

Faerun Diverge

This is a novelization of a D&D campaign I played in. Some events are paraphrased because I forgot or missed what happened, and some events are intentionally changed to add dramatic effect or flow or better as a story. Each chapter is based on a single session. I hope you enjoy the story of this campaign!

Content warning: blood, gore, sex

Chapter 1 – The Emporer

A human paladin rode his warhorse up the cliffside path near the sea. The chainmail on his chest and around his horse's body clink-clinked with each stride, and the battle-axe on his back shook. He held his horse's mane in one hand and a shield in the other. The flowers on his white shield jostled as if they were about to fall off, but their sturdy roots grounded them onto the shield. The white shield, paint chipped as it were, still proudly displayed the sun and field symbol of Lathander. The paladin's long golden hair flowed in the wind. He pulled the shield to his face and took a deep breathe. The flowers' aroma and the sea air pleased his wide nostrils. "Life," he smiled.

He rode several miles on the path, galloping the whole way. The morning sun shone brilliantly, casting his shadow towards the cliffedge. The cloudless sky let Lathander's full sunny smile bare down on the path in front of him and the many travelers therein. The paladin passed many a traveler on the way: merchants, mercenaries, tourists. All starting their day under Lathander's faithful watch. The paladin paid them no mind, except for maybe a "G'day" here and a "Good morning!" there.

But one traveler in particular caught his eye. Up ahead, what can only be described as bipedal lion walked up the path, head low, but mane in full display. He carried a halberd that he used as both his walking stick and a means to carry his knapsack.

"Hey, I want to talk to that lion." He patted his horse on the neck, pointing just up ahead.

The horse nodded, and slowed down to a walk next to the lion.

"Pardon me, but I have never seen a creature as spectacular as you. Are you a lion?"
The paladin lowered his shield to the lion's level.

The lion looked up at him, but kept walking. The lion spoke in a tongue unknown to the paladin, but seemed friendly. Sensing the paladin's confusion, the lion switched to a different language, but the paladin still didn't understand.

"/Do you speak Sylvan?/" The paladin asked in Sylvan.

"/Ah, yes I do./" The lion smiled. "/I learned the language from centaurs and satyrs in a forest about two years ago./"

"/Excellent. I learned it from the Fae myself./"

"/Well, that's what they are. Centaurs and satyrs are also Fae./"

"/Yes of course./" The paladin nodded, despite not previously knowing that. "/So, where are you heading?/"

"/I'm actually heading to this town called Waterdeep. I'm trying to get some extra coin to.../" The lion let out a low rumbling while he thought. "/Let's just say, do an important task./"

The paladin slaps his knee and hops off his horse. Walking between his horse and the lion, his 7'2" height was more apparent. "/What luck! I'm also heading to Waterdeep. I heard they need some zombies killed./"

"/Well that's good! I heard there's a 200 gold offer for those that join the hunt./"
The lion extends a paw to the paladin. "/I'm Jack by the way./"

The paladin vigorously shakes Jack's paw. "/I'm Larkwren Olivento Lightbrew. I'm here to bring life and kill death. Please to make your acquaintance, Jack./"

"/Likewise./" Jack sniffs the flowers on Larkwren's shield. "/What do you worship? Or like, who?/" He gestures to the symbol on Larkwren's shield.

Larkwren dons a huge smile. "/Lathander! The god of Dawn, Renewal, Spring!/" He traces the symbol: first the sun, the horizon, and then the fields. "/And who do you serve?/" He nods at Jack's necklace.

Jack grimaces. "/I serve under Aslan, the Lion Spirit./"

“/What is he the god of?/”

“/He’s not a god; just an animal spirit, that I serve./”

“/An animal spirit? I can get behind that! Welcome brother in life!/” Larkwren pats Jack on the back, and Jack nearly drops his halberd. “You know, one time I saved a lion from poachers. There was a group of orcs cornering this *gorgeous* lion. It had a huge puffy mane and big muscular limbs. The poor thing was scared to death. The orcs had stabbed it repeatedly and it was taking its final breathes./”

Jack looked disturbed.

“/But that’s when I came in! I rode in on Cloverbraid here./” He patted his horse on the neck. “/I sliced the orcs up good, and saved the lion from being killed. Right before it took its final breathe, Lathander intervened. He blessed my hand, and through me he healed the wounds of the lion. That lion lived to breathe—and breed—another day. Last time I saw him, he had already sired five lion cubs./”

“/Oh, well that’s good./” Jack said. “/If I ever finish this task in the future.../” He paused for a moment to think. “Let’s just say that I’ll give you a pass./”

“/A pass? I’ve always wanted one of those!/” Larkwren whispered to Jack, “/What does a pass do?/”

Jack whispers back, “/You’ll know when, if ever, that day comes. That’s all I can say./”

“/Well then I shall be glad to help you accomplish this important task. What do you have to do?/”

“/Unfortunately, I can’t tell others what I have to do to finish this important task. But I assure you, when it is finished, you will be astonished./” Jack looked at the sky.

“/It’s ok, brother. I understand./” He lightly patted Jack on the shoulder. “/Share it when you are ready./”

Jack shook his head. “/I don’t think I can until it is finished./” He looked ahead.

“/Well, what’s yours?/”

“/My task is clear, but difficult./” Larkwren looked at the ground. “/I doubt I will accomplish it within my lifetime./”

“/What is it?/”

“/To bring life, and... to kill death. But the forces of death are strong./”

“/Oh okay, yeah. That’s going to be tough./”

They walked to the front gates of Waterdeep on the south side of the city. The gate was guarded by two guards. One held a clipboard and the other held a spear.

“Pass?” He looked at Larkwren.

“No, I haven’t gotten it yet.”

The guard sighed, flipping through his clipboard. “Name?”

“I am Larkwren Olivento Lightbrew! I am here to bring life and kill death!”

“That’s great.” The guard said, absentmindedly. He wrote the name on the paper. He shifted his weight. “Just a moment, have to make sure you aren’t a criminal.”

“I can assure you, I’m not.”

“Well then you might want to avoid the Dock Ward. It’s a cesspool of criminal activity.” The guard gestured to an area of the city visible from the gate.

“They carry diseases down there?”

“No. Not any that should concern you.” The paper the guard was looking at scribbled a checkmark onto itself. The guard flipped through more papers and held out a slip the size of an identification card. “Here’s your pass. It’s good for one month. If you go to the admin building, you can get a permanent one.”

“Thanks.” Larkwren took the pass and looked at it.

LARREN LITDEW IS HEREBY PERMITTED TO ENTER WATERDEEP FOR ONE (1) MONTH STARTING ON THIS DAY, THE 7TH OF CHESS. REASON: ZOMBIE SLAYING

Larkwren smiled. “Ah, so this is a pass.”

“Yes.”

"Which way to the palace?"

"Take High Road up to Waterdeep Way, then it will be on your left."

"Highway up to Waterdeep Road, got it." Larkwren nodded. He led his horse through the gate.

Jack soon got through the gate too, going through a similar process.

"/I got a pass./" Larkwren held up the pass.

"/So did I./" Jack showed it before placing it in his knapsack.

"Do you need a guide?" A lady guard on the inside approached them.

"No, I know where I'm going." Larkwren nodded to the Dock Ward.

"You don't want to go there, sir."

"I'm just going to check to see if they have diseases or not. Real quick."

"No, you don't want to go there."

"Thanks." Larkwren brushed off the lady guard. He walked with Cloverbraid and Jack to the Dock Ward.

"Guards!" The lady guard yelled. Two guards also on the inside came to her side.

"Please escort this adventurer and his party to the throne room."

The guards escorted Larkwren, despite his unwillingness, and his two friends. They got to the castle and went inside.

There, they waited in the lobby for a meeting with the emporer. After a while, several more adventurers arrived. Two short humans with cat ears and a tail walked in with a giant armored soldier.

"Hello!" Larkwren greeted them. "I'm Larkwren Olivento Lightbrew. I'm here to bring life and kill death!" He held out his hand to the armored soldier.

The soldier stood there. Its glassy grey eyes stared into Larkwren's through the tiny gaps in its helmet. Its wood-jointed armored arms hung at its side. Its metal plating was covered in moss from head to toe. A little smiley face had been smudged out of the moss on the side of its shoulder where it couldn't see. The

sword on its back matched the shape of the sword symbol etched into its shield, which also had the same sigil carved into it as the being's chest. The armored soldier didn't say anything, but rigidly moved its hand up to greet Larkwren, but didn't connect with his hand.

Larkwren met him where he was at, and shook his metal hand. It barely moved an inch. "Nice to meet you, metal man." Larkwren then turned to the cat people.

The first cat person had a large red hat with a long white feather. Her cat ears laid flat under her wide-brimmed hat. Her long blonde hair poured out of her hat, stretching down to her blonde-furred tail. Her red robe was lined with gold seams and pockets, with sleeves stretching down her arms to her black leather gloves. Each hand rested on a rapier on either side of her hips. "I'm Miko, and I'm here to kill zombies." She smiled as she shook Larkwren's hand.

"Excellent!" Larkwren knelt down to his her hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Miko."

"Pleasure's all mine. And this here is E'Zhule." She gestured to the other cat person.

"Hey." He waved, then put his hands back in his pockets. His hands were still clearly visible from inside his black jacket pockets. His blue-furred ears peeked out from the hairy black mess that he called a hair style. He blew strands of hair out of his eye, but they fell back anyway. The sword on his back pointed to his swishing blue tail. He looked at Larkwren's outstretched hand for a moment, then shrugged. He didn't shake it.

"What a fine lad." Larkwren frowned. He then gestured to his lion friend. "This is Jack. He doesn't speak common. And this is Cloverbraid." He hugged his horse's neck. "We're all here to kill zombies!"

"Here! Here!" A voice called from behind Miko's hat.

"Oh, yeah!" Miko took off bag. A metal head appeared out of it. "This is Rust."

"I am Rust. I am rust." The metal robot said. Its whole head was orange from years of rotting. Despite not being in full view, it was plain to see that the robot wasn't all there. It waved an arm in greeting, but it was missing fingers that fell off from being rusted through. Not an inch was shiny or polished. "I am on my last legs."

“Yes, Rust. But don’t worry, we’ll get that money from killing zombies and we’ll fix you right up. Don’t you worry.”

“Yay.” It said as Miko pushed it back into the bag.

“You’re the adventurers?” A guard came into the room.

Larkwren nodded as he rested his hands on his hips.

“The emporer will see you now. Follow me.”

“Excellent.” Larkwren followed first, and then Cloverbraid.

“Whoa whoa there.” The guard gestured to halt. “The horse stays.”

“Sorry Cloverbraid,” he said while stroking her snout. “I’ll be back real quick.”

Cloverbraid snorted and stomped a hoof.

“Yes, don’t worry, I won’t sign anything without you.”

“Don’t worry, sir, your horse will be taken care of while you’re in the meeting.” The guard assured him as he led the party through the castle. The way was long and winding. Navigating this without a map would be difficult.

The guard led them to a small room that had just enough seats for each of them along the walls. The entryway was built for normal human height, making Larkwren have to duck to get in. He sat on one of the seats, tensing his muscles, trying to keep the seat from breaking under his weight. He and the other adventurers faced a desk with piles of papers and notes on it. Behind it sat an empty chair, and the three slit windows that illuminated the room with natural light from the morning sun.

A large man pimped out in jewelry materialized in front of the chair. He was a balding old man in fancy dress, who was nevertheless large at 6’0”. He appeared no less large as he sat in the chair. The snake around his neck relaxed its neck on his shoulder. Each of his fingers held a unique ring, including a gold ring, a brain ring, a ruin-etched jewel ring, and an envelope ring. He opened the envelope ring and pulled out a stack of tiny papers. He slapped them on the desk, and they grew to a normal paper size. Despite his old age, he gave off a divine energy so strong it felt blinding to Larkwren’s paladin senses. “Aha! It’s the adventurers going down to the

ancient gnome city!" He stroked his snake's scales. "My name is Galya. You may call me Emperor Galya." He flicked his finger, sending a paper floating to each adventurer. "This is the contract you are required to sign. Sign here, here, and here."

Larkwren looked at the contract, stumped. "Emporer Galeo?"

"Galya. Galya."

"Emperor Galya?" Larkwren stood up, crouching below the ceiling.

"Yes, Larkwren?"

"Excuse me for one moment. I need to go talk with—I mean, see—my horse. Just real quick."

"With the contract?"

"Yes." Larkwren nodded, already heading out the door.

Emperor Galya snapped. A blue guard appeared. "Escort him to his horse."

The blue guard bowed and did just that. It guided Larkwren through the winding corridors to his horse.

"Well, Cloverbraid, you were right." Larkwren brought the contract to his horse.

"They asked me to sign a contract first thing. No greeting, no ale, no nothing. Just straight to business."

Cloverbraid gave a smug look and snorted.

He crouched down and held the contract in her vision. "What do you think?"

The horse turned her head this and that, scanning the page.

I, Lorkwen Litebrue, DULY ACCEPT THIS QUEST TO SLAY ZOMBIES. I WILL COMPLETE THIS TASK AND REPORT BACK TO EMPEROR GALYA (*ALL HAIL GALYA*) IN A TIMELY MANNER. I WILL NOT DEVIATE FROM THIS TASK UNTIL IT IS COMPLETED. I AM HONOR BOUND TO EMPORER GALYA (*ALL HAIL GALYA*) UNTIL I COMPLETE THIS TASK.

REWARD: 300 GP

SIGNATURE:

DATE: 7TH OF CHESS

Cloverbraid snorted, stomped her hoof, and shook her head.

Larkwren hugged her neck. "Thank you, Cloverbraid." He approached the blue guard. "Ok, take me back to the emperor. The blue guard guided him back.

When he reentered, hunched over as he was in that room, everyone else had finished signing the contract and were giving it back to the emperor.

"Well?" Emperor Galya eyed Larkwren.

"I will not sign it." Larkwren handed the unsigned contract back to the emperor.

The emperor was unamused. "Is it because you don't know how to write? Or read?"

"Um..." Larkwren slapped his own neck. "That is not my strong suit."

"Fine. Come here." The emperor motioned to Larkwren, sending him gliding across the floor to the emperor's desk. He flicked his wrist, and Larkwren's gauntlet slid right off, exposing his hand underneath. Pulling a needle out of one of his rings, he pricked Larkwren's finger. "All you need to do is put a drop of your blood on the signature line." He held out the contract.

Larkwren pulled his hand back, healing the prick point. "Um, no. I will not sign it."

"You must sign it." The emperor insisted.

"Look, I'll just forgo the reward. Just point me to where the zombies are."

"I can't tell you unless you sign the contract."

"Um... no." Larkwren wiped the sweat from his brow with his ungloved hand.

"If you don't sign it, then I'll be forced to expel you from the castle."

"Larkwren, we all signed it. It's ok." Miko assured.

"Not me." Rust said, just now peeking out of Miko's bag.

“What have we here?” Emperor Galya raised a hand, telekinetically lifting Rust out of Miko’s bag. His full, ugly rusted form was exposed. His legs were completely rusted through, ending in sharp metal stubs at the knee.

Larkwren grabbed Rust and held him. “If he doesn’t have to sign, then I don’t either.”

“Hold on. Yes, he has to sign.”

“Sign what?” Rust asked.

Emperor Galya floated him on over to the desk. “Here.” He handed the robot a pen. It struggled, but Rust managed to sign it. “I signed it.”

The emperor put Rust back in Miko’s bag. He looked at Larkwren. “Now it’s your turn.”

“No sorry I have to go!” Larkwren ran out, banging his head on the way out. He ran through the corridors, but got lost.

The blue guard appeared and led him to his horse, and escorted both of them out.

On the outside of the castle grounds, Larkwren and Cloverbraid waited.

“No loitering. Move along.” The guard outside the castle gates told them.

“I’m just waiting for my friends to come out.”

“Move along.”

“Why can’t I stay here?”

“Because you didn’t sign the contract.” The guard said, almost uncharacteristically.

“You know about that?”

“Yes, I had to sign a contract to become a guard too.”

“And now look at you!” Larkwren gestured. “You’re stuck here in this one spot for the rest of your live. Wouldn’t you rather be free? Exploring the world, the multiverse maybe? Or at least your very own city?”

“I voluntarily serve my emperor, and gladly. Just like you serve Lathander.”

"Hmm..." Larkwren tilted his head. Then he smiled hugely, but hid it right after.

"So, how did you become a guard, serving the emperor?"

The guard squinted at him. "I know what you're doing. I'm not going to let you talk me into letting you loiter. Move along now."

"I'll just go over here and follow the party when they come out." Larkwren mumbled under his breathe.

"And if you follow the party, you'll be arrested." The guard called out.

Larkwren cursed under his breath. He yelled back, "Wasn't planning on it!"

Cloverbraid knickers, playfully stamping her hooves.

Larkwren waited at a tavern with outdoor seating that he predicted the party would walk by. He leaned over and held out his mug to another drinker. "Cheers!"

"Cheers," said the other man.

They both took a swig of their beverages.

"So did you hear that the emperor is in town?" the man said.

"I did." Larkwren nodded.

"Have you seen him around?"

"Seen him? I met him!"

"Fishlegs! The emperor only meets with very few people."

"Well, I'm one of them."

"You're an adventurer, aren't you?" The man took a sip.

"That I am."

"And a paladin of Lathander, at that." The man grabbed Larkwren's shield to gaze upon it.

Larkwren nodded as he took another sip.

"My daughter wants to be a paladin, and is considering following Lathander. What are your thoughts?"

“By all means! Lathander welcomes all who bring life. Your daughter sounds like a fine young lass.”

“Many thanks. Could you bless this handkerchief for her?” He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket. It was brand new, pure white, and gold-trimmed.

“With pleasure.” Larkwren took and pressed it up against his shield. Closing his eyes, he said a small prayer. “Lathander, please bless this handkerchief, so that another may find their way in life.” He pulled the handkerchief away. Specks of gold, pieces of white paint, and plant fibers stained the fabric in the shape of Lathander’s holy symbol. “Here. It’s not much, but I hope this helps.”

“Many thanks. My daughter will be thrilled to hear about this. An actual adventuring paladin of Lathander!”

“Do you not have Lathander paladins here?”

“We do, right down there.” The man gestured down the road to a building obscured from view. “We have a temple of Lathander here, but the priests there never leave the city. It’s great to meet someone with your experience.”

“The pleasures all mine.” Larkwren sat up in his chair. “But hey, I do need some help.”

“Oh?”

“I just got done talking with the emperor, and I forgot where he said to go to kill the zombies. Would you happen to know where an ancient gnome city is?”

The man shrugged. “I don’t have a clue. I’m just a blacksmith.”

“Ah, well thanks anyway.”

Larkwren talked for an hour or so with the man while watching for the party to walk by.

The party was still talking to Emperor Galya.

“Do you want a donut?” Miko produced a chunky piece of baked dough with powdered sugar on top.

“Donut?” Rust peaked out of her bag.

"Sure." Emperor Galya floated the donut to his mouth and took a bite. "Very sweet."

The armored soldier took notice of Rust. "What are your features?"

"I am here to protect."

"That's why I love you!" Miko reached around behind her to pat it on the head.

"You need repairs." The armored soldier pulled out a coin purse.

"He does but I'm working on it." Miko took off her bag to look Rust in the eyes.

"Is this your master?" The soldier gestured to Miko.

"Yes."

"Nice to meet you." Miko held out her hand.

"I'm happy to hear that you are taking care of Rust. He is very important and in need of maintenance. I can afford maintenance." The soldier poured coins into Miko's open hand.

"Oh, I don't mean to take your money." Miko tried handing the money back.

"I feel fine." Rust scraped some iron oxide flakes off his chest.

"You *are* in need of repairs," noted the emperor. "And if you're going to be fighting zombies, you'll need them before you leave here to today."

"But repairs could take hours. We don't have all day." The soldier contradicted.

"Yes, so we'll need a temporary replacement." The emperor snapped his fingers, and a portal to a blacksmith's workshop opened.

Out stepped a sexy 5'8" tiefling woman wearing leather armor and a flipped-up welding mask. "What's up, daddy?"

"Cynthalia, this robot needs repairs. Give him the iron golem body in the meantime."

"You got it." Cynthalia grabbed Rust and delicately pulled out his central processing chip with a pair of pliers.

With the emperor's wizardry, an iron golem body floated out of the portal and into the room. It hit its head on the ceiling and slumped over when it entered.

Cynthalia pulled a stepladder off her back, unfolded it, and climbed onto it. As soon as she put Rust's chip into the golem, its eyes lit up and came to life.

First, its right arm spun around, nearly knocking Cynthalia off her stepladder. Then the other arm stretched outward and punched a hole in the wall. Its knees bent, and then it toppled over on its face. On the ground, its knees outstretched, pushing the stepladder out from under Cynthalia.

She screamed as she hit the ground. Spitting out carpet dirt, she muttered, "You're not used to changing bodies, are you?"

"I am new." Rust found his voice box. "I am new!"

"Is that all?" Cynthalia grabbed her stuff and headed to the portal.

"That'll be all, thank you, Cynthalia."

She left. Before the portal closed, the emperor floated Rust's old rusty limp body through it.

"This is just temporary. Once Cynthalia fixes your old body, you can go back to it."

"Great." Rust gave a thumbs up while trying to get up, causing him to fall over to one side. "Great."

"As for you..." Emperor Galya turned to the armored soldier. "You could use some new wood." The emperor did his magic, and the soldier's wooden joints were ripped off and instantaneously replaced with new wood material. "The full repair will take longer, but for now, that will do."

Miko hugged Rust. "You'll get through this, buddy. I know you'll figure this foreign body out." She watched as he learned how to control his new body.

"And about foreign bodies..." The emperor held a glowing finger and pointed it at Jack the lion. He touched his chest, sending a golden wave washing over him.

Jack was still a lion.

"Hmmm... it didn't react. Interesting."

Jack stared ahead, bewildered.

"Nevermind then." The emperor sat back down at his desk. "Now that everyone is in condition to fight, now it's time to tell you where you're going."

Jack stared ahead, bewildered.

The party soon was on their way to the ancient gnome city where the zombies were. On the way, they passed by the tavern where Larkwren was waiting.

Larkwren threw his mug of beer at the lion, who was at the back of the party. The lion turned and looked at him.

"Psst!" Larkwren motioned for him to come over. "/Do you know where the zombies are?/"

"/I didn't catch it, no. I'm following them./"

"/Ok, go on./" Larkwren stood up as Jack left. "Nice talking with you, sir."

"You too." The man took the last sip from his mug.

Larkwren turned to Cloverbraid. "Well, since we're not allowed to follow them." He put a flat hand up over his eyes. "We'll have to use *stealthiness*. Ugh!" He shuddered.

Larkwren and Cloverbraid followed the party loosely, striking up conversation with merchants and passersby along the way. While Larkwren chatted up the strangers, Cloverbraid kept an eye on the party, stamping her hoof whenever they left line of sight. They followed them this way all the way to the entrance to the Dock Ward.

The party stopped when they saw a merchant being harassed by a group of three orcs.

"Give us the money!" One orc held a bat to the man.

"Now!"

"Hey!" Miko yelled. "What's going on here?"

"Scram!" The orcs said.

“Leave that man alone!” Miko drew her rapiers.

“Do we have a problem here?” The orcs said.

“Yes.” Miko struck first, but a cramp in her hand caused her to miss.

“Get her.” The orc commanded.

“You can do this.” Rust encouraged.

Miko smiled back at him. Then with a focus of concentration, she used her other hand to pierce her rapier through the orc’s brain before he could clobber her with his club. She engulfed the same rapier with green flames, searing through the orc’s brain to let her rapier slide through and pierce the orc behind it in the heart. Both died on the spot and collapsed to the ground. But the rapier wasn’t long enough to pierce the third orc.

“Frost.” E’Zhule spoke a single word and dashed to the third orc. He pulled his sword out and immediately put it back in its sheath in an instant. But during that time it was out, a flurry of cuts appeared on the third orc. Frosty ice crystals grew from the cuts, freezing the orc’s skin as the orc died of its wounds on the ground. E’Zhule stood over the corpse, studying it. “Strong, but defenseless.”

“Are you alright?” Miko helped the merchant to his feet.

“Yes, I’m quite fine.” The merchant nervously fidgeted. “You can go now.”

“Oh! But your cart lost a wheel!”

“I’m actually working on that right now—”

“Rust!” Miko whistled.

“I can fix it.” Rust, in a new iron golem body, walked over. His 7’0” body held the sigil of the emperor but not even a smidge of dirt or rust. He effortlessly picked up the cart and the wheel and slid it on. Setting it back down gently, he said, “All done.”

“You’re welcome.” Miko waved as she and the party left.

“Thanks...” The merchant looked with disgust at the three corpses laying right in front of his shop.

Larkwren approached soon after and checked each orc. "Dead. Dead. Dead." He knelt down and said a prayer. Then he noticed the merchant, who had blood stains on his clothes. "Are you injured?"

"No, I'm fine." The merchant shivered. "Please leave."

Larkwren nodded.

The merchant puked behind his counter as Larkwren left.

Once the party exited the city through the south gate, Larkwren and Cloverbraid caught up to them. "So, where are we heading?"

Miko filled him in, and they soon found the entrance just north of the Dessarin River. It was the entrance to Dolblunde, the ancient city of gnomes.

They go in, and slide down a muddy slope to the city gates. Miko, Larkwren, Cloverbraid, Jack, E'Zuhl, the armored soldier, and Rust all enter and walk down the corridors. Larkwren dismounts Cloverbraid due to the low ceiling.

The corridor is lit by evertorches on pedestals. Closed doors line the walls, stalactites the ceiling, and bloody pebbles the floor.

Larkwren puts a hand to his ear. "/I don't sense any evil. Where are the zombies?/"

"/Maybe someone killed them already?/" Jack knocked on a door.

"/Maybe./"

Miko opened a door and peeked in. "Anyone want a donut?"

The poorly lit room didn't greet her, and neither did the flipped table or toppled chairs.

"Ah, no one's home."

"No one's home." Rust confirmed.

Miko rubbed dirt off a door. Underneath was just stone. She opened it, and a zombie popped out!

"Arrrrgh!"

Miko screamed.

Jack lunged at it, knocking it to the ground. Rust held a foot up and stepped on its head, crushing its skull.

"I don't think he wants a donut!" Miko commented.

"Ok, the zombies are here. Stay here, I'll scout ahead." Rust walked with his new long legs ahead of the group. There was a hole in the floor, and he was heading right for it. He got to the edge, and turned to the left, but instead of walking around, he fell right in.

"Ruuuust!" Miko ran to the edge of the pit. "Are you ok?"

In the pit, Rust lay on his side. Several spikes pierced straight through his chassis. The adamantine tips sparkled in the light. "It would appear that I am trapped in this hole." But with little effort, he bent the spikes out of him, and stood back up. He jumped and reached for the edge of the pit. He only lifted himself a few inches and wound up on his butt, rolling backward. "I am trapped."

"I'll get help."

"I got this." E'Zhule pushed Miko aside. "Are you willing?" He called down into the pit.

"Yes." Rust answered.

E'Zhule took a few steps from the pit, then ran straight in. He landed in Rust's arms. "Then fly!" E'Zhule's hand crackled with energy that he pushed into Rust's body.

Rust held E'Zhule as he flew out of the pit, hitting his head on the low ceiling in the corridor. E'Zhule bounced out of his arms and landed feet first on the floor. Rust fell horizontal and flew across the room into a wall. The energy of flight left him to fall onto the floor.

"Are you ok?" Miko asked.

"Yes."

The party moved around the pit and searched the doors on the other side. Miko opened a door and a spiked wooden board fell from the ceiling inside the room. Miko jumped back, dodging it completely.

"This place is booby trapped." Rust hugged Miko. "I should go ahead. I'm not as valuable."

"Now there's a good lad!" Larkwren patted Rust on the back.

"No, Rust!" Miko protested. "You *are* valuable!"

"Yes, very valuable!" Larkwren agreed, pushing Rust forward. "For finding all the traps for us."

"No! You're my friend." She reached for the next door. "You're worth more than your ability to find traps." She opened the door.

A horde of zombies moaned on the other side, approaching the door.

She quickly shut it. "I don't have enough donuts for all of them."

The zombies banged on the door, trying to burst it open.

Miko drove a rapier into the ground, stopping the door from opening.

As a last resort, the zombies started breaking down the door from the inside. They ripped a board off, and pulled another one out of its spot.

"Watch your head!" E'Zhule threw a magic bolt at the zombies, singeing their fingers.

They recoiled and stopped breaking the door. But the door also took damage in the form of a hole. A zombie reached its arm out through it and swung wildly.

Miko took a step back, but hit a fluffy wall. Looking up, she saw it was Jack.

Jack two-handed his halberd into the zombie's arm, pushing it back into the room. Black goo stuck to the edge of the halberd.

"Miko!" Rust comes over and punches a zombie, but the zombie miraculously dodges and his fist gets stuck in the door. He pulls it out, but takes a piece of the

door with him. The door falls apart from all its years of decay and minutes of recent damage.

A zombie falls out of the room and falls on top of Miko.

Larkwren intervenes and slams his shield from above right in front of Miko. The zombie falls on Larkwren's shield and Miko takes no damage.

Caught between a lion and a shield, Miko felt trapped. "I want out!" she screamed.

Rust reached around Larkwren and pulled Miko out of her position, flinging her back into open corridor. "Sorry."

"Thanks!" Miko breathed a sigh of relief as she landed on the floor. "Fireball!" Fire spread across her whole hand, engulfing it. She flung her hand, throwing the fireball into the zombie room.

The flammable zombies exploded! Bits and chunks flew everywhere. Miko ducked as a whole necrotic arm flew over her.

The ground shook as the ceiling inside the room collapsed. The remaining zombies all got crushed and the entrance was sealed. A land slide of cement and rock slid out of the room. Larkwren jumped behind his shield and ducked, not getting dirty in the slightest.

Jack stood behind the shield, but stared ahead bemused. He took a rock to the face. He winced.

"/Need some healing?/" Larkwren asked.

"/I'm fine./"

"Arrrgh!" A zombie reached for Larkwren's ankle as it writhed in pain on the ground. Its lower body was crushed by the rock avalanche, but it still hungered.

Larkwren swung his battleaxe, cutting off the arm. "DIE ZOMBIE!!" He held the axe above his head. "Lathander! Make room!" His axe glowed bright white as he brought it down onto the zombie's skull, splitting it open.

Black goo splattered everywhere. The zombie stopped writhing.

"/High five./" Jack held up a paw.

“/High five./” Larkwren slapped his hand. He turned to the group. “We found the zombies.”

=====

Back at the castle, Emperor Galya was watching the party through the astral plane. “I bet they all suck at sucking dick. Except for that Larkwren guy. He’s probably really good.” Then he jacks off to the thought of Larkwren sucking his dick. “Yeah, I bet he’s really good...” He watched the party continue through the corridor on his simulacrum.

Chapter 2 – Exploding Zombies

Down a narrow corridor bricked into an arch, Cloverbraid walked, Larkwren leaning on her as they went. The cracks in the bricks leaked water droplets that trickled into puddles. Larkwren's boots and Cloverbraid's hooves splashed through the puddles, sprinkling in drops of blood as they went.

The drops of blood dripped from Larkwren's chest. Metal and wood shrapnel stuck out from Larkwren. He trudged along, holding his chest.

"We're almost there." Cloverbraid whispered. She looked ahead at the light at the end of the tunnel.

Larkwren looked ahead, but also glanced back. No one was behind, and no one was ahead of them. They were by themselves.

They reached the end of the tunnel, and a glorious sight greeted them. A giant glowing orb cast light into every corner of the atrium. The atrium was large enough to accommodate 12 whole temples, complete with everything they need. Although the entrances to the temples were the only part visible, it was obvious that one temple was bigger than the others: the temple of Tempus, the God of War. The other temples were smaller but still spacious.

Cloverbraid scanned the other temples. There was one for Galleon, a god who once praised Larkwren for his unwavering dedication to life; Oghma, Mielikki, Sune, Gond, Tyr, Gond, Silvanus, Mystra, Tymora, Selune, Baravar, and finally, Lathander. Cloverbraid guided Larkwren to the Lathander temple.

"By Lathander!" A priest ran to Larkwren and helped him to the temple. "What happened to you?"

This priest had white robes with a golden symbol on his chest: the symbol of Lathander.

"Long story." Larkwren moaned. He let the priest guide him to a seat around a pool of water. "But I survived. Not all of us were so lucky."

The priest called for help, and four more priests gathered around. They carefully picked the pieces of shrapnel out of Larkwren. "We're going to be here awhile."

"It all started this morning, when we went to clear a dungeon full of zombies..."

=====

"Housekeeping!" Miko peeked into a door. A necrotic stench poured out of a dead body hanging from the ceiling. For whatever reason, it was saved from being raised into zombie. She pinched her nose and shut the door. "Ew."

"Why face tank the potentially trapped doors when you got this guy?" Larkwren motioned to Rust. Rust turned to him. "Keep going, my friend! That door over there needs opened!"

Rust pointed a shiny iron golem finger at a door. "There?"

"You got it!"

Rust walked up to the door and pushed it. Instead of the door busting open, the floor did. He fell down again, and flew out again.

"Rust, are you ok?"

"I'm fine." Rust gave a thumbs up.

"I don't like you putting yourself in danger like that." Miko walked up to the next door.

"So you'll put yourself in danger instead?" Larkwren's small hammer on his hip rattled.

Miko opened the door, and three zombies poured out. But she was ready and stabbed one.

E'Zhule dashes in and freezes it, right before it would have hit Miko. Miko takes the chance to stab the zombie in the frozen face, and it stops struggling. She tries shattering it with the other rapier, but her hand cramps again and she loses her grip on it when it hits the frozen solid zombie.

Rust flies in, shattering the zombie, and picks up Miko's rapier and hands it to her.

The ice shrapnel gets into the eyes of the other two zombies. They slash at Miko, but miss hilariously.

“So you put yourself in danger instead.” Larkwren shakes his head. “Nevertheless, may the life of Lathander be with you!” He lays a glowing hand on Miko and E’Zhule. The light washes over them and pools in their hands.

E’Zhule took a moment to take in the sensation, and tested it out. The calm coolness enhanced the feeling of coating his sword in ice and slashing a zombie with it.

Miko embraced it wholeheartedly, as her cramp was now gone. She stabbed the newly frozen zombie right in the heart.

The zombie behind it pushed it to the ground, dragging her rapier with it.

“Neeeiigh!” Cloverbraid charged the zombie and knocked it on its back. She trampled it with her hooves.

The armored soldier held out a fist. With his other glowing hand, he reached next to his fisted hand as if grabbing something next to it. A ghostly hilt assembled in his hand. He pulled the hilt out away from his fisted hand, spawning a glowing blue blade along the way. The completed sword floated in the air to the zombie and slashed it while it was on the ground. The armored soldier smashed his fists together, and the spirit sword plunged into the zombies heart, killing it with a flash of light.

“Yes, I guess I would.” Miko sheathed her rapiers as she walked past Larkwren.

=====

“So this cat person put her own light of life in danger for an inanimate object?” The priest pulled the last inanimate object out of Larkwren’s flesh.

“Yes, she did!” Larkwren winced. “Multiple times!”

“Such baffling behaviour.” The priest’s glowing hands sealed the wounds in Larkwren’s arms.

“That’s what I thought!” Larkwren flexed, stretching his muscles. “Well, that’s what I *thought*.” He stretched and took a deep breath. “Many thanks! I feel great!”

The priest nodded. “Is there anything else you require?”

His stomach rumbled. "I am a bit hungry."

"We are happy to accommodate an acolyte of Lathander. What are you hungry for?" The priest extended open arms and led Larkwren to the dining hall.

"Hmm..." He licked his lips. "Some buttered rolls would be nice. What do you think, Cloverbraid?"

Cloverbraid whinnied.

"We can do that." The priest had a servant set the table and provide food.

Larkwren dug into the rolls first. He buttered one up and held it out to Cloverbraid, who gladly accepted. He happily chowed down on the meal.

As he did so, the priest sat across from him. "So why did the cat person risk their lives for a hunk of metal?"

"That's a good question." Larkwren shook his fork.

=====

Rust flew ahead of the party to the next door.

"Wait!" Miko yelled.

"Go on, metal man!" Larkwren cheered.

Rust opened the next door. Zombies screech at him and punch him. They body slam, but nothing happens. Rust punches a zombie and knocks it down, then slashes the other zombie with a sword.

"See? He's impervious." Larkwren walks up and slashes a zombie.

E'Zhule attacks. Miko jolts a zombie, but misses. At the last second, the jolt glows white and swerves into the zombie. "Still, I don't like seeing him get hurt. You wouldn't like it if your horse got hurt, right?"

Cloverbraid ran up to the zombies, turned around, and kicked it with her hind legs. Then she ran off.

"Get out of here, Cloverbraid." Larkwren slapped her flank as the zombies encroached out of the room.

The armored soldier flies his ghostly sword into the zombie. It still stands.

"These zombies are strangely tough." E'Zhule slashes the zombie again, and blocks an attack to get a closer look.

The zombies were wearing more than scraps of cloth. Beneath their beggar clothes, they wore studded leather armor. Although the symbol on the front of the armor was obscured and damaged, E'Zhule could see that it was the symbol of Lathander. "Lathander." He found a hole in the armor and pierced his sword through it. The zombie fell to the ground.

The other zombie was also wearing armor. Miko jolted it as its body slammed the armored soldier, who could shrug it off. But Larkwren put his shield in between, and the momentum of the zombie caused the shield to slip in between the cracks in his armor. The armored soldier slashes his sword into the zombie while it was still on top of him. A flash of light filled the inside of the zombie, and it went limp.

Larkwren brushed the zombie off his shield, taking care to also not push off the plants. "You got a little dent there." He laid a hand on the dent and sent a pulse of white light into it. "It won't repair armor, but it should stop the bruising underneath."

"Thanks." The armored soldier replied.

"Did you see the symbol on the zombies?" E'Zhule examined Larkwren's shield. "It was Lathander's symbol."

Larkwren gasped. "They were fellow followers!" He knelt down next to them and said a prayer for their souls.

"See?" Miko's hands stop glowing. "You don't like it when your horse puts itself in danger."

"No, I don't like it when *she* puts *herself* in danger. But she isn't made of metal."

Rust went to the next door and fell in another trap.

"Rust! Stop finding traps with your body!"

Rust flew out and shrugged. He proceeded to the next door, which was behind Larkwren and E'Zhule. The door explodes! Pieces of curved metal and sharp wood

splinters fly everywhere, jabbing Larkwren and E'Zhule. Rust, despite being the closest to the explosion, gets pushed back, but takes no damage.

"See? He's invincible." Larkwren picked splinters out of his scalemail. "You're being overprotective."

"I'm not being overprotective!" Miko examined Rust. "He's got a scratch! See?"

The party progresses through the hallway and finally sees a wall at the end. In between is a whole stretch of unknown ground.

Rust takes a step forward, but Miko grabs him.

"Wait, hold on Rust." She pulls a scroll out of her bag. "We'll use this Find Traps spell. I've got a feeling these next traps are the most dangerous." She unraveled the scroll and read it aloud. The scroll burns up and disappears. "There's two pits in this hallway."

"Where?" E'Zhule cleaned his sword.

Miko shrugged. "That's all the info I have."

"Only two pits? Then you must be ok with Rust going forward." Larkwren motioned to Rust to go to the next door.

Cloverbraid came up next to him. She grunted and stamped a hoof.

"Not now, Cloverbraid."

"Hold on, Rust." Miko crawls up to the door, checking the floor bit by bit. She examines the door. "Ok, it looks safe." She leaves to scan more floor.

Rust opens the door, and it explodes again. Shrapnel hits Rust and would hit Larkwren, but Cloverbraid stood in front of him.

She screamed in pain. A huge gash bled on her side. A green icky liquid leaked off the pieces stuck in her side.

"Cloverbraid!" Larkwren yelled.

Without hesitation, the armored soldier laid a glowing hand in the wound, pulling all the shrapnel out, sucking out all the green liquid, and stopping the bleeding of the gash.

“Thank you, armored friend.” Larkwren laid his own glowing hand on the wound, healing it completely and sealing it up.

The armored soldier nodded.

“Don’t know what I’d do if anything ever happened to you.” Larkwren patted Cloverbraid. Cloverbraid leans into him.

E’Zhule opens a door and noxious smell comes out. He immediately closes it. “It’s empty. Glad it wasn’t a bomb.”

Miko reaches for a door knob.

E’Zhule pulled her back. “It could be a bomb.”

“Ok, I’ll examine it first.” She eyeballs it.

“If you could see it from out here, don’t you think the Find Trap spell would’ve found it?”

Miko sighed. “You’re right. Rust!” She backed up to let Rust in.

Rust punched right through the door, knocking it off its hinges.

TWIIINGE! WHOOOOSH!

A small fast flying thing flew over the heads of Miko and E’Zhule. It hit the opposite wall and got stuck. A smelly, burning poison leaked out, eating away at the wall.

“Glad that wasn’t you, right?” E’Zhule examined it. “That would’ve been bad.”

“You’re right.” Miko looked down, and leaned on Rust.

Rust hugged her. “You can count on me.”

=====

“So you finally showed her the wisdom in using the robot for its purpose.” The priest stared at the wall behind Larkwren.

Larkwren looked behind him. There was nothing there. "Yes, but well... no."

"No?" The priest squinted.

Larkwren looked behind, but still didn't see anything. "Is there something behind me?"

"No, I suppose not." The priest wiped his faith with an embroidered handkerchief. "My eyesight must be going. Continue."

"So she did come to her senses, but it's not that simple..."

=====

Miko smiled at Rust as she hugged him. "Ok, you can open the doors, but no more pits! I can detect the pits, and I'm going to!" She gets down on all fours and feels around on the floor. It took her quite a while to get anywhere.

"Ok, that's excessive." E'Zhule takes his sword out and pokes at the ground as he goes.

"Be careful!" Miko warns.

"Of cours— AAAAH!" E'Zhule steps on a weakened floor board and falls through.

The floor boards cascade away toward Miko, who jumps back. She approaches the edge and peers in. "Are you ok?"

In the pit, E'Zhule lays prone on a spike, impaled through the gut. "I'm..." He winced. "Fine..."

"Hold on brother!" She turned to Rust. "Can you get him please?"

At her request, Rust flew in and lifted E'Zhule out of the pit.

"Hold him steady." Miko held her hand on her heart, energizing her hand with a red aura. She pushed her hand to E'Zhule and poured the red charge into the puncture wound. "Wound be gone!" The flesh around the hole reached out in tiny fleshy tendrils and closed the gap. She patted the area. "All better?"

E'Zhule turned and examined himself. "My jacket!" He lamented at the hole in his jacket.

"Looks like we'll have to get you some new clothes."

Jack and the armored soldier walked around the pit. Cloverbraid jumped over it, and Larkwren avoided it.

"So we've decided that we should let the robot open the doors?"

Miko grumbled. "I guess so, but I still don't like it."

"It makes perfect sense. He's disposable, unlike us." He knocked on the iron golem's metal frame. "Aren't you?"

"I am trash." Rust confirmed. He approached the next door.

"How dare you!" Miko shoved him away from Rust. "I hope your horse dies!"

"Hey, don't say such things about my horse!" Larkwren backed up to the opposite side of the hallway with Cloverbraid. "She's a living breathing creature just like you."

"She's a stupid animal. At least Rust is smart."

Cloverbraid snorted.

Rust fell in a hole right in front of the door. He didn't fly out.

"You ok down there, Rust?" Miko peered into the hole.

Rust gave a thumbs up.

BANG! CRASH!

Something hit Larkwren in the back of the head. Without looking, Cloverbraid kicks with her hind legs, connecting with something fleshy. She runs out into the hallway. Larkwren calls upon the moon, "Moon! Let your light shine!" He turned around to see the moonlight shining through into the doorway of the door that was behind him.

Two zombies writhe in pain as they burn in the moon's spotlight. The white flames dance on their limbs, happily eating it away.

“Clear the area!” Miko shoots a fireball at the zombies and dives into the pit with Rust. She lands awkwardly in his arms and suffers a minor bruise.

The fireball sets the zombies ablaze. The red flames danced with the white, and strange green flames joined them.

E’Zhule shields his eyes from the heat with his hand and blindly swipes at the zombies, but doesn’t hit anything.

The zombie lurches forward, tripping on its burnt foot. It hits the ground with a *THUD*. A high-pitched sound whines from within the zombie.

“Get down!” Miko yells from within the pit.

“What?” Larkwren plants his shield in the ground, but didn’t react in time.

The zombie’s arm explodes, spraying poison and flaming zombie bits everywhere. Larkwren and Cloverbraid get knocked to the ground. E’Zhule gets knocked against the wall, and the other zombie got knocked into Jack. Jack reacted with a quick strike, blocking it from knocking him down.

WHIIIIINE

Larkwren got up, not even noticing the burns and gash in his side. He looked around for Cloverbraid. She was lying on the ground in a pretty bad state. But her chest still moved slowly up and down. She was hanging on. Larkwren turned to the zombie. It was struggling to get back to its feet, because one leg was bulging irregularly as it burned. Larkwren grabbed his shield and planted it next to the zombie, shielding himself and Cloverbraid from it.

BOOOOM!

The zombie’s leg exploded. This time, Larkwren’s shield protecting them. E’Zhule and Jack still took damage, but survived. “DIE ZOMBIE!!” Larkwren jumped out from behind his shield and two-handed his battle-axe. He brought it down on the zombie’s back, preventing it from getting back up. His axe glows white and splits the zombie in two. Upon impacting the floor, the zombie disintegrated into dust. The flames harmlessly ate up the zombie’s clothes.

E’Zhule and Jack double team the last zombie and it dies.

Larkwren turns to his horse. "Cloverbraid?" He holds her head in his hands.

She took a few labored breaths. They span between each one got longer and longer, until they stopped coming. The air escaped her lungs for the last time.

"It'll be ok, Clover." Larkwren's hand glowed. He shoved it onto Cloverbraid's wounds. "I'll cure the poison." His other glowing hand stroked her burned neck. "I'll heal your wounds." He listened for breathing. Nothing. "I'll... I'll... it'll all be ok."

Cloverbraid didn't respond. Her wounds didn't heal. Larkwren's godly energy failed to heal her. And if she can't be healed, that means...

"No, no, no!" Larkwren hugged her neck tightly. He laid his head on hers. "Clover!" Tears streamed down his face. He had failed to protect her. He failed as her leader. She didn't deserve this. She was his best friend, and now she was gone. He'd never find anyone else as special as she was. Even with all his charisma and likability. Cloverbraid was irreplaceable.

The armored soldier put a finger on her pulse. "She's dead." He cured the poison from Larkwren and then tended to Jack and E'Zhule.

Miko and Rust came out of the hole. They had taken hardly any damage. "Is everyone ok?"

"I'll survive." E'Zhule picked zombie bits off his jacket.

Miko noticed Cloverbraid lying listless on the floor. She gasped. "Is that...? Did she...?"

E'Zhule nodded.

"Oh my... I didn't... I didn't mean that..." Miko approached. "I'm so sorry, Larkwren."

"It's my fault. It's all my fault." Larkwren sobbed. "I led her here. I led her to the door. And I... set fire to the zombies!" His tears poured down her neck. "I'm sorry, Clover!" His tears choked his breathes. "You've been my friend for over half my life. I can't imagine life without you."

"I'm sorry too, Cloverbraid." Miko laid a hand on the horse. She shed a tear. She went up to Rust and hugged him. "I'm glad you're ok."

Rust patted Miko, and then something caught his eye. "Treasure found." He pointed.

"What's that?" Miko crawled to the wall at the end of the hallway. No traps. She felt around the wall, but there were no hidden switches or anything. Then she turned her attention to the object Rust had spotted.

It was a magic scroll, just sitting in the middle of the floor on top the dust and cobwebs. It was in pristine condition, as if it had just been minted. The dust around it had been cleared in a circle.

Miko reached down and poked it. Nothing happened. She picked it up. "Magic Scroll of..." Her eyes got wide. "...Raise Dead!" She looked it over. It was out of her casting ability, but with the right words, and a bit of focus, she could cast it. "Hey Larkwren?"

"Uh-huh?" He turned to her, but could barely get a word through his tears.

She held the scroll out in front of her. "Would you like your horse back, or is this her time to go?"

Larkwren choked back tears. "I would give anything..." He got on his knees and clasped his hands together. "...To have her back! She means everything to me."

"Ok, hang on." Miko took a deep breathe. She recited the words from the scroll. The magic in the scroll bent and strained, but she enacted the words with such force, such conviction, that they straightened out and energized.

Her fur blew around as if in a typhoon, and her vibrated off her head. Her jacket came unbuttoned and her gloves slipped off her hand. Still, she stood strong.

Soon, the energy spread to Cloverbraid's body. The air around her became dense.

Larkwren sat back and watched, if only just to be able to breathe. He held his chest, slowing the bleeding.

Miko spoke each word with a command of the arcane higher than she had ever done before. Shrapnel burst out of her body and hung in the air. Poison flowed against gravity into the air. The flakes of burnt skin and flesh chipped off, revealing

fresh healthy skin below. The flesh inside the gash writhed and expanded, filling the gap. The skin and muscle knitted itself around the lesion, sealing it completely.

Cloverbraid's stomach suddenly expanded. She gasped. She was breathing again!

Larkwren hugged her neck! "Clover! You're alive! Thank Larkwren you're alive!"

With a magic surge, the spell ended. The shrapnel and poison fell harmlessly to the ground. Miko's hat stopped sliding away from her, and her fur stopped moving, though it was now floofed from all the static. The scroll burned up and disappeared. Miko smiled. "That was exciting!"

"Thank you so much!" Larkwren hugged her, shrapnel still in his arms.

She hugged him back, as best as she could. Her tight grasp made it hard for her to hold her arms. She patted his back.

"I'm... I'm sorry..." Larkwren cried on her shoulder. "I'm sorry for saying Rust was disposable. I know he must mean a lot to you."

"Yes, he does. And I'm sorry for wishing your horse would die."

"It's alright. It was my fault anyways. If it wasn't for your robo—Rust, I mean, things would've been worse."

Rust gave a thumbs up.

"Thanks so much, Miko!" Larkwren squeezed her tight. "I love you, I love you, I love you!"

"It's ok, Larkwren." She patted him twice. "Can you let me go now?"

"Yes, of course." He let go and wiped a tear from his eye. He took a deep breathe.

And so did Cloverbraid. And her eyes peeked open.

"Cloverbraid! You're awake!" Larkwren knelt in front of her.

"What... happened?" She spoke. Then, without warning, she vanished. Magical sparkles denoted where she once was. The dust around her was disturbed in the shape of a circle.

"Cloverbraid?" Larkwren thrashed around crazily, looking for her everywhere as if she had shrunk to the size of an ant.

A scroll appeared in the dust circle. He picked it up and unfurls it.

I HAVE YOUR HORSE

-Dahfair

The scroll burns away in his hands.

"Dahfair? I think I know who that is." Larkwren ponders. "It's ok, everyone. I think Cloverbraid is at the palace. He should go back."

"But wait! You're wounded!" Miko pointed to Larkwren's chest.

"'Tis but a scratch." He walked forward and stumbled. "Ok. You're right."

"Here, let me help." Miko put her hand to her chest. Red auras poured into her hand, but dissipated faster than she could move them to Larkwren's heart. "let me try that again." Same thing. "My magic isn't working."

"Settle down, sis." E'Zhule stopped her. "You just cast a high level spell. It'll take a day to get your magic back. Take it easy for now."

The armored soldier tried lighting up his hand, but it dimmed quickly. "I'd heal him, but I already used all my magic curing wounds."

"It's fine." Larkwren knelt on his knees. "All I need is a prayer. Gather around everyone, let us give thanks to Lathander."

"I'm not religious, but..." E'Zhule shrugged. "Why not?"

They sat around Larkwren as he prayed. "Lathander, thank you for granting us life. Thank you for restoring the life of my best friend, Cloverbraid Surefair Lightbrew. May her life be long and prosperous. Please help guide me in your name to choose the right thing for her, to keep her safe, and to keep the light within her glowing. Thank you for friends like Miko, whose sacrifice relit the flame of her snuffed light. May her life be long and prosperous."

Despite not closing her eyes or participating, a spiritual feeling overtook Miko, giving her a profound sense of calm, and easing her pain.

“Thank you for the life of light in my metal friend...” He nodded at the armored soldier. “Whose generous gift of life spared the lives me and my friends, and saved her from the brink of death.”

The armored soldier felt nothing, except the satisfaction of recognition and gratitude.

“Thank you for Rust, who bravely put himself in danger so that we may be safe, and thereby keeping her safe as well. May his battery life be long and full of charge. Even if he doesn’t have a light of life, he sure makes up for it with his heart.”

Rust gave a thumbs up. “I am trash.”

Miko shushed him. “No, you’re my treasure!”

“Thank you for E’Zhule, whose guidance kept the situation on task and running smoothly. His knowledge and wisdom is a boon to us all. May he find the answers he seeks and may he use them to brighten the light.”

E’Zhule’s breathing suddenly became light and heavenly. A spiritual bubble glowed within him, calming his anxieties.

“And thank you for my friend Jack Splicer, who defended us against the forces of darkness that wish to unlight our flickers. May he accomplish his task and find peace.”

Jack’s breathing calmed. He closed his eyes and soaked in the prayer. If he could, he would have purred.

“Thank you Lathander for the light of the day you have given us, and may we go forth and do your will so others will have, and continue to have, the light as we do.”

Larkwren opened his eyes and scanned the party. “Ready to go?”

They all nodded.

=====

“That was a very fine prayer.” The priest poured a glass of wine for himself and Larkwren. “I presume Lathander blessed you heartily.”

“He sure did. But you see now, why Miko protected Rust?”

The priest handed Larkwren his glass. "She had a sort of... emotional attachment to the robot."

"Yes! And despite it not having a light of life, she still loved it and cared it like it was a person." Larkwren raised his glass. "To life."

"To life." They clinked glasses. The priest took a sip. "She saw it as a living being? That's wild."

"It gives you a moment of pause, doesn't it?" Larkwren took a long, slow sip. "What if a robot becomes sentient enough, such that it *does* have a light of life?"

"But that raises so many questions."

"So many unexplored questions."

The priest spit out his drink. His eyes went wide and his mouth hung limp. He trembled softly in his seat.

Larkwren looked behind him. There was nothing there. "Is everything ok?"

The priest shook it off. "Yes. Yes. Everything is fine."

"Is there... something troubling you?"

"No. But I sense that there is something troubling you." The priest attempted to pour himself more wine.

"Yes, actually. You see, Cloverbraid's death was not the first time I failed to protect the light of life today..." Larkwren let his glass down and sighed.

"What's troubling you, my child?"

"It happened on the way back to Waterdeep..."

=====

The party had finished their business in the dungeon. As they walked through the halls, they tiptoed around the traps and dead bodies. They trampled up the slippery hill to the surface. They trudged along the muddy swamp and across the grassy plain.

They soon came across a commoner, who was surrounded by wolves.

"Shoo! Shoo!" He batted them away, but they got ever closer. "Leave me alone!"

"Hey! Someone needs help!" Miko drew her rapiers. "Let's go!" She ran at the wolves.

Larkwren grabbed her shoulder, pulling her back. "I saw what you did to those orcs, and I know what you plan to do. But these are wild animals, with lights of life of their own. I will see no harm done to them."

"Fine, I will try it the nonlethal way first." Miko shook him off. "Charge!" She stared at a wolf, one wolf in particular.

It turned its attention to the sound of her footsteps. When it met her gaze, its tail went down and it shrunk.

She stared intently at it as she ran with a rapier in front.

The wolf whimpered and ran away. The other wolves backed off from the commoner and faced her instead.

"Stay away!" She shook her rapier at them.

"Hold on, let me see what's going on." Larkwren opened his mouth. His tongue glowed white as he spoke in barks and yips. "What wrong?"

The wolves responded in kind. "Hungry." The wolf's ribs were poking out through its skin. Then it growled at the commoner. "Food."

"Commoner no food. This food." Larkwren pulled out some rations that had gone stale. "Eat."

"Commoner food." The wolf raced around Miko and ran for the commoner.

Miko reacted with a swift kick to the nuts.

The wolf faceplanted into the ground with a sickening crack. It laid limp on the ground.

“Holy—! Did I just kill it... with a nut shot?” Miko gawked at her boot.

Larkwren grappled the last wolf. “Help me feed this wolf.”

The wolf struggled to break free, but Larkwren held it in a tight grasp. It couldn’t even claw or bite him.

“If he sate his hunger with rations, he might leave.” He handed Miko the ration from his backpack.

Miko took apprehensively. “I don’t want to get bit.”

Larkwren wrangling the wolf’s head so it couldn’t move. “Here.”

Miko held it above his head and dropped it into its jaw. “Eep!”

The wolf coughed and spit it out. Then it broke free of Larkwren’s grasp and bit him in the arm.

Miko instinctively thrust her rapier forward and piercing the neck bone. The wolf’s head fell limpy off, tearing the skin as it went.

“Miko!” Larkwren angrily blurted. “I was trying to save it!”

“I’m sorry! I tried!”

Larkwren grumbled. “You’re tired. So am I. I guess we both did the best we could.” He pulled out some copper coins, and said a prayer for each of the wolves.

=====

“That is unfortunate, indeed.” The priest nodded. “Lathander sees that you did your best. Failure is a part of life.”

“I failed to keep them alive. I let them die.”

“You didn’t let them die. Death had to wrestle their flames from your hold.”

“Thank you, Father.”

"Praise be Lathander." The priest took a sip, but spooked, slipped and spilled it on himself.

"Are you ok?"

"Yes, yes, I am fine." He cast prestidigitation on himself, but visibly shook as he did so. "Maybe... I should retire for the night."

Larkwren yawned. "Yes, I am quite tired from the day's events. Do you have lodging?"

"We have room for you and your horse."

"Thank you, Father. If you don't mind, I'd like to room with my horse."

"You'll be sleeping in the stables then."

"I'm ok with that."

"Very well." The priest led him down the corridor. "This way then."

Larkwren and Cloverbraid followed him.

"Lathander smiles on you, for saving the light of life of the commoner."

"Oh yeah! The commoner! Do you know a Robert?"

"I know several Roberts. Which one?"

"I don't know. But he's not a normal Robert..."

=====

"Thank you for saving me." The commoner approached Miko as she stood among the dead wolves.

"Ah, no problem, sir." Miko bowed. "That's what I do."

"Oh, call me Robert."

"No problem, Robert."

"You're heading to Waterdeep too?"

"Yes we are."

"Do you mind if I join you? It's scary out here."

"Sure! Come along. We'll keep you safe from all the wolves out here."

"Splendid!"

"Would you like a..." Miko reaches into her bag and pulls out a box. "A donut?"

"Well thank you very much!" Robert takes a bite of the donut and spits it out.

"They're stale."

Miko shrugs. "I'm hungry. They taste good to me."

"Say, when we get to Waterdeep, I'll buy you a box of donuts, on me. It's the least I can do for your help."

Miko gives a thumbs up.

The party gets to the southgate of Waterdeep. Robert heads in without stopping at the guards, showing a pass, or anything.

"Who is this guy?" Larkwren asked. "And why was he out in the woods where wolves could get him?"

The party all showed their passes and entered. Robert bought Miko a fresh box of donuts on their way to the palace.

When they did get to the palace, Robert turned and bowed to them. "And now I must bid you adieu. I have some people to meet. God speed." He walked into the palace without knocking or an escort. The doors closed behind him and locked.

Miko pulled on the handles, but they didn't open. She knocked, but there was no answer. She shrugged. "Bye!"

=====

"Oh, yes, that Robert." The priest opened the stable doors. "He works with the emperor." He called for a stable hand to prepare a stable for Cloverbraid. "Any special requests?"

Cloverbraid whispered in Larkwren's ear.

"Hay. Lots of hay, in kind of like a bed. Pile." Larkwren said.

The priest nodded, and waved the stable hand away to get the hay.

"So, did you meet the emperor?" The priest asked.

"Yes... but this time, he was not happy..."

=====

Miko waited outside the palace doors. Soon they opened. A middle-aged tiefling stood by herself inside.

"Oh hi!" Miko greeted.

She nodded. "You've all done well. The emperor will see you now."

"You must be Dahfair?" Larkwren knelt in front of her.

"I am." She presented her hand.

He held it and kissed it gently. "I was told you have Cloverbraid?"

"Your horse? Yes, she is in the courtyard stables. She is alive and well. You may see her after you see the emperor."

"Very well." Larkwren bowed. "Thank you."

"Come alone now." Dahfair led them to the throne room.

Inside the tall golden doors, the 30ft x 30ft throne room was a sight to behold. Decorations adorned the walls: mounts of monsters defeated, heads of bloodlines absorbed, and condoms full of ageless liquid hanging from photos of exotic women.

The center piece was the throne itself. It floated in the air. It was a black creepy chair with a ridiculously high head rest and rhino skulls for feet. The space underneath rustled the red carpet that led to the entrance.

And on the throne: the emperor himself, Galaya. "Nice to see you all again." He gestured with his staff for them to come forward. The crystal at the end of it had an 8 etched into it. The black gloves and green boots made him a bit intimidating.

When the party arrived, he pointed with his long sword to a robot in the corner. "Rust, your new body awaits." He popped the core chip out of the iron golem and implanted it into the old body Rust had.

With a whirl, Rust's eyes lit up and his hands came to life. "I got a new thing."

"Yes, it is exactly what you've been used to for the first 50 years of your life. In addition, here is 300 gold for your valiant efforts today."

Rust accepted the gold. "Food?" He held the money like it was a foreign object.

"I got it, buddy." Miko opened her bag.

Rust poured the money into the bag. "Hop in?"

"Hop in!" Miko held the flap open.

Rust did just that. He hopped into her bag, barely fitting. He knocked Miko off balance, but Galaya caught her with his staff. Rust's feet touched down at the bottom of the bag, but his whole torso and head stuck out of it.

"I don't fit."

"Awww, I can't have you ride around in my bag anymore?"

"Wait." Rust whirred and went down. "I can compress my legs." He went down into the bag.

"You fit!" Miko excitedly closed the flap completely.

Rust stuck his head out. "I fit!"

"I made a few modifications to the original design." Galaya admitted. "That's just one of the surprises."

"Thank you so much!"

"It's no problem at all, miss." Galaya bowed.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you did for Rust."

"If you really want to show your appreciation, meet me back here in five hours."

Miko gives a thumbs up.

A guard escorts Miko out.

Galaya turns to E'Zhule, handing him a bag of 300 gold. "Anything you want?"

"Mmmm..." E'Zhule shrugs. "Nah."

A guard escorts E'Zhule out.

Galaya touches Jack in the chest again. "Huh, still no reaction." He produces a small handheld box. "A little gryphon told me you wanted a pair of cards."

Jack smiles and takes it.

"And here's your gold, as contracted." Galaya hands over the bag of 300 gold.

A guard escorts Jack out.

"Warforge, come." Galaya opens a portal.

As the armored soldier goes through, he accepts a bag of 300 gold.

Dahfair escorts the armored soldier out.

Galaya portals his throne out. Then he grows 2 feet taller. His python hisses. A dark cloud eeks out of him. "And now you, Larkwren."

"It's ok," Larkwren rubbed the back of his neck, letting his wound leak for a moment. "I didn't do it for the gold."

"You think you deserve gold? No, you will not get a reward. You should be grateful that I graciously did not have you arrested and put in prison. Be thankful I don't charge you for the blood stains on my red carpet from your gaping wounds. Be grateful I saved your horse."

"Wait, you're *Dahfair*?" Larkwren muttered, trying not to shake in his boots.

"I'm *the* Dahfair. And you best remember that!"

Larkwren nodded. He winced in pain.

"Be gone."

A guard escorted Larkwren out. It led him to the stables, where Cloverbraid was waiting for him.

"Cloverbraid!" Larkwren hobbled to his horse.

She whinnied in excitement. She sported brand new silver horseshoes that matched her coat perfectly. Not only were her wounds completely healed, but her coat was freshly brushed and cleaned. It sparkled in the afternoon sun. Her mane had been braided and so was her tail. Her teeth were brushed and sparkly. She ran up to Larkwren.

Larkwren held her head close to his. "Cloverbraid! You're ok!"

"I am. They took good care of me here." She whispered back to him.

"I'm so sorry, Clover. For getting you killed."

"Shh, shh, shh." She nudged him. "I'm fine now."

Larkwren let go, revealing his bloody hands. "Are you hungry? Let's go get something to eat."

"They fed me already, I'm quite full."

"That's great."

"However, you're not fine." Cloverbraid motioned to his wound.

"Ah, this is just a scratch." He waved it off, then began to violently cough. Blood filled his mouth. He spit it out. "Ok, you're right."

Cloverbraid nodded. She slipped her head under his arm and knelt down.

Larkwren flopped down onto her. With two pats, he said, "Ready."

Cloverbraid walked carefully out of the palace and down the street. She homed in on the location of the Lathander temple that they'd been to before. It was in a tunnel.

=====

"And that's what happened."

"That's quite the story." The priest nodded. "Thank you for sharing."

"And thank you, for the hospitality." Larkwren nodded.

"Always happy to oblige a paladin of Lathander." The priest reached for the door, but fumbled and fell. He stared at the space behind Larkwren.

Larkwren looked behind him. Nothing was there.

"I really must be going now." The priest stood up.

"Ok, you sure you'll be ok?"

"Yes, I am quite fine." The priest stepped into the hallway and shut the bottom half of the stable door. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Larkwren shut the top half of the door.

The stable hand led them to a space where Cloverbraid could sleep comfortably.

Cloverbraid circled the inside of it and settled down on a pile of hay. "Ah, this is good."

"Comfy?" Larkwren sat down behind her and rested on her back.

"Very."

"Cozy?"

"Very." Cloverbraid sighed as she closed her eyes.

"Conspicuous?"

"Huh?" She turned to him.

"Do you feel like... something's watching you?" Larkwren shivered.

"Hmmm..." Cloverbraid thought. "Yeah, but it's like the good kind. Like someone watching over me."

"That's reassuring." Larkwren patted her. "Goodnight, Clover."

"Goodnight, Larky."

Larkwren shivered under the blanket the stable hand gave him. Something was watching him, and it was angry. It was observing and analyzing his every move, and judging him. He was under intense scrutiny. He looked around, but nothing was there. Still, the feeling persisted.

And at a loss for what to do, and unable to sleep, he prayed. "Lathander, I feel guilty. I failed in my duties to protect the light of life. I fear I have angered you, and I—"

You have not angered me, but you have angered the emperor. The voice spoke through his brain, in a voice unfamiliar to him.

Larkwren looked around, and concluded it was a message. "Lathander? Is that you?"

No response.

"What should I do? Please, Lathander, guide my path."

There was no response.

So Larkwren prayed himself to sleep.

=====

Miko and E'Zhule walked with Jack to the inn. They reserved a room. After letting their stuff off, E'Zhule examined his jacket.

"It's still got a hole in it." He lamented.

"Ah, don't fret. We'll get you a new one, just like I said."

"But I don't want a new one, I want this one, *fixed*."

"How about this? Let's go to the market. Tailor or clothes shop: whichever we find first, we go there. Fair?" She spit in her hand held it out to E'Zhule.

"Fair." He spit in his hand and shook hands with the saliva in Miko's hand.

"Rust!"

Rust poked out of her bag. "Yes?"

"Watch out stuff, please?"

"You can count on me." He gave a thumbs up.

Miko and E'Zhule left on their shopping adventure. They walked down the streets and Miko found a clothes shop. E'Zhule pretended not to notice.

"We had a deal, remember?"

E'Zhule begrudgingly accompanied her into the clothes shop.

"Hi, I'm Nomi. What can I do for you?" A young human in fancy casual attire greeted them from behind the counter.

"My brother here needs a new jacket." Miko pushed him forward.

"No I don't..." he mumbled.

"Well I got just the thing for a cutie like him." Nomi walked around the shop, picking things off the rack. "Follow me."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes!" Miko pushed him until he walked of his own accord.

He went into the changing rooms with a pile of clothes and tried them on one at a time.

He came out first in an azura blue tuxedo with studded leather.

"Dashing!" Miko clapped.

"I want my old clothes."

He came out next in some blue jeans.

"Very casual."

"Why are you putting me through this?"

"I want you to look good."

"But I like my jacket."

"You can't wear the same clothes all the time, E'Zhule; you'll get all dirty."

"Yeah, those aren't dating clothes." Nomi winked at him.

"What if..." Miko turned her brother towards the clerk. "You find someone you like?"

E'Zhule rolled his eyes. "But you wear the same jacket all the time. Why don't you get a new one?"

"But I like this jacket!" Miko whined.

He stated triumphantly, "Exactly."

"Ok, you're right. I'll get a new jacket too." Miko peeked at the different dresses on display. "Oh! We can be matching!"

"I know just what you need!" Nomi brings them another pile of clothes.

They go to the dressing room and come out with several different styles, and finally land on something they like.

"How do I look?" Miko twirls around in her crimson red dress. Her black heels blend into the floor, concealing her inexperience walking in them. The blue bow on her head fits nicely between her perky kitty ears.

"Like my sister."

"You look amazing!" Nomi exclaimed. "And you..." She looked E'Zhule up and down.

He stood straight and tall (for his height) in his azura suit and black shoes. His red bowtie matched Miko's dress nicely. Miko had even combed his hair into a sleek new style, making his attentive cat ears more prominent.

"...And you can have my number." Nomi licked her lips as she placed a folded piece of paper in his jacket pocket. "I get off at 8."

E'Zhule glanced at Miko and sighed. His look said, "Can we go now?"

"Ok, Nomi, we'll take these. How much?"

"3 gold each."

"Here you go."

"Come back *anytime*." Nomi winks at E'Zhule. "Have a wonderful night."

Miko keeps the clothes on, but E'Zhule switches back to his old outfit. "Now can we go find a tailor?"

Miko giggles. "Sure thing, bro. Thanks for obliging me."

"Yeah."

"But that clerk back there, Nomi? She is *really* into you."

"I noticed."

"You should look at that note and go on a date with her. It might go somewhere."

"Yeah, and you should go on a date with the emperor."

Miko fell silent.

"What? It's obvious he's into you."

"I know."

"Sis? What is it?"

"It's just that... I don't know." She looked away.

"Sisssss?"

"I feel small next to him."

"You feel small next to everyone."

"Yes, but with him it's different. It's scary different."

E'Zhule watched her with concern.

"It's like... if I were to say no, or get into a certain situation with him... Eep!" She covered her face with her hands.

E'Zhule hugged her. "I'm here."

"I don't think I could escape. I'm not sure he'd let me." She looked at the time. "It's ok when you're with me, when Rust is with me. But in a few hours, I have to go see him *alone*. And that terrifies me."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"Yes, I mean no." She blushed. "I don't think you're allowed to. And I don't want to find out what he'd do if you did."

“Don’t worry, sis, I’ll come with.”

“No, don’t. Please don’t. I don’t want any trouble. I probably shouldn’t have worried you about this. Besides, if anything happens, I have my magic.”

“But today... with the spell... you used it all—”

“No, no, I can still cast spells. It’s just...” She tried to bring a healing aura around her hand, but it still dimmed too fast. “...hard.”

“Miko.”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore. So, about that tailor?” Miko pointed to a tailor shop down the street.

E’Zhule sighed.

E’Zhule got his favorite jacket repaired, and around 8:00 they got back to the inn. Miko told Rust about the clothes they found and Rust happily “tried them on” by tossing them in the air and catching them with an extended arm.

“Ok, let’s get some rest.” E’Zhule forcibly tucked Miko into bed, then got into his own bed.

“E’Zhule?” Miko asked.

“Yes?”

Miko paused. “Nevermind. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” He turned out the light.

Miko waited a few minutes for E’Zhule to fall asleep, then she snuck out with the dress she bought at the clothes shop. “Rust.” She whispered.

Rust whirred and faced her.

“Don’t let E’Zhule follow me out.”

Rust gave a thumbs up. “You can count on me.”

Miko slipped out.

A few seconds later, E’Zhule got out of bed and went for the door.

Rust grabbed him and put him back on the bed. "I'm sorry, E'Zhule, but I can't let you do that."

E'Zhule eyed Rust. There was no way he could overpower it. But he could outsmart it. "Rust."

"Yes?"

"Catch!" E'Zhule threw his clothes into the air.

Rust extended his arms to catch the clothes. "Tada! How do I look?" He turned to E'Zhule, but he was no longer on the bed, or in the room.

E'Zhule followed behind Miko as stealthily as he could. Which, in his black leather jacket, was actually pretty good. He followed Miko undetected to the palace gate. He climbed the fence without any guards noticing. He watched her enter the palace gate and get escorted in. He remembered the layout of the palace and snook around to the room they were in before. He found an open window and climbed in.

Halfway in, he stopped.

Turn back now.

"What?" He slapped his ears.

Turn back and leave.

He looked around. No one was there.

Turn back and leave or suffer the consequences.

He ignored it and entered in through the window.

Last chance.

He ran into the hallway and collapsed. When he awoke, he was back in the inn on his bed.

Rust stood in front of the door.

E'Zhule sat up with a jolt. "Miko!"