing his lichhood. He then said that despite what Ulcik might have told everyone, there's no

such thing as a good lich within this LARP. The phylactery he had was an immensely evil object that needed the lives of six people each month to keep it operating. He had used the phylactery to permanently kill members of House Cerberus, without even explaining what had occurred to them. If the rest of the players realized what kind of lengths that man was willing to go to just to stay alive, they'd understand the depth of his evil.

He then told me to start reading. I had to study Ulcik's abilities, and find a strategy that wouldn't require defeating him when he had run out of spells. As long as he had his seven bodyguards, it would take an incredible number of monsters to even force him to cast any spells at all.

I passed pages to Hardule and Lith after I finished reading them, their eyes bulging with surprise. This was an enemy who could take on an army all by himself. With over 500HP, instant kill spells, a few area attacks, and a number of resistances and immunities, including immunity to non-magical weapons he obtained through his lichhood, he could have fought the army of seshniks without breaking a sweat. Hardule seemed almost furious, his own character being nothing more than a substantially weaker version of this one. While their character levels weren't too far apart, the items Ulcik had and the rituals he had performed on himself made him far stronger than Hardule would probably ever be.

With the number of times he could cast spells nearly doubled thanks to becoming a lich, Ulcik seemed immortal. Worse still, he was actually immortal as long as his phylactery remained intact. While I cross checked things with the rulebook, the Monster Leader handed me more pages, taken from a binder intended for only Plot Masters. These pages described liches in great detail, and I skimmed through the details, looking for a weakness.

The Lich was perhaps one of the strongest monsters in the game. Even if Ulcik, already the strongest player in the game, had not been the one transformed, we would have had a terrible time trying to fight one. The thing that made Liches truly scary was that they had the power to kill anyone permanently by absorbing their souls into the Lich's phylactery, regardless of how many times they had died before. And, if the Lich was defeated, someone simply had to absorb one person's soul with the phylactery in order to restore the Lich to full health. The phylactery couldn't be destroyed by normal means, but needed to receive 10 points of fire damage, 10 points of lightning damage, 10 points of ice damage, and healed for 10 points of damage, which meant only a concerted effort could destroy it, since there were very few people who knew all four of these types of magic.

I started to think. Would Ulcik even be willing to take the phylactery into battle with him, or would he leave it somewhere safe? I posed this question to the rest of the group, but the

Monster Leader simply shook his head, replying that he didn't even know what the phylactery was.

After the Monster Leader left to take care of some business, the rest of us stayed in that small room for a few hours, with Vlaine occasionally stopping in to discuss ideas. Hardule and Lith eventually left to bring back some food from the inn, leaving me to bounce ideas around with Selenia.

She seemed to agree with most of my ideas, but was rather quick to remind me of details I had forgotten that would be problematic. I seemed to have a habit of forgetting that there were plenty of other high level players, most who would remain on Ulcik's side. In truth, I personally wasn't too worried about fighting them, but the rest of the people in our army had to be taken into consideration.

While I tried to figure out a way to determine how exactly I could get a chance to defeat Ulcik's squad of seven without having to deal with Ulcik casting spells at the same time, Hardule came bursting into the room, without any food and looking rather distressed. I immediately regretted thinking that they would be fine on just the short trip from the Cave to the Inn. Saying that he would explain on the way, he motioned for me to follow. Selenia looked confused, but I was already running after Hardule before I remembered that this was probably part of one of his bad decisions.

He and Lith had been ambushed, he explained, and Lith had stayed behind to make sure Hardule could escape to get help. I slowed down slightly, realizing that Hardule had thought it wise to just get me, rather than staying to help Lith escape. If Lith was even alive when we reached him, I'd be surprised.

Lith managed to impress me. He was standing across from two men, one who I recognized immediately by his black leather scale and his two-handed sword. The other one took a moment, but I recalled the dull red cape that he wore on his right shoulder, a look of intense interest appearing on his face when he saw Hardule and I.

Each step the two took forward, Lith took a step back, keeping his distance warily while clearly biding for time. Hardule moved in behind him and began tossing spells.

The change in atmosphere was immediate. Our two foes shot forward, each to either side of Lith, aiming for Hardule. Lith managed to intercept the one with the cape, who had not yet

produced a weapon, forcing him backwards. The other managed to get past Lith, his sword thrust forward towards Hardule.

I could get this. I was faster than I was last night. I had reawakened. I was stronger. I knew I could throw my sword out to block his attack from hitting Hardule, and I rushed forward to do so.

As if swatting an irritating fly, he threw aside my blade with his own, continuing the blow directly into Hardule and sinking in another 8 damage. He would have hit him again if Lith hadn't turned around to strike at him, forcing him to dodge to the side and away from Hardule. Lith paid for this dearly, as there was a slight movement from our other foe's cape, and he dealt 7 damage to Lith before I even had a chance to see his weapon.

My sword in front of me, as steady as I could manage it, I saw two options. The first was brave, but more importantly something I wanted to do, to simply get past these doubts that was invading my thoughts. These two were excellent fighters, I knew this well, and these two would probably be our toughest opponents tomorrow. Defeating them now would mean settling my score, and we possibly would have a chance to steal their items, making them far weaker while making us that much stronger. We could prove that their skills had weaknesses and limitations, and that even a level 1 character like myself had a chance against them.

This option began to seem less and less likely. Soon, I began to wonder if we even still had the option to escape. The black scaled warrior kept rushing past Lith, moving in towards Hardule while trying to keep the mage between the two of us. Hardule was taking blows left and right, and the red caped enemy was striking at Lith with what looked like a two-foot long short sword, parrying and striking while his cape concealed his movements.

With a dramatic spin of his cape that blocked all vision, his short sword flashed out from behind it, striking Lith squarely in his exposed hip for the final strike. Lith dropped to his knees, and our two enemies moved menacingly towards Hardule.

Hardule kept casting his spells, but these two dodged the bean bags almost too easily. If they got within close range, Hardule could hit them, but they could easily finish him off before he had even had a chance to cast a single spell.

I moved forward to protect Hardule, but the two moved to circle me on either side, intending to finish me off last. If only I had a way so that Hardule could hit them with his sp-

Moving my hand into my pocket as discreetly as I could manage, I pulled out a beanbag, my one true advantage over these two warriors. As they suddenly rushed forward, trying to pass me, I let them, then quickly cast an ice spell at the man's red cape.

He continued to move forward a little, unsure of what had happened, before realizing what I had just done. His feet pinned to the floor, I moved to strike at his exposed back. His ally stepped in to protect him, sweeping his sword towards me, forcing me back. A spell came flying towards him, and he jumped away, before a second one hit his impeded friend.

Time was running out. My ice spell only lasted 30 seconds, and a few of those precious seconds passed as the warrior raced towards Hardule. My memory of spells returning rapidly, I rushed towards Lith, taking the chance to use my last healing spell of the day to get him to stand.

The black scale clad warrior had nearly reached Hardule when I started calling out damage loudly, not even near his ally. He turned, and as he did, I simply shouted at Hardule to run.

There was a moment where I saw the warrior think. I knew the dilemma that was going through his head, whether to chase after Hardule or to protect his ally. With a slightly defeated look, he moved to position himself between us and the red caped man. With only seconds before the ice spell wore off and Lith having barely any HP, we ran, splitting off in separate directions.

When I arrived back at the Cave, Hardule and Selenia were waiting, looking relieved when they saw me. Minutes later, Lith arrived, breathing heavily but looking rather pleased with himself. To my eternal gratitude, Vlaine appeared around ten minutes later, carrying several sandwiches he had taken from the Inn, having gone there after Hardule had told him what had happened.

Eating while thinking, I realized that in the months between the two events I went to, I hadn't practiced using my spells with my sword-work. Had I practiced, perhaps the last battle would have started and ended differently, without us having to run. Now, being able to attack and block with one arm, there was no reason for me to not use my spells more often.

Ignoring that most people would probably chalk up the last battle as a defeat, I chose instead to focus on asking Vlaine what he had been up to in the last few hours.



He had asked the old members of House Cerberus if they were willing to side with the monsters. He had done so somewhat subtly, asking in his wizard NPC guise and referring to the situation hypothetically. Sadly, none of them seemed even the slightest bit interested for their characters having anything to do against Ulcik, having been at the receiving end of his rage once already. There was just no point, they reasoned, in being one of the few players who sided with the monsters, since the minority would surely lose for the sake of the game.

Though I wasn't surprised, I was still disappointed. Without the old members, House Cerberus consisted of two members and two honorary members. With over a hundred players and only around half that number of monsters, we were definitely the minority in public opinion. These numbers wouldn't matter too much in the battle, since the monsters would have several respawns to represent more monsters, but public opinion wasn't something that could be ignored at a LARP.

In a place that only existed within people's minds, the only way something could happen is if you convinced them it happened. If the monsters were too strong or respawned too many times, the players would protest, and events could be retconned simply to appease them. Things had to be done with discretion and skill on so many different levels, that I began to wonder if it could be done at all.

We needed more players to side with us. Even if it was only a handful, even if Ulcik started to take us as a serious threat, we needed more people to simply agree that Ulcik needed to die. While Vlaine and some of the other monsters had helped us greatly, it was time for me to take matters into my own hands.

Right now, we were pretty safe within the Cave. As far as the game was concerned, the monsters had accepted us as their leaders, so our characters were fine inside the Cave where they had all gathered. However, outside of the Cave was Ulcik's squad and the network that supported them, which had managed to catch Lith and Hardule rather quickly. Worse still, with the majority of my plans relying on talking to other players, I would be basically walking into places where there almost certainly would be some of Ulcik's supporters. And, though the monsters had come to learn I had some ability, the players would still look at me as a person who had only been to this LARP once before.

The worse part was that my character didn't have all the information I did. Though the Monster Leader had explained that the Stone Well Knights had provided my character with information, there were still gaps in the details that turned into holes in my story. With a sudden flash of thought, the basis of a plan started to form in my head. I needed to convince people that Ulcik really was evil, and I was going to do it in probably the most evil way I could imagine.

My sword strapped to my back, I told Selenia that I was going out. She stared at me for a brief moment, and seemed to realize that I didn't want anyone to come with me. She nodded, and I slipped out of the cave with neither Hardule nor Lith noticing.

I walked casually towards the Inn, taking the main roads.

There were several people who spotted me, running off to report to their masters. When I reached the Inn, there were two members of Ulcik's squad waiting for me. These two were not part of the four that were considered exceptional, but neither looked like they would be an easy fight. There were a few people outside the inn, and this number quickly increased as the two squad members took out their weapons and silently began moving towards me.

I didn't change my stride. They looked confused, perhaps wondering why I hadn't drawn my sword or even acknowledged them. I kept walking, until I was within range of their spears. With a genuine look of amusement, I started to walk around them, heading for the inside of the Inn.

The two moved to block me, brandishing their spears and asking me what I was doing.

Now, before I try to convince you otherwise, I'm not that great of an actor. Thankfully, I knew this very well, and only bothered to try acting when I knew only the most sarcastic, obviously fake theatrics would be the best choice of action.

With a look of surprise that deserved perhaps an Oscar or two, I asked what they wanted from me, as I did not even know who they were or what I had done to offend them.

Perhaps they were awed by my acting ability, but it was more likely that they had never considered their character's motivations. My acting, as bad as it was, at least forced them to recognize that I was in character, and that they had no in-character reasons to attack me. After a moment, one replied that I was from House Cerberus, and that they had been ordered to destroy everyone from that House.

Smiling, I first said that I was not a part of that House (I was only an honorary member, after all), and I asked them who had told them that I was. The other players had gathered around us, waiting to see if the three of us would start fighting. The two of them seemed stuck, slowly

realizing just how little their characters knew about me, despite that their friends had probably already told them plenty of information out-of-game. The one who had spoken before said that I had killed Promeus, and my confused expression was genuine. He described the sheild-bash-happy warrior, and I smiled, before putting a hand over my mouth. I simply said that that had been when I was playing a monster, and I was sorry about any confusion. I then lowered my hand, and said I had never killed someone like that.

He tried again, saying that I had killed Promeus again this morning. Placing my hand over my mouth again, I said that had been when he had been a monster, and even so that had occurred during a quest, which they shouldn't know. Removing my hand again, I gave a theatric look of surprise before replying that I had no idea what he was talking about.

The two seemed to be trying hard to think, and I simply pointed to the Inn, asking if I could go in yet. The other players seemed to be starting to lose interest, with many of them moving back inside. With disgruntled expressions they lowered their spears, and I asked them to join me in a drink.

Corpus, the one who had spoken, and Tiberian, the one who had remained silent, surprisingly accepted my offer, and we headed towards the bar. After purchasing ginger ales for all three of us (using real money along with the LARP coins), I began to ask them pointless questions, simply things that would let them talk about their characters.

At first, it was obvious that they hadn't done any roleplaying at all since they had joined this LARP, but after they managed to overcome the initial awkwardness they seemed to begin enjoying themselves. Tiberian in particular seemed to enjoy talking about his character, explaining that he hoped to earn enough gold to be able to retire young and return to the countryside and marry his childhood sweetheart. Part of me now hoped he would die miserably, but I didn't say a word.

While I listened, feigning interest, I tried to come up with an excuse to leave them and talk to the rest of the people at the Inn. Then, my chance came to me as she walked inside and gave a loud screech of anger.

A short, overweight woman who was dressed as a warrior was pointing her finger at me, shouting at Corpus and Tiberian to kill me.

The two of them stood up quickly, grabbing their spears but not pointing them at me just yet. I struggled to think, trying to figure out how to handle this sudden occurrence. Taking a sip from my ginger ale as casually as I could, I waved at her, asking for her name.

This woman, who believed that I had one time been responsible for her previous character's death and had gotten Ulcik to incarcerate me as a criminal, seemed to hold a very strong grudge against me but lacked any finesse in hiding it. She stomped towards me, screaming at everyone to help kill me.

Her grudge was nothing compared to mine. Hiding it stressed my restraint, but I kept smiling, pleasantly. The last time I had been with her in this same room, she had shrieked and yelled that I was a murdering coward, and all I could do was watch, uncertain what to do as it had been my first event and I had thought she had been my ally. Now, I wasn't going to just allow her to make the same events repeat themselves.

Calmly, I asked who she was and what I had done to offend her. She kept shouting for a moment, until my words managed to penetrate her rather thick skull. She paused, glanced around to see if any of the other players were coming to help her, then said that I was one of the criminals from House Cerberus.

I asked her why she thought I was in House Cerberus, when I didn't belong to any noble house at all. Before she could answer, I interrupted her, and asked what had House Cerberus even done to become criminals.

Many of the other players were listening, interested in the miniature drama that was unfolding. With a wicked grin, the fat woman said that House Cerberus had killed the Archduke Ulcik, an assassination which was the highest crime that could be committed. I asked her what evidence she had, and she scoffed, saying that Ulcik himself had told her who his killers were.

I laughed. There was no mirth, just an expression of how ridiculous I thought her answer was. Even the people who had still managed to refrain from paying attention suddenly turned towards us. I was glad that I would not need to act, as my genuine hatred was all that I needed.

I told her that Ulcik had lied. She looked at me furiously, as if that could never be the case, and I interrupted her before she started screaming again. I asked her what evidence she had used to condemn and murder an entire noble house beyond the words of a foul, scheming, murderous Lich.

She said that Ulcik's word was more than enough. Attempting to divert the argument, she said that I had obstructed justice by preventing the capture of the last remaining members of House Cerberus only a little while ago. That I had frozen and tried to kill Rubedo, who I assumed was the red caped warrior, allowing the criminals Lith and Hardule to escape.

Neither of us were roleplaying. Genuinely impressed by her stupidity, I asked once again who other than a Lich had called for their capture. By what right did any of the Lich's dogs have to murder anyone.

Pointing her finger at me, she started to shout, as loudly as she could, that I was the murderer, that I had murdered her.

I stood up.

Corpus and Tiberian tensed up and pointed their spears at me, but I chose to ignore them. I moved forward, standing so that I towered over the woman. There was a hint of genuine fear in her eyes, as if she was scared that I would strike her.

Softly, I told her that had been her other character, and that I would advise her to not lose herself and to try remember who she was. Backing up to sit back down again, I calmly asked her to repeat herself.

There was a moment of silence. The other players did not overhear what it was that I had said to her, but from her expression it looked as if I had just threatened to kill her if she said another word. The moment stretched unnaturally, before she said that the Archduke Ulcik was the savior of this town, and that his word was law.

Unable to contain myself, I asked her who he had killed in order to power his phylactery.

It was a mistake, I know, since that was information my character most likely would not know, something the Stone Well Knights couldn't have told him, but I didn't care. Her shocked expression made the people who didn't catch the significance of what I had just said at least realize I had just said something very important.

I asked her again. I told her that I knew that the phylactery needed six lives every month, and that Ulcik had permanently killed six members of House Cerberus at the last event, using the phylactery. I then asked who else he was planning on killing this month, since there were only two people in House Cerberus who hadn't either abandoned it or died.

She didn't ask me how I knew. She simply stared at the crowd, her silence telling everyone that what I had said was true. She seemed to be working her mind as fast as she could, but the shock of me having just told everyone that Ulcik was a murderous fiend seemed to be collapsing any argument she tried to present.

As if to her rescue, the door to the inn swung open, a brief blast of wind chilling the room slightly. First came Rubedo, his red cape covering his shoulder and not at all looking surprised to see the scene in front of him. I knew that things were quickly turning against me, but I didn't understand just how bad things had become until I saw the man who had followed Rubedo into the Inn.

The Lich Ulcik.

His face painted white, he looked like some kind of terrifying clown, his robes the same bright colors as they had been when he had been alive. The fat woman retreated towards him, explaining as much as she could as quickly as she could. Ulcik's eyes widened at one point, most likely when she told him that I had just revealed the secret of the Lich's phylactery to everyone. He walked towards me almost ceremoniously, allowing the people between us to get out of his way.

I hadn't planned on this. My original, evil plan was just to find out where one of Ulcik's followers slept, and then capture them during the night, forcing them to tell everyone in the Inn the next morning all of Ulcik's plans and secrets. I had gone to the inn in order to make sure that I would have a chance to enter it and hold an audience, but now I realized this part of the plan was going to lead me to my death.

Ulcik stopped a good distance away from where I was, before asking Corpus and Tiberian why they hadn't killed me. The two of them looked nervously at the two of us, but before either of them moved. I asked Ulcik how he dared to break the very laws of nature and still had the audacity to appear among the heroes who were patrons of this inn.

Ulcik's eyes briefly flashed with the malice behind them, but he managed to restrain himself, replying calmly that he was entitled to seek vengeance against the house that had killed him and destroyed his own noble house.

This was not the time to laugh at him, and I struggled to keep myself from bursting. Unable to hide my smile, I said that House Cerberus didn't even exist when he had died. That in his quest for "vengeance," he had killed people who were almost completely unrelated to his death. I would have added that he had managed to leave everyone who had participated in his death alive, but I think Ulcik managed to realize this on his own.

The rest of the players surrounding us were no longer silent, muttering amongst themselves while Ulcik glanced around at them. He then turned towards Rubedo, as if about to order him to kill me, but he paused.

Abandoning any sense of strategy, any guile and any hesitation, he turned to me and asked what my plans were.

The sheer boldness of his question caught me off guard. There was no reason to tell him anything, and doing so could even be disastrous. I was about to simply say that he would find out soon enough, but I stopped.

This was the man who I hated, a hatred that no good person should ever have. Even when surrounded by his cronies, alone and far from any sense of safety, being possibly the weakest character at the LARP while he was the strongest, I was more interested in providing him with a sense of panic than my safety or the success of my plans.

Finishing my ginger ale, I stood up.

I told him that House Cerberus would lead an army against him tomorrow.

I waited for his response, waited to see his fear and panic, at the thought of having to face an army the very next day.

He laughed.

He laughed, and laughed. The rest of the inn was completely silent, allowing his laughs to echo slightly. He looked at me with his tiny eyes, a grotesque smile widening his white face.

I didn't bother to listen to his reply. Corpus and Tiberian were looking nervously at Ulcik, startled by his laughter, as was the rest of the crowd. Seeing a chance that might never come again, I rushed past Corpus, who was just as surprised as everyone else.

I ran with everything I had. Not the way I would have chosen to end that conversation, but it was certainly preferable to being killed. Without glancing behind me, I exited the Inn just as I began to hear Ulcik angrily shouting commands.

Before I reached the woods, I turned to see who was chasing after me. The entire Inn seemed to have emptied out, but the only person who looked like he could manage to keep up with me was Rubedo. Grimacing slightly, I leapt into the woods, hoping he wouldn't be able to navigate through them as fast as I could.

He was good. Even as we left the rest of my pursuers far behind, he managed to maintain the distance between us, slowly closing the gap each time I checked to see if he had given up yet. He followed me for several minutes, until we were a good distance away from the Inn. Understanding that he would never stop chasing me, I rushed into a clearing, whipping around and drawing my sword from my back.

Rubedo looked only too pleased. Both of us were breathing hard, and he slowed down as he neared the clearing, content that I didn't intend to run any further.

There was a brief discussion. He thought it was important to say that he was very interested in fighting me one-on-one, and I thought it polite to say I was going to rob him of all his gear after I killed him. He realized I wasn't much in the mood to talk, and launched his attack.

He was good. He closed the distance between us instantly, his short sword flashing out from behind his cape. I blocked his attacks with my left arm, swinging at him with the sword in my right. He was too quick to be hit by my one handed swing, but he backed up, looking not overly impressed.



I moved towards him, sword in both hands, and trying to hit where I thought he was. My sword kept hitting nothing but cape, a frustrating feeling that made me wonder just how well he could read my movements. As a particularly half-hearted strike hit nothing but cape again, his sword shot out, stabbing me in the ribs for 7 damage before I even realized I had been hit.

Backing up, I realized that now wasn't the time to see who was the better warrior. As I passed him that title, I decided to see who's character suited them better.

Nephem Festiva was not just a warrior, and I couldn't keep getting caught up in forgetting to use my spells. I think a part of me resisted them, not wanting to abuse the advantage of an ability I had that my opponents lacked. Even so, I knew that I would have to rely on my spells if I expected to defeat Rubedo.

Throwing an ice spell at him, he barely managed to get his cape out of the way, knowing that it and his sword both counted as targets for my spells. He stared at me for a moment, a look of pure anger, asking silently how I could dare to spoil this battle between warriors by using magic.

I replied by throwing another ice spell at him, hoping to pin his feet. If I could do just that, while there was no one else around us, I was certain to win, no matter how skilled he was.

Easier said than done. He dodged the spell easily, then rushed forward, forcing me to block with my left hand. He seemed intent on preventing me from casting any spells, keeping close to me even as I managed a weak strike to his leg with my sword for 4 points of damage. He didn't seem to care, intent on not giving me enough space to do anything but block with my left hand and swing weakly with my right.

With only a little more space, I could swing my sword effectively, but he was matching my retreat with his advance perfectly. A second strike managed to get past my left arm, stabbing me in the chest painfully and dropping me to 4hp. Only one hit away from death, I dropped my sword for the second time today, catching his short sword with my right hand after managing to block it with my left.

Flinging my left hand into my pocket as he struggled to free his sword from my right, I recited the incantation as fast as I could before slamming the beanbag into his chest, a payback blow for his last hit. I leapt back, and was glad to see that he didn't follow.

However, he was still smiling.

My sword was still on the ground, at his feet. In order to pick it up, I would have to come within range of his short sword, where a single hit would kill me.

I returned the smile, pulling out another beanbag and watching his smile disappear. With a gentle toss, I dealt him 1 point of fire damage. I then did it again, in the same way I had defeated Lith several months before, using two of the weakest spells from two different schools of magic.

Several minutes passed before I managed to kill him with my fire spell, requiring me to renew the ice spell every thirty seconds. I worked quickly, because he had started to shout and yell, hoping to attract attention. No one came near us, perhaps actually scared by the intensifying panic in his voice.

After dealing the last points of damage, he sat down, sulking. Not wanting to see if there was any brave person heading this way, I told him that I was dragging his body, and he stood up, following behind me. After a good distance, I found a place with a good number of bushes surrounding us, and told him to crouch down. I then said I was searching him for all his magical items, and that I would appreciate it if I didn't have to describe just how thoroughly I was doing so.

He removed the plastic rings from his hand, then handed me cards saying he had a magic helmet, armor, necklace, boots, and even his cape was magical. With great reluctance, he also offered his sword, a well crafted weapon with ribbons signifying that it was a +2 weapon. All of his items were extremely powerful, though all did nothing but increase his raw statistics. Even though we were both 1st level characters, his character was most likely a degree stronger than Lith was, who was a few levels higher.

Or, at least, his character had been stronger, I thought to myself as I pocketed the rings and the cards. I then took off the ribbons from his sword, somewhat disappointed in that the rules prevented me from tying them to my own, as his weapon was a short sword and mine was a two-hander. Even so, a +2 weapon could be sold for a nice bundle of gold, and I returned the actual physical weapon to Rubedo.

I then struggled with the question of killing him. He was past the point of healing with low level magic, and I didn't even have any healing to spare for him. But, he still had a chance if he met a player with strong healing magic within the ten or so minutes before Rubedo was dead.

Certainly, he could be ressurected, as he was just a 1st level character, but it was both expensive and he would return weaker, being forced to give up skill points.

Deciding to leave it to chance, I dragged his body to one of the main roads, his furious expression clearly signifying he didn't understand or appreciate the risk I was taking to try and keep him from dying. I began to shout, calling for help and a healer, until I spotted a person in the distance. Not even bothering to see who it was, I ran off, heading for the cave.

When I arrived, Hardule and Lith were relaxing on the couches, talking about a movie they had seen recently. When they spotted me, they nodded a greeting, then returned to discussing the movie, their nonchalant attitudes ruining the atmosphere I had hoped there would be when I entered a cave. Without an atmosphere wrought with tension, I couldn't deliver my story of what had just happened with all the drama it deserved. Instead, I just told them I had stopped at the Inn, a little pissed off that they didn't even care that I had left.

Selenia appeared from one of the small rooms, and I was guiltily glad to see a worried expression on her face. She asked me what had happened, and I began to tell her the whole story of what I had just gone through. As I told her, only then did I realize just how badly I had messed up.

Besides telling Ulcik about the army, I had left him there in the inn, allowing him to get the last word to all the players who remained behind. Even right now, he was probably spinning lies and vilifying House Cerberus.

Selenia did not seem to pass judgment. She simply listened, sighing with relief when I managed to escape the Inn and when I defeated Rubedo. Looking over at the coaches, Hardule and Lith had stopped talking, looking at me with indecipherable expressions, perhaps a mix of several emotions that no one had bothered to name yet.

When I finished retelling what had happened, Lith stood up and simply said I was insane, though it wasn't clear if he was angry or happy or how exactly he thought I was insane. As an afterthought, he added that he didn't approve of how I fought against Rubedo, but respected the fact that I had beat him. In the end, he didn't seem certain of how to react. I think that none of us really knew what the repercussions of my actions would be, though I had a very good suspicion that I would be regretting some of them tomorrow.

Selenia asked for further details of my conversation with Ulcik, and seemed rather glad that I hadn't given any details of the army. As far as Ulcik knew, she reasoned, I could have been trying to gather a couple players together to fight him, and he still had no idea that there was a hoard of monsters intent on killing him.

Cheering up slightly, I took out the cards, rings, and ribbons I had recently acquired, allowing my friends to examine them. They were rather amazed, as most of these items were better than even the one's Hardule had, and there was a lengthy discussion of who would get what. Once finished, I had received the boots card and a ring, which increased my weapon damage by 2 (so I dealt 6 damage with my two-handed sword) and my HP by 10, to a total of 28.

By the time all this had finished, it was getting dark outside, and the Cave started to get somewhat crowded thanks to many of the monsters being too tired to go out. While I looked over Ulcik's stats, cross-checking his abilities with the LARP rulebook, Vlaine arrived, a wide grin on his face.

He explained that he had arrived at the Inn shortly after I started arguing with the fat woman, and had watched everything from within the crowd, wearing his old wizard costume. He then started to tell Hardule and Lith his version of my story, which he embellished liberally, saying things like I had fought my way out of the Inn and I had called Ulcik a disgusting old shitrag.

After I had finished fighting my way past all of Ulcik's men with my sword still strapped to my back while shouting "Death to Ulcik!," Vlaine began to tell us what happened afterward. As I had expected, Ulcik had addressed the crowd, repeating his lies that he was a "good" lich and that I had no proof of anything I had said. He then offered 30 gold pieces, a high amount in this LARP, to the person who brought me before him, dead or alive.

Vlaine had stayed in the Inn after Ulcik had left, asking people for their opinions of what had just happened. Many of them remembered me from the event several months ago, with most of them having participated in the last attempt to capture me. None of them seemed interested in actively searching for me, some of them questioning Ulcik's motives while the rest remembering how I had managed to evade capture last time despite all their efforts.

Some of the people were interested in joining together to fight against Ulcik, but none wanted to unless a sizable number of other players did also. I had hoped that some players would be willing to take the initiative, but it wasn't surprising that they were still siding with what looked like the clear winner.

Thanking Vlaine for the info, I sank into one of the couches, trying to figure out what to do next. While my original plan for this evening had gone awry, it still hadn't turned out too bad. Though I had spent the day running and fighting, I felt like there was still more I could do, something that could help us in the battle tomorrow.

Straining my brain, trying to force ideas into it, I tried to figure out how we could get more players to join our side. Going back to the Inn now, with a bounty once again on my head, was probably not the best way to go about it. Hardule and Lith weren't the best people to send out either, and Selenia might also be listed as one of Ulcik's targets. She also had almost helped us too much already, despite her not being anything more than an honorary member of House Cerberus.

While I welcomed her help, I don't think being part of our group was particularly fun. She probably would be enjoying herself more at this LARP if she hadn't decided to help us, but it was too late to ask if she regretted any of it. The best I could offer her in return for all her help was to make sure that Ulcik got what he deserved in the worst way possible.

I allowed myself a little time to indulge in a few fantasies, many, but not all, involving Ulcik's death. While I wasted time daydreaming, I heard someone call my name, bringing me back to reality.

The Monster Leader didn't look happy.

Inside his office, he told me about the meeting he had just had with the other two plot masters. Ulcik had said he had been hearing unpleasant rumors, and asked the Monster Leader if he had an army of monsters prepared for the sole purpose of killing him. When the Monster Leader asked where he had heard this, Ulcik said that I had been the one to tell him.

I began to explain that I had only said an army and had made no mention of monsters, but I realized those were trivial details. House Cerberus and I had provided enough evidence of what kind of an army it would be simply by staying inside the Cave this entire time, and all Ulcik needed to confirm it was the little information I had chosen to give him.

The Monster Leader didn't stop his story to blame me, and continued telling me about the meeting. The other Plot Master, the man who reminded me of a lawn gnome, didn't respond

well after hearing this accusation, and the Monster Leader had been forced to think up something quickly. He said that he had been preparing an event that would allow the players to choose sides, either remaining with the town or joining the monsters, in competition for a prize. The Monster Leader said that some monsters must have just been spreading rumors about it being an army to kill Ulcik because they knew he would remain with the town.

Ulcik, the Monster Leader reported, had smiled at this explanation. He then said that it was a great idea, but that it was just a little unfair to the town side, since they couldn't have any stats they wanted like the monsters could, and they also couldn't respawn. In order to make things fair, he reasoned, there should be restrictions placed on the monsters.

Though the Monster Leader protested, he did it without enthusiasm, not wanting to present his hostility openly just yet. The gnome Plot Master agreed that this new kind of battle could be interesting, but that the monsters should have more restrictions than normal, so that it didn't seem like anyone had rigged the battle.

While the Monster Leader had already limited the monster stats to keep the players from complaining, Ulcik wanted further restrictions. Without saying it outright, he revealed that he had planned all this before hand, reciting a number of restrictions that he wanted placed on the monsters. The Monster Leader, unable to argue very much without revealing his intentions, was forced to concede.

He showed me the restrictions, and scanning through them, I saw that tomorrow was just about hopeless.

The number and types of monsters that could be used tomorrow barely compared to what the players had available. By rough estimates, the monsters could only face about a quarter of the players and expect an even fight. Reading into the details, I spotted an important problem.

Among the restrictions, none of the monsters would be able to use lightning magic. I had been counting on this, since Hardule had plenty of fire damage spells and a few ice damage spells, but we needed lightning and healing in order to destroy the phylactery. Without a way to deal lightning damage, we had no way of truly killing Ulcik. Without question, Ulcik had made that restriction solely for that purpose.

I pointed this out to the Monster Leader, and his eyes widened, suddenly remembering something. He pulled out three plastic rings from his pocket, the three unique rings we had

found on the wolves we had defeated earlier today. He pointed to two of them, saying that they already had effects that were decided upon and written down.

The black ring set with a ruby granted its wearer immunity to fire, while the black ring set with a sapphire granted its wearer immunity to ice spells. The final ring, a silver ring with three black bands, he explained could literally be anything he decided it to be, since he had not written it in the official treasure record.

Thinking hard, I knew that it shouldn't be something too powerful, but we needed all the help we could get. Would it be a waste to make it a ring to specifically handle our problem with destroying Ulcik's phylactery? Even if it would be, I couldn't think of anyway for our side to deal lightning damage, and without that we simply had no chance.

As if anticipating my next question, he agreed quickly after I asked if a ring that allowed the wearer to turn spell or weapon damage into an equal amount of lightning damage would be a fair item, and then handed me the three rings. As he did, he began to frown, having been reminded of something from the meeting.

He simply said that there was an even bigger problem. In his haste to come up with an excuse for the battle, he hadn't really determined what prize they were going to fight over. The gnome Plot Master decided that he would determine what it was and keep it a secret from everyone else. He did say that even Ulcik, who had many of the most powerful items in the game, would want this prize, and he said no more about it. This meant that if Ulcik won, he would end up more powerful than he had been before the battle, making future chances of killing him all but impossible. This was our one and only chance, and we would have to do it with our hands tied behind our backs.

Frustration surging through me, I asked if he had told anyone else about the new restrictions, but he said that he knew this information would demoralize the monsters. He said it was up to me if I told Lith and Hardule, but I saw no point. However, I felt obligated to at least tell Selenia, to give her the chance to go back and side with the town instead of following us into a battle where we had almost no chance of winning.

After I had finished talking with the Monster Leader, I sought her out in the main room. After asking her if we could speak privately, we stepped outside the cabin. It took me a moment to gather my thoughts, to figure out exactly what I wanted to tell her. She kept looking at me, waiting for me to speak, and I looked away in order to focus on what I had to say.

Staring into the darkness around us, it took me a moment to realize it had gotten a lot colder after the sun had set, and there was no reason for me to waste her time and keep her outside. As quickly as I could, I explained how our monster army had just been crippled, and that I thought she should make the choice of whether or not to return to the town.

Looking at her, I saw that her expression had changed dramatically. She looked furious, as if I had just said the worst thing I possibly could have.

She began to yell at me, easily loud enough for everyone in the Cave to hear. She asked me if she looked like the person who would abandon her friends just to keep her stupid character alive, and whether or not I thought she was stupid enough to ever be on the same side as Ulic. Then, as she reached a crescendo in her outburst, she asked me if I wanted her to go back to her ex-boyfriend.

She paused, waiting for an answer while I stood paralyzed, shocked and scared and at an absolute loss of what to do. I stuttered that I didn't think she was stupid or that she'd ever abandon her friends, and she interrupted me again, sounding even more furious.

She said that I must have thought she didn't consider me or my friends as her friends. She followed that by saying that I probably didn't even consider her a friend, because if I had I would have e-mailed her at least once since my last event. She hesitated after saying this, her pause stretching out while she struggled to maintain a look of fury. As I watched her, I could see hints of sadness, but she kept scowling at me with conscious effort.

I apologized for everything. For suggesting that she had the choice to change sides, for not e-mailing her once, for not rushing to rescue her immediately during the large battle earlier that day, for being an insensitive jerk. I didn't offer any explanations or excuses, I simply waited, watching her reaction.

Once again, I must have erred in some way. She turned away from me, said that she was still angry, and that I should go back inside. Hoping to avoid any more mistakes, I followed her advice, returning back into the Cave, where a small crowd of people were looking at me as I entered. They all seemed to look away quickly, starting up conversations amongst themselves, and Hardule and Lith were engaged in a rather lively conversation about the movie they were talking about earlier.



The rest of the evening passed relatively uneventfully. I spent most of my time discussing plans with the Monster Leader and a small group of experienced monsters, which included Vlainé and Rhend. Hardule would occasionally drop into the conversation, but would leave almost immediately once he realized we were discussing how the units of monsters would be divided and how they would be organized.

With any luck, Ulcik would not change the tried and true strategy of having the players organized by the noble houses, and any player not in a noble house temporarily conscripted into one. This gave us a decent idea of how they would arrange themselves, and what each unit would be composed of.

Real military tactics had some value, but the way battles happened at a LARP meant that improvised strategies, based on the rules and rooted in how things were perceived, were just as, or even more, important. Exchanging ideas, we settled on a plan that would not necessarily lead us to victory, but it would at least spare us from immediate defeat. What we needed to do was rely on the players' overconfidence, which was based on the town never having lost against the monsters in the history of its existence.

Ulcik and his group were undoubtedly also discussing plans, and I knew that his advantage in knowing what the monster's limits were would not be wasted by his squad. While my ice-and-fire trick worked in one-on-one, I needed to come up with some way to fight the members of his squad in the middle of a larger battle.

Hoping to receive inspiration from Lith, I challenged him to some sparring outside of the cave. We ended up attracting a few monsters, who ended up joining in. While I tried to figure out some sort of strategy, nothing came to me, and when it had finally become late enough to go to sleep, I had nothing that I had any confidence would work. With Hardule, Lith and I borrowing bunks in the Cave, we relied on our exhaustion to fall into an uneasy sleep.

End of Part III

### Part 3 - IV

I woke up later than I had planned to, but I didn't feel particularly well rested. The sounds of the monsters preparing for the upcoming battle was what had awoken me, and quickly helped me remember everything of the previous day. This being the final day of the LARP, I knew that there was no time to waste. Getting dressed as quickly as I could, I was surprised to see that Hardule and Lith were waiting for me, serious expressions on their face.

Out of nowhere, Lith said that he was glad I had come to the LARP with them. Hardule nodded his agreement, and Lith continued on, saying how I had done so much for the sake of House Cerberus. Before I could say I was doing just what I wanted to, he started to remind me of how long ago, the name we had chosen for our old adventuring party was Cerberus, for no better reason than that there were three of us.

Without me, House Cerberus wouldn't have even existed, he continued, saying that I was the one who had donated the Ring of Wish to them, allowing them to wish for nobility and the right to start a house. Even so, they had started House Cerberus with just the two of them, and in a lot of ways, that just didn't make sense.

Hardule stepped forward, as if they had practiced this beforehand, and said that I had provided great services to House Cerberus, far more than any other member had contributed. As such, it was unfitting for them to not recognize my services. Having me just be an honorary member had been fine until now, but with the upcoming battle, which might be House Cerberus's last, it was his duty to grant me full peerage.

Lith handed him his sword, and realizing what was happening, I knelt down, preparing to be knighted.

Hardule walked over to me, placed his hand on my shoulder, and told me to stand. Lith then handed me my sword, and as Hardule placed Lith's sword upon my shoulder, he told me to place my sword on his.

We were to be of equal status, just as he and Lith were. After saying a few phrases, he stepped back and granted me the title of Baron Nephem Festiva of House Cerberus. He and Lith began to clap, and I sheepishly stood, not really sure what to make of the scene.

I thanked them, and not knowing what else to do, I fished into my pocket, producing the three rings I had received the day before. I handed Lith the one with the sapphire, saying he'd never have to worry about me freezing his legs ever again, and he wouldn't have to worry about any other ice spells either. I then handed Hardule the silver ring, telling him what it did and that he would have the important role of destroying the phylactery when we found it.

After I slid on the ruby ring, we headed into the main room, where the Monster Leader was giving instructions.

The battle would start in two hours. We needed everything to be ready by then. The monsters were busy putting on their costumes and memorizing their stat cards, picking out weapons they felt comfortable with. Most would be seshniks, which meant that their costumes weren't particularly elaborate. When the Monster Leader spotted me, he called out for me to wait for him, and after he finished talking to a group of monsters, he walked over to me, asking me about my plans for my own actions during the battle.

He didn't seem too happy, saying he'd prefer it if I stayed in the back and helped direct the troops, playing it safe. I simply said that there were things I needed to do, and he'd have to trust in my ability. He nodded, a sign that his confidence in me probably outweighed my own. He then asked if I was still willing to go through with the final stage of our plan, and I said that despite appearances, it was still the best way of handling Ulcik. He nodded once again, and I couldn't help but wonder whether we'd be able to succeed.

Throwing aside my uncertainty, I looked around for Selenia. I found her outside the cave, staring into the woods by herself. Ignoring that she may have been trying to avoid me, I walked towards her. Hearing me approach, she turned slightly to face me.

It took her a moment to decide what expression to make, but she ended up settling on a frown before turning away from me. Perhaps with the same stupidity of a man whacking a beehive with a stick, I said good morning and offered her to become my knight.

She looked at me, absolutely bewildered. Not giving her a chance to get angry again, I explained that I had become a baron of House Cerberus only a few minutes ago, and I was looking for knights.

She looked at me, and I could see that she was trying hard to find some reason to be angry with me. After a moment, she said that she wouldn't be a knight, but a lady.

Not bothering to say that usually lady referred to the wife of a knight and that a woman who was knighted was called a dame, I chose to simply resubmit my offer, and I asked if she would become my lady.

There was a moment where she realized what I said before I did, and she blushed dramatically, enough that I realized I was blushing just looking at her. Hoping to push past the moment, I pulled my sword from my back, saying that if she wanted to, I could knight her immediately.

She hesitated, eying me carefully. Feeling somewhat embarrassed, I looked away from her, pretending to inspect my sword while waiting for her response.

After a moment that likely lasted longer in my memory than it did in reality, she nodded, saying she would be honored to become my lady.

Happy for reasons I doubt I knew, I moved the tip of my sword to her shoulder. Reciting a few of the phrases Hardule had used on me, I then tapped her other shoulder before telling her that she now had the title of Lady Selenia of House Cerberus.

She smiled.

Back inside the Cave, I informed Lith and Hardule that Selenia was now officially a member of House Cerberus. Lith nearly nodded, but Hardule opened his eyes wide, staring at me in shock. Surprised by his reaction, I asked him what was wrong, and he said he was just amazed that I had finally managed to propose to her.

After I hurriedly explained that I had just knighted her, not married her, Lith started to laugh. Hardule, Selenia and I all turned away embarrassed, all for very different reasons.

Several of the monsters began to discuss the coming battle with us, and I was glad to hear that they were extremely excited. Usually, in these large battles, the monsters were always scripted to lose, no matter how well they fought. This time, however, they'd have an actual chance of really winning, for the first time ever at this LARP. I knew now why the Monster Leader didn't want to tell them just how weak they all were. It wasn't about the morale of the monsters, it was about not crushing this fragile, wonderful hope of finally achieving victory.

Only then did I realize just how many people were involved. It wasn't just me against Ulcik. It wasn't House Cerberus against his squad. It wasn't even just a matter of players versus monsters.

This wasn't just a simple battle that would take place at a LARP and be forgotten. It was a battle that would be repeated again and again, endlessly and forever. We were fighting a battle of vengeance, of liberation, a battle to open eyes and minds. There was hatred, yes, but that wasn't the only motivation.

I wanted to protect my friends as much as I wanted to kill Ulcik.

As much as I was ashamed of my hatred for that man, I was equally proud of how much I cared for my friends. As bad as my grudge was against Ulcik's followers, my respect for the monsters allowed me to act without regret. Even though I was angry at the players for not leaving Ulcik's side, I had not lost faith in all of them.

A new sense of determination burning in me, I wanted to start the battle that I knew was nearly hopeless as soon as possible. The small flickers of hope I saw in everyone were providing me with a confidence I couldn't simply claim as my own, a feeling that if we all tried hard enough, we might just succeed.

Most of us ate breakfast inside the cave, several of the younger monsters acting as a delivery service. After placing our orders, the four members of House Cerberus went to sit outside where we could see the road that eventually led to the Inn. The mood was optimistic, though Selenia seemed rather nervous, possibly because she knew just how weak the monsters would be in this battle.

After a little while, Vlaine came up to me, asking if I still had the weapon ribbons I took from Rubedo. Fishing the ribbons out of my pocket, I asked why he wanted them, and he said that I must have forgotten that Ulcik was immune to damage from nonmagical weapons. Thankful that he had caught my oversight, I began to worry if I had forgotten anything else.

While I fretted, he said that Thaladeus Norwinter, the old wizard NPC he always played, could easily transmute a magical shortsword into a two-handed one, and that if I really wanted him to, he could do it right now. Thanking him, I asked if we'd have to go through the whole motions, and he just said that if anyone asked, we did the whole thing yesterday. Tying the ribbons to my sword, I thanked him as he walked back to the Inn, leaving House Cerberus to wait for its breakfast.

After half an hour, I pointed out a group of people approaching, rather pleased to see them considering how hungry I was. To our surprise, it wasn't the courier monsters returning, but the group of teenage girls dressed in black.

They didn't look particularly happy, talking amongst themselves irritably as they neared the Cave. Noticing the four of us, they headed towards us, odd smiles appearing on their faces. The tall girl with the wide face offered a brief greeting before announcing that they wanted to join House Cerberus.

We were only too glad to hear that. Though these five girls were not my first picks in who I wanted to join us, I was happy just to know that some of the players wanted to help our cause. Hardule and Lith quickly started telling them about the process to join the House and started asking them a variety of questions.

I listened for a little while, but it was clear that Hardule was just enjoying making things seem complicated and official. The girls were looking at him seriously for the first few minutes, but when he had started to really stretch things out, they started to lose a little interest, whispering things between themselves while he continued to talk.

Eventually one girl, the girl who couldn't walk without shuffling her feet, shuffled away from her friends and came up to greet me. I returned her greeting, and asked what she had been up to the day before.

After glancing at her friends and seeing that they were still pretending to listen to Hardule, who hadn't even noticed one of his audience had left, she began to speak with a passion that made it quite clear she had wanted to tell someone what she had gone through very badly. She began saying how her friend's fortune telling and singing had been rather poorly received. They managed to entertain a few of the older men for about an hour, but eventually the merchant's guild that ran the inn had told them that they needed licenses in order to try and make money inside of it.

Her friends had spent most of the day arguing with the merchant's guild, who wanted 5 gold for each of their licenses while they barely had a few pieces of silver each. She had kept trying to convince them to go out and adventure to make gold, but they just wanted to keep trying to convince the guild to lower the price of the licenses. Eventually, they ended up banned from the inn, and then had to try and argue their way back inside.

Selenia was eying the two of us as the girl vented her frustrations, but after making an indecipherable expression she silently moved inside the Cave, leaving the two of us while Lith and Hardule continued what was quickly turning into an elaborate ceremony.

I told the girl that it must have been terrible for her, and that I was sorry she wasn't having a great first time at this LARP. As if it were the first time she had ever received sympathy, she started to thank me, saying I was a great person. She then admitted that she knew everything about what I did yesterday, because an old wizard had told her everything when she had asked him about me.

Wondering what kind of stories Vlaine had been spreading about me, I was too slow in trying to change the subject of the conversation, and she continued, saying that it was amazing how I was so "fair" about everything. Reading the confused expression on my face, she said that I wouldn't break the rules even if my opponent did, and that I didn't care about stats or position or guilds. Before I could say that wasn't all true, she said that I fought against everything she hated at this LARP, and that I was everything she liked about it.

As if surprised by what she had just said, she made a small gasp before turning around, heading back to where her friends were being inducted into House Cerberus. Wondering about the odd way she had chosen to finish the conversation, I glance around, managing to spot Selenia's head before she pulled it back behind the door to the Cave.

After the girls became squires of House Cerberus, our food finally arrived. Though I tried to escape inside where I could eat while discussing the battle with the other monsters, the girls seemed intent on telling me all the little details of the previous day. While they weren't the worst company, I had slightly more important things to do than to listen to how the older woman in the merchant's guild were jealous of these girls' talents. Somewhat frustrated, I told them they should have just gone out adventuring.

Four of the nastiest looks I have ever received in my life shot towards me, though their effect was somewhat lessened by one face that beamed with happiness.

The girls seemed more interested with talking to Lith after that, who seemed rather happy to be receiving all their attention. In a rather peaceful moment, I sat listening as the topic changed to matters unrelated to the LARP, movies and books they had read and thought interesting. It was an odd feeling, as if I were detached from the world, the tranquility before me clashing with the terrible battle I knew was coming. Then, just when I had started to really appreciate it, the moment was swallowed up by the sounds of the monsters emerging from the cave.

The battle was starting.

The Monster Leader, dressed in dark robes and carrying a spear and dagger, began to address the monsters. His speech was simple, only reminding them that this was not an ordinary battle, and that how hard we fought and the sacrifices we made would matter. He then asked for House Cerberus to step forward.

We moved towards the front of the crowd, every monster staring at us intently. The Monster Leader simply nodded at Hardule, who began to speak to the crowd.

Sometimes, I don't give him enough credit. But, in this moment, he shined. He didn't bother talking about distant ideas like freedom or justice, but simply encouraged us to fight to the best of our abilities. He told us to forget our noble desires or any virtuous goals we had, and to fight for our pride, to prove that our army would be stronger than theirs. He told us to be selfish, to seek glory, to ignore everything other than achieving victory.

Hardule understood the monsters. This is what they wanted more than anything else, the chance to prove themselves without being tied down by plot. Some of them let out warcries at the crescendos of Hardule's speech, which he encouraged heartily. At the end, people were roaring and shouting, with volume that was sure to carry all the way to the inn.

We moved out, ready for the first stage of our plans. We headed for a large field, peppered with a few small bushes. The monsters in charge of units began to position everyone loosely, a thin line of monsters with three person groups spread out behind it. House Cerberus took its place at the very front, a formality that we would soon abandon as the battle began.

We waited, but we didn't have to wait for long. The sounds of the players coming made all the monsters grow quiet, and the silence from our side rapidly increased the tension in the air. The players arrived, marshaled by the noble houses, and assembled into the classic formation, a wall of shield wielders with a line of mages behind them.

With the rules about charging, breaking through the wall of shield wielders required killing them, but they would be either replaced or healed rather quickly, leaving the wall intact. Getting past this wall to strike at the mages was the usual goal for the monsters, and one that rarely succeeded.



Looking beyond the mages, I saw the large group that contained Ulcik and his followers. His seven guards were standing around him, and around them Ulick's sycophants, the fat woman and the man I had killed twice last event among them. They remained behind the mages, Ulcik probably feeling rather smug about the impressive defenses in front of him.

As soon as the players reached their positions, Hardule began to speak, loudly and clearly.

He listed Ulcik's crimes, and demanded that the town deliver him to justice. He shouted that the Lich's phylactery required human sacrifice, and that he had deceived everyone. He then waited, to see if Ulcik would respond to these accusations.

Ulcik said nothing. He simply stared at Hardule, smiling, silently asking whether anything he had said mattered to the players.

With a look of regret that was either genuine or excellent acting, Hardule said that they would have no choice but to seize him by force. Many people would die, he cautioned, and he asked if any of them would rather fight on the side of justice rather than iniquity.

Spreading his arms out wide, he called out to the players, asking them to join him. This was their last chance, he warned, because as soon as the battle started, there would be no changing sides.

Lith appeared next to me, handing me a long white ribbon, with one already tied around his arm. He then moved down the line, passing one to Selenia, then to each of the goth girls, and finally handing the rest to Hardule. With a ceremonial flourish, Hardule tied a white ribbon to his arm before holding out the rest at the crowd of players in front of him.

No one moved. The players were muttering amongst themselves, trying to decide what to do. The difference between the armies was readily apparent, and the inclusion of the teenage girls in the front of our army did not add to our display of power. Hardule did not waver, even as the moment stretched, until a full minute had passed. With great reluctance, he lowered the ribbons, taking a step back as he did so.

I then noticed movement from the far right. I turned my head, disappointed when I saw that no one had stepped forward. But, just as I was turning back, I saw that people were parting the

front line to allow the old man I had journeyed with to get through, his grandson and two other warriors close behind him.

He took his time, hobbling towards Hardule, while everyone had become silent to watch. When he finally reached Hardule, he smiled at me as if to jokingly say "you owe me one," before turning to Hardule. With several unnecessary flourishes, Hardule handed him a ribbon, then handed one to his grandson and the other two fighters.

A slow trickle of players started to head towards us. These were the people who didn't belong to any noble houses, who wanted to see something exciting happen for once at this LARP. As Hardule greeted them, I discovered that some were the old members of House Cerberus, and Hardule was only too happy to see them return.

Many of the players who remained on Ulcik's side started to jeer and shout, some even physically trying to stop people from coming over to us, but after ten minutes, over twenty people had come to join us. Even with the monsters we were still outnumbered, but no longer as dramatically. When it looked like no more people were coming, Hardule beseeched them one last time, saying that we would be unable to spare them any mercy if they remained. When it became clear that no one else was coming, he turned away from the players, looking happy but at the same time a little disappointed.

The players who had joined us were ushered towards the back of our formations, where some of the monsters began to explain our plan to them. Before they could finish, the leaders of the Noble houses started to shout, ordering their men forward.

It became tremendously loud in an instant. People began shouting out damage and spells, and swords and shield collided. The battle had finally begun.

Our line of monster had large gaps spread throughout it, while the player's shield wall left no open spaces. When the two reached each other, they both stopped, observing the rule on no charging. After a moment, one of the players decided to take the opportunity that was directly in front of him. He moved forward, passing through the initial line of monsters without interference.

The closest group of three monsters behind our initial line started screaming at the top of their lungs, causing all the players around them to stare in shock. They rushed at the player who had broken past the line and surrounded him, attacking mercilessly while continuing to scream. The

player fell almost instantly, and the monsters stopped screaming, returning to their position silently.

This same scene repeated down the line, and after five players were killed in such a fashion, no one else seemed very inclined to pass through the gaps in our line.

These gaps were an important part of our strategy. As the mages behind the player's shield wall cast their spells, the monsters had space to move and dodge, forcing the mages to waste their spells. There were spellcasters among the monsters, and the difference between the effect of their spells compared to that of the players was dramatic. The shield wall, with the players practically shoulder to shoulder, prevented them from being able to dodge. Their large shields were perfect targets, making even the most wildly aimed spell almost guaranteed to hit.

Though the monsters had much weaker spellcasters, they were hitting with almost all of their spells, while the players' mages were barely hitting with a third of theirs.

House Cerberus had moved behind the monster line, except for Lith who was right in front. The girls were all mages, except for the shuffling girl who had chosen to become a warrior. They were terrible, throwing their spells with terrible aim and only managing to hit because of the density of the shield wall. They supported Selenia and Hardule as they all kept throwing spell after spell at the players.

I was moving behind the monster line, attacking when I saw a chance, occasionally throwing an ice spell to pin a player. I remained cautious, keeping myself out of any real danger, making sure to pay attention to the battle around me.

Ulcik remained in the back, his guards all around him, watching the battle with only passing interest. His followers seemed eager to join the fighting, but he seemed to be holding them back. With an army of players before them, without us even knowing where his phylactery was, he seemed invincible. I looked away from him and his group, knowing that right now was not the time to even consider fighting them.

Though our strategy was effective and the monsters were much better fighters than the players were, it was clear that the monsters dealt far less damage and had a lot less HP. Even so, more players seemed to be dropping than the monsters, their ranks becoming disorganized and gaps starting to appear in the shield wall. I started daring to hope that we might succeed with our goal in the very first stage of the plan, but Ulcik decided to make his move.

He sent forward four of his squad, leaving behind three to protect him. They quickly moved to the front lines, splitting into two two-man teams. They walked past the monster line, ready for the screaming monsters that came at them.

The monsters were quickly defeated, and the four men started to wreak havoc. In seconds, it started to look as if our front line would be completely shattered. Recognizing that it was time to change to the next part of the plan, I didn't bother rushing over to meet them, instead instructing the monster line to start pulling back.

As they retreated, they moved closer together, closing some of the gaps in the line. The rest of the openings were filled by our reserve troops, part of which consisted of the players who had decided to join us only a few minutes ago, and our battle line solidified. The four of Ulcik's squad saw what was happening, and not wanting to be cut off from the rest of their army, retreated back to Ulcik through the last remaining gaps before they closed.

It was time for me to head to the second stage.

Our front lines were dwindling, but that had been part of our plan from the start. We wanted the players to know how weak the monsters were, so that they'd have no excuses for their loss. Now, it was time to provide them with a nice reason for their defeat.

As a monster fell from the front lines, they were pulled back and healed, but some of them did not return to the battle. Instead, they retreated back towards the woods, to where a thin, unkempt path snaked its way towards our next destination. Right now, we needed the front line to fight hard not for survival or victory, but purely for time.

I moved in front of a particularly tall monster, hoping he would block me from my enemies' view. Once inside the path, I raced forward, praying that our front line would hold out.

At the end of the path was one of the larger roads, and the fifteen or so monsters who had retreated so far were all standing there, waiting. Not bothering to issue an order, I simply continued running, knowing that they would follow.

The monsters retreating was a common occurrence in the large battles at this LARP. Usually, it meant that the battle was simply going to change locations from one field to another, and the Plot Masters would inform the heads of the noble houses before the battle so that they would know where they would have to direct their troops. This time, however, Ulcik himself had not heard of a second location, and was likely expecting that the monsters who had retreated were simply the ones that had run out of times they could respawn.

The problem was that Ulcik knew I wasn't a monster, and more importantly he knew I wouldn't retreat. It probably was better for me to stay behind with the rest of House Cerberus, but I needed to make sure this part of our plan succeeded. With luck, I'd be able to return before our front line fell.

After a turn in the road, I finally saw our destination. While still a good distance away, I slowed down, and heard the people behind me do likewise. Without a single word exchanged, half of them followed me, while the other half went to circle around the building in the opposite direction. Though most of the players were at the battle, there was certain to be a few who had remained at the Inn.

Carefully, as quietly as I could, I stepped into the entrance, looking around. After moving in further, I saw a few older woman talking to each other, not bothering to pay attention to me. These were the heads of the healing guild, who rarely ever participated in battles. I moved around them, and saw a few more players, sitting or standing, looking bored.

The monsters burst in from all sides, and all the players started panicking, moving to block the exits, thinking that this was a full assault. While the warriors ran to grab their weapons, the monsters slew them without mercy. The older women began to cast spells, and I wasted no time in cutting them down.

None of these player's were particularly skilled fighters, being possibly the weakest fighters at this entire LARP, and I easily took out the few warriors that managed to reach their weapons. Only six other monsters had fought, but we had managed to defeat everyone so quickly that the rest of the monsters looked disappointed.

As a group of monsters rushed upstairs to see if any people were up there, I surveyed the scene. Had they known we were coming and managed to keep us from entering, it could have been a hard battle, even though there was only about ten players inside the Inn. From the noise upstairs it sounded as if they had found more, but it quickly became quiet once again. Moving to the nearest player, an overweight man who hadn't managed to reach his sword before he had

been killed by a monster, I explained that we were going to move all their bodies upstairs. They all looked furious, and one of the older woman started to argue, but one of the monsters said that they shouldn't have thought that the Inn would be safe, as it wasn't the first time monsters had attacked it.

After leading them all upstairs and leaving two monsters up there to remind them that they were all dead bodies and couldn't move, I watched as the monsters began to hide themselves. They kept close to the entrances, their main focus being to make sure that they couldn't be seen from outside.

Several more monsterw arrived, until around twenty of them were spread out inside of the inn. With everything in place, I realized I hadn't really been necessary in this little battle. Knowing I had to get back as soon as I could, I ran back to where the larger battle was hopefully still going on.

I passed a few monsters, only stopping to say that there were enough inside the Inn already. They continued down the road, heading for the woods that surrounded the Inn.

When I arrived in the large clearing, I realized I had been gone for much too long. The monsters were barely holding their position, with most of the only surviving players that had joined us being the ones with stats good enough to keep themselves from being killed every few seconds. The old man was feebily tossing beanbags at our enemies, calling out the same 1 damage fire spell I had, though I doubt anyone was taking notice.

Lith had moved back to protect Hardule and Selenia, who were looking tired but still casting spells as fast as they could. I rushed over to them, before I spotted the Monster Leader.

He kept thrusting his spear one handed into the shield wall, scoring hit after hit, occasionally using his dagger when a player tried to get past our front line. Rhend was next to him, bent low with two short swords in his hands, striking at people's legs with rapid speed. The two were shouting orders, doing everything they could to keep our line from failing.

Changing course, I headed towards the two of them, and with a shout, I told him that it was hopeless, that we had failed, and that we needed to retreat.

The Monster Leader turned to face me, in order to hide his smile from our enemies.

He began to call for retreat, and we all started to move back. Hardule, with a well crafted look of indignation, shouted at Ulcik that this wasn't the end, and that we would return.

Less than a third of our army remained in the clearing, looking tiny compared to the size of the player's army. We retreated into the woods, and it looked for a moment as if the players were going to chase after us. Some followed all the way to the edge of the woods, but none went further, and after a moment the heads of the noble houses started to call back for everyone to return.

To the Inn.

Most of the players must have been disappointed. While it had been somewhat difficult for them in the beginning, it quickly became almost too easy and ended far sooner than anyone had expected. The only person who probably predicted a short battle was Ulcik, who was probably patting himself on the back for thinking up all the restrictions he had placed on the monsters.

As the players headed off, the remainder of our army had already begun marching. We were taking a long, roundabout route that would reach the Inn several minutes after the players did. If all went well, it would be the best chance to show how well the monsters understood tactics.

While the Monster Leader took the longer path, leading the way, I knew I would regret it if I missed seeing the players arrive at the Inn. After passing my intentions on to Hardule, who told me to make sure I didn't ruin the surprise, I raced off towards the Inn, taking the most direct route I could take.

I kept to the woods as I got near to the Inn, and was not surprised to stumble into several monsters, who were hiding as best as they could. They were all watching the Inn, waiting for the right moment.

First, one or two players entered the Inn, long before anyone else. There would be a brief moment of motion that we could see through the windows, but then nothing.

Finally, the town army appeared, a small group ahead of everyone else. This group went straight into the Inn, possibly intending to have a nice, refreshing drink.

There was a scream, followed by several others. The monsters must have emerged from their hiding spaces, and were now moving towards all the entrances. The poor players in the group who had entered first must have received quite a shock, and only one managed to escape. The man ran screaming, genuinely scared, and the town army reassembled outside the Inn, ready to reclaim it.

They first tried to focus on getting through the main entrance, but they knew even better than we did how foolish that plan was. The players had defended the Inn time and time again, and knew that two people, with replacements, could defend a single entrance against almost any number of opponents. They must have assumed that our entire army was inside the Inn, which meant we could defend the main entrance for hours.

They decided to adopt the strategy the monsters typically used, to launch a continuous attack on all the entrances, in hopes that one entrance would eventually run out of replacements. As we had predicted, they separated into smaller groups, and I saw that Ulcik had five of his squad members go with them, leaving only two to guard him. It was the black scale warrior with the two-handed sword, along with one I hadn't met yet.

He didn't look particularly impressive, his armor painted a dull gray, and even the axe he carried look barely looked functional. It had two large, wide blades about two feet long, and the entire weapon was no longer than a typical sword. Even so, I had heard enough from Vlaine about him, enough to know that he was probably the strongest of the seven.

The groups began attacking all the entrances, and once they were sufficiently spread out, shouts started to come from out of the woods. Monsters were running forward from all around, and the players started to scream and panic.

They were defenseless. Without a shield wall in front of them, the mages were easy targets, and once they were down the players could no longer heal. I saw the group containing Tiberian fall apart rapidly, sandwiched between the inn filled with monster and the ones that had emerged from the woods. I almost felt bad for his imaginary sweetheart, but there were more important things for me to worry about.



Even as the monsters around me ran out to join what was starting to look like a massacre, I remained behind, waiting for my chance.

The nobles were confused, with some of them still intending to try and get into the Inn while others seemed keen on retreating back. The disorganized players began to act on their own, forming small clusters to try and protect their mages. Finally, I saw a great moment.

The Hammer-wielding plate wearer had separated from his group and had started sprinting towards where Ulcik was. I ran out of the woods, intending to cut him off.

He spotted me from a distance, and changed directions. When I was within his range, his hammer swung out, forcing me to dodge backwards to avoid it. He swung again, but I threw an ice spell at him, forcing him to dodge back before he could complete the swing.

He probably knew that I had tried to get him, or one of the other seven, into a one-on-one match so my ice spells would be more effective, but it didn't look as if he was judging me negatively for my tactic. He whipped his hammer at me again, and I blocked with my sword, not realizing his intention. He allowed the hammerhead to slide down the back of the blade towards my hands, and with a sudden yank managed to pull the sword out of my grasp before I knew what had happened.

He tried to follow this up with more attacks, but I blocked his hammer easily with my arms, before leaping and rolling to where my sword had fallen. Without standing, I quickly spun around, hoping to catch him in the legs with my sword.

He had barely managed to jump away in time. With a bit of distance between us, I tried another ice spell, but he dodged it again. Wondering how these bastards had managed to get so good at dodging spells when I'm pretty certain their historical recreation society didn't have them, I tried another one as he closed the distance between us. He twisted out of the way of the spell, and continued the spin, bringing his hammer flying towards my side.

Blocking it with my left hand, I tried to strike him with a one handed swing, but he leapt backwards and out of the way. He didn't create too much distance, however, making sure to try and keep me within range of his hammer. While his weapon was heavier and slower than mine, his reach was much longer, keeping me from getting any decent strikes.

I knew that this couldn't continue for very long before someone else decided to join in, and I could only hope it was one of my allies and not his. We continued to exchange blows, neither of us managing to get a single hit in.

Then, he tried it again. After I managed to block another one of his horizontal swings, he allowed the head of his hammer to lower down to the hilt of my sword. Almost insulted that he'd try the same trick twice, I pulled my sword to the side, unhooking it from his hammer.

He stepped forward, thrusting the head of the hammer into my chest for 10 points of damage.

I had been stupid to think that he wouldn't treat his hammer polearm as a thrusting weapon, but I had no time to further regret my actions. He swung in earnest now, invigorated by his successful hit.

I struggled to keep blocking his attacks, his hammer a mere blur as he struck again and again, the momentum of the battle entirely his. As I retreated backwards, he followed relentlessly, until I managed to back up all the way into the woods.

He stood at the edge, looking uncertain, but entered after I tried to pull a bean bag from my pocket. I led him further in, glad to see that he had to restrict the motion of his attacks to keep his long polearm from hitting any trees or branches. My sword was not restricted as much, and I began to take the initiative, managing to land a hit on him after I had taken cover behind a tree.

He was smart enough to know that this was not the best place to fight me, but it was much too late now. He struggled inside of the forest, trying to keep me at bay, until a second hit convinced him to take his chances. The moment I had been waiting for, he leapt back and turned to run out of the woods.

My ice spell hit him, squarely in the back once again. Without waiting to see just how good he could fight without moving his legs, I began to strike at them, chipping away at his HP 8 points at a time. He dropped to his knees after several hits, his hammer dropping down in front of him in frustration.

He then called out to me, asking if I really thought I had "won" the match.

Walking past him, I didn't have an answer. The thought of looting him crossed my mind, as did the thought of dealing him a finishing blow, but I kept walking, not in the mood to do either.

The battlefield had changed dramatically since I had last seen it. The small clusters of players had joined together into one large mass, and they were slowly edging their way to one of the main roads. There were bodies of dead players everywhere, most of them opting to sit rather than lay down and have the chance of being trampled.

Ulcik was casting spells in earnest, killing any monsters that came near him. The players were gathering behind him, using him as a form of shelter from the storm of monsters. I moved forward onto the battlefield, making my way towards him.

While still a good distance away from him, I stopped to watch him. Nothing about his actions made any suggestion as to whether or not he had his phylactery with him. He didn't seem particularly interested in heading into the Inn, so I could at least rule out that it was there.

We needed to know where it was, or at least what it was. Without that information, there was no way for us to win this battle, even if we killed every player other than Ulcik. As long as he remained in this world, he would never allow House Cerberus to exist, especially now that we've waged war against him.

Realizing that staring at him wouldn't let me read his mind, I moved closer, until I was certain he had seen me. Right now, what I needed was a chance, a chance that his phylactery was either on him or somewhere nearby. Beyond this, I could only pray that Ulcik was as dumb as I thought he was. Hoping beyond hope that the plan that had popped in my head, I gave Ulcik the biggest smile I could muster.

With a few words to his two guards, the black scaled man started heading towards me.

Before he had taken even a few steps, as loudly as I could, I shouted at Ulcik, saying that I had stolen and destroyed his phylactery.

It happened. I could almost not believe that such a simple plan had worked out so perfectly. Ulcik and his two guards all stopped, and for the briefest of moments all looked in one direction. At first I was confused, until I realized why the black scaled man had looked down.

He had looked at his sword.

The high quality weapon would be the perfect item for a phylactery that could devour souls. With the phylactery being something that could only be destroyed in a very specific manner, he wouldn't even have to worry about shatter spells. And though it's simple design didn't even hint that it was magical, that only served its master better.

Ulcik laughed, shouting that I had no idea what the phylactery even was, and that there was no chance I ever would. Knowing that I needed to confirm my suspicions, I realized I would have to once again rely on his stupidity.

Shouting again, I said that I had replaced the man's sword while he had slept, and the one he was carrying now was a fake.

Not even considering the sheer absurdity of what I had just said, Ulcik gave a look of utter panic, something I delighted in seeing. He turned to the black scaled man, who quickly replied that couldn't have happened, since he had slept with his sword in hand.

It dawned on Ulcik what had just happened.

Before he could say anything, however, we were all distracted by the sudden addition of the remaining part of the monster army onto the battlefield. They had come up the way that the players had been moving to retreat, the Monster Leader in front and looking particularly fierce.

The players lost hope. With the number of players who had died, the monsters now had the numerical advantage, and with no place for the players to run and all of them surrounded, we also had the strategic advantage. If the battle continued, with most of the players' mages being dead, it would only be a matter of time before they were crushed.

Ulcik, his frustration and rage having built up so much in the last few moments, began throwing instant kill spells at the monsters, hitting two players in the process. They fell to the ground, screaming angrily, but Ulcik didn't seem to even notice. He was planning on killing every monster all by himself, and he had the stats to do it.

Then, just as the players could do nothing but lament their inevitable deaths, one of the doors to the Inn swung open, and an old wizard shouted towards the players that the monsters had vacated the Inn.

There was a great, unified shout as the remaining players started to push their way towards the Inn. The monsters between them and the building moved out of their way, a smart move considering how ferociously they wanted to reach safety.

Once they managed to all get inside, they positioned guards at each door, Vlaine being among them, his old wizard costume as ridiculous as ever. The players would probably be rather unhappy to see the pile of corpses upstairs that included healers they desperately could use, and right now what we wanted them to be was as miserable as possible.

The monster army moved to circle the Inn, and once positioned, simply stood, an unnerving sight for the players inside. Usually, in the scripted battles where the players would always win, the monsters would just keep attacking the Inn until the players had killed enough of them. Now, however, the monsters had nothing forcing them to make suicidal attacks. Rather than being safe within the Inn, the players were trapped inside of it.

I'm pretty sure that there were a lot of people at the LARP who thought that Vlaine's old wizard NPC was actually his character. He stood confidently at the door, while the player who was guarding it with him glanced around nervously. I don't think it's fair to call Vlaine a sleeper agent, since he hadn't and wouldn't do anything against the town. He was just a "necessary player," a person who would do things so that the plot would advance in a reasonable fashion.

As Lith and Selenia moved towards the main entrance, it was Vlaine who announced to the other players inside the Inn that an envoy was approaching in order to discuss terms. As Ulcik moved forward, Vlaine reasoned with him, convincing him that he wasn't the best person to discuss anything right now.

Another man stepped out, one of the heads of another noble house. While he didn't look very pleased, he at least seemed a lot calmer than Ulcik was at the moment.

Selenia spoke first, saying that while they talked the monsters would move back, so that the players would have a chance to save their people on the battlefield, many who were still within the 15 minute limit.

Vlaine and several other players went out, checking the people to see if they were still alive and dragging them back into the Inn if they were. After several people had been saved, Lith began his speech.

He started by saying that many people had died who didn't need to, and that if they all had only joined sides with House Cerberus at first, only one person would have had to die.

He said that Ulcik had given House Cerberus no choice, and it was either kill him or die. It didn't excuse them for all the killing that occurred, but the players were not blameless themselves. They had harbored an evil Lich, and had chosen to fight for him.

Now, he said, they all had one final choice.

To either cast out Ulcik, or to die for him by the hands of the monster army.

The monsters began to shout and scream at these words, and Lith and Selenia walked away from the Inn, giving them a chance to discuss what to do next. This would now be Vlaine's time to shine.

I could only imagine what he said. At this point, I think it would be rather easy to convince everyone that throwing Ulcik out was the only right move. We all watched the Inn from where we stood, waiting to see what their response would be. As we waited, I told the other members of House Cerberus about the sword phylactery, but they remained stoic. We needed to see the players' answer, to see how they felt about Ulcik.

Sounds of commotion came from the Inn, and indistinct shouts could be heard coming from inside it. Finally after several minutes, Ulcik stepped out alone, looking furious.

Lith walked closer to him, but kept a good distance away all the same. Ulcik simply said that he was now alone, and he wanted to know if he thought that all these monsters would be enough to kill him.

Lith struggled, trying to make up his mind of whether or not to say his next part. He had disagreed with this part of the plan, and probably had only agreed because he had doubted we would make it this far.

He looked back at me, and then at Hardule, frowning. In truth, there was a part of me that also didn't want Lith to speak. But, the Monster Leader wanted Ulcik defeated utterly, and sending him wave after wave of monsters until he finally died would be a glorious death he didn't deserve.

The last part of our plan had been created almost at a whim, under the notion that we would only proceed with it if everything had gone well. It was something that the Monster Leader had thought up, and I had agreed with in regards to principles, but not necessarily practicality. We had finally managed to get this far, and the final stage of the plan had a large chance to ruin all of our efforts so far.

Still, it was a matter of principles. It was a matter of making sure that complete and total justice was delivered.

Lith seemed to understand.

Turning to Ulcik, he said that this was a private feud between our two houses. House Cerberus had the right to challenge House Ulcik, and we had decided to use that right.

Ulcik looked confused for a moment, then furious, until finally he smiled. A disgusting, miserable smile. Nodding his acceptance, he began to move forward, but Lith called out to him, telling him to stop.

The duel would take place within the field before the castle, and that Ulcik was free to take any members of his house who were willing to join him. House Cerberus would expect him within the half hour.

Lith walked away, not waiting for Ulcik's response. Hardule and Selenia joined up with him, heading down the road.

I stayed behind for a little while, watching. The monsters began to pull away, disappearing into the woods around the Inn. Many seemed pleased with themselves, having pushed the players into such a state with nothing but tactics and their own fighting skills. Others, however, seemed to understand that the battle wasn't over yet. Though their part was over, they now had to place their faith into House Cerberus, as nothing would be settled as long as Ulcik lived.'

Ulcik stood outside for a little while, not looking at anything in particular. Finally, he started to laugh, a maniacal laugh that couldn't be produced by a sane man, before rushing back into the Inn.

I continued to watch the Inn, indulging in a moment of hesitation. We were not finished yet, but the gravity of the final stage of our plan hadn't seemed real until then. It would be perhaps my final battle at this LARP, a certainty if House Cerberus lost this challenge.

A few minutes of the precious half hour passed, and no one came out of the Inn. As I wondered what Ulcik was planning, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I was surprised to see Vlaine, not in his old wizard costume but in ordinary clothes. He asked why I hadn't gone to the castle yet, and I just replied I was on my way. As we both walked away from the Inn, I asked what he was doing here.

His pace slowed slightly, and he let out a small sigh. He had managed to convince the other players to finally turn on Ulcik, but not the way he had wanted to. Ulcik had been giving a speech of the value of loyalty, and when Vlaine had interrupted him to argue, Ulcik lost his temper. He started to yell at Vlaine, and when he saw that Vlaine wasn't particularly intimidated, Ulcik used an instant kill spell on him.

Vlaine regretted the passing of the NPC known as Thaladeus Norwinter, but the old wizard's death wasn't in vain. The other players needed no other reason to exile him from the town and throw Ulcik to the monsters. Even most of the ones who had supported Ulcik saw the change in the times, abandoning their old master in order to side with the majority.



Ulcik's position within the town was destroyed, his reputation ruined. All he had left was whatever fools he managed to bring with him, and himself alone. If we managed to defeat them, we would finally be finished.

Uncertainty slowing me down but hope moving me forward, I walked towards what could be my final battle.

End of Part IV.

### Part 3 - V

When Vlaine and I arrived in the field, the castle across from us, we were greeted by a large crowd of people. They were standing around Hardule and Lith, and many of them were arguing.

Most of them were players who had joined our side, though there were a few monsters intermixed as well. After they parted to let me into the little circle, it became apparent what they all wanted.

Lith stood silently, as if afraid that if he spoke he would end up giving in. Hardule, however, was trying his best to explain that if we accepted all of them into House Cerberus then the next battle would have no meaning. His words were being drowned out by the shouting of people who wanted to help us fight against Ulcik and whoever he managed to bring with him.

Finally, the Monster Leader stepped into the circle as well, and everyone became silent, staring at him. He had closed his eyes, and was revolving where he stood, very, very slowly, as if attempting to hear the sounds of everyone around him. The silence continued as people seemed to be trying to figure out what he was trying to hear.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, and began to speak.

He was proud of the monsters. He had always been, and after seeing how hard everyone had fought in the last battle, he felt that he would regret not telling them everything that he was about to say.

Ulcik had become a symbol to him. A symbol of everything he didn't want LARP players to be. He was a disease, a cancer that continued to afflict the LARP as long as he remained.

Many of the crowd nodded in agreement, none daring to say anything, a strange tension pervading the entire field. The old man paused, as if questioning whether this was enough to justify what could be considered a petty hatred, but he continued on.

Ulcik needed to be defeated by the things he didn't understand. The man didn't know anything other than how to bully people with power that wasn't his, and how to gather other people who were willing to follow him in exchange for some of that power. He was barely a human and more of an agent of corruption and decay, and his character now reflected that side of him.

Ulcik the Lich needed to be defeated by people he had overlooked. People who had not been intimidated by his power, people who succeeded with nothing other than their own skills and talents. He deserved to be killed by the people he hated the most, the people he was jealous of, the people who reminded him of how miserable of a person he was. It was people that were not seduced by his promises of power, who didn't rely on character sheets to fight for them, who would enter a fight even with losing odds. These were the people who would defeat Ulcik.

I had been listening intently, but a sight drew away most of my attention.

Hardule looked sick.

As the Monster Leader continued to speak, Hardule stopped being able to look at him. He gazed around and caught my eye, and I saw a guilty expression that I quickly understood.

Hardule, when the LARP had first started, had followed Ulcik, acting on his orders no matter what they were, just so that he could gain power. He had even managed to become a member of Ulcik's Noble House with his efforts, and in the first event I had gone to he had chosen to spend his time with Ulcik rather than with his friends.

Hardule had a lot in common with Ulcik. Both were mages, both were among the strongest characters in the game, and both revered the concept of nobility. Had I not presented Hardule with the opportunity to kill Ulcik at my last event, he might still be serving under him, seeking to rise in position and power.

Though the Monster Leader's speech was rather good, I chose to interrupt it, saying that none of what he had just said mattered.

The Monster Leader stopped, but he smiled at me, waiting for me to continue. I said that my reasons for hating Ulcik were not that he represented all the evil in the world, but because he was an awful man who had tried to ruin my friend's fun-filled fantasy adventures.

The crowd around us seemed taken aback, but I continued, saying that what Lith had said was true, that this was a private feud between houses. Though plenty of people would wished for it, Ulcik's death only had meaning to us.

The crowd began to shout, at first all at once, and then in turn. One person shouted that Ulcik had destroyed his small Noble house several months ago, and that he had just as much of a right to fight him. Another person shouted that Ulcik had scared his girlfriend so badly that she no longer wanted to come to the LARP. Another shouted that Ulcik had borrowed 10 gold and never paid it back, denying borrowing it in the first place.

Ulcik's crimes and sins were everywhere. Everyone had one or two to share, and while I could have guessed, I would never have known that Ulcik really was such an absolute villain. After some time, the Monster Leader spoke again, quickly quieting the crowd.

He said that there was no way that we could all kill Ulcik. Though we all deserved to be the one to kill him, he pitifully only had one life to offer.

House Cerberus would shoulder everyone's desire to give Ulcik what he deserved. Each member had now heard Ulcik's crimes, and would seek vengeance for them. He looked at me and fell silent, and I realized what he wanted me to say.

I apologized. I said that I had spoken without thinking, without knowing everyone else's reasons. But now, I knew, and I, along with the rest of House Cerberus, would make certain that we delivered to Ulcik every share of vengeance that was due to him. We would punish him where it hurt the most, by tearing apart his pride with the fewest amount of people. House Cerberus, I pledged, would not betray them.

The crowd seemed somewhat pacified, though not exactly happy. Thankfully, the Monster Leader began speaking to them again, and I saw that Hardule was looking a little better.

I walked over to him, and he smiled. He and I started to walk toward the castle, and Lith and Selenia soon joined us. I wondered if the four of us could defeat Ulcik, but I at least knew that there was a chance, one that I was willing to gamble everything on.

An odd shuffling noise came from behind us. I almost groaned when I realized what it must be, but I held it in, turning around. I was surprised to see not only one girl dressed in black, but five.

I launched into an argument, saying that we had just turned down the aid of several of the most skilled and most powerful people at this LARP, and it would be insane to think we would take them with us. This was a matter for House Cerberus, and they would more than likely be a detriment to us than an asset. After saying all that, and seeing that none of them seemed at all repulsed or inclined to leave, I finally said that I didn't want them to die over something so stupid on their very first event.

The shuffling girl made her way to the front of her friends, looking defiantly at me. She said that they were just as much a part of House Cerberus as any of us were, since they had been made squires this very morning. I almost wanted to argue that they hadn't even been members for an entire day, but remembering that I was only inducted into the house some minutes before they were kept me quiet long enough for her to continue.

She said that all the stuff that we had told the other people was about how we were supposed to be breaking Ulcik's pride, and she then asked if there was anything more humiliating than being beaten by a gang of teenage girls.

Her friends looked at her as if she had just insulted them, but she kept staring directly at me. Impressed slightly, I couldn't find the right words to tell them that I still didn't want them to join us, and they took my silence as agreement, and ended up walking with us to the castle.

Before we reached it, the old man hobbled towards us, perhaps intent on creating a reunion of the first night. When he got near, my resolve in telling him to stay out of this wavered when I saw the hope-filled look in his eyes. His grandson wasn't too far behind, and I wondered if everyone was about to come to ask to join us individually.

Thankfully, the old man only wanted to say that he knew that we were going to win, and that he wanted to wish us the best of luck anyway. He admitted he didn't really understand everything, but he knew enough to say that I was a good guy and that the Ulcik person was a downright villain. His grandson merely nodded in my direction before moving over to Lith, who he began to talk to with enthusiasm. Before I could move over to them to hear what they were talking about, the shuffling girl started to ask me about what my battle plans were.

It wasn't very long into my explanation that she decided to change the subject, asking me whether I appreciated her. It was such an odd phrase that I had to consider what she was asking, and the proper moment to reply passed before I had an answer. Realizing that it looked as if I were contemplating the question far more deeply than I was, I quickly replied that I didn't know what I was feeling at the moment.

With the boldness that had initially surprised me but now I had started to expect from her, she said that I was always overthinking things. I knew this only too well, but she added that I really should just know what I'm feeling without having to think about it. Girls like guys who are in touch with their emotions, she hinted, and I wondered whether this was the time for this conversation. Telling her that I wasn't the kind of guy who cries during sad movies, I turned towards Lith and the grandson, who had finished talking.

As the grandson walked away, I asked Lith what they had discussed, but Lith only managed to say they had discussed shield techniques before people began to start shouting behind us. I turned around quickly, to see Ulcik and who he had brought with him.

He was walking towards us with arrogance deep in each of his steps. He didn't look at all as if any of what had happened before had effected him at all, as if the rest of the players sending him off to die was something insignificant. It wasn't until this moment that I knew that this final stage was more important than any other.

To his right were three people. The Fat woman warrior was there, her allegiance to Ulcik unquestioned. Next to her was Selenia's ex-boyfriend, the man I had killed twice before and now wanted to kill so dearly for a third time. And to his right was a teenager who I could only guess was an idiot who had decided to pledge unwavering loyalty to Ulcik on his very first event.

To his left were, to my surprise, only four others. Rubedo and Promeus, along with the black scaled and the gray armored warriors. Tiberian, Corpus, and the plate-wearing hammer wielder were not there, and my opinion of those three skyrocketed, even if the reason they weren't there was because they had died.

Ulcik stopped a good distance away, and his entourage stopped a little behind him. The crowd within the field moved towards the edges, encircling Ulick's group as well as ours, as if staking out the arena in which we would battle. The tension rose rapidly as everyone simply silently watched and waited, taking in both sides and trying to determine by sight alone which one would win.

The eight of them stood across the field from the nine of us. Hardule stood in the center, with Lith on his right, me on his left. Selenia stood next to me, a quiet rage inside of her as she stared at her ex-boyfriend, who stared at her with equal intensity. The rest of the girls looked nervous, as if for the first time realizing that they'd actually be fighting.

Ulcik began what sounded like the start of a speech, but Hardule called out over him to shut up and fight. Ulcik paused, but then tried to continue, but Lith told him once again that no one wanted to hear what he had to say.

Ulcik, looking furious, said something to his companions, and they started to run towards us.

The people he had imported from the medieval combat recreation society were far faster than their allies, and all of them were heading in my direction. They looked as if they were racing to reach me first, and I did what any smart man would do.

I shouted for everyone to head into the castle and ran. Fighting them in an open battle would be insane, since those four warriors were more than enough to defeat us. We needed to go to a place where we could try to defeat them in detail. Once inside, I realized I needed to make a slight deviation from my original plan.

Originally, I had planned on Hardule, Lith, Selenia, and I being the only ones, enabling us to maneuver fairly quickly inside the castle. With the addition of five teenage girls who were actually starting to panic, we wouldn't be able to move anywhere as quickly as we needed to.

Once inside the castle, my memory attempted to combine with what I was seeing, a map of the layout reforming in my mind. The core of the building was a sturdy, enclosed structure that even had a second level, while the rest was an open roofed semi-labyrinth made of standing plywood. It was thankfully brighter than it had been when I last visited, and everything was just as I remembered.

The spectators outside the castle would be unable to see what was going on inside, but they would certainly be able to hear it. I would have preferred if everyone could watch Ulcik get defeated, but actually defeating him took priority. With walls obstructing everyone's vision, we could hope to separate and defeat Ulcik's group.

Only thirty seconds within the castle, I realized our own group would have to split up. It happened without any planning, just a moment passed and I realized that Lith and the five goths had separated from us. Hoping that he had some sort of plan, I continued on with Hardule and Selenia.

Deep inside the labyrinth, Selenia stopped, asking if I had been hurt at all. After healing me the 10 points of damage I had taken earlier, she asked what we should do about our plan. It was quickly unraveling, as it became clear that while we had counted on Ulcik's group being unable to remain together, we hadn't realized the difficulty of keeping together ourselves.

Deciding quickly, I said that she and Hardule would stay together, while I sought out our enemies. These two staying alive was vital, since they were needed to destroy the phylactery, and I could maneuver through the rooms and corridors more easily by myself. Hardule nodded his agreement to this plan, but Selenia looked hesitant. She looked as if she was about to say something, but there was no time for me to waste. I ran off, hoping that they would try and stay safe.

The construction didn't seem to follow any set standard, with some corridors wider than others and odd opening and exits placed almost as if by random chance. Hearing footsteps in the corridor next to mine, I followed next to them until an opening revealed Rubedo, who was only too glad to see me.

His short sword flashed out, forcing me to block with my hand. I leap back into the corridor as he entered mine, grinning a fair bit. Without hesitating I threw an ice spell at him, hoping to force him to dodge back. As it hit him, he smiled, then stepped forward, amused by my shocked expression. He was temporarily immune to ice spells, he told me, and as I cursed Ulcik we began to fight in earnest.

I was at the disadvantage. My sword was too long for fighting indoors, something I thought I would be able to learn how to deal with. In comparison, Rubedo's short sword was ideal, and he remained on the offensive, the red cape that covered his right side fluttering as he struck.

My left arm was doing the majority of the blocking, and it didn't take me long to figure out that he wasn't holding back at all. Inside these walls, far away from observing eyes, rules no longer existed unless we wanted them to. As my left arm began to shudder slightly from the pain of each of Rubedo's blows, I began to wonder if he was actually targeting my arm.

I brought it out to the side, and was surprised to see him ignore the chance for hitting my chest, instead aiming for my left forearm once again. Realizing that what I had thought had been blocking was nothing more than presenting him with the target he wanted. He was smiling at my pain, striking as hard as he could, knowing that if my left arm finally faltered, I would be only too easy to kill. He wanted to defeat me as cruelly as he could, and he was doing a very good job at it.

I knew he had a reason to be angry. I had killed him in the cheapest way I could have, and then robbed him of all his important items. My half-hearted attempts at saving his life meant nothing, and I should have expected this wrath, and perhaps I even deserved it. But now was not the time for me to atone, nor was it time for me to be defeated by an overconfident sadist who had given his worst enemy plenty of time to think.

I thrust forward my sword, intentionally missing his body. He ignored the strike, thinking it was just a wild one caused by desperation and the difficulty of the situation. But, I had managed to strike my target.

With a flourish, I whipped the edge of his cape upwards, allowing it to fall over his face. Blind, he struggled with his left hand to get it out of his face, but the one opening was all I needed.

My sword sank again and again into his left side, the 8 damage I dealt multiplying with each hit. He managed to get his cape away from his head in time for me to deal the final blow to his shoulder, forcing him to drop to his knees.

Not willing to take the chance that one of his allies would find him and revive him, I placed the tip of my sword at his heart, counted the three seconds, and dealt him a killing blow.

He looked up at me, anger and rage trembling inside of him, but I didn't have time to watch him break down. Running off, I needed to find Lith and the girls to make sure they were okay. I tried



listening them, and was certain I could hear them in the distance. Trying to navigate my way through the confusing passages, I turned a corner and was not at all happy to see what I found.

The gray armored warrior stood across a long corridor from me, standing with his axe held in front of him. He called out to me, introducing himself as Regent. I responded in kind, and he seemed rather pleased by this. Without saying anything else, he ran forward.

I whipped by sword out at him, but he blocked with his axe, holding it towards me like a shield. With a quick twist, he swung it at me, forcing me backwards.

He was excellent. Only my quick understanding of this saved me. After a brief exchange where he landed two blows for 7 damage each, I knew that I was outclassed. I kept moving backwards, not even attempting to engage him, only swinging my sword in hopes that it would keep him from simply charging straight into me. He would block with his axe easily and try to return a blow in almost the same instant, and only the reach of my weapon and my constant retreat kept him from landing a hit.

Frowning, he didn't approve of my tactic, but it wasn't long before I had run out of room. With all my hopes and dreams, I whipped a bean bag at him, hoping to halt his advance. It barely struck his arm, and he stood frozen, waiting to see what my next action was. I knew I couldn't face him in the restrictions of these corridors, and probably outside of them as well. I turned to run away, but heard him say words that made me turn around instantly.

He had cast an ice spell, the same one I had used on him, and it hit me in the chest, pinning my legs to the ground. Not even allowing myself to be surprised, I quickly pulled out another bean bag, ready to throw it at him. He also brandished one, and we both seemed to contemplate the situation.

My fire spells would kill him in time, but right now I didn't have that luxury. There were shouts coming from all around us, and I momentarily considered shouting for help. I dismissed this, since I knew full well that it was just as likely that an enemy would come rather than an ally. Though the two of us could throw ice spells at each other all day, we would be simply preventing each other from taking part in the rest of the battle, something neither of us could afford to do.

I waited, the seconds slowly passing, and it looked as if he had come to the same conclusion I did. If I cast an ice spell why he was still frozen, he would do the same in kind to me. Our only

chance to settle this was for us to wait until the spells expired, giving us the chance to dodge and react.

There was a problem though. I had frozen him before he had frozen me, by a full two second by my estimates. In those two seconds, he would be able to dodge and freeze me again, and I would simply be at his mercy. Gripping my sword in my right hand, I knew I had only one chance.

The thirty seconds ran out, and he leapt to the side, throwing his ice spell at me.

I blocked with my sword.

Regent smiled before he rushed forward, thinking that my sword counted as a target for his spell. As I dodged to the side, I threw my own ice spell at him before rolling into another corridor, out of his field of vision. He started to scream at me for having cheated, and I poked my right hand back into the room, displaying the rings on it. After telling him I had a ring of minor spell reflection, and how it allowed me to block spells as if they were weapons, he fell silent.

Knowing I would just receive an ice spell if I tried to enter the room to finish him off, I sped down the corridor away from him. I was hoping to find Lith, who more likely than not would appreciate an ally who wasn't dressed like they were attending a funeral. As I ran where I hoped he was, I heard shouts coming from a room close by, and knew I had to find my way inside.

Selenia was yelling at her ex-boyfriend, who seemed intent on trying to convert her back to his side. At first, he was pleading with her, saying that he had only joined with Ulcik for this chance to talk with her, and that it was only a matter of time before House Cerberus was killed. If she wanted him to, he could ask Ulcik to spare her, and even allow her to join his House.

Selenia's rebuttal was surprisingly rude, and I doubt she would have said it if she knew anyone else was listening. Her Ex did not seem to approve either, and stopped pleading with her, saying that she wasn't playing her character and that her character would still be with him, since they were supposed to get married.

Selenia said that his old character was permanently dead, and she had no ties with this new one. He exasperatedly told her that his new character was his old character's twin brother, and that she would naturally be more interested in him, instead of THE PERSON WHO HAD KILLED HER FIANCE. He shouted these last few words so loudly, I'm sure that everyone within the field had heard.

Realizing that I might never have a better cue ever again in my entire life, I stepped into the small room where the two of them were arguing.

He stared at me as if he had just managed to succeed in summoning the devil, a look of awe and shock with a heavy amount of fear. All of this was quickly consumed by pure rage, as he began to shout at me, telling me I was weak and that he had already killed me during this event. Selenia stared at him as if there was no way he could repulse her more.

He rushed towards me, his two-handed sword swinging wildly.

It was pathetic.

In the months since I had last seen him, he hadn't changed at all. He fell into easy patterns, his sword was slow, and he had no sense for his surroundings. It was like fighting a child, an angry child who thought that his tantrum gave him strength. I landed blow after blow, but it quickly became clear that he wasn't counting. I watched as he kept accidentally slamming his sword into the walls rather than me, his rage only increasing further.

I did nothing to help ease his anger. The mean side of me took over, and I taunted him, striking him painfully on the fingers while he screamed at me to die. Selenia faded into the background, blurred by my malice, and I only saw openings and weakness in my opponent's defense.

With a hard strike to his hands, he dropped his sword, yelling in pain and rage. I smiled at him, a perfectly villainous smile, laughing at how pathetic he was. No sword in hand, he charged at me, screaming and yelling, and I watched amused, wondering what he would do.

He punched me in the face.

I staggered back, surprised not only by the punch but the fact that it had managed to hit me. The pain suddenly woke me, and I saw Selenia again, looking scared as she stared at the two of us.

The punch seemed to wake him from his trance as well, and he stared at me in horror. We all stood, silent, not certain what to do next. I suddenly felt ashamed, and I turned away from the two of them, reaching up at my face to try and see if I could feel any damage. He didn't miss the chance.

He ran, picked up his sword, and then rushed past me, running off into the labyrinth. I let him go, wondering what Selenia thought of what had just happened. Looking at me rather solemnly, she said that I had been hurting him. I didn't say anything, but slumped down against a wall, feeling that a break would be a good idea.

After a moment, she asked if I was hurt. Without thinking, I said that I had taken 14 points of damage, and she looked surprised. A moment passed, and it became apparent that if I cared more about my fictional injuries than any others were negligible. As she healed me, I noticed something was wrong, and I asked where Hardule was.

She said he had gone after Ulcik.

Swearing, I stood up, knowing that Hardule didn't stand a chance against the Lich. I almost set off running, before I realized that while Selenia did have a few offensive spells now, she was still primarily a healer, and leaving her by herself was something only an idiot like Hardule would do. She understood my intent, and we set off, weaving through the corridors, listening for sounds of battle.

It looked like other people had also been listening for battle, and had overheard ours. At the end of the corridor stood Promeus, Regent, the fat woman warrior, the misplaced teenager, and the ex-boyfriend. The ex-boyfriend shouted at us with rage, then ordered the rest of them to hunt us down. The five of them started heading towards us, and we quickly turned around, racing away from them.

Selenia, amidst all her wonderful attributes, wasn't anywhere near as fast as I was. Thankfully, the group behind us also were slowed down thanks to losing sight of us behind corners and bends. Even so, they managed to stay on our trail fairly well, try as I might to shake them.

Realizing that this was the majority of Ulcik's force, calling for help meant that the odds were in our favor that anyone who'd come would be an ally. Shouting for help, I led Selenia by the hand through corridors and rooms, hoping that the group behind us wouldn't catch up.

I heard Lith. He was in a direction I wanted to avoid thanks to a long, unbroken corridor, but I decided to take the chance. Passing into the corridor, I heard shouts from behind me, and I cursed, taking a guess at who was the first to reach us. The gray warrior was racing towards us, his intent clear.

Then, I heard shouts coming from in front of me. Hope rose in me, as I saw Lith standing, his shield in front of him, with the five girls behind him, shouting for us to keep running.

Regent didn't slow down, and Lith advanced forward. I shouted at him that he didn't stand a chance, but Lith ignored me, continuing forward. As I passed him, I realized something.

He wasn't holding his sword.

With both hands on his shield, he approached Regent, who stopped, looking intrigued at Lith's lack of a weapon. He swung his axe with blinding speed at Lith, who brought up his shield with time to spare. The gray warrior launched another attack, but Lith's shield moved fast enough to block again, his two arms moving it far faster than he could do it with only one.

They were at a standstill, but the rest of Ulcik's group was coming down the corridor as well. I moved behind Lith, trying to get a strike in, but Lith's shield blocked me just as much as it blocked our opponent's. Finally, our five enemies were altogether, right in front of Lith, and I heard him shout a command at the five girls.

Four of them began to throw spells. Most were weak, pathetic spells, and their aim hadn't improve at all, but within this corridor our enemies had no room to dodge. The fifth girl, the shuffling one who had chosen to be a warrior, was handing bean bags to each of her friends as quickly as she could, and the five of them were raining down a torrent of spells on our foes.

They struggled, trying to dodge at first, but it was like trying to dodge rain drops. Regent cast his ice spell at Lith, who shrugged, immune to it and not really interested in moving to begin with. I

realized now what the old man's grandson had told Lith, this technique of using both hands on his shield. Though it was useless when by himself, with an ally Lith was practically invincible. Regent was now moving with speed that was truly awe-inspiring, managing to get a few hits in out of sheer determination, but Selenia's healing kept Lith well away from any danger.

I could see Ulcik's group struggling to do the math as spell after spell hit them, and it wasn't long before the teenager dropped after getting hit by three spells at once, probably just to save his brain from trying to do the calculations. Finally, but much too late, they realized just how quickly they were taking damage, and that retreating was the best option.

As they moved back, we moved forward. The fat warrior woman soon collapsed, the barrage of spells being too much for her, and she blocked a good portion of the corridor. Selenia had joined casting spells, and a well-aimed spell took down her ex-boyfriend, who slumped down next to the woman.

Then, Promeus charged. Regent quickly got out of his way, and he slammed his shield into Lith's, a blow that threw him backwards. Catching Lith before he fell to the ground, I saw that this was something that could really hurt someone, so I called out to Promeus, saying that what he just did was much too dangerous.

Promeus ignored me, took his position, and charged forward once again. I watched as Lith braced himself, and I shouted at Promeus to stop. He kept moving, focused on slamming his shield as hard as he could into us, completely oblivious to the dark shape that had crawled forward from beside us.

Turned to the side and curled up in a ball, I saw the shuffling girl place herself right into Promeus's path. I shouted at her to get out of the way, but it was too late.

Promeus tripped spectacularly. There was a brief moment where everyone saw him become airborne, a look of horror on his face as he continued to head towards Lith. Thankfully, he managed to turn his head so that his face wasn't what collided with Lith's shield, but his head slammed into the wood all the same and he crumpled to the ground.

Before I could shout at the girl, before I could check to see if Promeus was alright, I heard Lith exclaim that what just had happened was awesome. The tension disappeared immediately, and I saw Regent unable to conceal a smile. We all stopped, and I bent down, asking Promeus if he was okay.

He muttered that he took harder hits at the recreation society, and slowly got up, taking his position next to Regent, still looking disoriented. As we started up the game again, the two of them turned around to run, but I caught Regent with my ice spell, while Promeus was hit by another barrage of spells from the girls. Regent, unable to dodge, fell shortly afterwards.

I took a moment to catch my breath before moving forward, dealing killing blows to each of our enemies. With the five of them dead, and Rubedo having also been dealt with, that only left the black scaled warrior and Ulcik himself. Listening, I realized that the sounds of the crowd outside were much louder than they had been before. With a sudden realization, I told everyone to head outside, running as fast as I could.

Lith struggled to keep up, but was left far behind along with the others as I headed for the exit of the castle. My hatred of Ulcik only increased, as the bastard hadn't even bothered to enter the castle, instead sending his minions at us. As I got closer and closer, I began to hear Hardule and Ulcik shouting, and I cursed at Hardule for being so goddamn stupid.

Outside, I was relieved to see Hardule still standing. He was shouting out spells, casting them at Ulcik and the black scaled warrior with a degree of skill that I had never seen before. Ulcik was hit by several spells, but seemed to not care at all, casting spells almost lazily at Hardule. The warrior was surprisingly keeping his distance from Hardule, and when it looked as if he was about to run forward, Ulcik would call him back.

I ran up to Hardule, who was gasping for breath between spells. When he looked at me, he smiled, stumbling slightly as if he just realized how tired he was. With a tired, low voice, very unlike the way he had been shouting his spells, he told me he had managed to deal 10 ice damage and 10 fire damage to the sword, though it had cost him a good chunk of his own HP.

I had wanted to yell at him, to call him an idiot for going out on his own, but instead I smiled, saying he'd done well.

My arrival seemed to trigger something in Ulcik. No longer content to lazily cast spells, he started flinging them towards us, and the black scaled warrior rushed forward, apparently now free from Ulcik's tether.

He came straight at me, and I rushed towards him, both of us understanding the importance of this battle. We were both almost too eager to battle, intent on finally settling this. He was the last wall between me and Ulcik, and I was the one that he needed to kill above all else.

Our swords clashed, and I saw that he didn't manage to perform a clever parry, the force of my sword too much for him to throw it off. He struggled under the pressure for a moment, before returning it with equal force. We each leapt back, and I smiled, knowing that this would not be like our last two battles.

In the first one, he had defeated me cleanly, not giving me a chance to even react. In the second, he had avoided me, attacking my friends instead. This time, however, I was not allowing him to go anywhere near Hardule.

He tried to run past me, but I attacked him again and again, forcing him to block. As I tried a strike against his shoulder, I sensed his parry, but continued the strike anyway. He blocked, and with a wicked twist of his sword swung it down upon me.

Raising my left hand, I blocked the strike with it, then struck him hard in the side for 8 points of damage. I smiled, then tried striking him again, but he lifted his own left hand, blocking my sword.

He didn't need to tell me he also had bracers. We simply kept fighting, and I pushed him further and further away from Hardule.

And Ulcik.

Realizing my mistake far too late, I turned and rushed back towards Hardule, ignoring my opponent. How could I have done something so stupid? How could I have left Hardule alone to fight Ulcik?

It happened when I was only a few feet away from him. Hardule and Ulcik had each exchanged spells, but Hardule's had not been an instant kill spell.



Ulcik had merely uttered the word "Death," and as the beanbag struck Hardule, I shouted with rage, then hopelessness, and then sorrow.

I had been relying on Hardule to destroy the phylactery, but that was pushed out of my mind as I watched Hardule collapse. Unlike me, who could die but be resurrected several times because I was low level, Hardule had long past that point.

His death was permanent.

I didn't think I would cry. It was stupid of me to. But Hardule's expressionless face was frozen as he lay on the ground, looking as dead as his character was. Blinking back tears, memories of the battles we had fought together flooded towards me.

Nothing. We had struggled for nothing. House Cerberus had lost its most important member, all because we had wanted to teach Ulcik a lesson. All because I had rushed away from him to fight.

I heard Lith also begin to scream, and I saw him running. He disappeared from my field of vision, which had narrowed intensely. With Hardule dead, Ulcik's death would be meaningless, but he would suffer it all the same.

Ulcik was laughing. Laughing in a way that hurt me. I struggled to keep focused, my mind whirling, and I knew I had to settle on a single thought to keep my sanity. Ignoring my hatred or my sorrow, I settled on the single thought that Ulcik needed to die.

I ran at him, but the black scaled warrior had move between us, protecting his master. I struck hard and fast, my fury seeping into my attacks, but this made them easy to predict and easy to dodge. Struggling to keep myself from being reckless, I watched as he pushed me backwards, away from Ulcik, who was content to watch my struggle, still laughing.

As I fought, I noticed that while I was being forced to dodge backwards, the attacks were not coming as quickly as they had been before. With a sudden realization, I saw that he was fighting more defensively, and as I swung my sword I forced him to forego an attack and block with his arm. Seeing no reason for him to not be fighting all out, I wondered if he was doing it subconsciously, a sign of how wounded he was. Intending to use Hardule's legacy of damage, I pulled a beanbag out of my pocket.

Ulcik responded with a smile, and I saw that the warrior didn't seem at all threatened. Ulcik must have cast a ward on him to protect against my ice spell, but that showed just how little he understood about me. Given the choice between the two, I preferred fire.

I said the spell and threw it before he realized what had hit him. As he took the 7 fire damage from my most powerful spell, the one I could only cast once a day, he dropped to his knees. His sword, the phylactery, dropped to the ground, it's protector finally defeated.

Ulcik was furious. He began to cast spell after spell, forcing me backwards away from the sword, bellowing at everyone and everything. Even though he was the only one left, this would be the greatest challenge yet, as he was by far the most powerful collection of stats ever assembled in one person that ever existed in this LARP.

Shouts came from behind me, and I turned to see Lith and the girls rushing towards me. I was about to rebuke Lith and ask him why he had left me to fight against the warrior by myself, but I was only too glad to see him. Even more than him, I was glad to see the four mage girls, who I could only hope had a lightning spell they could use to destroy the phylactery.

With all of House Cerberus assembled before him, Ulcik should have been afraid. But his smile, his disgusting smile, suddenly brought his character sheet back into my memory.

I started to shout at everyone to get back, that I was the only one who could fight him, but it was too late. With an exaggerated flourish, he dropped a beanbag to the ground, announcing that he had just cast Fire Storm, dealing 10 fire damage to everyone in a 50-foot radius.

The first spell I had ever seen him cast swept past me, my ruby ring protecting me from the damage. No one else was as lucky.

Two of the girls, only first level mages, dropped from that single spell. As I shouted for the rest to run back, Ulcik cast Fire Storm again, dropping all the teenage girls.

Selenia looked torn, and moved towards the girls, in order to try and heal them so that they wouldn't die. I shouted again, shouted desperately for her to run, but Ulcik's third Fire Storm

was cast just as she managed to get one of the girls to stand, who fell over again. Tears in her eyes, she turned to run, but Ulcik's fourth Fire Storm ripped into her, forcing her to her knees.

Lith, the horror of what had just happened gripping him, was breathing hard. He could barely have any HP left, and I screamed, screamed as hard as I could, for him to stop being an idiot and to get the hell away.

He smiled, and charged forward.

Ulcik seemed amused. Holding his beanbag over him, he seemed to be waiting until Lith was only a few feet away before he finished him. I kept screaming at Lith, though I knew it was too late for him to turn back.

He ran at Ulcik as fast as he could, his shield flung away with his sword held high. I almost couldn't watch, but I knew I had to, out of my duty to him as a friend.

Then, before he reached Ulcik, he rolled to the side, striking twice at the sword that lay a few feet from him, calling out 5 lightning damage each time.

Ulcik looked confused, but I noticed it. On Lith's finger was the unique ring I had entrusted to Hardule, and I turned to look at our fallen friend, who was smiling despite his death.

Lith pointed to his ring, telling him what it did, and Ulcik's slow brain finally managed to understand what it all meant. With a look of absolute fury, he threw down the beanbag, casting his fifth Fire Storm, and I watched as Lith fell to the ground.

Looking around, I saw the remnants of House Cerberus, reduced to one lone fighter in a matter of minutes. A cold wind swept over the field, and I turned to look at my enemy, who smiled at the destruction he had caused.

Ulcik stared at me, looking down at my fingers. He saw the black-and-ruby ring, and knew why I was still standing.

He sneered, as if he was about to say something, but he said nothing, knowing I would hear none of it. Right now, I knew that I was the only one who had a chance to defeat him, perhaps who ever had a chance to defeat him, and it would take everything I had in order to do so.

He threw an instant kill spell at me, and I dodged to the side. He threw another, and I dodged again, moving closer towards him. He raised a beanbag as if to throw it at his feet, but hesitated.

He realized what I had figured out. That all of his area spells dealt fire damage.

He tried another kill spell, but I blocked it this time with my sword. He looked triumphant for the briefest of seconds, before remembering another ring I possessed. Another instant death spell was blocked by my sword, and now he was within my range.

I hit him, again and again as he ran backwards, thinking of what he could do while I blocked another kill spell aimed at me. Victory started to look not only possible to me, but inevitable. He had nothing he could do against me, and his HP dwindled with each strike.

Then, as if fate decided to mock me, teaching me that I had learned nothing in these last several months, I blocked a spell instinctively, not realizing what word he had said before he had cast it.

"Shatter."

He crowed triumphantly, watching as I discarded the destroyed weapon, savoring the moment as much as he could. As my brain raced as to what to do, Ulcik stepped towards me, a kill spell in his hand. He threw it at me, a savage look in his eye, as he was about to finally do what he had desired for months.

I caught the spell. Holding it in my hand, I turned it so that he could clearly see my ring, the one that allowed me to block spells as if they were weapons, before saying "Bracers," the ability to block weapons with my hands.

His triumphant look deflated slightly, but he still thought he had the upper hand. As he threw spell after spell at me, I taught him otherwise. Blocking spells with my hands was easier than

blocking them with my sword, and I snatched the bean bags out of the air, dropping them to the ground. Even so, he continued to try, thinking that I had no way of returning an attack.

He followed me, trying to keep close, but I kept my distance, leading him around the field until I arrived at the place I wanted to be. Picking up the phylactery from between the bodies of the black scaled warrior and Lith, I turned to face Ulcik.

He immediately threw a Shatter spell at me, forgetting what he knew perfectly well. I blocked it with the sword, and Ulcik's eyes widened, knowing that this was a weapon that could only be destroyed in a very, very specific way. It was his stupidity, which must be infinite, that made him decide to make his phylactery the one and only weapon type that I could use.

I started to cut away at him with the sword, and he started to scream at me. I ignored him, continuing to deliver blow after blow into his fat body, and he changed tactics, trying to plead for me to stop. With a look of pure disgust, I silenced his pathetic whimpers.

Finally, he said that I couldn't kill him with the sword, because as long as the phylactery remained, he would return, in full strength. I knew full well that he only said this because he thought I didn't know that the sword needed to consume a soul in order to revive him, that he was trying to lie his way out of death.

Pulling back the blade, I asked him how much HP he had left.

He smiled, saying that he had only five, meaning a single strike would kill him.

It was a hard strike.

It wasn't just me. It was everyone. Everyone who wanted this man punished. Everyone who had been forced to carry him on their shoulders, everyone who had refused to. There was no wrath in the blow, just pure and simple justice, which I knew would hurt him far more.

I stabbed at his belly, thrusting him backwards, where he fell over in a heap. He started to protest, to vent and rage, but I had no time for him, no time to savor the victory I had wanted for so long.

My healing spells, the weakest of their kind, could only restore fallen players within five minutes of them falling, and I had no idea how long I had been fighting against Ulcik. Rushing over to Lith, I placed a hand on his shoulder, and was relieved to see my healing spell bring him back. Not even waiting for him to stand, I ran towards where Selenia lay upon the ground, healing her as quickly as I could.

Dramatically, she once again pretended to wake up slowly, as she had upon the table in the seshnik cave, and feigned surprise as she sat up to look at me. A part of me wished to act out our reunion, but I was too busy running towards Hardule.

I stopped.

My last remaining healing spell couldn't save him. No healing could. He was dead beyond dead, the character he had played since the very beginning of this LARP. Bitterly, I knew that killing Ulcik had not been worth it.

Grasping the sword, the phylactery we had worked so hard to destroy, I continued walking over towards Hardule. He had died valiantly, and he deserved all the respect we could give him.

I sensed someone behind me, and turned to look. Selenia had wasted no time, and I saw the five girls standing, cheering and shouting to each other. Lith walked past them, not sharing their mirth, and stopped next to us, staring down at Hardule, who was lying with his eyes closed.

Holding out the sword in front of me, over Hardule's body, I said "For Hardule," before channeling my final healing spell into the sword, healing it for 4 points of damage.

Selenia, knowing what else needed to be done, stretched out a hand to touch the sword, and said "For Hardule," before healing it for the remaining 6 damage.

Lith, perhaps feeling somewhat left out, also stretched his hand to touch the sword, and said "For Hardule," before simply staring down at our fallen friend.

People started cheering. Or, perhaps they had been cheering for a while. I watched as the spectators rushed towards us, their voices a singular blend of a myriad of praises. Somehow, it all seemed distant, unreal.

The Monster Leader was saying things that didn't matter, Vlaine and Rhend were talking about the meaningless battle, and everyone was ignoring how Hardule had sacrificed himself in order to make sure that Ulcik would remain dead forever.

Ulcik was not taking his defeat calmly. He started to shout and scream about cheating and conspiracies, launching the Monster Leader into an argument defending our victory.

They shouted at each other, finally revealing all the hostility they had for each other, only for a brief moment. I turned to see why they had stopped, and saw the last Plot Master, the one who even now reminded me of a gnome.

He said he had watched the entire battle from the second level of the castle, looking upon the plywood maze. He said that Ulcik's forces had been defeated fairly, and he didn't need to say anything about the battle that took place in the field, as it was clear that Ulcik had been defeated without anyone able to say otherwise.

Looking at the Monster Leader, he said that he was surprised, that in all of this fighting that he had assured had not been just to kill Ulcik, no one had made mention that they had been fighting for a prize.

The Monster Leader looked ashamed for the briefest of moments, but the gnomish Plot Master continued, saying that he had planned the prize to be something that Ulcik would have really wanted, but it was now a question of whether the victors would also like to receive it. They would find it in the ruins of the castle, he reasoned.

Pulling out a piece of paper, he walked forward, people moving to get out of his way, until he stood in front of me. He simply said that I deserved it, an almost mischievous look in his eyes, before turning around as I read the title of the piece of paper.

Scroll of True Resurrection.

End of Part V

### Part 3 - Epilogue

There was only a little time left of the event, and everyone seemed more than content to simply discuss what had taken place, swapping stories and exaggerated accounts.

Hardule wasn't helping much, telling anyone that would listen about how he had journeyed through Hell itself in order to return from being permanently dead, and had to literally fight through an army of monsters. I was just glad that I wouldn't have to hear him whine about losing his character, which he certainly would have done for several months, and let him say whatever he wanted.

As the best known Leader of House Cerberus, who had fought against the town itself in order to save them from an evil Lich, he was constantly surrounded. In the little time left in the event, House Cerberus had grown to include minor noble houses within it and a full third of the members of the LARP.

Lith's popularity also had dramatically increased, and he was constantly surrounded by the four teenage girls who had served as his artillery. He seemed to enjoy the attention as well as their company, responding quite earnestly to their questions about death and other silly things teenage girls obsess about.

The fifth member of the goth girls seemed interested in applying for a job as my shadow, the sound of her shuffling constantly behind me. Finally, I asked her the question that I had been wanting to ask her for ages.

She blushed, and answered that the reason she shuffled her feet was because tiny little steps were cuter than big ones.

As the event came to a close, everyone gathered inside the inn, where the Monster Leader started the closing ceremony. The gnomish Plot Master was smiling, and no one seemed at all displeased by the lack of Ulcik. As the events of the weekend were recounted, there was a moment where the Monster Leader paused, as if he was going to say something more than just a brief summary, but he chose not to. The ceremony finished, the event finally over, we all prepared to leave the LARP.



The girl who thought shuffling around was "cute" followed me as I said my goodbyes. Vlaine eyed me suspiciously, making a few jokes I'm sure he thought were good natured. He was already planning his next constant NPC, though he admitted that he might just end up making another old wizard. He then told me when his next game was planned, and I said I'd make sure to be there.

Rhend and the Monster Leader were at the Cave, getting things organized. A lot of things needed to be done before the next event, including promoting a new Plot Master, as Ulcik had been quietly banned from the entire LARP shortly after his death. He had protested, but threats of legal action quickly shut him up.

Ulcik was gone. His fat little girlfriend ran around searching for him, calling out for him, but it looks like he had left early. The Monster Leader said she had threatened to quit if Ulcik left, but the general opinion had been "good riddance."

I made sure to thank the old man and his grandson, since they had really helped us out. The old man said that he was really glad to have come, and he said he had a great time with his grandson.

Ulcik's squad of seven ended up approaching me, though I think I would have preferred not meeting them. They said I should join their medieval combat recreation society, but I just replied that I'd think about it. They asked if I had seen Ulcik, since he owed them a fair amount of money, and I told them I didn't plan on ever seeing him again.

With the girl still shuffling behind me, I walked over to her friends, thanking them for being excellent members of House Cerberus. They said that they might try adventuring more the next time they came, because they had started to realize how fun battles could be.

As I walked away, I realized that she was still following me, and I think we both realized who was the last person I had to say goodbye to. I tried to shake her off, but she seemed intent on staying with me. When it looked like I had no other option, I turned around to face her.

She looked as if she was holding back tears. As I told her that it had been fun LARPing with her, she bit her bottom lip, as if to stop herself from saying something that was about to burst out of

her. We stood silent, neither of us knowing what to say, until she said I hadn't said goodbye to Selenia yet. Looking directly at her, I said that was true.

After taking a deep breath, she smiled. She then told me I should go before Selenia left. I nodded, and I started to walk away. Before I had taken a few steps, she called out to me. Turning around, I saw her hesitate, as if making a hard decision, before she simply asked for my e-mail address.

Smiling, I gave it to her and received hers in exchange. We stood, only a few feet apart, before she stepped forward and hugged me. Gently patting her back, I told her that I'd definitely send her a message soon. I said goodbye to her, and went off looking for Selenia.

She was standing outside the Inn by herself. I realized that I was nervous, but I hid it well, and Selenia greeted me with a smile. We began to talk about the event, and everything that had taken place, but neither of us seemed to be really paying attention to the conversation. As our own words drifted around us, neither of us absorbing them, we stared at each other. There was an odd tension building between us, and I knew I couldn't delay any longer.

She beat me to it. Looking down at the ground, she said that it would be dinner time soon. Stupidly, I simply agreed.

Looking up, she smiled, and asked if I wanted to have dinner with her. Before I could answer, she leaned in close to me, closed her eyes, and kissed me.

It was a soft, gentle kiss. She stepped back, blushing deeply, waiting for my response. When my mind finally started working again, I said the first thing that came to it. I told her that I was heading home with Lith and Hardule, and that I'd probably be eating dinner with them.

She looked at me as if I had just said that I hated her. She took the slightest step back, as if preparing to run away, and my stupid brain nearly killed itself trying to figure out what to do next. Not knowing what else to do, I stepped forward and held her, pulling her close as I kissed her.

As I said goodbye to her, I said that I'd send her an email later tonight, to see when she was free so that we could have dinner together. She merely waved, looking somewhat dazed, as I headed off to find Hardule and Lith.

They had nearly finished packing up the car, and I saw all the gear I had brought and barely used. Glad that Hardule had never been tempted to use his ninja costume, we all got into the car, amazed that the weekend had gone so well. We traded stories and perspectives during the car ride, and we competed to see who could give the most exaggerated account of our final moments fighting Ulcik. Hardule won easily, explaining that he had been guiding us in spirit, telling us what to do. Lith laughed, saying that Hardule had almost yelled at him when he had started to pull off the lightning ring, thinking that he had just been trying to loot him.

I laughed at this too, partly because I wouldn't be surprised if Hardule would be the first one to loot one of his friends when they died. Hardule only grinned, before saying that it looked like things would definitely be changing at the LARP. With him being the head of the largest noble house, he hinted that he might actually have a chance at becoming the next Plot Master. Fearing what would happen to the LARP if Hardule was allowed any measure of control, I said he'd be better off putting in a good word for Vlaine or Rhend.

Looking back at the event, I had the feeling that most of it sounded more impressive than it had been. In truth, I had just been running around the woods, fighting imaginary monsters and people. Yet, I had also not only helped save my friends, I had defeated the man I hated the most in a way he'd never forget. Though I still hated Ulcik, perhaps more than a person should, I no longer had to worry about him or his schemes, nor would anyone else at the LARP.

Feeling peaceful, I listened as my friends started to talk about their plans for the future of House Cerberus, excited about all the possibilities they now had.

Maybe, just maybe, if they ask me to help them out, I'll join them the next time they go.

The End