

Sagiro's Story Hour

PART THREE



CHAPTERS 21 TO 30
OF
THE ADVENTURES OF ABERNATHY'S COMPANY



Sagiro's Story Hour, Part Three

Contents

CHAPTER 21: Exit the Maze	5
The Company's attempt to pick up the threads of their normal lives in Tal Hae is disrupted when the unpleasant legacy of a long-ago promise to Shreen the Fair forces them to return to the city of Djaw, in Kivia. There, a tense confrontation with the master of abominations becomes a turning point for Aravis and the Crosser's Maze. It also provides the Company with the first hint of a great storm approaching...	
CHAPTER 22: The Shadows of the Past	47
Still in Djaw, the Company now face deadly attacks from assassins hired by an old foe out for revenge, as actions long ago come back to haunt them. Aravis begins to receive strange visions of ancient events and the death of gods – even as his own divine nature becomes understood. Back in Charagan, the theft of the Null Shadow Cauldron by an unknown enemy leads to a fateful encounter in the city of Kallor...	
CHAPTER 23: The Search for Praska	85
The Company discover that Dranko's childhood friend, Praska, is now a powerful priestess of the Black Circle and responsible for the null shadow attack in Kallor. They must employ every divinatory resource they can find to penetrate the shielding around her and locate her. Meanwhile, Aravis discovers more about his status as a sort-of god of cats, and an old adventure from Kibi's past comes back at a most unexpected moment...	
CHAPTER 24: Blood, Death, and Rats	127
After a brief side trip to the world of Cafille, the Company find themselves battling powerful undead forces in the course of restoring the soul of Dranko's old mentor, Califax. They find out what's really going on with Praska, and how it relates to the schemes of their long-dead enemy, Mokad. Then Aravis leads the quest to avenge the killing of the divine animals of Abernia, after which an old adventure from Dranko's past comes back at a most unexpected moment...	
CHAPTER 25: The Crimson Maw	179
Fulfilling a long-standing obligation, Ernie leads the Company to the halfling country of Appleseed in Kivia, which is under threat from a huge goblin army. They must venture into the extraplanar goblin stronghold, the Crimson Maw, and find a way to neutralise the thousands of goblins gathered there. And all the while the schemes of the Black Circle are drawing ever closer to completion...	
CHAPTER 26: Breaking the Circle	221
The Company perform a dangerous ritual to banish the soul of Mokad once and for all from the body of Dranko's friend Praska, in the course of which they fight a massive battle against many of the leaders of the Black Circle. Then they must prevent the Black Circle's final scheme to bring the Emperor Naradawk back to Abernia, using a huge army of undead in Kivia – after which an old opponent from their past comes back at a most unexpected moment...	
CHAPTER 27: Tales of the Gods	271
A conversation with Parthol Runecarver and a vision from the Crosser's Maze lead the Company to a greater understanding of the threat posed to their whole world by the Adversary, and the knowledge that two of their long-time foes, Meledien and Tarsos, have found a way into Naslund, the last resting place of the Gods. The party follow them, braving the defences of the great necropolis – and another opponent from their past is revealed at a most unexpected moment...	
CHAPTER 28: Finding the Way	317
Morningstar's long-ago prophesied destiny to be "the Slayer" leads the Company into battle against the most powerful dragon they've yet encountered. Afterwards, they have some time to clear up several loose ends, before an ancient tome leads them to the portal they must ultimately take to finally confront the menace of the Adversary. But the time for that is not yet – first, they must deal with their long-time yet never seen nemesis Darkeye, leader of the Sharshun...	
CHAPTER 29: The Madness Comes	357
The Company finally encounter the ancient elven mage Moirel, a.k.a. Darkeye – a confrontation which does not go at all as expected. Afterwards, their list of tasks still to be done shrinks a little further as good news arrives from the enslaved dwarves in Kivia. But soon the threat of the dream-warrior Octesian – infected with the insanity of the Far Realms – becomes too great to be ignored any longer. Morningstar must lead the Company and a party of Dreamwalkers into <i>Ava Dormo</i> to finish off the madman once and for all...	
CHAPTER 30: The Beginning of the End	393
The threat of the insane Octesian is finally ended after a long and costly battle. But now, the signs become unmistakable that the Company must soon embark on their ultimate quest – to descend beneath the impenetrable Yulan's Barrier into the Underdark, in pursuit of those who would free the Adversary. After making their last preparations and saying their farewells to friends and families, the Company begin the journey from which they expect never to return...	



The Power of Perspective

“She’s clearly intelligent,” says Dranko, rubbing his temples. Ye gods... Turlissa? It’s going to take some getting used to.

“She has a legitimate front,” says Grey Wolf, “but she’s involved with you in something shadier, no doubt.”

“And your extra key is probably to your hideout,” adds Kibi.

“A hideout that I’m in charge of,” says Dranko. “But this Lucas guy has taken over in my stead.”

The party ponder this change in history – that Dranko may rule his own criminal organization. Ernie looks around to see if he’s spontaneously acquired a five-star restaurant. Aravis looks for his mages’ academy. “I’m afraid to go to my temple,” says Morningstar with a nervous laugh.

“You might be running it,” says Grey Wolf.



Ernie suggests that Dranko might get some insight into the recent changes from his old landlady, Berthel. It’s not far to his old house, so Dranko takes the thieves’ highway, stopping only for the traditional bottle of wine. Soon he is knocking on Berthel’s window from out on the wall.

“Dranko? That you?” comes Berthel’s screechy, abrasive voice. “What you doing out there?”

He slips in the window. “You being followed?” asks Berthel. “And if not, why didn’t you use the door?”

“Boring!” is Dranko’s reply. He hands Berthel the wine, then sits in a chair in the landlady’s small apartment.

“I need info,” says Dranko. “What do you know about my reputation in the city?”

“You’ve always been kind of cagey about that,” says Berthel. “You’re a priest, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right, I’m a priest. Say, there was a parade, right?” Dranko is suddenly terrified of the thought that his big victory celebration never happened.

“Oh, yeah,” says Berthel. “A couple of months ago I think. I didn’t go to it.”

“You didn’t go to a parade for *me*?” accuses Dranko.

“That was for you? Should have told me! But why would they have a parade for you?”

Dranko sighs. “Look, is there anything else you know about me?”

“I think you know everything I know about you. And yet you’re an incredibly generous person underneath all of that. You’ve made a family very happy, when you let them have your old place with the rent paid up forever. I’ve even fixed the roof.”

Dranko stands and stretches. “Look, next time there’s a parade for me, will you come to it?”

“If you send me a letter or something, sure!” says Berthel.

“Oh,” adds Dranko. “Also I’m royalty. They made me a knight.”

“Really.”

“And I got married!”

Berthel laughs. “Is this ‘make up stories about yourself’ day, and no one told me?”

“No, really. I did get knighted, and I did get married. Look, I have a ring!”

Berthel looks at his hands. “You have lots of rings,” she says.

“Yeah, but this ring lets me fall off high buildings, and this ring means I can control water, and this ring means I’m married.”

“Dranko, I believe you. Congratulations. So, who is it?”

“Morningstar,” says Dranko proudly.

"The Ellish priestess?" Berthel raises her eyebrows. "She agreed to marry you? Did you cast a spell on her or something?"

Dranko leaves by the window.

Abciximab: Hmm... You can only have two rings active at once; does that mean Dranko is not married when you need the other two?

RangerWickett: So in 4th Edition, you can't get married 'til 11th level? *grin*

Intriguing as always. My theory is: Turlissa is married to Dranko, and Lucas is their child. Seems too obvious, though.



A brief interview with Eddings after dinner confirms that while he didn't actually travel with the Company, he also remembers the past the same way as they do. He was just as surprised to find the change in Turlus.

"She thinks that the two of us, and some guy named Lucas, are involved in some underground organization," says Dranko.

"Who's Lucas?" asks Eddings.

"I think he's probably that man who came to visit you while we were away," says Dranko.

"Turlissa was flirting with Dranko, too," adds Morningstar.

"Was she? Harlot!"

"Eddings, I've really missed you," says Ernie.

"This seems like a bigger change than Cranchus said would happen," says Grey Wolf, lounging in the Greenhouse living room.

Aravis nods. "He's ended up with a key to a manse owned by a secret organization of which he's evidently the leader? Yeah, I'd say that's not small."

Morningstar stands up and peers outside at the setting sun. "I really need to check in with my temple," she says.



She finds that her reception is the same as always; her sistren are cold, suspicious, but not overtly rude or hostile. Her request to speak with the High Priestess Milanwy is quickly passed on, and soon she is praying in the small chapel beside her old superior. Milanwy was never quite as bad as many others, if not exactly warm and friendly.

When the services end, the two of them retire to Milanwy's office. Morningstar realizes that navigating the dark corridor, while easy, is no longer so instinctive, so second-nature as it once was.

"Welcome!" says Milanwy. "Welcome back."

Morningstar thinks the High Priestess is nervous, which makes sense considering the circumstances. "I take it you've heard some strange things," Morningstar says.

"That would be an accurate statement, yes," says Milanwy. "Have you come here straight away?"

"We arrived back yesterday," says Morningstar. "I've visited no other temple before this one."

"Oh." Milanwy pauses, balancing decorum and curiosity. "Are you here to tell me what happened?"

"You mean why I disappeared?"

"Yes, that, but also why..." Milanwy pauses again, then plunges onward. "We've *communed* with Ell in your absence, and the answers have been vague, hard to decipher. Perhaps we weren't asking the right questions. But... it sounded like you were not dead exactly, but rather that you existed and you didn't exist. It might be easier if you could just tell us what happened. But did you... did you exist two thousand years ago?"

Morningstar nods. "How is that possible?" asks Milanwy, awed.

"It's a very long story," sighs Morningstar.

"Did you speak to Ell?" asks Milanwy.

"Yes," says Morningstar simply.

Milanwy sinks back into her chair and looks up briefly at the ceiling. "That I should live to see such times!" She shakes her head a bit, as if overwhelmed by the thought. "Can you just tell me what happened?"

"I've told you before about the Emperor," says Morningstar. "We stopped two plots to bring him back, but not the third."

"Then the Emperor has returned?"

"No... I mean, he was, but... no. It's complicated. We were in the Greenhouse, which was protected by Abernathy. It was not affected when time changed and the Emperor..."

"Time changed?" interrupts Milanwy. "What does that mean?"

"It means the Emperor had never left. It was like we had never defeated him."

"And where was the temple when this happened? Where was I?"

"You, and it, didn't exist. Ell was very, very weak. It was... terrifying."

"The Emperor had won," says Milanwy, still unsure of what she's hearing. "How did that happen?"

"Another servant of the Emperor used some very old magical artifacts, and changed history so that the Emperor had never fled."

"He changed history. And in the new history, he was victorious."

"Yes."

"Then how are we having this conversation?"

"The Company and I fixed it."

"You changed history back to the way it should be," says Milanwy, nodding. "And that's what you were doing these last two months. Fixing history."

"It's been more like a year for us, but yes."

Morningstar describes Het Branoi as well as she can. Milanwy can't really understand the details, but Morningstar keeps it simple. When she gets to the point about going 2000 years into the past, Milanwy shakes her head. "That is consistent with some of the answers we've gotten from our divinations. I still don't understand much of what you're saying, but I'll take your word for it. But... while you were in the past, you *communed* with Ell?"

"She was not well. I think I may have been her only disciple."

"And this was in the time when the Emperor had won. Yes, I imagine he outlawed all other religions. We'll need to send a report to Rhiavonne... This will make things interesting. I am the first person you've spoken to in the church? Then you don't know... about the Illuminated Sisters. You see, Rhiavonne thought you were... out of the picture, so to speak. She said that you had made a promise before your disappearance, that you would dissolve the Illuminated Sisters after the recent battle at Verdshane."

"I promised I would do my best to make it so," says Morningstar.

"Well, she took your promise straight to Amber. Rhiavonne has ordered the Illuminated Sisters to be disbanded. That was about three weeks ago."

"And?" prompts Morningstar.

"Amber is very clever," says Milanwy. "She's stalling, calling on old laws from old books, involving church bureaucracy, which is at the very least sending religious scholars scrambling. You know my feelings on the Illuminated Sisters – neutral at best. But the *communes* we have done paint a slightly different picture. I'm no longer so convinced that they *should* be dissolved. You've learned something, haven't you?"

"I have," says Morningstar.

"Something that's not going to make Rhiavonne very happy?"

"No. But I have always wished that the Temple be whole. I *never* asked for this."

"If it's true that you have gone into the past and *communed* with Ell, and asked questions that we in the present are not encouraged to ask, and you received from the Goddess clear answers... then that puts you in a very unique position. There will be many priestesses who will back you up, if you use this opportunity to... write policy, if you take my meaning." Morningstar puts her head in her hands and lets out a long sigh.

"If that policy is reintegration – to make the church whole, as you say – I expect little disagreement," continues Milanwy. "Amber, perhaps. But... you should think about what you want. Because whatever that is, many priestesses from all factions will be behind you. As you know, Ell wants us to find our own path, our own interpretation of her teachings. She does not answer direct questions about her will. We feel that this is still true, regardless of your return."

"And yet Ell was very straightforward in sending me to train in the light, to become who I am," says Morningstar.

"Yes, I know," says Milanwy. "And I find that interesting, that Ell speaks so clearly to you. My personal opinion is that Ell is testing us. She wants us to see how we resolve this crisis. I expect She will be pleased however this turns out, but then, I am an optimist."

"I hope you're right."

"What do you want the Church to do, Morningstar of Ell? Think upon that. I am certain, given your journey, you should be allowed time to reflect. You need not decide right away. And in my opinion, you should talk to Rhiavonne, and to Amber – you need not make any decisions alone. Your sisters... will share their opinions with you one way or another."

"Oh, I know that!" laughs Morningstar.

"Yes. You have not been treated fairly by our church, I admit, and I personally did not make things any easier for you. For that I am sorry. But times have changed, and Ell, I'm sure, now watches us with great curiosity."

"When I spoke with Ell, I learned that She does not agree with everything the Illuminated Sisters would have," admits Morningstar.

"Are you... will you share your whole conversation with me?" asks Milanwy, expectantly.

"Do you want to know?" asks Morningstar.

"Of course I want to know!" Milanwy exclaims. "Most of the High Priestesses of the various temples around Charagan would be just as eager as I am. And were you to write you a journal of your experiences, it would quickly become among the most renowned of our religious texts."

Morningstar blinks. "Oh," she says quietly.

For a moment they simply regard each other, quietly, in the pitch dark of the office. "I don't envy you, Morningstar," says Milanwy at last. "Ell has given you a winding road."

"It's not what I would have chosen for myself," says Morningstar.

"And what would you have chosen for yourself?" asks Milanwy, standing up.

Morningstar stands as well, before giving an answer about which she hardly needs to think. "A simple life of prayer," she says.



Back in the Greenhouse, Morningstar throws herself onto a sofa. "Crap, crap, crap. Crap!"

Dranko, Ernie and Flicker have stayed up to find out how things went. "Good news?" says Dranko.

"Crap!" Morningstar confirms. She shares with them her full conversation with the High Priestess.

"So you could be the architect of the future of your temple?" asks Dranko when she finishes. "What's wrong with that?"

"I'm not qualified!" Morningstar protests.

"The fact that you don't feel worthy of the task, is a good indication that you are," says Ernie.

Dranko frowns. "Does that mean I'm the wrong person for the job of being in charge of the Thieves' Guild?"

"Yeah, probably," says Flicker.

Dranko turns to his wife and becomes serious. "This is your test from Ell," he says. "She's asking you to choose between the traditional teachings of the church, and what you learned from her directly in the past. And if you follow your conscience, and do what you feel is right, everything is going to be okay." Morningstar smiles, reminded of why she married him.

"And if you get a swollen head in the process, we'll mock you," adds Dranko. "But I don't think that will happen."



It's Hard to Explain

Dranko's visit to his own temple is much less momentous; most of the clergy there never even knew he had been away. He spends a pleasant afternoon with Harmon but learns nothing new about changes to his history.

Kibi casts *prying eyes* to track Turlissa when she leaves her bakery that evening. Their combined report is brief: she left the shop, bought some produce at a stand in the marketplace, and went into a small tailor's shop. When one of the eyes followed her in, it didn't see her anywhere inside. She did not emerge for the duration of the spell.

That evening, at the Company's invitation, Spence comes over for dinner. Spence is their liaison among the town guard, the replacement for the late and lamented Marbury Tillerson who died in the Battle of Verdshane. He's a nice enough fellow, even if he's never quite settled into the comfortable relationship that Marbury enjoyed.

Tonight doesn't help. The Company invite him in for dinner, and after a minimum of pleasantries Dranko gets right to the point. "So," he says, trying to be casual. "What do you know about the Thieves' Guild?"

Spence freezes for a second, reminding himself that these folks are Adventurers who by nature will ask awkward questions. He finishes a bite of Ernie's delightful stew before answering. "You mean the Undermen, sir? They... they both run and restrict crime in the city. They have a certain latitude – kind of like you do. There are certain of their operations we don't interfere with. They're somewhat self-policing. We still often investigate them, to keep things honest. And I have no personal connection with them, yourself and Flicker excepted."

"Take a step back," says Dranko. "In what way are Flicker and I involved in the Undermen?"

"I don't know the full extent, sir," answers Spence.

"Tell you what," prompts Dranko. "Give me the rumors."

Spence starts to sweat just a little. "I don't know that I should be talking about this, sir."

"Oh, sure you should," says Dranko, smiling.

"All right," says Spence. "It is suspected, at least, that the two of you are members of fine standing in the Undermen. There were rumors that you were involved in some sort of... altercation of succession, some time back?" Spence phrases this last comment deliberately as a question, as if he fears to assert something dangerous. He cannot hide his nerves.

"You mean to say that the someone who once was the leader of the Undermen no longer is, and now I am?" asks Dranko, a bit eagerly.

"I can't speak to rumors that you are thought to be leading the Undermen," says Spence stiffly. "I doubt that's the case. But you may have had a hand in the... change of positions involved. Now, these are all entirely unfounded rumors, of course."

"Of course!" Dranko agrees. "And I'm sure there are rumors, unconnected to the truth, of the name associated with the leader of the Undermen."

"I really wouldn't know, sir," says Spence weakly. "I'm just a rank-and-file member of the town guard, and not privy to details like that. I only hear the same rumors as everyone else. I've already told you everything I know. Well, there's this: the only name I've ever heard in conjunction with the upper ranks of the Undermen is 'the Slipper.'"

Morningstar decides it's a good time to cast a Silent, Still *detect thoughts*, and it appears Spence is telling the unvarnished truth. Dranko continues to press him for details, but all this does is add to the guard's discomfiture without revealing any new details.

"He's never coming to dinner again," mutters Kibi under his breath. And indeed, Spence can't leave fast enough, not even staying for dessert.

But as it happens, Dranko doesn't need to wait long for some real answers. Not ten minutes after Spence's hasty departure there is a knock on the door. It appears that the stranger Eddings spoke of has returned – a tall and handsome man stands in the street, hair and goatee neatly combed, sharply dressed in gray and black.

He looks at Dranko, then peeks in the door at everyone else. Yoba shakes her head: not evil. "Come on in," says Dranko.

The man steps into the Greenhouse. "We need to talk," he says to Dranko. "In private, I should think."

Morningstar touches Dranko on the shoulder. "Can I talk to you first?"

"Hello, Morningstar," says the man with a smile.

"Hey, we got married, you know?" says Dranko.

"You did?" asks the man, and his smile gets bigger. "Well, it's about time. Congratulations!"

"Thank you," says Morningstar demurely. Yoba introduces herself while Dranko and Morningstar have a brief meeting in the kitchen, during which Morningstar casts a quick and silent *Rary's telepathic bond*.

The gentleman solemnly shakes Yoba's hand. "A pleasure to meet you. My name is **Lucas**." Turning to the rest of the Company, he nods politely and says, "It is nice to see all of you again. You've been missed." When Dranko comes back, Lucas says, "Now. Should we go talk in the... private room?"

What now? The secret room? This guy Lucas knows about the secret room in the Greenhouse?! Dranko is mortified; he waves generally for Lucas to go first, and the man does in fact head right up the stairs toward the secret door behind the bookcase. *I guess I trust the guy*, thinks Dranko over the mind-link. The rest of the party can't believe it. At least, when Lucas reaches the door, he politely turns his back so that he can't see exactly what Dranko does to open it.

Once inside they sit in chairs, and Dranko says, "Talk to me, Lucas."

Lucas stares holes into him before answering. "I thought we had come to an understanding, Dranko. When you go off on one of your excursions, you *have* to let me know. It's very difficult to explain your absence when I don't know where you are!"

"I didn't know where I was either," says Dranko. "And my absence was neither anticipated nor preventable."

"You know the rumors, don't you?" asks Lucas.

"That I was dead?" answers Dranko.

"That, or worse."

"What's worse than dead?"

"Well," says Lucas slowly. "I know this will sound silly, but some of the rumors indicated that you weren't just dead, but had never existed at all."

"Ah. Yes," says Dranko knowingly. "Yeah, that's been going around. But, hey, tell me about Turlissa!"

"What about her?" says Lucas. "I'll say this: she doesn't believe that you're you. And her instincts are good; I'd believe her, if you weren't here in the Greenhouse. And from her story, I don't blame her."

Dranko lets out a long breath, considering for a moment what direction this conversation should take. "OK, look. It appears that we've been gone for seven weeks. In fact, it's been more like eight months. All right?"

"I'm listening," says Lucas.

"I don't know who you are," says Dranko.

Lucas stares for a moment, thinking he's missing the joke. "Dranko, please. Of course you know who I am."

"Not only do I not know who you are, but when I left, I wasn't involved with the Undermen at all."

When Lucas looks at him like he's gone mad, Dranko lets out another breath. "Look, you're familiar with the Battle of Verdshane, right?"

Lucas nods. "Of course I am. You dropped all Guild business to go fight in it."

"Except that I didn't, because I wasn't involved in the Guild," says Dranko.

"You don't remember, perhaps, but you were involved, I can assure you," says Lucas. This conversation is, at the very least, proving that Turlissa wasn't exaggerating.

"OK, fair enough," says Dranko. "So here's what happened: there were three plots to destroy Charagan and put the old evil Emperor in power. We stopped two. The third worked. The Emperor managed to change things, change time, so that he was in charge. We managed to change things back to the way they were before, but not exactly. So I got back from that little jaunt, and I discover that I've been involved with the Undermen, and I've got you as a friend."

Lucas raises an eyebrow. "Involved in? That's what you call it?"

"Well, am I in charge of the Undermen?" asks Dranko.

Lucas sighs. "You... you're testing me, aren't you? That's what this is."

"When I left, Turlissa was named 'Turlus' and was a pudgy, middle-aged man," says Dranko.

Lucas leans forward, becoming just as annoyed as had Turlissa. "What is the point of all this, Dranko? Please. This is bizarre even by your usual standards."

"The point is this: I'm not testing you, and I'm not lying. Would this be easier if I just said I was hit in the head and don't remember anything?"

"You don't remember... but... How far back does your memory loss go?" asks Lucas.

"My memory is fine except for certain things: specifically, everything to do with the Undermen and my involvement with them."

Lucas shakes his head. "Oh, for the love of the Gods..."

"I can pick stuff up on the fly, but anything you can do to help would be wonderful."

Several times, Lucas opens his mouth as if to speak, but can't quite figure out what to say. He mulls the possibilities. This could be an imposter, but someone capable of that level of deception – and capable of getting into the Greenhouse – would have come up with a better ruse. Dranko could be insane. He could really have lost his memories of the Undermen, perhaps at the hands of an enemy? Dranko has antagonized plenty of people, goodness knows, during his strange extracurricular adventures. Or, maybe this really is a test. A bizarre, annoying and stupid test, of someone whose loyalty should be beyond any question...

"Dranko, whether you remember it or not, we've known each other a long time."

"OK," says Dranko. "When did we first meet?"

Lucas thinks for a second. "We first met about three weeks before the Slipper tried to have you killed."

"I was attacked by evil footwear?"

shilsen: You know, I hate whenever that happens!

Lucas thinks to himself: *No imposter could be this good.* "Not a slipper. *The* Slipper. The assassin, the Slipper. The one who... You really don't remember this? Can't we take to you a temple and get your memory fixed?"

"Nope. Not possible. So. When did the Slipper try to have me killed, and why?"

"That was about two years ago. I'll assume this is a test for the moment; it will make me feel better."

"Fine," says Dranko.

"Do you remember the name 'the Oracle?'" asks Lucas.

"Yes! That was me!"

"Good, good!" exclaims Lucas. "You remember something after all! Excellent."

When Dranko simply looks at him expectantly, Lucas frowns and continues. "Some years ago – and I don't quite understand how this got started – you and your friends downstairs operated as a kind of adjunct strike team to the Guild. The old leader knew he could count on you. But then the Slipper..."

Dranko interrupts him with a derisive snort.

"You weren't laughing at the time," says Lucas seriously. "You barely survived! The Slipper was the leader of the Undermen, and a formidable assassin. Unlike his predecessor, he didn't approve of you – the Oracle – and your friends having the power and privileges that you did. He tried to have you killed. It was a mess – a mess that resulted in the Slipper being dead, as well as the man most likely to have succeeded him. There was a power vacuum."

"Tell me I stepped in!"

"You stepped in."

"Good for me!"

"Yes, it was. And you've been running the Undermen for the two years since then."

Over the mind-link comes Morningstar's distressed thoughts: *No! No, no, no, no, no, no, no!*

She turns to the rest of the party (to whom she is relaying Dranko's conversation), a look on her face even more aggrieved than usual. "I'm married to the mob."

shilsen: Was that line actually delivered at the game or is this creative license?

Sagiro: Actual line, straight from the tape.

Eccles: Short query since I just started re-reading the PDF files. How old is Dranko by this stage? He's only ten when the campaign opens.

Very much enjoying the story, you guys must have a blast with this much history behind you all!

Piratecat: If it says that somewhere, it's a typo! When the campaign started, he had finally gotten himself free of the church and had moved out on his own; that put him at about 17 or 18 unless I'm forgetting something. At this point, a few years on, he's 21 or 22.

Eccles: Having just eaten and checked my facts... my bad! He was mindwiped and lost ten years briefly. That's fine. I no longer feel the wedding to be a deeply sinister affair!!

Piratecat: Incidentally, what you're seeing here is the result of a long-delayed Leadership feat. I took it for Dranko not long after angering that demon lord Tapheon in the Citadel of Indifference, probably with the half-formed thought of getting a bard and having him spread embarrassing lies about Tapheon. (I also thought about spreading a rumor that Dranko was now Saint Dranko, so if Tapheon ate my soul, some do-gooder paladin would show up in the Abyss to free me. It was a nice thought, but a very silly one.)

My Leadership feat sat fallow all the time that we were in Het Branoi and the past. Then it kicked in all at once.

Oversight: Well having gotten my first post I figured I'd might as well do another and comment on the extremely interesting role-playing possibilities evident in Dranko's new "friends." Even the friendliest Thieves' Guild is going to run morally very gray. I'm curious how Dranko deals with the complicated moral collisions between running a Thieves' Guild and being a member of a party of national heroes that runs very much to the "good" side. Not to mention being a cleric of Delioch. Basically it seems that Dranko is connected to three different moral authorities: the Undermen, the Spire Guard, and Delioch.

It's these kind of complicated situations that lead to difficult decisions that in turn bring life to a character. Do the Undermen take assassination jobs? Do they do money-lending and if they do, what happens when someone doesn't pay up? Are examples made? If these kinds of things happen, how do the other members of the party feel about it? How does Delioch? How does Dranko? Very good stuff.



What an Oracle Should Know

Dranko grins wide, having finally heard confirmation of his lofty status. And upon hearing that he does in fact head up a powerful semi-criminal organization, the first words out of his mouth are: "Then tell me why I'm not richer!"

Lucas clears his throat. "As your right-hand man – and it pains me to remind you of this – I should point out that the Undermen's treasury can be used for discretionary purposes, by you or other members of your Small Council with your permission. I don't know if it's a lot by your standards – we have perhaps 30,000 gold in liquid assets, and another 15,000 tied up in investments and business ventures." He pauses, then asks: "Have I passed the test yet?"

"Not yet. Keep going!" exhorts Dranko.

Lucas strokes his goatee and peers thoughtfully at Dranko for a moment. "If Turlissa is correct, and you are someone disguised as Dranko attempting to learn Guild secrets, it's a brilliant disguise. It means you have somehow infiltrated the Greenhouse, disposed of Dranko Blackhope and all of his adventuring associates, replaced them with people who look and act like them in all ways, and have adopted a number of Dranko's unique mannerisms that I would have sworn could never be ascribed to another individual... No, it simply can't be. It's much easier for me to believe that you've simply lost your memory. I don't understand what you were saying before about time changing and the rest, but honestly I don't think I have to."

"Agreed," says Dranko, and now he feels relief at having gotten past the tricky part of the conversation. "What I need from you, is that you look after our best interests, and *my* best interests in particular."

"You know I always do," says Lucas gravely. "Part of the reason your position is so tenuous is that many in the Guild do not wish to be led by someone with such a high degree of absenteeism. When you are gone, which is often – and usually you tell me, so I can step in smoothly – I am always pleased to handle the affairs of the Undermen."

Dranko smiles gratefully at Lucas. "I'm curious," he says. "Just as a matter of moral principle, we don't do assassinations, do we?"

"No, not as a rule," says Lucas.

"Excellent," says Dranko. "That makes me happy."

Lucas does offer a qualification. "Occasionally, in the course of disrupting some illicit operation, people die. But it is not our preference. Murder is bad for business, and we are involved in a lot of... business."

"We are the grease that keeps the wheels of commerce turning!" says Dranko with a knowing look.

"Yes, that's an excellent way of putting it. In fact, I've heard you say similar things in the past."

Over the mind-link, Morningstar suggests a new inquiry. "You'll need to brief me on any enemies we have," says Dranko. Then, not that Morningstar specifically asked, but he adds: "Oh, and am I sleeping with Turlissa?"

Lucas looks scandalized. "Gods, no!" he exclaims. "You really have no memory, do you?"

"Then why did she kiss me when she first saw me?" asks Dranko.

"That's just how she is," says Lucas. "A shameless flirt. She's always been like that, especially with you. She has... utmost respect for you and your relationship with Morningstar. She just... thinks you're cute. It's one of those mysteries that none of us can explain."

Kibi suggests asking about the other members of the Small Council. Morningstar passes this on to Dranko, who in turn asks Lucas.

Lucas sighs. "I suppose I'd better remind you about them before we meet, which we ought to do at your earliest convenience. Turlissa is technically not a member of the Small Council. She is... well, she calls herself a master spy. She collects incoming information about illicit crime in the city. She delivers her reports to me on a regular basis."

"Which reminds me," says Dranko. "We should make a public show of a healer coming to 'fix my memory,' so that Turlissa's rumors don't make it to the wrong ears."

"I'll take care of that," says Lucas. "I'll explain everything to her. Now. The Small Council, then. Of course there's you at the top – styling yourself 'the Oracle,' naturally."

Morningstar shares this with the others, which elicits a gale of laughter. For better or worse the secret room is soundproofed, so Lucas doesn't hear.

"I am Lucas Blackwell. I am 'the Hand' – your right-hand man, and the second in command. I have always been privy to your plans and thoughts, so that I can step in and take over during your many absences."

"There is **Greta Smith**. She is 'the Box.' She is the treasurer."

"If these are all named after body parts, then she totally got screwed," says Dranko.

Lucas counts silently to three. "She has an excellent head for numbers," he says evenly. "She runs the accounts, keeps the money flowing smoothly."

"There is **Aaron Martel**; he is 'the Blade.' He trains the Undermen in combat. He has been fiercely loyal to you ever since you saved his life. Do you remember that?"

"Nope."

"Remind me to go over all of the details – as many as I can think of. Aaron Martel is perhaps the most critical person to your political position, because the self-proclaimed 'Knuckles' don't approve of you. He keeps them in line."

"There is **Gideon Hollow** – he calls himself 'the Brain.' He is an arcane trickster, a halfling, very good at what he does despite his attitude. From time to time he crafts items that we sell or use on Guild business."

"And of course there is 'the Mouse,' your friend Flicker, in charge of 'questionable procurement,' as we say."

Morningstar shares this with Flicker, who freaks out. Grey Wolf puts a hand on his shoulder. "That means you're nearly at the top of the Thieves' Guild." Flicker hyperventilates.

"Just for reference," says Dranko to Lucas, "Flicker doesn't remember any of this either."

"Because he was with you?" says Lucas, shaking his head. "Of course. Can I count on you to brief him on everything we discuss? Tell him it's very important that Gideon doesn't find out – the two of them are not on the best of terms."

"Right."

"Finally," says Lucas, "there's **Octavius Hightower**, who is technically part of the Small Council. He is called 'the Ear,' and he is the head of your propaganda arm. He leads the Starshine Ensemble, is an excellent musician, and is your main source of

information outside Tal Hae. They have players, musicians, dancers and such in various places around Charagan. He has an office in Tal Hae but is based out of the capital and so only attends meetings sporadically. Whenever you need rumors spread or rumors gathered, he's your man."

"Great!" is Dranko's comment about all of that. No understatement, that: Dranko is already scheming about the ways he can use a kingdom-wide rumor machine, most of them entirely inappropriate.

"Perhaps I should call a meeting at the Manse, tomorrow afternoon," says Lucas, breaking Dranko's reverie.

"Where's the Manse? Say, I found this extra key on my keychain when I came back – does it open up the Manse?"

Lucas realizes he's acquired a splitting headache since arriving at the Greenhouse. Not bothering to hide the pained tone of his voice, he answers, "That's the key to the vault, Dranko."

"Good to know. So, is the Manse in the tailor shop?"

Surprise blossoms on Lucas's face. "Very good! Perhaps your memory is returning. You have just identified one of the ways in."

"We actually used divination to follow Turlissa," admits Dranko. Lucas's face sags.

"So you understand," he says wearily. "Just... so we're on the same page. Your position is highly unusual in the history of the Undermen. You are... as secure as you can be, given your position in your church, and your position as a member of the Spire Guard, and your liaison with the Church of Ell."

"I'd like to think that all adds some legitimacy to the position," says Dranko.

There's not enough time in the world to explain everything, thinks Lucas, rubbing his throbbing temples. "Let's just say that you exude an aura of extreme importance that people are generally afraid to poke," he says, trying to encapsulate Dranko's complex position in as few words as possible.

"Ah," says Dranko.

"There is a rumor about a connection even with Duke Nigel himself," adds Lucas.

"What, nothing about King Crunard?" asks Dranko, feigning seriousness.

Lucas counts to five this time. "No."

He stands up and moves to the door. "Talk to **Quince**, the tailor. He will pretend not to know you, but if you ask to see the scarves in the back of the shop, he will tell you to go right ahead. In the back of the shop, out of sight from most of the rest, is a rack of coats. Behind that rack is a trapdoor. I will trust that a man of your means will have no difficulty finding it."

"Wouldn't it make more sense to have people ask to see the rack of, you know, *coats*?" asks Dranko.

"It's subterfuge. There is a rack of coats, next to the rack of scarves. It's useful if we think someone is tailing. We change the password regularly – in fact, you yourself insisted on the current every-two-month rotation. The Manse is entirely underground. It contains meeting rooms, safe houses, the council room, the Vault to which you have the key; it has Gideon's laboratory... Look, why don't you simply meet me at the Manse, and I can go in with you. That way I can cover for you if you meet anyone on the way to the council meeting."

Dranko and Lucas descend the stairs to the living room, where the Company, having essentially eavesdropped on the entire conversation, act natural.

"Everybody!" Dranko announces. "This is Lucas. Lucas is my second-in-command with the Undermen. We like him."

Lucas starts. "Oh, so none of them remember anything either?"

"Nope," says Dranko.

"Ah," says Lucas. "Please explain it to them."

The tall man turns to the assembled Company and bows. "It was nice to see you all again, even if you don't remember me." With that, he walks out into the night.

Aravis turns to Dranko. "Yes, you have a *lot* of explaining to do."

el-remmen: You know, normally I have a definite vision of Dranko, but for this whole exchange I just kept imagining Piratecat's pie-eating grin, except replace "pie" with something else. Sounds like a fun "discovery."

coyote6: How much of this (Dranko's new position) did the player(s) know about in advance, and how much was made up entirely by the GM and thus was a total surprise to the player(s)?

KidCthulhu: All of it was a surprise. For Piratecat it was a pleasant surprise, nay, a culmination of all Dranko's wildest dreams.
For the rest of us, it was rather more on the nightmare side.



Dreams, Deliveries, Disease and Doctrine

Dranko's new responsibilities aside, the Company has no clear agenda for the first time in its history. With no dire threats to the Kingdom or other Spire-related outings on which to embark, they mostly hang around the Greenhouse divvying up loot, laying in supplies for a magic-item-creation bonanza, and enjoying some much-deserved R&R. Nonetheless, they are about to experience an extraordinarily eventful three-month stretch.

Lucas Blackwell does call a brief meeting of the Undermen Small Council, allowing Dranko to meet his immediate underlings. Greta Smith is an immense woman, easily 6'4" and 250 pounds, with short hair and an open smile. She does sleight-of-hand tricks with coins while others talk. Gideon Hollow is an obnoxious and arrogant halfling who shows absolutely no respect for the Oracle's position. Aaron Martel is a hulking, brooding man who says little, and if it's true that a life-debt to Dranko has earned his undying loyalty, there's no evidence of that during their meeting. Octavius Hightower is not in attendance but that is not unusual.

There is little business to discuss. The day-to-day operations of the Undermen proceed quite smoothly under Lucas's guiding hand. The only items on the agenda are a local jeweler suspected of receiving smuggled goods from Forquelle without Guild involvement, and the ongoing surveillance of an independent cat-burglar. Dranko needs to say little, letting Lucas take the lead in discussions. Flicker remains entirely silent under some dire but unspecified threat from Dranko.

After the meeting, Lucas takes Dranko on a tour of the Manse, a regular warren beneath the city of Tal Hae. There are actually two ways in: one through Quince's tailor shop, and another through the basement of an abandoned tenement. Both are heavily guarded every hour of the day.



"God damn it!" Dranko yells. He has just woken up on the morning after his council meeting to discover that the itchy mystery rash is all over his face. Flicker and Grey Wolf have it as well. *Restoration* and *remove disease* are still efficacious, but ye gods, it's annoying! Among the Company only Kibi seems immune (as do Snokas and Yoba), but it's the dwarf who has one of those face-smacking moments of insight about the affliction. "You know," he says over breakfast, "I could just cast *legend lore* on one of you. A disease that can't be cured by magic seems important enough that the spell could work."

There's no reason not to try it. Kibi casts his spell, and ten minutes later a brief verse comes into his head.

EACH AGREED, AND EACH KNEW WELL,
A BARGAIN WAS MADE WHERE THE DARKNESS FELL.
PROMISES BROKEN ARE VILE THINGS.
THE GODDESS HEARD, AND WOE SHE BRINGS.

There are groans all around the breakfast table. Shreen the Fair! The Company had sworn an oath on Dralla's name that they would return the Crosser's Maze to Shreen when they were done with it. The rash started to appear soon after Aravis had used the Maze to seal the rift between Abernia and Volpos at Verdshane. It appears that they are now suffering divine punishment for failing to fulfill their promise.

Joshua Randall: I was cleaning out my e-mail and I found one I had sent to myself (who, me? Crazy?) regarding Moirel and the Eyes. This was way before the most recent spate of updates that made clear who she was/is, and before the Eyes served their purpose and got dusted.

At the time, I was trying to come up with my own explanation for Moirel, the Eyes, Condor, etc. Long-time readers of this Story Hour thread will be familiar with my other wildly unsuccessful predictions, such as that Condor and Cranchus were the same person, or that Darkeye (heretofore unseen leader of the Sharshun) is actually the mirror universe version of Mrs. Horn, complete with tight-fitting black leather outfit.

Actually, I still hold out hope for that latter prediction...

Piratecat: Dude, you deeply worry me...

Joshua Randall: So says the man who plays the half-orc with sex on the brain so often that his own party members sometimes have to ask him not to think over the *Rary's telepathic bond*!

Piratecat: My theory that Cranchus and the evil Parthol Runecarver (traitorous archmage) were the same person is *still* utterly brilliant, even though it's been blatantly proven to be completely wrong. I was so sure... Our current theory is that Darkeye and Moirel are the same person. If so, it's going to be fun to get to say "Hey, nice to meet you, we killed your dad" when she's wiping the floor with us.

Joshua Randall: That seems too obvious for Sagiro. His machinations are more subtle and devious.

Unless that's what he *wants* us to think, and it really is as simple as Darkeye = Moirel.

My head hurts.

"I guess a visit to our old friend Shreen is in order," says Aravis grimly. Whether or not he will (or even can) relinquish the Crosser's Maze is not clear. Still, since the rash can be controlled by daily spells, the Company still plan to spend a few months crafting magic items before returning to Kivia and a showdown with Shreen.



Four nights later, each member of the Company has an intensely vivid dream. It is the same dream for all of them, and what they dream is this:

There is only blue. Above, the sky stretches clear, and below, the ocean lies calm like a sheet of cerulean glass.

On the surface of the sea there are ships, two sets of three, facing each other across a half-mile of calm water. The three ships facing west display the holy symbol of Posada, Kivian God of the Sea. The three ships facing east fly the flags of Charagan and of Brechen.

One of the ships under Brechen's symbol is familiar; Makel Troutman is its captain.

A whirlpool starts to form, slowly, its center exactly between the two groups of ships. Over time it expands, growing loud and vigorous and deep. The ships make no move to escape the vortex, and so inexorably they are sucked in; around and around they sweep, tilting ever more steeply as the whirlpool draws them into its heart.

After a time made immeasurable by the nature of dreams the ships plummet downward and out of sight, into the depths of the Uncrossable Sea, their banners and crews lost forever, sacrifices sealing an accord between bitter Divine rivals.

The Company awake, and they, like every citizen of Charagan and Kivia alike, understand instinctively what has changed. The Uncrossable Sea is uncrossable no more. Across both continents the implications are discussed for weeks – new possibilities opened for ship travel, trade, exploration and war. Dranko wastes little time in asking Lucas to start sending envoys via *teleport* to seek economic opportunity.

coyote6: This = Totally Badass™.



Morningstar has been dreading the inevitable meeting with High Priestess Rhiavonne. It's hard for her to guess what the High Priestess's reaction will be to Morningstar's account of the distant past – or indeed what she has already learned through *communes* – but the fate of the Illuminated Sisters is certainly at stake. And no matter what Rhiavonne might say, Morningstar will not abandon her calling as the Child of Light, especially with Octesian still at large. To better prepare for the confrontation with the matriarch of her church, Morningstar casts *commune* herself.

The Avatar of Ell is with her. Instead of opening with a question, Morningstar takes a moment to frame her inquiries.

You warned us there was a need for some of us to withstand daylight. So far we have met the challenges before us. Politics have grown up around this issue like weeds, but the question remains: will the need for sisters who can walk strong in the daylight span for only a few years, or is this something we should institute for generations? The High Priestess fears that if we dilute our skills, and return to walking both in night and day, we will be unprepared for some great danger in the future. The Illuminated Sisters believe that your call to us was a signal that we should change our ways for more than just the immediate danger.

"Things have changed somewhat in my present and in my past. Is all that I have just spoken still the core of the issue?"
YOUR POLITICS HAVE NOT CHANGED.

"The prophesies of the turtle and the great army showed me that sometimes all paths lead to some kind of danger. Is one of these ways of serving you better than the other?"

SERVE ELL WITH YOUR HEART.

(Morningstar can't help grumbling a bit at this. *My heart isn't the problem; it's what my mouth may do that I'm worried about.*)

"Will Ell be displeased or weakened if the Illuminated Sisters are cast out and form a separate temple?"

NO.

"If all Priestesses learn to withstand daylight, will it cause us to be unprepared for another danger in the future?"
THAT FUTURE IS UNCERTAIN.

"If I ask the Illuminated Sisters to follow Rhiavonne's demands, will we be less well prepared for future battles in the dreamscape and with Octesian – the battles that you warned me of when I fulfilled my promise for Mrs. Horn's life?"

YES, IF THEY LISTEN.

"Once Octesian is defeated is it likely that the need for a group of Dreamwalkers who can withstand the daylight will be fulfilled for my generation?"

LIKELY? YES. CERTAIN? NO.

"I have no clear opinion on which practice is the best. My thought is to ask for compromise – to have some sisters in each temple serve as Daywalkers. After being accepted as priestesses and fully learning to operate at night, they would then train to withstand the day. They could work in shifts during the day so that the temple doors could remain open to callers. When not on a Daywalking shift the priestess would be awake at night with the rest of her sisters. The main body of the temple would be able to continue operating as before. The Illuminated Sisters could serve as the first Daywalkers at our various temples and train others."

"Would this change weaken or displease Ell?"

NO.

"Is there a chance High Priestess Rhiavonne would accept a proposal like this?"

YES.

"Have the plans to bring back the Emperor been aborted for the next three months?"

YES. YOU HAVE DONE WELL.

"The Company has several interests to pursue in Kivia. Will our enemies in Charagan do significant harm here if we pursue our interests in Kivia next?"

PROBABLY NOT.

"You warned me that Octesian will not forget me. Would it be to our best advantage to pursue him next?"

PROBABLY NOT.

"You warned me a while back that there is a great evil hidden in Kynder Hold. Does this evil still remain?"

YES.

"Is it time yet for us to pursue that evil?"

YOU WOULD NOT SURVIVE.

"Is Parthol Runecarver the threat in Kynder Hold?"

YES.

"Are Tarsos or Meledien threats that we will need to deal with?"

YES.

"Should we try to rescue Rosetta or Cencerra before returning to Kivia?"

NO.

darkhall-nestor: Does the party still have that "lizard man mage" that was killed on one of the planes of the Abyss and then deflated, rolled up and stuffed into a bag of holding? If they do, any plans on doing anything with him/her/it?

Piratecat: We did that? Got a link? I have no memory! Holy cow, that may explain that lingering smell...

Incidentally, just to give folks a feel for it, we played Thursday night and everyone is now 17th level. Sagiro is a sneaky, sneaky DM; in the game right now we are currently of the opinion that we want to build an inlaid black circle diagram out of obsidian bricks, to perform one of their own damn rituals. Oh, that's a good idea, and we certainly have a choice – but the alternative is worse. Stupid sneaky DM.

Joshua Randall: I think he means the guy who temporarily kidnapped Flicker during the Het Branoi adventures, in order to coerce the party into following him to (what turned out to be) Sagiro (the NPC) and the Red Eye.

darkhall-nestor: Yep, that is the one. Wouldn't the body be preserved in a bag of holding or a [magical] haversack?

coyote6: Not ordinarily; the usual variety don't come with stasis fields or anything; food will rot, wind-up clocks will wind down, living people can use up all the air and suffocate, etc.

darkhall-nestor: Ooh, scary – "the haunted haversack"...

coyote6: Worse – open the bag, and some souped-up wight reaches out and grabs you. Forget bag of devouring; it's a bag of energy drain!

thegreymen: Of course, it could just be that everyone forgot, and now that we've reminded Sagiro, lots of evil, twisted things come of it. It's sometimes really bad to remind your DM that you still are carrying those extra tidbits you picked up...

darkhall-nestor: I thought of that. It's all good – for us...

KidCthulhu: I'm pretty sure we remembered to take him out of the bag, and this just wasn't an important enough item for Sagiro to comment on. Sorry guys, no haunted sack.

Piratecat: Dranko has a haunted sack.

[Venture Brothers]

ERNIE: Dude, the Apaches are back, and they're pitching a haunted teepee in your pants!

DRANKO: My pants are haunted! My pants are haunted!

[/Venture Brothers]

Ahem. Moving right along.

The One Warlock: My pants are haunted! My pants are haunted!

Best Windows Critical Error sound ever, by the by.

A week and a half after that, while the Company eat breakfast at the Greenhouse, there is a loud knock on the front door. Eddings finds a messenger from the Ducal Palace standing outside, a rolled up carpet beneath one arm. "Is this the residence of General Kay Windstorm and her associates?"

Eddings lets out a sigh; there has been no sign of Kay since her departure from Het Branoi. “Yes,” he answers shortly. “Though the General is indisposed at the moment.”

“My orders stipulate that I may leave this delivery with her associates at the Greenhouse,” says the messenger. He hands over the rug, along with a note, and departs. Eddings brings the delivery inside.

Ernie nearly leaps out of his apron when he sees what has arrived. “*Burning Sky!*” he exclaims. “How in Yondalla’s heaven did this find its way back here?” The accompanying note explains:

To General Kay Windstorm and Company:

You’ll be happy to know that your carpet was a turning point in the final battles against the Delfirians. By extreme good luck, a Delfirian messenger using the carpet was shot down by a unit of Werthian archers who were stranded behind enemy lines. The messenger was carrying orders, and the Werthians smuggled these back to our command center. With knowledge of their strategies, many kingdom lives were saved in the subsequent battles. Word has reached me that the Delfirian flying rug had once belonged to you, a spoil of war from a previous battle. In gratitude for your allowance of continued deployment of the Yrimpan army, I now return this device to you.

Yours, General Largent Brown.

There is much rejoicing, especially among the Company’s halfling cooks. And, even better, it turns out that the reacquisition of *Burning Sky* isn’t even the coolest delivery the party gets that week. Two days later there is another knock on the Greenhouse door during lunch, which interrupts Flicker complaining that he didn’t get a key to the Undermen’s vault.

Eddings again opens the door, but isn’t sure what to make of what he sees in the street. The others come over at his request, and they behold what appears to be a hovering scarecrow with fly-wings. It’s holding a wooden box about three feet on a side. As the Company watch, a small twig emerges from the scarecrow’s head, and there are small pieces of paper affixed to the twig. It dangles the papers in front of its own eyes, seeming to stare at them for a few seconds. Then the whole thing dissolves into a pile of loose straw, the box landing with a thump in the street and the papers fluttering down after. The papers, it turns out, have crude sketches of each of the Company on them.

Suspicion is high, and some in the Company note that the box is just the right size for a torso. Flicker makes a tasteless joke about Levec Oldbarrow. Neither the box nor its contents detect as magical. Ernie casts *augury* and learns that opening the box will bring “Weal.”

Dranko pries open the container and discovers three things inside. One is a dark green book with a strange symbol on the cover. One is a chunk of rough white quartz about the size of a baseball. The third is an envelope with a wax seal bearing the same symbol as the book. The inside of the crate was also lined with lead; the book and crystal now both radiate significant magic. Dranko tears open the envelope to find a letter written in a scratchy hand and an unfamiliar language. One *comprehend languages* later he is reading the letter to his friends.

It seems you folks did okay, and more than okay. I’m enclosing a couple of old things from my storeroom, gifts in gratitude for freeing us multitudes from the web of Slices. Before you utter the command word for the Lucent Tower, stand well back, and don’t use it indoors! The commands are simple: “crystal rise,” and “crystal fall.” The book goes one page at a time, and anyone can use it. I’ve a feeling that folks in your line of work will find good uses for these things, more than an old retired wizard with his time nearly expired.

Sincerely,

Chiswick.

The book is one of “infinite” spells – Dranko flips the front cover and finds the first incantation is *shout*.

There is a bit of moist-eyed reminiscing about the old wizard Chiswick, encountered in the Eye of the Storm back in Het Branoii. He had been exceedingly old, and the timeless nature of the Slices had given him many extra years he had not expected to enjoy. But soon enough thought turns to the Lucent Tower, and Ernie takes the others on his newly-reacquired carpet to an empty field outside the city walls.

Dranko tosses the chunk of quartz onto the ground, uttering “Crystal Rise.” It immediately starts to grow in the fashion of an expanding crystal, rising upward until, within a few seconds, it has formed into a pearlescent tower almost thirty feet high and twenty feet in diameter. It comes to a point at the top, just above four balconies set high up in the walls. Down at ground level a doorway appears. Dranko slowly pushes it open.

Inside the Lucent Tower it is cool. It also *looks* cool, an effect of the blue-white light that filters through the walls. The boots of the Company echo on the hard marble floor. The most notable feature of the Tower is its lack of features; the entire interior is one huge space. There are no stairs (or other means to reach the balconies), no furnishings, no objects at all, save for four wooden “handles” that sprout from the walls at the four compass points, about three feet off the ground. These handles don’t look *entirely* solid, as if they’re part substance and part illusion. Aravis reaches out and grasps one, discovering that it feels much the same – *almost* solid, but not quite. It doesn’t move at all.

Dranko grabs one and thinks about a chair on the floor next to him. Silently a chair appears matching the image in his mind. When he releases the handle, the chair remains. Aravis imagines a spiral marble staircase leading up to the balconies, and there it is. Both staircase and chair share the semi-physical nature of the handles, but are solid enough to bear human weight.

Ernie grabs a third handle and thinks: *Fully equipped kitchen!* It appears off to the side. He realizes that his mental image of the kitchen was incomplete – it’s missing some shelves and a spice rack – but even as he realizes these things, they fill themselves in. Dranko grabs a wooden spoon and walks out of the Tower with it; it melts away to nothingness as he crosses the threshold.

He comes back in, grips a handle, and thinks: *Big pile of treasure.* There it is: coins, jewels, gems, crowns, the works. He does the only sensible thing, and dives into the heap.

A bit more experimentation reveals the following:

- Semi-illusionary food can be created, and even eaten, but it vanishes from the throat when swallowed.
- Only the person who activated the Lucent Tower can open and close the door.
- It’s unwise to keep hold of the tower in closed form when activating it.

(Dranko learns that last one by direct empirical testing, though his stellar reflexes and tumbling skills spare him any actual harm.)



Before meeting with Rhiavonne in Kallor, Morningstar travels to Kynder Hold to see her parents. Dranko, her husband, goes with her. They arrive at dusk, hoping to catch her mother at home.

Morningstar’s mother and father – **Domira** and **Rodvin** – are delighted by the visit. Morningstar wonders how she’s going to break the news to them. What she ends up doing is babbling. “We have some news. We didn’t think we’d be gone so long, but it turns out that we were gone longer than we thought we had been, and when we were there, we... we got married.”

There’s a second or two of awkward silence; Dranko leaps to fill it. “I know it’s a little late,” he says to Rodvin, “and after the fact and all, but I would be honored if you would give me the hand of your daughter in marriage.”

As Morningstar’s father nods, bewildered, her mother blurts out: “You got married, and you didn’t invite us?”

“We’re really sorry!” says Morningstar. “It’s complicated. We weren’t technically on this plane.”

“Plane?” asks Domira.

“Of existence,” adds Dranko.

“We couldn’t get back,” says Morningstar. “There was a big enemy plot, and we had to stop them. For us, we were gone almost a year.”

“Time moved differently there,” says Dranko.

“You were off on another world, fighting evil,” says Domira. “I at least understand that much.”

"It was very dangerous," says Morningstar. "And we weren't sure about the whole 'getting back' thing, so we decided to get married, in case... you know..."

"In case something bad happened," says Domira.

"And by 'something bad,' you mean 'get killed,'" adds Dranko helpfully.

"But you didn't," says Domira, and, having finally accepted her daughter's reasoning, she breaks into a grin. "And here you are. Congratulations! And don't you worry – we'll have another marriage ceremony now that you're back, for your friends and family who might have missed the first one."

Morningstar smiles back, but she can't keep the worry off her face. Her meeting with Rhiavonne is fast approaching. Domira notices immediately. "I'd expect you to be happier," she says. "Something else is bothering you, isn't it?"

"She's going to be talking to the High Priestess in Kallor," says Dranko.

"The High Priestess Rhiavonne?" says Domira, surprised. "Well, dear, you are strong in the faith of Ell."

"More than you know," says Dranko. "But she and Rhiavonne are sometimes at loggerheads. They might have an... argument."

"Rhiavonne decided to disband the Illuminated Sisters while I was gone," says Morningstar.

"Yes, I heard," says Domira. "I wondered about that. But we're having a wedding ceremony, whatever Rhiavonne says to you." She smiles encouragingly at Morningstar, who can't help but smile back.

"I'm honored to be a part of your family," says Dranko.

"I'm sure that the church... appreciates you, for all that you've done," says Domira. Then, speaking more to Dranko and Rodvin, she says with clear pride in her voice, "I know that my daughter can do things many other sisters cannot, a sure sign of Ell's favor. It's time they understood just what she does for them, how important she is to them."

"Thank you," says Morningstar, grateful. "I wasn't sure how you'd feel about all this."

"I'm still not sure how I feel," says Domira. "I've never quite understood this whole 'Illuminated Sisters' business you're involved in. But Ell is Ell, and if people want to serve Her, they will, and if she wants to bless them, She will. If your faith is strong, and your works are good, I don't think Ell will mind the rest."

"I wish more priests of Delioch were like this," Dranko mutters under his breath.

"I did a *commune*," says Morningstar, "and She didn't seem to mind."

Domira can't help but laugh. "Do you see how she tosses that off?" she says to her husband. "Oh, yes, the other day, when I was talking with Ell..."

"She chats with angels," confirms Dranko. Morningstar turns red.

"What did She say?" asks Domira. "Did She say 'Hi?'"

"She said I did a good job," says Morningstar.

"See?" says Domira. "You can say about me, 'Oh, I'm just your mom,' but you can't say that about Ell. If She thinks you're doing a good job, I daresay you are."

"I didn't seek the Illuminated Sisters out, they came to me," says Morningstar.

"But they needed you," says Domira. "They needed you to teach them."

"Yes, for a task that's not yet over," says Morningstar. "So we can't let them be disbanded."

"So you just tell Rhiavonne that."

"That's what I'll do." There is now more resolve than doubt in Morningstar's voice. "And I'll ask that there be Daywalkers, just as there are Dreamwalkers, who will be able to withstand the light."

Morningstar goes to church with her mother while Dranko stays behind to swap stories with Rodvin. After services Morningstar seeks out her old combat trainer, Clariel. They talk for a while, and then Clariel offers to spar, to see how Morningstar has progressed. She is astounded at her pupil's martial prowess. "How did you learn so many fighting techniques?" she asks.

“Mostly from having them used on me,” says Morningstar modestly.

“I’d love to learn more,” says Clariel. “How long will you be back in Kynder Hold?”

“I have to leave in just a few minutes,” says Morningstar.

“Off on another adventure?”

“Of a sort.”



Morningstar’s meeting with the High Priestess Rhiavonne is at 1:00 a.m. As has been the case in previous meetings, the old priestess is standing with her back to the door, staring out a large window into the blackness of Kallor.

She turns as Morningstar enters her office, looking older than Morningstar recalls, and more tired. But despite the extra lines in her weathered face, and shoulders that seem more stooped, the High Priestess still radiates an unmistakable piety and power. Her expression is unreadable.

“Please, sit down.” She motions Morningstar toward a chair. “You wished to have an audience. Here we are. Would you like to speak first?”

Morningstar clears her throat. “Do you know what happened? Where I was?”

“I’ve heard things,” admits Rhiavonne. “That you’ve traveled to the past.”

“That is true,” says Morningstar. “But not initially.” While Rhiavonne listens with unwavering attention, Morningstar briefs her on her recent adventures, starting with the Sharshun plot to change history. She talks of the Emperor, and how he had never been banished. Unlike Lucas, the old priestess actually seems to understand the contortions of time involved.

Morningstar goes on to explain Het Branoi as plainly as she can, and how, with the Eyes of Moirel, they went back in time to preserve history. “I presume that the very fact of our current discussion means you succeeded in going back in time, and preventing history from being rewritten after all,” says Rhiavonne, nodding. “And then you managed to come back to our own time. It sounds like you have had quite the adventure... and the details help explain some... odd... answers to *commune* questions posed by some of our sisters.

“And now you’re back.”

“Yes,” says Morningstar. She ventures a smile. “To be a thorn in your side once more.”

Rhiavonne looks up at her, a glint in her eyes. “I think the days of you being a thorn in my side are just about over.”

Morningstar cannot hide her dismay. She braces for excommunication.

“Don’t look so dour,” says Rhiavonne, seeing Morningstar’s crestfallen look. “I don’t mean what you think I do. Let me explain. There is a rule about being High Priestess of Ell, a rule with which you are unfamiliar. You know that Ell greatly values our independence, our freedom to make our own decisions. When one is the High Priestess of Ell, one may make only one questioning assay into the mind of the Goddess, only one *commune* in her natural life. I had never used mine. I always intended to cast it at the end, to pose questions about my successor, to make sure things would be in good hands when I was gone. I won’t be able to do that now, because when I heard that you were back, and considering some of the details that had reached my ears, I knew I had to have answers. I had reached a more important fork in the road. So I asked questions of Ell. Do you want to know what she said?” Morningstar nods.

“I have a clear memory of my discussion with Ell. I’m not going to share all of my questions; some of them were personal, and don’t involve you. Here are the rest.

“I asked that if I allow Daywalking to become prevalent in the church, will that lead to the eventual failure of the church as predicted in the allegory I shared with you in this very room. The answer was: Only without eternal vigilance.

“I asked if I should elevate you to a position of higher authority within the church. She said: She will find her own place.

“I asked if she would be angry if I upheld the excommunication of the Illuminated Sisters, and let them find their own way in Her eyes. She said No. They would still serve Her.

“I asked if she would be angry if I altered the policies of the church sanctioning all sisters to walk freely beneath the sun. She said: Less angry than disappointed.

"I asked if you really did speak to her in the past. You know what she said.

"I asked if her desires for the church had changed since she spoke with you. She said that her desire for a strong church has never changed. I'm not sure quite what to make of that answer. I have a feeling there's as much in what she didn't say, as in what she did.

"I asked if you are acting for the betterment of the church, more so than for your own personal gain. The answer was Yes, she is as faithful as you.

"I asked if the same could be said of Amber. The answer was No. For her, Power and Piety are of equal weight.

"When I asked if I should remove her from power, even if I did continue to sanction the Illuminated Sisters to operate in daylight, she said: She has great potential.

"I asked: You chose Morningstar for the task of defeating Naradawk's dream-soldiers. Must she continue her vigilance regardless of my choices? The answer was: It would be prudent.

"I asked if there were still enemy agents of the Black Circle within the church of Ell, here in Kallor. No, not in Kallor.

"Elsewhere then? The answer was yes."

Rhiavonne finishes her recitation. She looks thoughtful. She looks at Morningstar. "What do you propose?" she asks.

"I know that my task is not done, that Octesian is still out there," says Morningstar. "I have asked Ell: when Octesian is defeated, will the need for Dreamwalkers trained in the light during my generation be fulfilled. The answer was: Likely? Yes. Certain? No."

"So, my thought is, I would like to create a group of Daywalkers, just as there are Dreamwalkers now. They would be of limited number, but they could withstand the daylight when needed."

"A new order," murmurs Rhiavonne.

"I would propose that they would not stay in the daylight all the time," continues Morningstar, "but would work there in shifts. I would also propose that the Illuminated Sisters be the first group of Daywalkers, and have them spread throughout the various temples of Charagan. This would help all sisters see who they are, and what they do."

"I do not agree with all the tenets of the Illuminated Sisters, and never have. But I think we need to be able to withstand all threats, and I think that's particularly important now that Possada's Boundary is down. Dralla is an extremely powerful force in Kivia; people have good reason to fear the night there."

Rhiavonne fixes Morningstar with a steely gaze. "I will tell you, Morningstar of Ell, Child of Light, that I will follow your suggestion, given what I now know. There will be a new order of Sisters, and they shall be called Daywalkers, and they will train beneath the sun. But I ask this of you in return: that you take the time, when you have it, to write your memoirs of your time in the past. I want the words you spoke to Ell, and that she spoke to you, written as holy text and added to the canon. I want you to write, in whatever manner you see fit, a work that will become required reading for all novices, that they will remember why we have Daywalkers, why they are the exception, and what role they will serve, and the dangers of following that path too far. 'Eternal Vigilance,' Ell advised. I deem the way to make that happen is to be sure none stay with the Church of Ell without hearing those words for themselves. Will you do this?"

"Of course," says Morningstar.

"Then it shall be done. And Amber will accept it, since she will not like the alternative. I will invent a position for her that will be to her liking. And then this chapter of division within the church will come to a close. There will be grumbling, and a backlash, but if we manage things correctly that will subside, and we will be stronger for it."

Rhiavonne's eyes flash a dark fire. "And when this Octesian comes back, you will throw him down."

A bell rings out in the church, and Rhiavonne's ardor subsides. Again she looks tired, old. "Would you care to join me for prayers?"

"I would like nothing better," says Morningstar.

"Then let us retire."



More weeks pass, bringing more changes, and a tying up of loose ends. With much regret, Yoba finally takes her leave of the Company, needing to return to her home of Evergreen. Her duties as Commander of the Southern Border will wait no longer. Ernie casts the *plane shift* himself, accompanying her and staying a few days longer than is strictly necessary. They depart with promises of many *sendings* and visits whenever possible.

When he returns, he takes upon himself the unpleasant task of flying to Kay's family farm. He tells her parents and brothers of her great bravery and her role in saving the world from disaster. As for where she is now? "She stayed behind to continue the fight," he says carefully. "She's still alive, but may not be back for quite some time." Her family seems to understand at least that much, and Ernie is disinclined to try explaining parallel dimensions.



Soon after, the Company loses the last of its temporary members. Snokas approaches Morningstar one day, looking sheepish. "I uh... now, don't take this the wrong way. It's been an honor serving you, and I don't regret a second of it. But... uh... well, I want to learn more. I've learned a lot traveling with you, and I appreciate it. Ell wanted me to protect you, and I have." He looks especially embarrassed as he adds: "I want to spend a while in the library."

Dranko snorts.

"Hey, shut up!" snaps Snokas. "I've been working on my reading skills, and I want to read more about Ell. They have a really good library here in Tal Hae, so I figured I'd spend a few months educating myself."

He looks nervously at Morningstar. "Do you think it'll be all right, given that I'm a... you know, a guy?"

Morningstar laughs. "I'm sure it's okay."

"It means I won't have your back for a while," says Snokas.

"Go," says Morningstar. "I think you're going where you're being called, and that's very important."

"Yeah," says Snokas. "Thanks."



At the same time the Company are crafting magic items, they also get around to setting aside piles of treasure for those who helped them defeat the Cleaners in Het Branoi. Through a series of *sendings* and *plane shifts*, they make good on their promises to reward Ox, Kiro and Cashbox Jack, their allies from Bakersfield.

They also take some time to write out full reports of their recent adventure, for delivery to the Spire. Ozilinh still marvels at the account and is a stickler for detail. He also fills the Company in on what's happened in their absence. Royce, Glade and Wellington had cleaned out another Black Circle bestiary that had become un-Masked, just before the party's return. The brother/sister team of Jerzembeck and Junaya, together with their adventuring group, have been tracking down and eliminating enemies who fled the Battle of Verdshane. There has been no sign of Cencerra or Rosetta, nor of Tor or Meledien. No progress has been made in discovering the murderers of Grawly and Thewana. And neither hide nor hair nor *simulacrum* has been seen of Parthol Runecarver.

The rash – or Curse of Dralla – grows steadily worse over time. Each week it afflicts more and more of the Company, and it covers more of their bodies. More troubling, it starts to cause ability score loss – Charisma and Constitution are both affected. Still, since a daily battery of *restorations* can keep the effects at bay, the Company gut it out and finish their full slate of item crafting.



At last the day comes when all the loose ends have been tied up, and the Company decide it's time to make the journey to Kivia. Dranko makes sure to tell Lucas where he's going.

"And now that Posada's Boundary is no more," says Lucas, "you'll be able to make regular reports."

el-remmen: Can someone remind who/what "Octesian" is? I have no recollection. Reading this update made me wish there was an Abernathy's Company wiki... But great stuff as usual; I like how the PCs have an effect on the world's organizations.

weiknart: Red armor guy. Hangs out in the Dreamscape. Has a sword that can kill dreamwalkers.

energy One: I hearby challenge you, el-remmen, to create an Abernathy's Company wiki.

el-remmen: Um, as much as I would love to volunteer for such a project my own homebrew wiki and life in general makes such a task impossible for me to undertake. Anyway, wikis work best when you have a group of people contributing.

darkhall-nestor: <http://home.comcast.net/~dorian.hart/charagan.html> – not a wiki but there is a lot of info.

el-remmen: Yep, been to that site before; informative, though not as convenient with cross-references as a wiki.

Sagiro: That site is hopelessly out of date. I used to update it back before I had kids, but now I just don't have the time. Consult it at your own risk!

“As long as they’re twenty-five words or less,” says Dranko.

“Excellent,” says Lucas. “Though, regrettably, it means you’ll be unable to grace your communiés with your usual colorful lingo.”

“Actually, it’ll be Morningstar sending the *sendings*. ”

Lucas grins. “This is getting better all the time.”

“I like him,” says Grey Wolf.

With that taken care of, the wizards prepare to *teleport* to Djaw. Next up: a reckoning with Shreen the Fair.

Joshua Randall: Hot damn, I love this story.

Tallarn: Sagiro – would it be possible to get a list of the items that the Company made during this break? This would also be a great time to get an idea of the Company’s levels, if that’d be OK.

Thanks for another great update – I’m sure I’m not alone in saying that the RP-heavy sessions are just as entertaining as the combat-heavy ones, often more!

Sagiro: The Story Hour currently lags behind the game by about 20 runs, or 2.5 years. Unless the items are specifically mentioned on the next tape or two, I’m not sure how I’d figure it out.

Tallarn: Ah, OK. In that case, consider my request rescinded.

Sagiro: I’m pretty sure the average party member was about 15th level at that point in the story.

For the record: my next session, scheduled for early May, will be the 211th of the campaign. The party is currently all 17th level. That means the party has leveled about once every 13 games over the life of the campaign.

Another way: the game has been running about 150 months, which means, on average, we’ve played 1.41 times per month, and the PCs have leveled about once every 9 months.

Tallarn: Hmm... now I’m looking forward to the party getting regular access to 9th level spells...

Vargo: I think the idea of Dranko with 9th level spells is a very scary idea.

Sagiro: I’m sure you’re not the only one who thinks that, but I doubt it will ever happen. Only 4 or 5 of Dranko’s levels are in Cleric. The other 12 or 13 are in Rogue and Lasher.

KidCthulhu: I don’t know why it’s so scary. He’d cast *miracle* to surround himself in treasure and be crushed under his own greed.

Tallarn: Whereas Ernie would just use it to provide the *Greatest. Meal. Ever!*

Piratecat: I’m totally okay with this.

Joshua Randall: *shakes head sadly* That’s just how my father went. *sniffle*

KidCthulhu: Did you at least inherit the loot?



Meow Down Before Him

Posada’s Boundary may now be fully permeable, but the actual distance in miles is such that a normal *teleport* is insufficient. Since Aravis is the only mage with *greater teleport*, he is obliged to take the spell three times and ferry the Company in shifts. As he prepares to cast, he remarks, “We should visit Lord Dafron in Mirj while we’re over there.”

“Why would we do that?” asks Ernie, making a face.

“Because it will make him feel very uncomfortable,” says Aravis with a wicked grin.

A minute later, the party are standing outside the massive gates of Djaw – no special magical rope needed, and with no perilous dashes through the Delfirian Arch. It’s early March, but still warm. Some of that is geographic – Djaw is warm most of the year – and some is because, while it was mid-morning when they left Charagan, it’s mid-afternoon in central Kivia.

A short line of trader wagons is ahead of them in the line to enter the city. The air is filled with unfamiliar smells that bring back the wonder of Djaw, greatest city in the known world and the seat of culture, commerce and military might in Kivia. But just ahead of the Company is a reminder of the civilization’s darker side; a dwarven slave attends a wealthy spice-merchant, a red iron collar clamped around his neck. Kibi glowers.

Ernie is still chomping at the bit to enter the city gates. He’s been lustng after the spiced chicken sticks sold in many of Djaw’s outdoor markets, and is so excited at the prospect that he asks the gate guards if they happen to have any – you know, just maybe sitting around. “I haven’t seen you this happy since Yoba went home,” observes Dranko.

Kibi frowns, watching the dwarven slave ahead get led into the city. “How can you like this place so much?” he mutters.

The guards don't stop him as he pays for his visiting papers just like everyone else. Still, when they look at him askance, he gives them a withering glare in return, almost daring them to say something. Morningstar puts a hand on his shoulder. "We'll take care of it," she says, referring to the Guild of Chains. "But the best way to do that is not to draw attention to ourselves."

Kibi shrugs his shoulder out from beneath her hand. "I'm just walking around," he says angrily, "minding my own business."

They emerge into the city proper, glittering white buildings lining the clean streets, urbane locals in their gauzy robes going about their daily business. Kibi notes that while dwarves are scarce, the few he sees are all slaves.

"You're the only free dwarf in sight," says Morningstar, pressing the point. "That's calling attention to yourself. I understand that your pride is..."

"I am *not* wearing a collar," snarls Kibi.

"I would never suggest that," says Morningstar. "But, we can make you look like a human..."

"Or I can look like a free dwarf," says Kibi, "which maybe is something they should get used to around here."

"And if anyone has a problem with it, they can go through me," says Ernie.

"And me," adds Grey Wolf.

"And me," says Aravis.

Morningstar sighs. "Getting bogged down fighting these little battles isn't going to help the dwarves in the long run."

"Let's just go to the Church of Kemma first," says Ernie. "They can tell us whether it's okay for dwarves to walk around free these days. Maybe it's not a problem at all."

Morningstar *sends* to One Shining Mirror, the High Priest of the Sun Goddess Kemma and leader of One Certain Step's church. They've spoken with him in the past, and hope for wisdom on Shreen and Dralla, as well as insight about the dwarves. The answer comes back that Mirror is indisposed for the rest of the day, but that he would be pleased to meet with them tomorrow. That leaves them free agents for the remainder of the day.

"I think we need to celebrate," says Ernie suddenly. When the others look at him curiously, he continues: "That we can teleport across the sea. And that time is restored..." And here he can't help but grin widely, as he spills some beans from his last trip to Evergreen. "...and that Yoba agreed to marry me!"

There are hearty and exuberant congratulations all around, though Dranko can't help leering. "So," says the half-orc, "Did you... you know...?"

Ernie just stares. When Morningstar gives him a burning glare, Dranko backpedals a bit. "I mean, how did you ask her?"

"It's kind of personal, Dranko," says Ernie.

Dranko gives him a pat on the back. "Well, I'm proud of you."

Ernie smirks. "Well, I figured, if *you* could get married..."

"Go ahead," dares Dranko. "Finish that sentence."

Ernie doesn't say anything, but Flicker's happy to jump in. "If you could get married, then even a blind weasel could get lucky and tie the knot!" A deft wrist-flick later and Flicker is lying on his backside, a whip curled around his ankle.

"So," says Ernie, ignoring this last exchange, "I say we stay in the finest inn in Djaw!"

It's the consensus of several passers-by that the finest inn in Djaw is the Golden Goblet, located in the ritziest part of the city, not many blocks from the immense limestone and marble palace of the Emperor, One Supreme Intellect. Aravis is keen to visit the Court of Cats en route, so they take a meandering route, admiring the architecture and breathing in the exotic scents. Ernie eats about a half-dozen spiced chicken sticks.

The Company is approached just outside the Court of Cats by a Falcon – one of the omnipresent and imposing city guardsmen of Djaw. The Falcons are rumored to be able to see into men's souls and note the guilt or innocence reflected therein.

The Falcon walks directly to Kibi. "You're not wearing your collar," he says flatly.

As Kibi flourishes his papers, Ernie steps forward. "He's not a slave. He's a free dwarf."

"Are you aware that Posada's Boundary is down?" adds Morningstar.

"I shared the same dream as everyone else," acknowledges the guard.

"In Charagan," says Morningstar, "dwarves are a free people."

The Falcon smiles. "Very well. His papers are in order. If you can vouch for him, that's good enough for me. As you were." He walks off.

"We have to do something about the Guild of Chains," says Grey Wolf.

"Don't worry, Kibi," adds Ernie. "I know we'll find a way to free the dwarves of Kivia."



The Court of Cats is a huge open-air plaza surrounded by cafes and shops. It is filled with fountains, benches, and numerous tables and chairs. It is also the home to hundreds of cats, prowling the place for attention and scraps of food. Built right into the flagstones are numerous small bowls, and the human denizens of Djaw make a ritual of keeping these filled with meat and milk. It's no wonder the place is such a feline hot-spot.

As happened the last time, Aravis becomes a cat-magnet the moment he arrives. Dozens of felines start milling around his legs, rubbing against him and meowing loudly. One even jumps up on Aravis's shoulder, but Pewter chases her off. *Only one familiar per wizard!* he hisses. Then, to Aravis, he adds: *The cats don't seem to know exactly why you're so interesting, just that you are.*

All of this inspires the party to learn more. Encouraged by the success of *legend lore* in revealing the cause of the Mystery Rash, Kibi casts the same spell on Aravis himself over the course of the next few minutes. When the spell is over, Kibi's eyes bulge and his jaw drops. Already a bit jealous of Aravis in the wizarding department, Kibi grumbles: "Does Aravis have to hear this?"

"Why?" asks Aravis.

"Well, just don't let your head get more swollen than it already is," says Kibi. The spell produced the following:

HE, A PRISON GUARD.

HE, A WIZARDS' BANE.

HE, A FELINE GOD.

HE, A UNIVERSE.

A feline god?! *If you want to get a swollen head, says Pewter, I wouldn't blame you one bit.*

Ernie can't help but laugh. "I, for one, will not be worshipping you. I'm spoken for."

"But we can add a shrine to you back at Longtooth Keep," says Grey Wolf.

"Hey!" says Flicker. "If I worship you, will you grant me spells?"

"I don't know," says Aravis. "Do you truly believe in Me?"

"Sure!" assures Flicker. "All hail the almighty Aravis!"

"Your first follower," sighs Morningstar.

"Actually," says Grey Wolf soberly, "This would explain why the rats are so concerned about you."

The cats continue to swarm around Aravis's feet. "I'm sorry," he tells them. "I don't have any miracles for you at the moment."



The Golden Goblet is the very epitome of posh. Its main three-story edifice is surrounded by numerous outbuildings scattered over a several-acre property. The landscaping is impeccable, with lush green lawns that are a rarity in Djaw, fountains, marbled walks and colorful flower gardens. Private guards are discreetly placed, implying safety without making the place seem like a fortress.

Ernie takes a deep, contented breath as they approach the main doors. "It's a whole week I don't have to cook!" he says happily.

"I thought you loved to cook," says Dranko. "Isn't cooking like praying for you? Are you saying you want to go a week without praying?"

"Ernie didn't say he wasn't *going* to cook," says Flicker. "Just that he doesn't *have* to cook. Don't you see? When you have to do something you love, it can start to feel like a job."

"Whoa," says Aravis. "That came from Flicker?"

"Yeah," says Flicker sheepishly. "I guess that was my flash of insight for the year."

"It comes from worshipping Aravis," says Grey Wolf.

"That's right!" exclaims Aravis. "My first miracle!"

An elegant (if slightly rotund) commissionaire greets them at the door. "Welcome to the Golden Goblet," he says expansively.

"I would like to reserve rooms for me and my friends for a week," says Ernie.

"Of course. And how many of you are there?"

"Seven," says Ernie. The doorman does a quick headcount and only gets to six. "One of my companions is a free-born dwarf," says Ernie, keeping his voice polite and formal. "From the Kingdom of Charagan."

"Charagan?" asks the doorman.

"As you may know," says Ernie, "Posada's Boundary has fallen, and the Uncrossable Sea is now crossable."

"Yes, I know," says the doorman. "There has been much speculation about the lands beyond."

"That's where we're from," says Ernie.

"Such an honor!" exclaims the commissionaire. "And it is a special honor to meet you, master dwarf. Seven of you then. And you'd like a week? That will be 700 miracs."

From their previous visit to Djaw they have some miracs rattling around in their *bags of holding*, enough for a down payment on the rooms. They get seven rooms in total; with Dranko and Morningstar sharing a bed, the seventh will serve as a smoking room for Dranko and Flicker.

"Please make yourselves comfortable, while we prepare your rooms," says the doorman. "If you have any needs, our serving staff will attend to you without delay."

"And you are...?" asks Dranko.

"My name is **Balthazar**," says the man, bowing.

"You're not 'One something something'?" asks Dranko.

"I'm not originally from Djaw," says Balthazar. "But I find it much nicer to be here than in Mirj." This elicits great sympathy from the Company.

The waiting area is gorgeous – wonderful padded sofas and chairs arrayed around a fountain and illuminated by colored lanterns. A huge platter of honeyed dates is brought in, along with perfectly-brewed tea. Morningstar turns to her husband and asks, "When you were renting from Berthel, did you ever imagine you'd be staying somewhere like this?"

Dranko just grins at her. "Say, think anyone would mind if I stripped down and bathed in that fountain?"

Especially given that there are a half-dozen other patrons in the lounge, the rest of the party talk him out of it. "Let's try not to get thrown out on the very first night," suggests Grey Wolf. That sets off a minute or two of fond reminiscing about inns around the world that have suffered serious damage during Company stays. They count at least four: The Eye of the Storm in Het Branoi, The Singing Sickle in Mirj, The Victory in Tev, and The Shadow Chaser in Verdshane. The other guests glance over nervously at the conversation.

A pretty serving girl approaches after a few minutes of this. "Your rooms are ready," she says. "Will you be dining with us tonight? And if so, would you prefer a private dining room?"

"We'll dine in the public room tonight," says Dranko. "But let's plan on a private room tomorrow night."

"Is there a dress code?" asks Morningstar.

"I would expect you to look clean and presentable," says the servant. "According to your own custom, of course. Do you wish any refreshment sent to your rooms in the meantime?"

"Yes," says Dranko immediately. "And a bottle of wine would be nice. Whatever your wine steward thinks good – I'm sure he has impeccable taste."

The servant leads them outside and along a shaded stone path to an outbuilding surrounded by perfectly manicured hedges. Inside – oh, the rooms! Each is enormous, with a full-sized feather bed, complete furnishings and magically heated bathtubs. They have carpets so thick you could comfortably sleep on them were anything to happen to the beds. On bedside tables are pitchers of lime-flavored water next to plates heaped with sweet grapes.

There is a knock on Dranko's door; a servant has arrived with his wine. "Your wine, sir. Tevian vintage." The servant uncorks the bottle, and Dranko makes a show of smelling it, pressing one nostril shut while sniffing with the other.

His finger sticks. Try as he might, he can't remove it from his pushed-in nose. It feels like something has glued it there.

The servant looks at him curiously. Dranko turns a bit red before dismissing her with his free hand.

"Flicker!!" Flicker and Morningstar come rushing into the room. "Finger stuck to nose!" says Dranko. "Very annoyed!"

Flicker tries hard not to laugh. "What do you want me to do about it?" he asks.

"Did you have anything to do with this?" asks Morningstar.

"And remember," says Dranko. "Before you answer, you shouldn't be thinking of me as good ol' Dranko who's having a practical joke played on him, but as a man whose wife can cast *fire storm*."

"I swear!" says Flicker. "I don't know why your finger is stuck to your nose!"

"Can you find out for me?" asks Dranko. "I'm thinking Grey Wolf, but I have to consider Aravis or Kibi too."

"I'll make some inquiries," says Flicker, who can't help laughing out loud at this point.

"That would be great," grumbles Dranko. "I'll... uh... just stick around here then." With his free hand, Dranko casts *detect magic*, but neither the bottle nor cork are radiating enchantment.

Flicker finds Aravis eating grapes in his room. "Aravis, Dranko's finger is stuck to his nose. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"His what?" asks Aravis, not sure if he heard right. "His finger is stuck to his nose?"

"Yeah," says Flicker. "And he's going to blame me unless I find out who did it!"

"I can't imagine why."

"I didn't do it, I swear!"

Aravis puts his own finger to his nose and walks into Dranko's room. Kibi hears the commotion and comes along as well.

"You too, huh?" asks Dranko, seeing Aravis. Aravis casually removes his finger, prompting a growl from Dranko.

"How did this happen?" asks Aravis.

"Was he picking his nose?" asks Kibi.

Aravis casts *dispel magic* on Dranko, and the finger comes free. Dranko opens his mouth to thank him, but notices that Kibi has a huge smug grin on his face.

"Hello, Dranko!" says Kibi brightly.

"Kibilhathur..."

"What seems to be the problem?" asks the dwarf.

"My finger... became stuck to my nose. What can you tell me about this?"

"Oh!" says Kibi. "It, uh, might have been a side-effect of the gloves I made you." There are gales of laughter from the rest of the Company, who have now all gathered in Dranko's room.

Dranko looks down at his fingerless *gloves of dexterity* recently crafted for him by the dwarf. "Will this happen often?" he asks.

"Well, I intended it only for when you picked your nose, but I guess being next to your nose was good enough."

"Will this happen *every* time my finger comes close to my nose?"

"Well, maybe it'll be every time you press your nose hard with your finger," says Kibi. "But I did design it so that it can become undone."

"And how might that happen?" asks Dranko, each word filled with a flat menace.

"You just have to say the command word. Well, more of a phrase, really."

Dranko lunges forward and grabs Kibi's beard. "You know, my religion forbids me from using bladed weapons, but I'm pretty sure there's no rule against razors and beard-cutting. And I can't help think that what you did was inappropriate among those whose lives so often depend on *mutual trust!*"

Kibi looks indignant. "Oh, and you've never put some wacky side-effect on a magic item you made for someone else."

Dranko can't help but take a quick look at Ernie – whose plate mail emits a loud fart when the left gauntlet's pinky is pulled. "Yes," admits Dranko. "But I did that years ago, when I was younger and immature."

Morningstar looks serious. "What if his finger stuck to his nose in the middle of combat... when he's trying to heal you?"

"Well," explains Kibi, "I thought it would only happen when he was picking his nose – which I figured wouldn't be when his life was in danger."

"You've effectively made these gloves something I can't depend on," says Dranko. "I can't be in a situation where I might be in combat, and end up with my finger stuck to my nose. I just can't. Which means I can't use them."

Kibi is taken aback by Dranko's lack of humor. "You're serious," he says.

"Oh, I'm absolutely serious," says Dranko.

Awkward silence.

"Unless there's some way you can remove the curse from the gloves," adds Dranko. "Then it would be okay."

Dranko does find that just touching his nose isn't enough to trigger it, but pressing again causes his finger to re-stick. He sighs. "OK, so what's the command phrase?" he asks.

In a smaller voice, Kibi says: "Kibi is a genius."

This elicits more laughter, and Dranko can't help but chuckle himself. "Well, I guess I have to give you bonus points for that."

"I'm sorry, Dranko," says Kibi. "I figured this side effect wouldn't happen as often as the one on your other magic item."

What? This is news to Ernie and Flicker, at very least. "Ah, yes," explains Dranko. "My dear, trusted friend here has informed me that, when I turn invisible, someone who can see invisible people will observe something... amusing."

"Really?" asks Flicker. "But we can't see him when he's invisible."

"That's the problem," says Kibi. "It's too obscure. You can only see it when he's invisible, and you have *see invisibility* cast."

"See what?" asks Ernie.

"See that his *sash of invisibility* says 'Miss Charagan' on it," says Kibi, and that sets Ernie and Flicker to rolling on the floor, helpless with mirth. Kibi does agree to remove the 'curse' from the gloves at his next opportunity – it should only take a couple of days.

"In the meantime," says Flicker, "Just don't pick your nose in combat. How hard can that be?"

"So!" says Aravis. "Dinner!"

Dranko and Morningstar hang back for a moment while the rest depart for the main dining room. "I have two choices," says Dranko. "I can take the high road, and forget this whole thing... or I can think of a good way to get him back."

It's not hard for Morningstar to guess which one he'll choose.

Piratecat: Oh, lordy. *This game*. I as a player was surprisingly annoyed about this, a fact that Kibi's player was also really surprised about; he meant it in good fun. We've never removed that particular "feature" of the gloves. But man, it was awfully embarrassing. Nothing is more irksome than a gloating dwarf.

The Golden Goblet is a simply gorgeous inn. Enjoy it while it lasts.

Tallarn: Why do you think you were so annoyed about it, particularly as I can't imagine Sagiro is the kind of DM who would unexpectedly enforce this in combat or something? I can appreciate that I would also find this a bit irritating, but like you I hope I'd manage to see the funny side.

Piratecat: A really bad day that leaked into the game, I think. In addition, Dranko had trusted Kibi to make him something and the practical joke left him feeling really vulnerable. If my friend could do this, what could my enemies do?

Not that he *did* anything about that feeling of vulnerability. We'll be regretting that uncharacteristic lack of paranoia soon enough...

Tallarn: I can't help but think that such a (mostly) cheery update can only mean Upcoming Doom for the Company.

Jackylhunter: Hear hear! This is going to be bad, and oh so good... Great to have you back and posting Sagiro!

Piratecat: You. Have. No. Idea. The scene you're about to see is one of the most memorable in the campaign for me. Man, Sagiro is a big jerk!

Sagiro: You're not *quite* about to see it; the Company managed to dawdle an awful lot before heading over to see their old pal Shreen. Soon, though...



Preparations

Dinner at the Golden Goblet is appropriately sumptuous: six courses, all expertly prepared; more excellent wine; delicious desserts. A cadre of discreet servants attends them at all times. The Company share the main dining room with about a dozen other guests, all in traditional formal Djawish attire. No one attacks. No one poisons them. The furniture doesn't animate. It's simply lovely.

After the meal, Aravis finds something on the floor outside the door of his room. It's a tiny little altar of stones, on which is balanced a tiny cup of milk – that Pewter immediately drinks. Aravis looks around curiously but there's no sign of who might have left it there.

Inside his (locked) room is another altar, this one atop the wardrobe, and with a dead mouse instead of milk. Pewter leaps up and gives it a sniff. *I usually like to kill them myself, but it's still reasonably fresh.*

It's all yours, says Aravis. He has a strong suspicion as to how it got there. *I'm going to bed.*

EroGaki: All hail the Lord of Felines!!

That night Morningstar visits each of her friends' dreams – there is no taint of Dralla in any of them. In fact, the Company seem more relaxed than they have been in quite some time. Feather beds will do that.



The next morning the entire Company is blissfully free of rash. Dranko opines that, since they're actively moving towards fulfilling their promise to Shreen, the Curse of Dralla has temporarily abated. "We should consider the possibility that we'll just have to hand the Maze over," he says.

"And how do we go about doing that?" asks Morningstar.

"I don't know," Dranko confesses.

"How would we even get it out of Aravis's head?" asks Grey Wolf.

"I don't know that either," says Dranko. "I'm just saying it's a possibility."

"I'd say 'last resort,'" says Grey Wolf.

"And technically we didn't promise to give the Maze to Shreen," says Ernie. "We only said we'd bring it to him." It remains to be seen if Dralla will acknowledge the distinction.

A servant knocks on the door, asking if the Company would like breakfast in their room, or in the commons. They decide on a private meal, since the topic of discussion will be Shreen the Fair and how to deal with him. Aravis, wondering if the Crosser's Maze can be used to increase the accuracy of teleportation to locations only seen in another timeline, decides he wants to have a talk with King Vhadish XXIII.



When he enters the Maze, the first thing he notices is that something is wrong with it. It's not disastrous, or even particularly alarming, but the whole thing seems to be – well, vibrating, for want of a better word, and it gives him a headache. Aravis finds Vhadish in his fortress, still guarded by steel-handed golems.

King Vhadish appears before him, looking peevish. "Young Aravis," he says.

"Master Vhadish," Aravis bows.

"I am quite busy," says Vhadish. "But I can spare a moment or two."

"I have two questions for you," says Aravis. "Have you noticed that there is something wrong with the Maze?"

"Yes," agrees Vhadish. "There is. I assume it's your fault."

"Probably, yes," admits Aravis.

"What did you do?" asks Vhadish.

Aravis explains his recent time-travels, as well as the Curse of Dralla. Vhadish has little interest in Shreen the Fair, but listens intently to Aravis's accounts of temporal journeys. "Time travel," Vhadish says to himself when Aravis is finished. "Interesting that such a thing is possible. I imagine that the Maze is reacting to that in some fashion. Can you fix it?"

"I will try," promises Aravis.

"Please do. It's annoying."

"The second question I have," says Aravis, "is: can I use the Maze to correct teleportation?"

"I doubt the Maze was designed for that," says Vhadish. "Perhaps you could bend it to your will if you were mighty enough. But I doubt you are. Maybe with sufficient training, you could be elevated to a sufficient level of mental prowess. I could take the time to train you again, though you are already in my debt."

"Right now I don't have the time," says Aravis.

"Very well," says Vhadish, looking bored. "As it stands, I haven't even thought of a task for you in regards to your existing debt. Every time I think of some job I want done, I come to the conclusion that it would be easier simply to do it myself. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have many things to attend to. Good day, young Aravis."



Before their appointment with One Shining Mirror that afternoon, the Company discuss the Guild of Chains. Dranko decides he'll spend the morning collecting information about them. He uses his *robe of blending* to disguise himself (as Turlus, of all people) and presents himself at one of the Guild's own offices as a bard and historian. He is writing a book about the Guild of Chains and its many glorious contributions to the Djawish society and economy. He desires to know how the Guild of Chains came into being.

He is handed off to a minor functionary who is happy to sit and talk with such an illustrious author, especially since there is no particular secret about the Guild's origins. What Dranko is told is this:

The Guild of Chains, before it was called that, was actually a branch of the Djawish government, as slavery has been an acceptable punishment for criminals since the city's founding. Certain humanitarian factions in the noble court eventually became uncomfortable with the close connection, and the government office in charge of administering sentences of slavery was calved off as a separate organization, which named itself the Guild of Chains.

As a separate entity seeking to increase its financial means, the Guild of Chains sent a prospecting team into the mountains east of Djaw. There they discovered a small and scattered tribe of dwarves, who themselves had recently fled from the mountains' interior from encroaching ogres. The story is that, of the small number of dwarves who actually escaped, many had been inmates in a dwarfish prison. That was making it difficult for the dwarven tribal elders to maintain basic order, let alone establish a new dwarfish nation. The Guild of Chains struck a bargain with the dwarves: they would provide the dwarves with the supplies needed to bootstrap their society, and purchase the worst of their criminals to boost their inventory. In return the dwarves would grant limited mining rights to the Guild. So it was that over the course of many decades, the dwarves managed to establish the Kingdom of Gurund.

Eventually, however, there arose a faction within Gurund that felt it was immoral to sell criminals to the Guild, especially since over time the severity of the crimes required for such sales had grown small. Even petty thieves and vandals were being sold into slavery. This schism grew more and more intractable until it led to a civil war. The Guild, of course, threw their weight behind the pro-slavery faction, and that assistance

made the difference in the outcome. But the new ruling government of Gurund was now further indebted to the Guild of Chains, and so things began (from the dwarves' point of view) to spiral out of control. The dwarves grew ever more surly and resentful, but the Guild had grown so strong that there was nothing they could do about the all-pervasive institution of slavery.

Technically, Dranko is assured, the dwarves sold into slavery are still all criminals and debtors, and the Guild has the full cooperation of the Gurundian government. It's a shame, truly, that so many dwarves cannot accept the status quo.



In the early afternoon the Company visit One Shining Mirror, High Priest of the Sun Goddess Kemma in Djaw. Mirror doesn't have much to offer regarding Shreen the Fair or the temple of Dralla – it seems that Shreen has laid low ever since the party's previous visit, and there has been little activity from the poor Drallan presence in the city.

On the other hand, the party have much information to provide. One Shining Mirror listens to every word they have to say about One Certain Step, as they recount in full his role in their adventures. They make sure to emphasize his honor and sacrifice but don't gloss over his spiritual wavering and subsequent atonement. Dranko tells of Step's defiance of the demon lord Tapheon, and they finish with his final words and deeds as they entered the Lightless Room. A scribe busily records the entire tale.

Before the Company leave, an underpriest shows them to the stables, where Thunder's glowing stall is kept clean and empty. It has been designated a holy site by the church, and a few pilgrims have already prayed at the stall of One Certain Step's horse.

Joshua Randall: They built a shrine to One Certain Step's horse! I love it.



Back at the Golden Goblet the Company continue to discuss strategy – should they be looking to negotiate? Subdue? Annihilate? Could Shreen be swayed with gifts? Maybe the curse will be lifted if Shreen is killed? And what spells should they prepare, or cast ahead of time? One thing they all agree on: they should ask to meet him on neutral ground, and not at the Plaza of Glory.

One thing is for sure: more information is never a bad thing. Morningstar attempts to scout the Plaza of Glory (site of Shreen's temple) in *Ava Dormo*, but finds it protected there by an impenetrable darkness that extends several blocks in each direction. "Shreen's subscribed to the Mokad School of Dream Warding," she tells the others.

Aravis decides to cast *vision*, with Shreen the Fair as his subject, and this provides an interesting vignette. His vision goes black as he casts, and he feels submerged in darkness.

A small glow forms out of the black, a circular pattern on a floor, coruscating with red and gray light. Then Aravis sees the silhouette of a humpbacked humanoid creature, pacing back and forth in front of the circle. There's no way for Aravis to place the scene, or even tell if it's indoors or out.

The red light of the circle flashes brightly; Shreen turns to look. A tall beastly humanoid has appeared standing in the circle, a vile creature with snakes coming out of its midsection. The two beings regard each other for a moment, and then Shreen starts to chuckle in his distinctive broken-glass voice.

"This way, this way," urges Shreen, and the monster steps from the circle, following. The vision ends.

Whatever else the vision might indicate, it leaves Aravis and the others with an even stronger sense that Shreen would use the Maze to evil ends. "If it looks like an abomination," says Morningstar, "it's an abomination. I think the Vree are the only exception we've ever run across." The others agree. It looks like the encounter will entail more ass-kicking than calm discussion.

A servant comes by asking if they need any laundry done. The Company politely decline, and Dranko asks if the Goblet could stop sending servants for a while, as they wish more privacy.

"Maybe we should invite Shreen to meet us here," suggests Grey Wolf, mostly kidding.

"That would make this the most expensive inn we'd have ever destroyed," says Ernie.

"No!" objects Kibi. "This is the only place in Djaw I actually *like*."

A thought comes to Dranko then, and he smiles to himself. He excuses himself from the room for a moment, and once outside he uses his *robe of blending* to look exactly like Kibi. He sticks his finger in his nose and goes in search of a servant. "Excuse me," he says in his best imitation of Kibi's voice. "My name is Kibilhathur Bimson. As a dwarf, I don't have very good personal

hygiene. And I need a snot rag, because my finger is holding a giant booger inside. If you could get me one please, I would appreciate it. And perhaps one for my bottom as well. Just have it brought up to my room.”

The servant is unflappable. “Of course, sir. Will you require any medical assistance?”

“No, no! It’s actually rather fun. Thank you, though.”

He returns to the rooms and changes back, uttering “Kibi is a genius” to dislodge his finger while savoring the irony. Inside, he approaches the dwarf. “Kibi, I want you to know: no hard feelings about the gloves. I don’t think we really need to worry about removing the side-effect. They do the job I need them to. Thank you for making them.”

Kibi wonders how suspicious he should be of this change in attitude, but he bows graciously and answers: “I’m glad you like them.”



Ernie casts a *sending* to Shreen the Fair, requesting a meeting the next afternoon on neutral ground. But the answer is implacable:

You will bring it to me here, after sundown tomorrow. You will hand over my prizes, as requested.

Ernie repeats this to the others, adding: “You will be a big old jerk!”

“We made an offer that would have spared his shrine considerable damage,” says Grey Wolf. “He can hardly blame us now.”

There’s a knock at the door. “Didn’t we ask for privacy?” asks Morningstar.

Dranko opens the door. “Hi there,” he says.

“Delivery for Master Bimson.” The servant hands Kibi two clean and folded linens. “As you requested, sir.”

“As I requested?” asks Kibi, but the servant is already leaving. Kibi gives Dranko a funny look. “Does this have anything to do with your recent change of heart?”

“Yes. I think it might,” says Dranko. He turns and walks whistling to the other side of the room, where he plucks a grape from a table and pops it into his mouth.



The only additional action of import the Company execute that day is a *divination* spell, cast by Ernie. “*Will we do well, if we go to the Temple of Dralla to meet Shreen the Fair?*” The answer comes to him:

They will take what is not given. The darkness presses close, and does not lift.

“So negotiation isn’t likely,” Morningstar opines.

“I think we should open negotiations by burning the whole place to the ground,” offers Grey Wolf.



heedless of Shreen’s preferred schedule, the Company head to the Plaza of Glory at noon the following day, having foregone the Golden Goblet’s excessive breakfast for a *heroes’ feast*. The sun is dim behind a thick cloud layer; drizzle starts to fall soon after they depart. Their trip through Djaw shows them every strata of the city’s social structure – they leave from the wealthiest neighborhoods and travel through genteel residential blocks, marketplaces and parks, then poorer areas, and finally the squalor of a forgotten corner of the city wherein they find the Plaza of Glory.

The rain grows steady as they walk. The Plaza of Glory is as they remember: a little courtyard of broken flagstones and abandoned tenements, far from any thoroughfare and watched by a cracked statue of an angel in the center of a dried-up fountain. Beyond one of the boarded up walls of empty homes lies the Shrine of Dralla, and its Night Master, Shreen the Fair.

In the spattering rain, the angel weeps.

Artoomis: Like many, I love reading this stuff...

jensun: Nice update. Can someone track down the page where Shreen appears?

Vargo: [See page 133 (run #88) in Part One.]

Innocent Bystander: Do you guys ever reminisce about the days where *magic missile* was a powerful spell and a good roll on a *cure light wounds* potion could bring you from the brink of death to full health?



No Obvious Compromise

Dranko reaches out gently and bestows a small orison on the angel, expelling the accumulated dirt and grime and scrawled graffiti. It shines, its clean white marble now incongruous in the dilapidated plaza. Still dripping with rainwater, it watches stoically as the party cast some protective spells.

A small goblinoid creature detaches itself from the shadows and approaches the Company. "You're early," it barks.

"We're unpredictable that way," says Ernie.

"Not unexpected," growls the goblin. "You will leave your weapons and spell components here."

Unsurprisingly, this suggestion is greeted with derision.

"Then you will not come in," says the goblin.

"I am here to return the Maze," says Aravis. "You can take it or leave it."

"We will take it when you come in, leaving behind your weapons and spell components, as I said," insists the goblin.

"Your master's intentions are clear," says Morningstar. "We will *not* give up our weapons."

The goblin rubs its wrinkled chin. "The Night Master has instructed me to say that if that is how you feel, we will simply wait for you to die."

"We refuse to stand here bandying words with servants," says Ernie, growing frustrated. "Now open that door!"

"I am not authorized to do that while you're armed," says the goblin. "Eventually what afflicts you will kill you. Then we will take what we need from your bodies."

Kibi sighs, and casts *charm monster*. The goblin's eyes grow a bit glassy. "We have come a very long way," says Kibi plaintively. "We have everything that you want, and midnight is so late; we're usually sleeping by then. Couldn't we just go in now?"

"Yes," says the goblin, sympathizing. "But I still need you to leave your weapons behind, or I'll get in terrible trouble!"

"I think it'll be okay," says Kibi.

"I believe you," says the conflicted goblin. "Look... let me go explain things to my master. I'm sure he'll see reason once I talk to him. Please excuse me."

As he turns to go, Ernie casts *true seeing*. One of the cluttered walls of the small plaza is mostly illusion, falsely showing boarded up doors and windows, and making the one real door look like solid wall. The goblin melts into magical shadows masking the entire thing, but Ernie clearly sees him open a small door and slip inside. Dranko, *invisible*, follows, and just gets inside before the goblin closes the door.

Once inside the shrine, the goblin turns a loud crank on the wall which slides an iron bar across the door. Then he scuttles across the interior courtyard and disappears into the rain and shadow. Dranko notices that the sunlight, already dimmed by the precipitation, is strongly muted here, reminiscent of the Ellish holy city of Kallor. Worse, he can only see clearly to about thirty feet even with his darkvision. Beyond that it's like peering into foggy shadow, where no details are visible.

Dranko gives the goblin about thirty seconds before casting *silence* on the iron bar and turning the crank. Soon the door is open and the rest of the Company stand just inside the Shrine of Dralla. Kibi casts *xorn movement* and sinks into the ground along with Scree.

The last time Morningstar was here, the unholy nature of the place stifled her ability to cast spells. She still feels the evil – it's like an unpleasant pressure on her very soul – but she has grown much stronger since her previous visit. Her connection with Ell is unwavering.

At Dranko's request, Flicker disables the locking bar, so that Shreen's minions cannot lock them in. Morningstar casts *detect thoughts* and senses dozens of minds, mostly in the upper floors of the buildings that surround the courtyard on all sides. They're animalistic, barely intelligent, and all of them malign.

Thinking they'll want a safe zone in this den of evil, Morningstar casts *consecrate* on a spot just in front of them. There is a hissing, and steam rises from the affected area. Soon after, they hear footsteps approaching from the darkness beyond their sight.

“Who comes?” demands Morningstar.

A stocky human in black robes comes stumping out of the shadows, leaning on a staff. He doesn’t seem to mind the rain that runs down through his stringy black hair. It is not Shreen the Fair.

“I am **Strug**,” he says in a gravelly voice. “I know who you are. And you...” He stops and sniffs the air. “What have you done?” he barks, appalled. He gestures to the spot of *consecrated* ground. “You have committed blasphemy on our holy ground. Remove it at once!”

“Will your master meet with us?” asks Morningstar.

“You have broken into our shrine, armed,” spits Strug.

“Yep,” says Ernie.

“Yes,” agrees Morningstar. “Your master’s intentions were quite clear.”

Strug glowers. “My master’s intentions are that you hand over the things you promised to him. That is all.”

“We will not speak with your master unarmed,” says Morningstar.

“And he will not speak to you while you are armed,” says Strug. “He knows your treachery. I am authorized by him to take possession of those things you have brought. You will give me the head of the person Lapis, and you will give me the Crosser’s Maze. Now!”

Dranko rummages in a *bag of holding* and pulls out Lapis’s head. He tosses it onto the ground at Strug’s feet.

“Now,” says Strug. “The Crosser’s Maze. Give it to me, and then depart. Quickly.”

“That’s a problem,” says Ernie. “And this is why we need to talk to your master. The situation is more complicated than it seems. He’s going to be wroth. And that’s why we’re armed... in case he loses his temper. We’ve seen his temper. But the fact of the matter is, we don’t believe we can give you the Crosser’s Maze.”

“You lie!” accuses Strug. “It is a *thing*. You will give it to me now, or leave, and come back when you are prepared to hand it over.” Strug takes a step toward the Company, but stops short at the edge of the *consecrated* area. He hisses and glares.

“Before we continue with this transaction, I demand that you dismiss your blasphemy.”

Aravis says, “The Maze is not an object that can be...”

Strug interrupts him. “For the moment I am not talking about the Maze.” He gestures at the ground. “Who has done this?”

“Do you agree that we can have our weapons?” asks Morningstar. “If so, I’ll dismiss the spell.”

“You already have them,” concedes Strug, “so I suppose... yes. Fine. Drop this.”

It’s only then that Morningstar realizes that she *can’t* simply dismiss a *consecrate*. Worse, she has no *dispel magics* prepared. “I don’t have the ability to dismiss it right now,” she admits. “You’ll have to wait.”

“You should have thought of that before you committed this sin,” says Strug. “I am familiar with the magic. It will go away on its own tomorrow. You can come back then.”

But Ernie does manage to *dispel* the effect, and Strug smiles. “Very good. It seems you may be willing to act in good faith after all... but you will refrain from casting your spells again while standing on holy ground. Now... the Maze.”

Aravis launches into a long and technical description of the Maze, but Morningstar cuts him off. “The Maze is not an object,” she says. “It exists inside my companion’s mind.”

“And I am not part of the bargain with your master,” says Aravis.

“Then perhaps you should not have put the Maze inside your mind,” says Strug. “We will take both.”

“I didn’t put it in...” says Aravis.

“I don’t care how it got there!” yells Strug, cutting him off. “We will take it... off your shoulders, if necessary. You and my master have an agreement. If you now find it difficult to uphold your part of it, that is not our problem. You will do what you must.”

“I am willing to renegotiate the bargain,” says Aravis.

“There will be no renegotiation!” screams Strug.

“Then your master will have no choice but to destroy the Maze,” says Aravis. “If I am destroyed in the process, so be it.”

Strug grins slyly. “But what of your friends?” he says softly. “It will do great harm to them, in the long run, if you fail to fulfill your promise.”

“We fulfilled our part,” says Dranko. “We’ve returned the Maze to your master.”

“Until the Maze is in my master’s possession, I dispute that claim,” says Strug.

“Okay,” says Aravis. “Then I will give myself into your master’s possession, and then, having fulfilled the bargain, I will destroy the Maze... or else it will be destroyed if he kills me.”

“Are you willing to take the chance that Dralla will see things that way?” asks Strug. “Perhaps it will leave the quest in a perpetual state of unfulfilledness, dooming your friends to a slow and lingering death of horrid rot.”

“I am willing to take that risk,” says Aravis. “But I don’t think your master will risk the destruction of the Maze. Your option, right now, is that you bring us before your master so that *he* can make the decision, and not some lackey.”

Strug bristles. “I am authorized to speak with his voice. I am no lackey. And you should show more respect while you are on my holy ground.”

“Wanting the Crosser’s Maze is like wanting the ocean,” says Ernie. “You can see it, but you cannot hold it. You cannot control it, and no more could we bring it to you, than we could bring the ocean.”

Dranko looks down at Ernie, impressed. Then, to Strug: “What does your master want to do with it, anyway?”

“That is not your business,” says Strug. Then to Aravis he says: “Are you so certain that the Maze would not simply come away along with your head, after which it could easily be extracted and used? I speak hypothetically, of course.”

“There is no point in discussing hypotheticals that cannot come to pass,” says Aravis.

“Indulge me,” says Strug.

“You didn’t indulge us when we asked what your master wanted to do with the Maze,” says Dranko.

“That was not part of the bargain,” snaps Strug, growing weary of this banter. “The bargain was that we would help you – which we did – and then you would help us, which you are now stubbornly refusing to do.”

The Company are also becoming increasingly frustrated at the impasse, and they all know how it’s likely going to end. They have a quick discussion over their mind-link and decide that if they have to make threats of their own, they will.

“You’re telling us that our only option is to deliver the head of our friend?” asks Morningstar.

“You have had ample opportunity to come up with an alternate solution,” says Strug.

“We did not have time to find a solution,” says Morningstar. “The curse started to take effect almost immediately. So we are here.”

Strug snarls. “If you had honestly been making that attempt, the curse would have gone dormant! Please do not lie again in so transparent a manner.”

“We do have several other obligations...” says Morningstar.

“Which are not my concern!” screams Strug.

Ernie has had enough. “Look. Here is the bald truth. Taking Aravis’s head will not give you the Maze. We have never physically held or possessed the Maze. We do not believe it can be held or possessed, or removed from its host in any way save by the consent of the person who controls it. And, having returned it to you as we promised, you have two other options. Your Goddess can release us from our promise, or we can lay waste to this temple.”

Strug blinks in disbelief. “Are you threatening us?” he growls.

“I would consider it a negotiating point,” says Aravis.

“*Are you threatening us?!*” repeats Strug. This time his words are backed by the hoots and hollers of the myriad hidden creatures in the upper floors of the buildings.

"We are much more powerful than the last time we were here," says Ernie. "We do not want violence. But you are being extremely inflexible to the unfortunate truth that we cannot give you the Maze."

Strug stares for a moment at Ernie, and at Morningstar, and Aravis. "Perhaps you are right," he says at last. "Perhaps we should discuss this with my master. Follow me." He turns and walks away from them, across the muddy courtyard.

"Finally," mutters Ernie under his breath.

The Company begin to follow him, thinking that at last they'll get some satisfaction from Shreen the Fair. But Strug has no intention of taking them that far. No, having been threatened by these double-crossing infidels, he has decided to take the risk that the Maze can be removed later from Aravis's lifeless head. He raises his hand, and the assault from the darkness begins.

EroGaki: Heh, good tactics on the Company's part. Getting in with their weapons is definitely a good thing.

Cerebral Paladin: Indeed. One of the most problematic sessions I've ever DMed really went off the rails because under a similar circumstance, my PCs agreed to surrender their weapons. It meant they were negotiating from such a position of weakness that frustration was almost inevitable – either I had to be unreasonable in how I played the NPCs, or they had to accept a really raw deal. It was... not so good.

But yay, additional Sagiro Story Hour!

blargney the second: I like the last little double-cross from Strug. I'm going to have to use that sometime!

Hammerhead: I bet the party really wanted to throw down, but couldn't strike the first blow in good conscience. Sweet!

Tallarn: This is always the problem with heroes, isn't it? No matter how evil you know your opposition is, you have to let them ambush you sometimes...

Piratecat: Strug is one squirrelly, backstabbing little bastard. He better get what's coming to him!

EroGaki: The reactive nature of good is always something I've griped against. Evil is proactive, while Good waits for something bad to happen. Once innocent people suffer and die, then good gets to smite evil. Me, I try to be more proactive; if my character has word of an evil organization or cult gaining power, I strike before they can do harm to the world. If I had been in the Company's situation, I would have gacked Strug beforehand. Good doesn't mean you have to let the bad guys get the jump on you.

KidCthulhu: That was Ernie's feeling about the whole situation. Ernie's pretty much the group's moral compass, and he really was all for wiping the temple of Dralla off the map. He didn't trust Shreen any further than he could toss him in a hot pan with garlic and chives, and wasn't about to let any of his friends die because of his treachery.

Joshua Randall: If I were playing one of the mages, I would have save-or-died Strug the moment he mentioned taking Aravis's head. And then Quickened fireballed the rest of the room.

Who, me, twitchy?

Piratecat: This whole fight was weird. We didn't really feel like we had moral superiority here, not really. Speaking only for myself, it was unclear at what point we'd have conceded to the terms of the *geas*. But then again, Dranko's not particularly the type to want to burn others in the name of his religion.

Joshua Randall: Who said anything about religion? I just like burning things. (In game.)

Anatanatatos: Well, i guess Dranko prefers, you know, *licking* things. Although he hasn't been doing weird stuff for a while...

Hammerhead: Or peeing on his enemies.

Everett: [Dranko's not particularly the type to want to burn others in the name of his religion.] None of you are. At the same time, the exchange reminded me how inflexible alignment often feels. If I'm CN, but the character's in a situation where he might act like a chaotic good guy (or might act a little flippantly "evil"), I can't just necessarily do it without wondering about the fictional "axis" I'm supposed to be on. I guess that's why the only D&D I have is reading this Story Hour...

energy One: I find alignment extremely useful, especially when I let my players know that alignment isn't strict, it's just strictly defined. After a certain point, if they aren't acting according to their alignment, I tell them what their alignment actually is. Until then, mechanics that act according to alignment act according to what their alignment supposedly is. I've known people to arbitrate this through point systems. That seems to work fairly well, but I can be a fairly arbitrary DM at times.

Didn't Dranko's alignment shift at some point, long ago?

Piratecat: Yup. He started off pure neutral with some chaotic tendencies, slid to neutral with good tendencies, then ended up solidly at neutral good. It was deliberate and made a lot of sense at the time. Morningstar is still true neutral, though, and she can be quite the pragmatist; she's not quite as concerned about "doing the good thing" as the rest of us are. She rolls her eyes a lot.

By the way, want some proof that Sagiro is evil? Something he did to Dranko in run 39, something like twelve years ago in real time, has just come back to *ream* bite him on the ass. Sagiro's a bad, bad man.

The Warlock: Sign of quality DMing there... I only waited seven years in my campaign to catch the priestess with the Euryale Card save penalty from a deck of many things draw she'd made and not researched...

Graywolf-ELM: I've wondered how the Crosser's Maze issue would be resolved for some time. It doesn't seem to have been abused much from reading the Story Hour, whereas it seems that it could have been. I still love reading about these characters, and this adventure, though probably not as much as the players enjoy participating. Thanks again for enjoyable entertainment.



Hostile Territory

It's an ugly battle, fought in the rain and the mud, and the Company feel stifled from the start by the limit to their vision. Two large insectoid creatures leap down from the balconies, cousins of the beasts that the party encountered previously outside of

Djaw. These are larger, with sharper claws, more teeth and unyielding chitin. A green liquid glistens on their plated hides. These beasts squirt jets of some foul substance at Ernie and Morningstar, and when it contacts Morningstar's skin, it saps her of strength.

Back in the darkness lurk several gaunt red-skinned humanoids, with writhing snakes protruding from their guts. They attack with rays of negative energy, and one of these strips Aravis of *both* of his prepared *maze* spells. Ouch!

In other words, as with so many of the Company's violent encounters, this one looks particularly dire at the start – dangerous foes, limited vision, and that doesn't even count Strug, who's a formidable adversary in his own right. Meanwhile, from the buildings around the courtyard, hundreds of cackling and hooting voices are cheering on their enemies, as if the Company are competing in a freakish nightmare sporting event in front of a hostile crowd.

For all that, the party manage to turn things around pretty quickly. For starters, Aravis uses *polymorph any object* to turn Strug into a squirrel – and one that *thinks* he's a squirrel. The Drallan servant-turned-rodent goes scampering off into the shadows, in absolute terror of the monsters all around him.

StevenAC: [Piratecat: Strug is one squirrelly, backstabbing little bastard. He better get what's coming to him!] You're a bad man, Mr. Piratecat – hiding a spoiler in plain sight like that...

And beyond that, the Company's regular tactics and powers prove adequate to the task of vanquishing evil – even when the ranks of enemies are swelled by a pack of ogres and swarm of stirges that land on Grey Wolf. Oh, it's an exciting battle, full of *blade barriers*, *cones of cold*, *walls of force*, snapping whips, swinging blades and *summoned* earth elementals. The combined might of the enemies proves troublesome, and Kibi and Flicker are both hampered by the fact that, having been bitten by the gut-snakes of the reddish enemies, they lose the ability to see other living creatures, friends and foes alike.

But soon enough the last enemy is slain, and the Company stand – bloody, drained, and partially blinded, but victorious – in the drenching downpour. The hoots and hollers from the peanut gallery don't grow any less after the victory. Dranko blinks the water out of his eyes, and nods at Grey Wolf. "I'm with you. We should burn down this entire place."

No one disagrees. And through all the talk, and all the battle, there has still been no sign of Shreen the Fair.



There's no immediate consensus as to whether they should press on immediately after Shreen, or fall back and recuperate after the battle. To buy time they activate the Lucent Tower right there in the shadowy courtyard, and pile inside. They can hear the rain hammering on the roof.

While the familiars keep watch out of arrow slits, the party clerics try to figure out what odd affliction is preventing Flicker and Kibi from being able to see living beings. They conclude that it's neither a disease nor a curse, but it turns out that *restoration* removes the effect. Since *restoration* is on the menu anyway given all the ability score drain and negative levels suffered in the battle, it's a moot point. Soon enough the party are back to normal.

"Now what?" asks Flicker, once his full sight is restored.

"Now we go and kick Shreen's ass!" says Dranko.

But while the Company are taking a quick inventory of their remaining spells and resources for the day, the familiars report a large green insectoid creature walking out of the darkness toward the Lucent Tower.

"Could be coming with a message," says Ernie.

The creature taps one knife-sharp appendage against the Tower's solid crystal exterior, then backs off a few feet. "Guess it wanted to see if the tower was an illusion," says Dranko.

Ernie heads to the top of the tower and hits the thing with a *searing darkness* cast from a wand through an arrow slit. The monster leaps back, angry, and then skitters off into the shadows. (The party's vision is still limited in the unnatural gloom of the shrine.)

Then there's a burst of motion from the darkness all around them, and swarms of small creatures assault the Tower. Bats, birds, stirges, insects, rodents and other vermin hurl themselves at the crystalline walls to no avail. A few dozen flying insects manage to get in through the arrow slits before the party shutter them, and Aravis mops these up with a *flaming sphere* before they can cause any harm. Five minutes later, the swarms retreat.

Dranko peers through an arrow slit, hoping to spot the next wave of the assault. What he sees is that the previous wave hasn't actually subsided. By looking as close to straight down as is possible, he sees that the exterior wall of the tower on that side has a patch of stirges, clinging with sticky feet to the crystal.

"Gods, this sucks," opines Flicker. "Shouldn't we be kicking Shreen's ass by now?"

Aravis raises an eyebrow. "That reminds me. How's the worship going, Flicker?"

Flicker looks over at Aravis. "You haven't granted me any spells yet. Frankly, I'm disappointed."

"OK, fine," says Aravis. "What spell do you want?"

"How about *true strike*?"

"Why don't we start you out with a cantrip?" suggests Aravis.

"A cantrip? What kind of god are you, anyway?"

"Hey, I only just found out I was a god. Give me a break!"

"Excuse me," says Dranko. He points outside. "Stirges."

They discuss their options for a moment or two before Dranko comes up with a plan himself. "Here it is," he says. "You guys put some spells on me to protect me from fire. Then I run out there into the courtyard. All of the stirges will come to land on me, at which point I'll use my crown to cast *paroxysm of fire*. One of you mages will back that up with a *fireball*. We know it takes a few seconds before they start sucking blood, and they'll all be toast before they can kill me. What do you think?"

Everyone thinks he's nuts, is what.

But when they start to discuss it, they come around. It should work! All it will take is Dranko's nerve and some fire magic. And after the stirges are gone, the party will come out of the tower, fold it up, and make a break for the door leading to the interior of the shrine.

Before he can talk himself out of it, Dranko walks casually out the door of the Lucent Tower and looks about. "Oh, *crap*." It turns out there's not just a small patch of stirges on one side of the tower. Nearly the entire thing is covered, and Dranko barely has time to flinch before thirty or forty stirges descend upon him.

They blanket him head to toe, and he feels over twenty proboscises plunge into his flesh. He cannot see past the shroud of bodies and wings; all he hears is flapping and buzzing. The plan had been for him to use his *crown of fire* first, but he panics. Over the mind-link the others can hear him: *FIREBALL! I CAN'T SEE ANYTHING! FIREBALL!*

Aravis sticks a wand out of an arrow slit and blasts Dranko. A few stirges survive, but Dranko regains his composure and uses the crown. One of the remaining creatures starts belching flames spasmodically in every direction, and soon all of them are dead, lying in a sickening charred heap around Dranko's feet.

He twitches. *We will never do that again*, he thinks to the others. *But now that I did... let's go!*

The Company hurry out of the Tower and Dranko commands it closed. They dash across the courtyard to a small wooden door that leads into the surrounding buildings. It's locked. Ernie gives it a good kick but it doesn't budge. Around them they hear the sounds of flapping, buzzing and chirping as the swarms of small creatures again head toward them, so Morningstar casts a protective *wind wall*. Even as Aravis casts *knock* and they all rush through the door, hundreds of small creatures are swept up and away by the wind.

The door opens directly onto a small downward staircase. Morningstar casts *locate object*, looking for Shreen's holy symbol, and gets a reading: down and to the left. They head down the stairs into the darkness, single file.

The sound of the pelting rain fades as they descend. Kibi pulls out his *lantern of revealing* to light their path; its illumination extends out thirty feet and then stops, choked off by the unholy darkness of Dralla.

Piratecat: Anyone remember back in Het Branoi, when we were fleeing the tentacular and horrific Cleaners from the Far Realm? Dranko threw an empty bottle with a note in it ("Dranko was here") into the void as we fled. I thought it was funny and kind of clever and utterly inconsequential in a throwaway sort of moment. Like throwing a note in a bottle off a ship into the ocean.

Well, last week, just as Dranko said "Ha! Suckers. My life is boring. No one exciting is trying to kill me," Sagiro said, "Funny you should say that."

And tentacles ripped through my chest, my abdomen, my back, and my eye as something inhuman started talking to me in my head. It began something like "As per the ancient pacts that bind our kind, I have accepted your offer and demand payment..."

And the tentacle emerging from my eye was holding a little glass bottle with a note in it.

They found me.

Dranko is so screwed.

Tallarn: Is it wrong of me to want to collapse on the floor laughing at this? That is so, so RBDM of Sagiro – sir, my congratulations!

Joshua Randall: Uh, "Dranko was here" is a pact?! I've gotta be more careful what I say...

Down, down into the black. Morningstar feels an ever-increasing pressure on her psyche, a burning hostility settling on her. She casts *true seeing*, and it takes unusual concentration and effort. They pass small alcoves, empty rooms and hallways, following Morningstar's location spell. The place seems quiet and abandoned, except for the... is that squeaking?

Rats! From behind them comes a crescendo of skittering feet, and a veritable wave of large and deformed rats comes crashing around a corner behind them. Kibi quickly casts *repulsion* with a ten-foot radius, and the swarming rats smash into the invisible barrier, piling up against it, the ones in back crushing the ones in front. Morningstar casts *darkbeam* (with great difficulty, as her connection with Ell is weakening) and soon enough the rats are destroyed.

Finally the Company find themselves in a small empty room. There are light patches on the stone walls that indicate recently-removed artwork or tapestries; it looks like this whole place was recently packed up and moved out. Is it possible that Shreen has fled ahead of them? But no... there is sound coming from a dark space adjacent to this room. They can't see what it is; their light doesn't extend out far enough through the doorway. But the sound is disconcerting; a mixture of grinding stone and squelching flesh. Morningstar's spell tells her that Shreen is in that direction, perhaps even making the hideous sound.

"Are we ready to spring the trap?" asks Dranko.

Ernie casts a *greater dispel magic* out into the darkness, just in case. The sound continues.

"Shreen!" shouts Ernie. "Come talk to us yourself! We've brought the Maze, but we *cannot give it to you!*"

No reply. "Chicken," Ernie grumbles.

Morningstar follows this by firing a *darkbeam* toward the source of the strange noise. She feels a painful jolt in her hand, and the stifling oppression grows worse. But nothing fires back.

With nothing else for it, they move cautiously into the room. They see that, like the previous room, this one has been stripped of furnishings and objects. Only one notable feature remains: a hideous morphing statue set atop a simple stone altar. It looks like a deformed bear with lobster claws, but as they watch, it changes, the living stone oozing and reshaping into a six-legged jackal. And then some kind of multi-eyed squid. The statue reforms into one abomination after another.

On the opposite wall there is another door, and a faint light is coming from the space beyond. From that space comes a voice, the rising-and-falling, broken-glass-and-velvet voice of Shreen the Fair. "Stop wasting time and GET IN HERE! We've waited long enough for you to finish this nonsense."

"Well," says Kibi. "Your guy outside said to wait twelve hours before coming in, so you can't have been in *too* much of a hurry."

"He was very offensive," adds Ernie.

"And then he attacked us without provocation," says Dranko.

"I'm not going to treat with you while you're standing out there," says Shreen. "Come in. COME IN! And don't try anything. You'll regret it, I promise. But we want to talk with you NOW!"

They go in.

Atanatatos: Oh, joy! An update!

Fimmtiu: That is the second-best system for stirge removal that I've seen. (First is *iron body* and a tennis racket, of course.) Thanks for the update!

EroGaki: Nice!! Thanks for the update, Sagiro!

thegreyman: So I was rereading some of the Company's older adventures, and saw a correlation that may not have been brought up.

Way back when, Aravis visited an old Keeper known as Vhadish in order to learn how to seal up the planar gate. Vhadish told Aravis that he had to use the gate to seal up a hole that some Black Circles had dug into the Hells. That was about 650-ish years ago.

Fast forward to Het Branoi, where they find out that some Black Circles were using an Eye to dig a hole to the Abyss to try and locate their BBE god.

Was it ever postulated that these two events may have been closely linked? How old are the Hets? I know Vhadish was dismissive of the "Demon Plague" (that scholars thought was misnamed and should have been "Devil Plague"), but could they have been mixed up, and it was demons?

If they were linked, was the effect of Vhadish sealing the gate to throw the entire insides of Het Branoi out to the Far Realm? Kinda like like the Black Circle pressing up against the planar fabric causing stress (stretching a rubber band), and Vhadish sealing it, releasing stress (snapping the rubber band).

Does this mean that Aravis's sealing of the planar gate between Abernia and Volpos catapulted Volpos out into the cosmos someplace? Specifically, I don't want to think of how horrible it would be for the Emperor to get an alliance with the Cleaners and start sending out tentacled, evil-gooped minions to wreak havoc...



Belshikun

It's not exactly what they expect. For one thing, rather than one more hastily evacuated chamber, this one feels like a living room. A damp, decrepit living room to be sure, with rotting furs on the ground and mold growing on the walls, but there's a fireplace with a lit fire and two misshapen stuffed chairs. It resembles a dilapidated underground hunting lodge.

For another thing, Shreen the Fair is not the most commanding presence in the room. Oh, he's there, slouched in one of the chairs, ugly and hunchbacked and smoldering with sullen rage. Behind him are two of the demonic humanoids with snakes protruding from their bellies. But in the other chair... a humanoid of indeterminate kind, cloaked in unnatural shadows. Two bright blue eyes burn beneath a black hood like fragments of a star. Wings of coherent smoke rise behind him. Two of his four arms grip a deep black battleaxe, held blade-down but menacing nonetheless.

"Please. Be at ease. I wish only to talk to you." Where Shreen's voice is silk and smashed cinder blocks, this creature's voice is guttural but distinct, grating yet potent. Grey Wolf looks from one chair to the other, and over the mind-link he thinks: *Ah. Something that can kick Shreen's ass.*

Morningstar can't take her eyes off the shadowy figure, and soon realizes what about it troubles her. While undoubtedly evil, it reminds her, in terms of its bearing and guarded might, of the Avatar of Ell that has trained her in *Ava Dormo*. Her throat goes dry.

"We've come to deal honorably with you," says Ernie.

"Good," says the black creature. Then turning to Shreen, it says: "We tried it your way."

Shreen looks distinctly uncomfortable, but works up the courage to speak. "They were going to betray us!" he barks. "Dralla told me. They were never going to give it to us willingly. We had no choice but to try to take it by force!"

"There is a difference between not giving it to you, and betraying you," explains Ernie. "We cannot give it to you, because we don't know how."

"Perhaps," says the blue-eyed shadow. "But I know how. I only wish to negotiate in good faith. I do not want to harm you, or make you an enemy. I am... dissatisfied by Shreen's clumsy attempts. I know about the Maze."

Over the mind-link the party consider casting *dispel evil* on this being, as a prelude to attack, but decide to hear him out.

"May I ask who you are?" says Aravis.

"I am **Belshikun**," replies the creature. "I am a... servant of Drosch."

The Company have heard the name before – Drosch is a Kivian deity, though they don't recall his portfolio. Shreen squirms a little more in his chair.

"I wish to take the Maze from you," Belshikun explains. "Shreen will agree..." – and here he looks pointedly at Shreen – "...that that will satisfy the condition of your bargain. You will no longer be afflicted by Dralla's curse. I know how it can be done. One of my Lord's followers long ago was a Walker of the Maze, and wrote extensively of it. We now require its use, and you promised to return it, so our interests are in alliance. You should not be harmed by my taking it, and it will be easier for us if you are alive. But, I should add, not strictly necessary."

"What do you want with the Maze?" asks Ernie.

"It is a way to... leave ahead of the storm," says Belshikun.

"What storm?" presses Ernie.

"You will have to learn that for yourself. We mean to explore its use as a means of travel. There are places we wish not to be."

"Is this storm something that's coming here?" asks Dranko.

"Everywhere," says Belshikun. "Good luck with it. The rest of our agenda is not for discussion. It is enough for you to know that we desire it. And Shreen will hold your promise fulfilled if you give it to me."

Kibi turns to Shreen. "Will you hold your promise fulfilled under any other conditions?"

"If you give it to me personally!" spits Shreen.

"But that's not going to happen... is it?" says Belshikun, turning his baleful eyes on the hunchback.

"No, my lord... You may take it... I only beg to come with you."

Belshikun chuckles. The members of the Company hear his voice briefly in their heads as he speaks telepathically. *When I have what I have come for, I will leave, and you may do whatever you want afterward. But you may find it... tedious... to deal with Shreen on his own holy ground.* Belshikun looks at Shreen and smiles. Shreen smiles nervously back.

"Now," says Belshikun. "Do we have a bargain?"

"Not necessarily," says Dranko. "See, the fact is, we made our deal with Shreen, and just because he's willing to give it up to you, doesn't necessarily mean that's okay with us. No offense. Two: there's the possibility that it won't matter if Shreen accepts that we've fulfilled our promise. We could find magic that could break it. Three: According to the word of the promise, just by being here with Shreen, we've fulfilled it already."

"That's for Dralla to decide," says Belshikun, turning its head to Dranko. The half-orc can see no features inside its hood, save the eyes. "It is Her interpretation that matters, and I think you will find that you have not yet met Her conditions. To address your first point, I will be a much more responsible caretaker of the Maze than Shreen ever would be." Shreen looks insulted but says nothing.

"Who's the 'we'?" asks Aravis.

"The followers of Drosh," says Belshikun.

"Are your gods and the other Kivian gods related to the Travelers of Charagan?" asks Aravis.

"They are... irritating guests," answers Belshikun. "Our gods were here long before they arrived."

"Does this have anything to do with the Enemy?" asks Ernie, referring to the great Adversary from whom the Travelers fled.

"You'll have to decide that for yourself," says Belshikun.

"I'll take it as a yes," says Dranko.

The Company have a hurried meeting of the minds over the *telepathic bond*. Should they give up the Maze? Dranko thinks it's a bad idea to give the Maze to this being. Aravis doesn't care so much about that, but wants to be sure that doing so will fulfill the promise to Dralla.

Belshikun interrupts. "I find your telepathic conversations rude and boring," it declares.

"I wish to consult with my goddess about the wisdom of this decision," says Morningstar.

"Impossible," says Belshikun, "since I will not let you leave without making your decision, and you cannot commune with your goddess here. If you need assurances, I will promise you in Drosh's name of my good faith. I would not dare lie."

Thinking rather than speaking, Dranko retorts: *Like the assurances you made to Shreen?*

I have made no promises to Shreen, Belshikun replies via telepathy. *I have been very careful about that.*

To all of them, still telepathically, Belshikun continues: *I can promise you safe passage from this place once the transfer has been made. And that I will leave, and not use the Maze in any way to harm any of you. I am offering you a way out, that you can fulfill the promise you have made and not suffer for it. The alternative is, I will take it by force. I strongly doubt you can stop me. And if you do stop me and escape, you will suffer Dralla's wrath. The choice is yours.* He runs a finger along the haft of his night-black axe before adding: *I would not find combat with you entirely dissatisfying.*

Kibi thinks back: *Can you make assurances that you won't use it to harm...*

"WHAT ARE YOU SAYING TO EACH OTHER?" Shreen screams. "I know you're communicating. Just make up your mind, please. MAKE UP YOUR MIND!"

Morningstar shoots a dismissive glance at Shreen and turns back to Belshikun. "What assurances do we have that anything you're saying is the truth?"

Belshikun laughs – a nasty gravelly sound. "You, of all people, should understand the power of making promises in Dralla's name on Her holy ground. I do not underestimate your abilities, or the strength of your deities. I do not wish to make enemies of them. I wish to leave them."

"I still don't understand," says Aravis, "how you – a servant of Drosh – can release us from a promise we made to Dralla."

"It would be Shreen who technically releases you from the promise," says Belshikun. "But consider this also: Drosch created Dralla."

"I wonder what the Black Circle would think of all this," muses Morningstar.

"The Black Circle," spits Belshikun. "I assume you loathe them as much as I. They are the enemy."

"They are bringing the storm, aren't they?" asks Ernie.

"They are its leading edge," says Belshikun.

"We've killed a lot of them," says Dranko.

"Good!" Belshikun sits straighter in his chair. "I will make you a promise, as part of your agreement to give me the Maze. I will do what I can to find information, or materials, that you might find useful regarding the Black Circle."

"Make a decision!" yells Shreen, reaching his tolerance for discourse. "MAKE A DECISION!"

"Won't you shut up?" says Ernie.

Belshikun leans over toward the cringing Shreen. "You should listen to your betters," he says quietly. "Shut. Up." Shreen quivers and fumes. One could almost feel sorry for him.

"One thing I'll need to do before we discuss this any further," says Aravis, "is speak to someone I know in the Maze."

"You should not attempt treachery," warns Belshikun. "You may go into the Maze, but your familiar will remain with me as a hostage."

Pewter? thinks Aravis.

You owe me big time for this, Boss, replies Pewter, as the cat leaps into Belshikun's lap. *Oh, he's gross! Ew!*

Aravis drops into the Maze, and navigates its strange inner world until he finds King Vhadish XXIII. They meet on the lawn outside Vhadish's mansion, the golem guardians standing at attention. "I am very sorry to disturb you," says Aravis.

"Yes, I am also," responds Vhadish.

Aravis explains their current situation, and the possibility that he'll be giving up the Maze to a powerful evil being. When he finishes, Vhadish stares for a moment as if waiting for Aravis to get to the interesting part. "And what is it then you want of me?" he asks at last.

"I want your advice, as to whether you think this is a wise course of action. Also, to point out that I have made a promise to you, and if I give up the Maze, I won't be able to keep that promise."

Vhadish steeples his fingers. "This creature – the Maze is stronger than it, and will outlast it. The Maze itself is in no danger, if that's your concern. Creatures greater than this Belshikun have possessed it, and creatures more vile. The Maze persists."

"I'm not worried about the Maze," says Aravis, "but about those in the Maze, such as yourself."

"I'm not concerned about him, honestly," says Vhadish, looking bored. "As for your promise, well, I have thought about that. Frankly, you're unlikely to live long enough to become facile with the Maze, to the point where anything you could do wouldn't be easier done on my own. Perhaps I'll find a way to get my promise out of you regardless... the universe is a funny place. But, if you want to give the Maze up, I'll... suspend your promise until I find a way that I can possibly extract it... Wait... here's a thing."

Vhadish perks up, then continues. "Tell Belshikun, this servant of some dark god of somewhere that I can't bring myself to care about, tell him that the condition is that he has to inherit your promise. That I can ask him a favor, and he will have to do what I ask. I'll gauge his abilities, and the speed at which he learns to use it, and... oh, I don't know, maybe I'll have him go and fetch me a steak or something. Fair enough? Now, if there's nothing else, I'm quite busy, and you're not all that interesting to talk to." He smiles at Aravis.

"I appreciate everything that you've done, and I won't waste any more of your time," says Aravis, letting Vhadish's condescension slide off him.

"That's true," agrees Vhadish. "Good luck!"

Aravis does one other thing while in the Maze. He uses its powers of enhancing observation to take a good look at Belshikun. He tries to gauge the creature's martial and magical prowess, and while his analysis isn't exact, he gains the impression that in a battle between Belshikun and the entire Company, Belshikun would, by a small margin, have the upper hand.

While Aravis is journeying, the others endure an awkward silence. Morningstar tries to make small talk with Shreen. “We did bring Lapis your regards before taking her head, you know.”

“Well, that’s something,” says Shreen. “I had considered you... in a more friendly way than Lapis. At least you did not come to see me the first time with elementals laying waste. It’s a shame that you decided that you wouldn’t GIVE ME THE MAZE LIKE YOU PROMISED!”

“We were coming down to talk to you, when your guy turned on us,” protests Dranko.

“I know what your plan was!” says Shreen angrily. “Do you think my eyes are blind? Do you think I cannot also talk with my goddess, and learn what you were going to do, or not do, with the Maze? You came here with betrayal in your hearts. I considered that a first blow. But it’s all immaterial now.”

“I’ll say,” agrees Dranko. “You called in your buddy here to take charge.”

Shreen splutters with rage. To Belshikun he asks: “When you’re done, can I kill them? Master?”

Belshikun turns to Shreen and answers, “I doubt it.”

“You can try,” says Ernie.

Shreen lets out a short but abrasive cackle. “You can’t kill me in this place, but eventually, I can kill you. It may TAKE A LOT OF BLUDGEONING! But I’ll batter through that eggshell you wear, and see your brains dashed upon the floor!”

“How come we can’t kill you?” asks Dranko.

“I am unkillable, Dranko Blackhope,” says Shreen quietly.

“Really?” presses Dranko. “How did you arrange that?”

“You’ll find out, if you’re stupid enough!” says Shreen.

Ernie asks Belshikun, “Is he blowing smoke?” Belshikun shakes his head no.

“It’s still pretty simple,” says Dranko. “If he’s unkillable, we just bury him alive.”

“That’s kind of cruel,” says Ernie.

“Remind me which part of this isn’t Shreen the Fair.”

“Fair combat is fine, but I’m not on board with torture and live burial,” Ernie insists.

“I’m on board!” Flicker pipes up.

Aravis returns, his head snapping up, eyes open.

“Have you made your decision?” asks Belshikun. His cold blue eyes meet Aravis’s star-fields, and the wizard smiles.

“If your decision is to fight me, let’s get on with it,” says Belshikun. His voice almost sounds eager.

Over the mind-link, Aravis shares his assessment of Belshikun’s might. The Company have more hurried internal debate about what to do.

To buy time, Dranko asks, “After you guys leave, who fills the hole?”

“Someone new must become the lord of Death and Undeath,” says Belshikun. “I suspect Myr Madar will take over in our absence. He’ll probably make a mess of things, but he’ll do it. Someone will have to.”

“What more can you tell us about Drosh?” asks Morningstar.

“He is the God of Death and Undeath,” says Belshikun. “What is there to explain?”

Morningstar feels in her gut that this is a bad idea. Instinctively she glances down at the red mark on her hand, a reminder of the deal she made with the Winged Ogre, when she was named the Slayer.

“Who will be using the Maze?” asks Kibi. “One of your minions?”

“If I give up the Maze, it will be to a superior,” says Belshikun.

“Then how can we be sure whoever that is won’t use the Maze to harm us?” asks Kibi.

"You'll just have to take my word for it. I do have a certain authority. If you're asking if I can promise that Drosh himself will not take it from me and put it to His own use, I cannot. But if He does take the Maze, I can assure you He would not use it to do anything to you *personally*. He is a God, and you are beneath His notice."

"We are not beneath Dralla's notice," Aravis points out.

"Here, you are not," says Belshikun. "Here, nothing is beneath Her notice."

"But the curse affected us outside of this place," says Aravis. "I'm not convinced that we're beneath Drosh's notice, given that we're not beneath Dralla's."

"Anything is possible," admits Belshikun. "But you are enemies of the Black Circle. If Drosh ever does notice you, it will be in a favorable light."

The dark being turns to Morningstar, eyes glittering. "I'll tell you this, Morningstar of Ell. Dralla is Drosh's daughter, and He loves Her dearly. Your goddess is Her enemy. It occurs to me that you might plan, in the future, to bring hostility to Dralla's mortal children. It will not go well for you if you do. Perhaps you should stay on your side of the ocean."

Morningstar meets his veiled gaze. "We're already here."

"That may not last very long if you attempt to push things, but that's for you to decide," says Belshikun.

The Company engage in one last mental debate, and they make their decision. They will give up the Maze. But Aravis wants to extract some promises first. "We are prepared to give you the Maze," he says. "But first: will you promise, that to the best of your abilities, you will prevent the Maze from being used to harm us or our causes?"

"I don't know all of your causes," answers Belshikun, "but if I think the Maze will be put to a use that you would disapprove of, I will counsel against it."

"And will you promise on the names of both my god and yours, that taking the Maze from me will do me no harm?" asks Aravis.

"I promise, on Drosh's name and those of your Travelers, that if I perform the ritual correctly, it will do you no permanent harm."

"Umm..." says Aravis. "Please explain that last statement."

"I will be performing rituals that I have only read about, but have obviously not performed," says Belshikun. "And it is possible, even if I do everything correctly, that your mind will suffer some damage in the very short term. It will be nothing that your allies cannot heal."

"And, finally," says Aravis, "will you promise to take upon yourself all obligations that I have incurred, in connection with the Maze?"

Belshikun draws a short breath. "Explain these obligations."

"I have made promises to a creature within the Maze, a former Keeper named Vhadish. I am at his beck and call, should he desire a service."

"Are you saying that I would be at this Vhadish's beck and call?" hisses Belshikun.

"I cannot in good conscience give up the Maze to someone not willing to take on those obligations," says Aravis, barely repressing a smirk.

"In your opinion, what sorts of duties would I be required to perform?" asks Belshikun.

"I have no idea."

The servant of Drosh stays silent for half a minute before answering. "I will agree, as long as his requests will not put me at great personal risk." Aravis nods.

"Now then," Belshikun growls. "Is there anything else? If you continue to heap conditions upon our transaction, I will be inclined to turn to violence instead."

Aravis shakes his head. "I am satisfied. You may take the Maze."

Belshikun turns to Shreen, nearly forgotten during the past few minutes. "Shreen, do you understand that after I take possession of the Maze, you are to let these people go unharmed? I don't want to have to return here, to inflict discipline or punishment."

"Of course I understand," snarls Shreen, clearly not happy with the arrangement. "I'll give them safe passage out."

Telepathically, Belshikun reminds the party: *He will rightfully fight back, if you become hostile during your exit, and I will not interfere in that case.* Out loud, he says only: "Aravis, step forward."

He reaches out a shadowy claw to Aravis's head, and begins to chant in a strange tongue. After about a minute of this, he hisses: "Enter the Maze, Aravis. Now!"

Aravis tries and fails. Something is clinging to his mind, and it breaks his concentration. "Try again!" says Belshikun. "Concentrate!"

With a mighty effort of will, Aravis drops into the Maze, appearing at the window that looks out upon the doubled multiverse. Belshikun is there with him, beside him, writhing in pain. Aravis indulges in a moment of schadenfreude. Soon Belshikun's agony subsides, and he stands up straight. For a moment he gazes in wonder upon the majesty of the cosmos in miniature.

"Fascinating," he breathes. "Now, Aravis. You will hear my words in your head as I continue the ritual. I will speak a Word of Power... you will know it. When that happens, you can make the transfer. Simply imagine the Maze in my possession instead of yours, and it will be so."

Belshikun continues his chanting, and after almost five subjective minutes utters what Aravis thinks is some esoteric variant of *power word*. Aravis begins to imagine the Maze moving from himself to Belshikun, but stops. With a thrill of anticipation and danger, he has a wonderful, terrifying idea. He breaks off a small piece of his own consciousness and life force, and sends it into the Maze on its own, and only when he is sure it has gone undetected, does he imagine the Maze in Belshikun's mind instead of his own.

Belshikun groans and writhes before yanking his hand away from Aravis's head. As the Company watch, the star-fields fade from Aravis's eyes, and the metal tracery does likewise from his skin. At the same time, Belshikun's blue glittering eyes fade to black, with a field of white pinprick lights. Aravis comes back to his body, head pounding and dizzy.

"I see I will need great concentration and study," says Belshikun. "Drosh will guide me. Thank you, Aravis. You have done me and my master a great service. We will not betray our promises to you. We too wish to see the Black Circle smashed."

The creature takes deep breaths, clearly awed. "The universe is in my mind. I must go and begin to explore."

"Give Solomea our regards," says Dranko.

"It's been a pleasure doing business with you," says Belshikun. He vanishes.

A piece of Aravis goes with him.

Atanatotatos: Just. Great.

EroGaki: Well. Things are getting grim. Why do evil people always get immortality?

Fimmtiu: Must be nice to have eyes again! It's been a long, long time.

Tallarn: Aravis is a smart cookie – that kind of planning is exactly the sort of thing that a good DM can reward in the future. And as we all know, Sagiro is a good DM! I assume he took some sort of XP penalty or something to do that?

Sagiro: He lost one point of Intelligence.

Jackylhunter: Ouch, that had to hurt for an INT caster. Does this mean Aravis is now an Immortal part of the maze? Will creatures traveling in the maze be able to talk to "an Aravis" like Aravis talked to Vhadi?

Joshua Randall: If Shreen doesn't get his butt kicked, I'm going to be sorely disappointed...

But on a more serious note, I wonder about the out-of-character discussion (if any) around this transfer of the Maze. Did Sagiro say something like, "You've had this powerful artifact/plot device long enough; time to give it up so we can move on to other things in the game"? Was Aravis's player content to give up the Maze, or did he feel like he was getting screwed? What did the other players think?

Abciximab: If it were me, I wouldn't have minded giving up the artifact, but I'd be bummed about losing my "cool look."

Artoomis: That's funny... My character, a bard, gave up a powerful artifact because it negatively affected his looks. *That* was unacceptable...



CHAPTER 22
The Shadows of the Past

Room Disservice

Dranko turns menacingly toward Shreen. “You promised not to attack me!” the hunchback screeches.

“We made no such promise,” says Aravis. “Understand, Shreen, that you now live at my sufferance.”

Shreen narrows his eyes. “You cannot kill me, Aravis,” he says softly. “But I will let you go. You would be most unwise to attack me in this place. We would TEAR YOU APART!”

Morningstar is unimpressed by the theatrics. “Shreen, look at me!” Shreen does so, almost against his will. “Do not get in my way,” says Morningstar simply. “I do not fear you.”

“You should,” croaks Shreen. “YOU SHOULD!”

“But we don’t,” says Dranko.

Kibi rolls his eyes. “Why are we still here?”

Shreen couldn’t agree more with the sentiment. “Go,” he hisses. “Leave, and NEVER COME BACK! Just. Leave.”

The Company do just that. For all of Shreen’s bluster, nothing attacks them as they make their way back to the surface and thence to the Plaza of Glory. Flicker looks back on the door before it closes. “With any luck, the Church of Kemma will come back here with a thousand soldiers and just wipe this place off the map.”



The streets are mostly empty, the folk of Djaw preferring to stay out of the driving rain. The only people out and about are slaves. Dranko tries vainly to keep his cigar lit but soon gives up. All of the Company are covered in mud and gore, streaking and running in the torrent. Aravis doesn’t seem to notice; he looks dazed.

“Are you okay?” asks Morningstar. None of them know exactly what happened in the Maze, or what Aravis sacrificed in that final moment.

“No,” answers Aravis faintly. “Not really.”

“I think we need a good night’s sleep,” says Dranko, glancing worriedly at Aravis. “Him especially.”

For a while the Company make small talk. Flicker talks about maybe joining a Farangi team, now that he could *teleport* across the sea for matches. Ernie wonders if meat-on-a-stick vendors stay open in the rain. No one wants to talk about the Big Scary Thing. Dranko makes a tentative foray as they approach the Golden Goblet. “Hey,” he says. “Is anyone else concerned that the Kivian God of Death wants to flee Abernia?”

Everyone else nods, but no one says anything. “Uh, OK. ’Cause that’s kind of been bothering me.”

Ernie adds: “The phrases ‘rat’ and ‘sinking ship’ keep running through my head.”

More silence. Morningstar changes the subject. “I think we should go back and kill Shreen the Fair.”

“Wouldn’t that be murder?” asks Dranko.

“I have plenty of reasons – legitimate reasons – to kill him,” Morningstar points out.

“In the name of scientific inquiry,” says Flicker, “we should go back to find out if he really is immortal, by stabbing him a bunch of times!”

“I like the way you think,” says Dranko.

“The thing is,” says Morningstar, “for all that I’d like to kill Shreen, that Belshikun creature *wanted* us to kill him, and I *really* didn’t want to do what he wanted.”

“Maybe he was using reverse psychology,” says Kibi. “Anyway, if he tries something else in the future, we can kill him then. It sure won’t take much provocation.”



Balthazar greets them at the door of the Golden Goblet, and sees the blood and grime smeared on their skin and clothes by the rain. "Goodness, what has happened?" he exclaims. "Do you require medical assistance?"

While declining Balthazar's offer of healing, they do gratefully accept his follow-up offers of hot baths, tea and food. Almost before they reach their private building, servants have prepared the baths and set out whiskey, tea, cakes, bread, figs and cheeses. Soon everyone is cleaned up and refreshed, though still spoiling for a fight. When a servant knocks sometime later and asks if they require anything else, Dranko's answer is: "Do you want to attack us, so we can burn off some aggression?"

The servant blinks, but then says smoothly, "If you'd like, we can hire you a sparring partner and you can duel in the yard."

"No, no, thanks, but we're good," admits Dranko, slumping back into his chair.

"Is there a Farangi match anytime soon?" asks Ernie.

"I don't know," says the servant, "but I can procure the schedule for you easily enough."

When evening comes around the Company are still lounging in the large commons of their building. Tensions have eased somewhat. It turns out the next Farangi match isn't for three days; the games are delayed for inclement weather. They make small talk until bed, touching on subjects such as how to end dwarfish enslavement without riling the Djawish establishment, and wondering what's happened to their old adventuring companion Tor. Dranko goes to sleep with the intent of visiting Saum Derrie's farm the next day, to reclaim the Candlestick of St. Jenniver, a holy Deliochan artifact.



Sleeping alone in his room, alternating between sweet dreams of Yoba and nightmares of Shreen, Ernie wakes at 3:00 a.m. to discover that his throat is being cut. He tries to scream but his mouth is filled with blood, and he manages only a feeble gasp before the assassin plunges the dagger deep into his heart. He falls back into darkness.

Dranko is woken up by the sound of a screaming cat. Before his mind is fully aware, his adventurer's instincts take control of his body. He's out the door in seconds, naked but with his whip in one hand and his holy symbol in the other. A bubble of force starts to form around him once he's in the hallway, but he slams his body sideways into the wall and escapes the *resilient sphere*. A black-clad spellcaster some ten feet down the hall mutters a curse beneath a mask.

Dranko glares at him. "I am very, very cranky."

Pewter's screams are the direct result of a nearly successful assassination attempt on Aravis, happening concurrently with Ernie's assault. Because of Pewter's last-second intervention, Aravis's assailant only manages a grievous wound to Aravis's neck – a poisoned wound that immediately saps him of strength and vitality. With no strength even to lift his arms, all Aravis can do is utter a voice-only spell; he and Pewter *teleport* directly from his own room into Morningstar's bed. "Poison," he croaks. Pewter continues his furious caterwauling.

Morningstar, already awake from the noise and Dranko's hasty exit from their room, screams "WAKE UP" at the top of her lungs before casting *heal* on Aravis. Having done that she leaps from bed and stumbles out into the hallway to join her husband. "Two in the hall ahead of us," warns Dranko, but Morningstar can't see anyone. Apparently the assassins are *improvedly invisible*.

The second assassin casts *greater command* on Dranko and Morningstar, but both of them resist the compulsion to halt in their tracks. "Still cranky," Dranko warns.

Kibi comes crashing out of his room into the hall, beard tangled, barely awake. "Invisible bad guys down there," says Morningstar, pointing down the hall. Kibi casts *glitterdust* and one assassin gains a sparkling outline.

Dranko, wearing a magic eye-patch that lets him see the invisible, snaps his whip at the closest assassin and trips him before following up with more cracking blows. Aravis, freshly healed but lacking his spell components, doesn't have many battle options. He casts *contagion* and sends Pewter to deliver it to the glittering assassin. Morningstar casts *invisibility purge*, and Kibi sees a third assassin pop into view right behind him. Like the others, this one is dressed all in black, face covered. The assassin who failed with the *greater command* has better luck with a *flame strike* brought down on Kibi, Morningstar and Aravis.

Grey Wolf, sleeping soundly enough that the noise hasn't yet woken him, is instead jolted to alertness by the sharp sting of a poisoned dagger slipping beneath his collarbone. His monkey familiar Edghar is clinging to the assassin's face, which is probably the reason he's only injured instead of dead. Grey Wolf leaps to his feet and returns fire with *enervation* before backing hastily toward the door of his room. He can feel the poison afire in his veins, filling his limbs with lead.

Kibi turns and casts *hold monster* on the assassin next to him, but the spell fails. “Why doesn’t that ever work?” he cries, much aggrieved.

Yet another assassin comes rolling smoothly out of Flicker’s room, which doesn’t bode well for the little halfling’s fate. The attacker pelts Dranko with daggers, while another one tries (and fails) to bluff Morningstar into dropping her guard. Dranko has a second to thank Delioch that the poison didn’t take, before one of the spell-slinging assassins points at him and utters the single word: DARKNESS. Dranko’s sight fades to black as the *power word: blind* takes hold. “Crap! Blind!” he yells.

“I’ve got a scroll that’ll get rid of that,” says Morningstar.

“Wonderful,” says Dranko. “I’ll just read it then, shall I? Ernie! Get your ass out here!”

StevenAC: If I’d been drinking something when I read that, you’d have owed me a new keyboard, Sagiro...

Aravis yells at Dranko to get out of the way. Dranko does so, dropping to the ground and rolling toward what he hopes is an open door. It’s enough to get him out of the way of Aravis’s *prismatic spray*, and while the spell fails to affect one assassin and does minimal damage to a second, the third one caught in the effect is turned instantly to stone.

Morningstar positions herself centrally in the fight and casts a mass curative, much needed at this point, especially since she herself, along with Aravis, Dranko and Kibi, are blasted with another *flame strike*.

Grey Wolf’s attacker does manage to bluff him, and delivers a painful sneak attack. Grey Wolf manages to stumble out into the hallway, hoping to get into a better casting spot, but he’s struck by another assassin’s poisoned blade. His remaining strength is completely sapped and he falls to the floor. “We’ve got to get out of here!” yells Dranko. “Ernie! Flicker! NOW!”

Kibi decides that if Ernie won’t come out, he’ll have to go in and get him. Grabbing as many nearby party members as possible, he *dimension doors* into Ernie’s room. Ernie is there, lying in his blood-soaked bed, horrific wounds on his chest and neck. His chest, though, is slowly rising and falling. Somehow, though unconscious, he is alive.

Dranko feels the cutting edge of an assassin’s blade, and his own blood pouring out from many wounds. Blinded, weakened, drained, injured and naked, he laments his plight out loud. “I’m blind and naked! Can’t you give me a break?” He hears the closest assassin chuckle beneath her mask. But he also readies an *ice storm* from a magic ring, intending to drop it on the next enemy he hears casting.

Aravis casts *disintegrate* at Dranko’s attacker but misses with the beam, and instead vaporizes a chunk of wall. Morningstar has better luck with a *darkbeam*, tagging the enemy cleric. Better yet, when the assassin tries to follow up with *heal*, Dranko hears the sound of casting and drops an *ice storm* on his head. The cleric drops.

“Did it work?” asks Dranko.

“Yes!” says Morningstar. “But we still should get out of... Dranko!”

Another assassin appears out of the shadows and stabs the blind half-orc repeatedly. Dranko drops to his knees, vision reddening.

Tony Vargas: Which might seem like an improvement compared to being blind... ☺

Sagiro: That does deserve a ☺, but not for the reason you think. The *power word: blind* ran out a round or two before that attack on him, and I forgot to mention it.

Aravis reaches out and grabs him, then *dimension doors* the two of them into Flicker’s room. Flicker, like Ernie, is unconscious but breathing despite a seemingly mortal wound. There follows about ten seconds of cat-and-mouse *teleporting*, as the Company try to grab as many of their possessions as possible before a group evacuation, while the assassins continue to hunt for them room to room. Kibi manages to forestall some of them with a *wall of force*, and eventually everyone in the party is gathered around one of the two standing wizards. With no time or means to coordinate their retreat, Aravis *teleports* himself, Dranko and Flicker to Saum Derrie’s farm hundreds of miles away, while Kibi whiskers the rest of them to the Church of Kemma right there in Djaw.



Saum Derrie hears a knock on his door at three o’clock in the morning. He grabs a club kept near the bed and stumps to the door. “Who the hell’s out there?” he calls. This had best be good.

“Dranko. Remember me?”

Saum scratches his head for a second. Does he know a... ? Oh, for Quarrol's sake! "You!" he cries.

"Yeah, me."

"Hold on."

Saum unbolts the door and opens it a crack. He sees Dranko and Aravis, with Flicker laying on the ground. All of them are covered with blood, and Dranko's wearing nothing except his eye-patch.

He blinks. "It *is* you," he manages to stutter. "What happened to you? What happened to your friend? Is he okay?"

"Someone just tried to kill us," says Dranko. "Can I have my candlestick back?"

Saum blinks again, rubs his eyes. "That? You want it back? Sure, if you want. But..." He looks pointedly at Flicker. "Someone just tried to kill you? Here?"

"No, in Djaw," says Dranko. "We figured we needed to get somewhere far away."

"Ah, I get it," says Saum. "You're in Djaw, thinkin' 'Where can I go that's safe?' and you figure, 'How about Saum's farm at three in the morning.' Right. Well, I was going to get up in a couple hours anyway to feed the chickens. You wanna come inside?"

"Nah," says Dranko. "We don't want to get blood on your floor."

"We can clean it up," says Saum. "Look, you need rest, and some patching up. Come in. We'll take care of you. I'll wake the missus."

Inside the farmhouse, Dranko heals Flicker back to consciousness. "I had the worst nightmare," Flicker says groggily. "I dreamt I had my throat cut in my sleep."

"You did," says Dranko. "Assassins attacked us in our rooms at the Golden Goblet."

Flicker looks offended. "We ought to complain!"

Dranko can't help but laugh. "Yes. Yes we should."

el-remmen: I love that you can lay the smackdown on such a powerful party and force them to flee for their lives.

Jackylhunter: [Dranko glares at him. *I am very, very cranky.*] Oh yes... Dranko was itching for a fight before... Now he's been forced to run away! Nekked! Someone's gonna pay...

Innocent Bystander: I'm really surprised no one was outright killed. Without much effort one can get an assassin's death attack DC into the low 30s.

Sagiro: The assassins could have killed a bunch of them, but given Ernie and Flicker's odd conditions, it's likely that whoever hired the assassins wanted the Company taken alive. (Also, it's just not my style to introduce a situation to the game where, with a couple of good die rolls, I could kill PCs without them ever even knowing they were in danger.)

Joshua Randall: I shall have to ask you to hand in your Killer DM card as you exit the premises, then.

Innocent Bystander: I've been reading your story since day one and I figured you weren't that kind of DM. That's what surprised me about the situation. I forgot about the paralyze option of the death attack. I guess that begs the question who hired them. An old enemy, or a new one?

I've personally never liked and have never used save or die spells/attacks on my players. It's one thing to beat them to near death in battle but it's another to have one bad roll kill a character that they've put so much thought and effort into.



Long Memory

Dranko uses a healing wand to get himself and Flicker back to reasonable shape. Dranko looks around and notes that the farmer (to whom they gave a large sum of money following the battle in his barn) has moderately nicer things in his house than the last time they were here. His barn has also been expanded. Still, Dranko hands over another 100 gp to Saum. "For your hospitality, and the Candlestick," says Dranko. "But this time, I'll ask that you use this money to help your friends and neighbors."

"As you say," says Saum, smiling. "Now, you three be all right down here? I'd like to grab a bit more sleep before sunup."

Saum heads back upstairs, and the three of them – Dranko, Flicker and Aravis – make themselves comfortable. But Dranko soon starts to feel dizzy, and then his innards spasm and he vomits up a gout of blood. "It's the poison," he gasps. "Still in my system."

Aravis scrawls a quick note for Saum ('We have to leave. Dranko not well.') before teleporting them to the place he's most sure can provide the healing they need – the Church of Kemma in Djaw. Good luck, then, that the rest of the party are already

there getting patched up. Dranko is barely conscious and with no strength left in his body by the time one of the priests there is able to restore him.

Morningstar asks that a message be sent to the Golden Goblet, requesting that the scene of the attacks be left undisturbed so that she can use her *thought captures*. A runner is sent. Also, having examined Ernie, one of the Kemman healers opines that it was a property of the blade used to inflict the wound, that kept the halfling from dying. Whoever attacked the Company very much wanted them alive.

So, there they are, somewhat healed and with no one killed, but still extremely upset – not merely because of the assassination attempt itself, but also because they were unable to escape with all of their belongings. Flicker is out most of his magic items, Morningstar is missing almost everything save her weapon and shield, and Aravis was unable to grab a number of valuable possessions before their hasty flight. Nothing motivates a group of adventurers quite like the theft of their stuff.

But after a few minutes of collective fuming and vows of revenge, a Kemman acolyte offers to take the party to see something he thinks they'll enjoy. They cross a small courtyard beneath the stars, then through some dormitories and across another yard, toward the stables. They can see from a distance that a lantern has been lit in one of the stalls, but when they go inside it turns out that there's no lantern at all. One stall is glowing with a warm, yellow, and wholly supernatural light.

"Was that Thunder's stall?" asks Ernie in a reverent whisper.

"It was," the acolyte nods. "It's been that way for quite a while now. Thunder vanished from her stall, and left this glow behind."

They all take a moment to stand in silence, bowing their heads and thinking of One Certain Step. "Soon there will be a pilgrimage of horses," says Dranko, "to come here and worship at the stall."

"I think you overestimate the intelligence of the average horse," says the acolyte with a smile.

"We loved Step," continues Dranko. "What he did for us was more valuable than any treasure. So, the fact that he and Thunder can be together in the afterlife? Not too shabby."

"It is no less than he deserves," says the acolyte. "One Certain Step was an excellent example of Kemman virtues."

"How do I get him nominated for sainthood?" asks Dranko.

The acolyte quirks an eyebrow. "You don't have that authority, though of course you may write a letter to the High Priest. It would be weighed with all other evidence, decades or centuries hence."

"No way to get him fast-tracked?" presses Dranko. "No? Oh well." Then another thought occurs to him, wholly unrelated.

"Hey, you know, in the future we should all wear big metal neck-cuffs to bed. No more slit throats!"

"There are a lot of other arteries an assassin can choose, you know," says Flicker.

"What's an artery?" asks Dranko.

"Weren't you paying attention to your lessons?" asks Flicker. "An artery is a vein with extra blood! You stab it and the blood comes pouring out even more than usual. There's one in your thigh, and one in your groin. We learned that right here in Djaw! It was when we... uh... when... er..." The Kemman acolyte is staring at him.

"We're just leaving," says Grey Wolf. They thank the Kemmans profusely for the assistance, leave a large donation to the church, and head back to the Golden Goblet.



There's a great deal of bustling activity when they get there, with guards and servants swarming even though it's still an hour before dawn. The party are greeted by a huffing Balthazar. "Are you okay? I am so sorry! So very sorry that this happened!"

"So are we," agrees Ernie.

"Assassins!" says Balthazar, wringing his hands. "In our very inn!"

"Were any employees hurt?" asks Dranko.

"No, thank the Gods. One of our guards saw someone dressed in black disappear into thin air, but he did not investigate, because we had orders not to go in to your building. That was the word that was sent – no one should disturb the scene of the attack."

"Excellent," says Morningstar.

"We will of course refund your money for your stay, and you are welcome to stay in other rooms, if you wish. Our magical protections were dispelled by your assailants, but they have been reactivated. No one has ever managed to dispel them. Your attackers were clearly professionals!"

"We might not pay for tonight's stay, all things considered," says Dranko. "But we'll still pay for all the other nights. The service has been fantastic."

"I am glad that things have been fine until tonight," says Balthazar, wiping his brow.

"You are clearly a man of means and connections here in Djaw," says Dranko thoughtfully. "Someone must know the names of the oppressive powerful guilds of assassins that could pull off something like this. I know you don't, being an honorable man, but perhaps you know someone who knows someone who could tell us something? Because this was, as you say, a professional job."

"Everyone knows of Vinceris," says Balthazar. He spits on the ground after speaking the name. "He is the God of assassins and other unsavory types. There are cults to him in the city, though I know nothing of them of course."

"I need to know how I can contact an agent of Vinceris," says Dranko.

"I'm sure I don't know anyone who could do that," assures Balthazar, horrified at the thought.

"Of course not!" says Dranko. "But, like I said, you might know someone who knows someone who knows someone... Could you ask around?" Balthazar nods, but Dranko senses he's not actually going to do it, from sheer terror of the possible association.

"Is there anything else I can do?" asks Balthazar. "We have prepared new rooms for you, and the magical defenses have been restored, and we will post extra guards around your building. Again, I apologize. There have been a small number of incursions onto our grounds in the past, but they have always been detected and thwarted."

"Thank you for your quick response," says Dranko.

"If there is any more trouble around us, please don't send your men into harm's way," adds Ernie. "The attackers will be extremely dangerous; we will handle them."



Morningstar casts three *thought captures* – all that she can cast tonight – in Aravis's room. The first reveals a mundane thought from an assassin: *I hope the other two do their jobs well.*

The second collects a thought from Pewter: *Oh my gosh, an assassin! Gotta make noise! Gotta make noise! MREEOWWWW!*

The third is related, and again from the assassin: *Oh, for the love of... He's got a familiar! Dammit!*

"I can try more in the morning," says Morningstar. "But we should all get some sleep."

The last thing they do before turning in is a quick check (thinking as little as possible) of their rooms, which confirms that the assassins absconded with all of their abandoned gear.

In their new rooms, Grey Wolf (with apologies to Edghar and Pewter) uses the *Mordenkainen's cube* to create a *faithful hound* to keep watch.



Aravis wakes the following morning and notes immediately that he is free of the rash. In fact, not a single party member is afflicted. It seems that Belshikun was true to his word. But something is clearly troubling him over breakfast (especially sumptuous, even by the standards of the Golden Goblet) and he toys with how to broach the subject. At last he simply says to the others, "I got a warning from the Maze last night."

Dranko freezes, a forkful of scrambled egg inches from his mouth. "How?" he asks. "You gave it up!"

"Well," says Aravis, almost sheepishly, "this might have been a bad thing to have done, but... I left a piece of myself in the Maze before I gave it to Belshikun."

"What piece?" asks Ernie.

"Like a finger?" asks Flicker.

"No, no," says Aravis. "A piece of my mind. Which might have been dangerous, I admit. But last night I had a vision from the Maze. Whatever it was that warned me about Parthol's *simulacrum*, it talked to me again."

"Is something coming to kill us again?" asks Flicker, looking around worriedly.

"No, no, there was no warning."

"Are you going to share it with us?" asks Dranko. "I mean, what it was he *did* say to you?"

"I was sitting across a table from myself," says Aravis, "and it... it seemed to confirm that giving up the Maze was my only good option. He... I... I said to myself, that if from inside the Maze I could help myself, I would. Or something. It was disorienting. I can't explain any better."

Here's the handout I gave to Aravis:

In your vision, you are sitting at a wooden table in a small tavern... somewhere. Across from you sits a double of yourself. The double speaks; he's in the middle of explaining something to you. There's a dream-like quality to the scene, as if something about it isn't real.

"...turned out to be the only way. It still is. It's hard enough for anyone in here to contact the Keeper, let alone someone who was never a Keeper himself. But I don't regret what I did, or that I'm stuck here now. You got my warning about Parthol, oblique and filtered and vague though it ended up. It's amazing, really, that you heard anything at all. And on that subject, I can't help but wonder if you... the real you... will ever know what I'm saying now."

"The Maze is an amazing place to be stuck, I must say. So much to explore, so many avenues of inquiry to follow. I'll help you as much as I can, Aravis. Two heads are better than one, right? Every secret of the multiverse is here, if we can figure out where to look, who to ask. I'll warn you, though – if I find a way to get back to my rightful place, I'll be sorely tempted to take it. I was enjoying myself immensely."



After breakfast Morningstar goes back to the scene of the previous night's attack and casts more *thought captures*. She gets nothing useful; the thoughts she gets from the assassins are all repeated mantras: *I will strike swiftly and silently. I will strike swiftly and silently.* There's nothing that would lead back to their employer.

The Company scheme, and settle on two more avenues of investigation. Flicker and Dranko will seek a meeting with the Faceless, the Thieves' Guild of Djaw. Meanwhile Ernie will fly around above the city on his flying carpet, using *locate object* on one of the party's missing items.

Thinking that he ought to get someone's permission before flying around, Ernie seeks out a guard captain. Not wanting to discuss the party's personal business, he tells the guard that he's thinking of buying property, and wants to do some aerial surveillance before making any decisions. The guard stares at him. It's rumored that the Falcons (as the Djawish city guard is known) have the ability to see into men's souls. This may or may not be true, but either way, Ernie is a terrible liar.

"Ernest," says the guard patiently. "I don't sense that you're a bad sort, but you're not leveling with me, are you? Why is it, really, that you wish to fly over the city on a magical carpet, criss-crossing back and forth?"

Ernie blushes. "Well, for one thing, I really like riding on the flying carpet!"

"Yes, I'm sure it is an exhilarating experience," says the guard. "But that's hardly all of your motivation now, is it?"

"Er, have you heard about what happened at the Golden Goblet last night?" asks Ernie.

"No."

"A party of powerful adventurers – of which I am one – was attacked by assassins of Vinceris."

"Go on," says the Falcon.

"I'd like to locate them, and they have some items that we could locate with a simple spell."

"Ah," says the guard, smiling. "So you're going to fly above the city with this spell cast, hoping to find your stolen possessions. Very well. I suggest you postpone your reconnaissance for another hour, so I can make arrangements that you not be shot down as a spy. How long do you expect to be airborne?"

"Um, about two hours, I think."

"And how high above the city will you be?"

“Two hundred feet.”

“Please inform me when you are about to start, and again when you have finished. You can meet me here in an hour.”

Ernie breaths a sigh of relief. “If we do locate them,” he asks, “would you be interested in...”

“Yes,” interrupts the guard. “Yes we would.”

But for all of that, Ernie spends his two hours scanning for their missing loot and finds nothing. Either the assassins have moved the stolen goods out of the city, or are storing them somewhere that’s shielded from the spell.

Aravis tries a different tack. He collects some dried blood from one of the assassins and uses it to *scry*. That doesn’t work, either – his scrying sensor doesn’t even appear, which indicates that something is blocking the spell, possibly a *private sanctum*.

Flicker and Dranko do have success in setting up a meeting with the Faceless. The rendezvous is set for midnight at the garden of living topiary, which is well-lit and well-populated.



That afternoon finds the Company lounging at the Golden Goblet, reviewing the day’s failures. When Aravis grumbles about his personal disappointment, Ernie suggests that he try scrying for their old adventuring companion Tor Bladebearer. And this time he gets his sensor, and to everyone’s surprise finds himself looking at Tor.

(Tor, you may recall, left the party to infiltrate the Delfirian military and serve as a double-agent. He figured he’d pretend to be turning coat, and find a way to feed the Spire information about Delfirian battle plans. For a while it seemed to work; the Delfirians accepted him as a long-lost son, and were pleased at his exceptional martial prowess. He’d occasionally lead forays into Charagan, where he’d drop off secret reports of Delfirian plans. But over time, the Spire’s military strategists came to realize that he’d been compromised. His reports, while technically accurate, were often suspiciously incomplete or misleading. Eventually Tor stopped communicating altogether, leading the Spire to believe that he had been killed, imprisoned, or actually converted to the Delfirian cause.)

And now Aravis is looking at him – a tall, youthful figure in a Delfirian military uniform, sitting at a table on which is spread a map of the terrain between Delfir and Bederen. Sitting across from him is a dark-haired woman Aravis doesn’t recognize, also in uniform. The two are discussing military strategy, and Tor addresses her as “Davarian.”

Aravis shares all of this with the rest of the party. They’re delighted that Tor’s alive, but dismayed that he’s seemingly become a Delfirian for real. While Aravis draws them a sketch of the woman he saw, the others try to remember why the name ‘Davarian’ is so familiar. “Wait, I remember,” says Dranko. “It’s Tor’s great-great-great-grandfather. Davarian Firemount.”

“It can’t be that Davarian,” Ernie protests. “Tor killed him inside of that evil Delfirian throne, or at least left him trapped in there. Also, Davarian was a guy.”

“Here’s the woman I saw,” says Aravis, holding up a well-drawn portrait. There are several gasps from various party members. It’s Thewana, Abernathy’s one-time apprentice!

“But she was killed,” says Flicker. “She and the Archmage Grawly. And they never found out who did it.”

“But remember what we did with that throne?” asks Dranko. “We gave it to Abernathy and Thewana, so they could drain the power out of it.”

“Davarian was still in there,” says Ernie. “He must have jumped bodies into Thewana while they were sucking out its magic.”

“And then he just bided his time, and eventually killed Grawly and faked Thewana’s death.”

“And now he has Tor,” concludes Ernie.

“F***!” yells Dranko. He throws a glass against the wall in anger.

Aravis just looks confused. “What are you talking about? What throne? Who’s Thewana?”

Dranko explains the whole thing: their long-ago mission to Seablade Point, the weird pseudo-dream battle between Tor and Davarian, and their retrieval of the ancient Delfirian throne for Abernathy. Thewana was Abernathy’s apprentice until the old wizard’s death, after which she was sent by the Spire to serve as Grawly’s apprentice. Ozilinsh, Grawly’s old apprentice, replaced Abernathy as the Archmage of Tal Hae. When Dranko is done explaining, Ernie splutters, “We’ve got to go find him and save him. Can we *scry* again and *teleport* to him?”

"What if he doesn't want to go?" asks Dranko. "What if he's evil? Also, can we deal with him some time when we're not getting stalked by assassins?"

The others agree. One thing at a time, and the assassins are currently priority #1.



The rest of the day passes without excitement. Ernie visits the two legitimate magic dealers in Djaw and asks them to keep an eye out for the Company's stuff. As the midnight meeting with the Faceless draws near, Dranko casts *omen of peril* and gets a response of SAFETY for the next hour.

The Moving Garden of Djaw is laid out like a simple and low hedge maze, through which roam a number of animated topiary. There's a large mammoth, several small dogs and cats, and even an alarmingly lifelike topiary grass reaver. Kibi frowns as he sees an iron-collared dwarven slave trimming the hedges.

A nondescript man on a bench waves to them as they pass. "It's kind of you to see us," says Dranko, approaching.

"I thought we were done with you," answers the man.

"Yeah," says Dranko. "Well, we have a slight problem, and we're hoping you might help."

"In fact," says Ernie, stepping up with an affected swagger, "my colleague here has a business proposition for you."

Dranko glares at him, and over the mind-link thinks: *Ernie?*!

What? thinks back Ernie. *I'm trying to sound tough! Isn't that what tough negotiators say?*

Not helping, thinks Dranko.

"Ooh, look!" says Ernie out loud. "A topiary gryphon!" He wanders off.

Dranko turns back to the man, whose expression is unflinchingly neutral. "We were attacked last night by a Vinceris strike team," he says.

"Not our business," says the man flatly. "Do you have anything else to talk about?"

Dranko is taken aback. "Yes. Well. I'm well aware that you're not responsible for it, but we were hoping you could put us in touch with someone from the church of Vinceris."

"I'm afraid we can't. Can't help you. Anything else?" The man stands, as if he's already wrapping up the meeting.

"Our main goal here is that no more assassins come after us," says Morningstar.

"We know they were professional assassins, but we don't technically know their religion," adds Dranko.

"Let me make something very clear," says the Faceless man. "We have an agreement. We will not meddle, will not inform, will not spread rumors, will not spread truths. We are entirely uninvolved in their business in every way, and that is how it's going to stay. I am going to offer you no assistance in any attempt to track them down. They would learn that we meddled, and that would be the end of us."

"On a separate note," says Dranko after a deep breath, "they stole a bunch of our stuff. If these items reach your fences, can you tell us, so we can buy them back?"

"If we see them, we will learn the prices and contact you. Now, this interview is at an end. Good night." He leaves, and as expected, none of them can remember what he looked like.

"Well," says Dranko. "Another waste of..."

"Excuse me." A scrawny young woman has approached, seemingly out of nowhere. She can't be more than eighteen or nineteen years old. "I couldn't help but overhear."

"What can we do for you?" asks Morningstar, her voice calm.

"Not all of us are so rigid in our thinking, and may see an angle to make a profit."

Dranko turns his back on her. Sure enough, he can't picture her face. He turns back. "This can be very profitable for you," he says, "and I appreciate your flexibility."

"What do you want, and how much will you pay me for it?" asks the girl.

"What we want is to find out who hired the professional assassins who tried to kill us."

The girl nods. "I'll have to be discreet, but you pay me enough, and I can get you a name."

"How do you want to handle it?" asks Dranko.

"Some amount up front for my trouble – this is a high risk operation – and the rest when I get you the name. How much were you thinking of paying? Remembering, of course, that I'm not only risking my own life, but potentially the entire Faceless organization."

"So you're going to share the reward with the rest of the Faceless?" asks Dranko.

"Of course not."

"Then we only have to worry about paying you then, and that's not really relevant."

"You misunderstand," says the girl. "If the Faceless find out about this... Let's just say my risk is doubled, so the reward should be substantial."

"We don't do this much," says Aravis. "Just tell us what it's worth to you."

"I was thinking five thousand miracs now, and another five thousand when I get you the name."

That sounds about right to Ernie and Aravis, but Dranko can't help but haggle. "I was thinking half of that," he says.

"I wasn't," says the girl. "I was thinking all of it."

"Are you willing to submit to a truth spell, to verify you intend to hold up your end of the bargain?" asks Morningstar.

"Nope. No chance," says the girl.

"So we should just give you the money and hope for the best?"

"Yep," the girl agrees. "That's pretty much it. Or I can just go my merry way."

"How about we give you a third of it now, and two-thirds of it afterwards?" suggests Dranko.

"Deal," says the girl.

As Dranko hands over the money, he tries to surreptitiously pluck a hair from her jacket, thinking Aravis can use it for scrying. Over the mind-link, Kibi offers dryly: *You've only been married for a few months, and you're already trying to get a piece of a nineteen-year-old.* But the attempt fails; despite Dranko's finely honed skills at sleight-of-hand, the girl spots the attempt and slaps his hand away. "There was a little bit of fuzz on you," explains Dranko.

"Yes. Of course."

"Do you have something we can call you?" asks Dranko.

"No. Where will you be in 48 hours?"

"The Golden Goblet."

"I'll send word, and tell you where to meet me."

"You are aware," says Morningstar, "of what happened the last time the Faceless crossed us?"

"Oh, yes. I'm not going to double-cross you."

"Nice of you to say so," grumbles Morningstar.

"If that's the case, then we appreciate you taking the risk for us," says Dranko.

"I'd better get started," says the girl. "Have to earn the rest of that money!" She turns, leaves, and seconds later they can't remember her face.

"She probably knows who it is already," says Dranko. "I bet she's just going to lie in a hot tub for a couple of days."

"And yet, it's still worth the money if she gets us a name," says Ernie.



Two days later, just after lunch, a note arrives at the Goblet with an address located in a seedy neighborhood on the far side of the city. Though expecting some kind of double-cross, the Company make haste on foot and arrive to find an old man with a bushy beard sitting against a crumbling stone wall.

"I have a letter for you," slurs the man, getting to his feet and shaking the dust from his grubby clothes. "But you're supposed to hand over somethin' first, somethin' valuable. Don't open the letter 'til I'm gone, too."

Dranko gives him a small bag with 6,600 miracs' worth of gems and coins. The old man hands them a stained and folded piece of paper before ducking down an alleyway and into an unmarked doorway.

Dranko unfolds the note as the others crowd around. It contains only two words: **LORD BLUEFACE**.

For a moment no one speaks. Then Ernie blurts out, "Who the heck is Lord Blueface?"

"People we've never even met want to kill us now?" asks Aravis, throwing up his hands.

"And couldn't they have told us anything more?" complains Dranko. "Like where he lives, or... what..."

He stops talking. A thought comes into his head. "Wait a minute," he says. "Remember that second potion we told Lord Dafron he had to drink, in order to cure him of the Powder addiction? What color was that going to turn him?"

Aravis's eyes grow wide. "Blue," he says quietly.

"Oh, yeah," says Dranko. "That was *absolutely* worth five thousand gold pieces."

Jackylhunter: Good stuff. Gotta love it when those loose ends turn into snakes that bite the party on its collective arses...

Piratecat: The fight in the inn was spectacular, a ludicrous avalanche of desperate tactics. Ernie and Flicker were in the -20s or -30s for hit points, but the daggers that the assassins used kept the victim alive and unconscious at that point.

Interesting fact: I seem to remember that Dranko got sick at Saum Derrie's because I remembered, and failed, the poison's secondary effect a minute later. It brought his Constitution (or maybe Strength? I forget) down to single digits or zero, enough that I think I was going to die as soon as a buffing spell wore off. They *really* got our attention.

Tallarn: Can someone remind me about Lord Dafron? I'm afraid I don't remember him.

Sagiro: Lord Dafron is a corrupt member of the House of Law in Mirj. He was running an extortion racket (long since thwarted by the Company) wherein his alchemist partner was making a dangerous and addictive substance ("Powder") that he would trick wealthy people into consuming.

Through a prodigious feat of sleight-of-hand, Dranko slipped Powder into Dafron's own drink, forcing Dafron to admit the scheme. The party confronted the alchemist (actually a rakshasa, who had slain the original alchemist but who was continuing to work with Dafron for reasons of his own) and learned the formula for the antidote. When the party sent a bottle of the antidote to Dafron, they included a second bottle with instructions to drink that as well, to make the cure permanent. In fact, the second bottle would have no effect save to turn the imbiber's skin blue for a few days.

To top this all off, the party started rumors in Mirj that Dafron had been "cursed by the gods for his double-dealing," and also that Dafron may have been engaging in illicit activities with certain barnyard creatures.

No wonder, then, that Lord Dafron is in a revengin' mood...

StevenAC: A slight continuity glitch here – the original notes (see session #86 in Part One of the collected Story Hour) stated that the potion would turn Dafron purple, not blue. But "Lord Purpleface" would have just sounded silly, of course...

Sagiro: Well, yes, but it was a blueish-purple...

Tallarn: Other than that – another great update! Loved the detail of the escape plan/revenge plan, and I'm really looking forward to seeing how the party do without their main items!

Did anyone consider trying to use some portable wealth to buy some new ones? Seems odd that they managed to put together several thousand gp for bribes when the rest of their stuff went missing.

Sagiro: Just to clarify: the party still have the vast majority of their stuff, as they made a point of scooping up everything they could before teleporting out. Stuff that's missing is:

- Almost all of Flicker's stuff. He's borrowed some spare weapons from other party members.
- Most of Morningstar's magic items, though she still has her armor, weapons and shield.
- A handful of Aravis's miscellaneous magic items, though he still has his spellbooks and components.

Everyone else is still fully equipped. It helps that Morningstar casts a custom spell every night that allows folks to sleep comfortably in their armor. Most of the party do this as a matter of course, out of general adventurer paranoia.

jensun: Doesn't Aravis have 7th-level spells? I was always under the impression that by this point standard operating procedure for your average group of (justifiably) paranoid high-level adventurers was to always sleep in a *Mordenkainen's magnificent mansion*.

Sagiro: Aravis has always tended to reserve his 7th-level slots for offense and/or greater teleport. And while he will often use *Leomund's secure shelter* or even *rope trick* while on the road, remember that on the night of the attack, the Company were staying in what might well be the most expensive and luxurious inn in the known world. The party were not about to forego the comforts of the Golden Goblet, paranoid or not!

Aravis: Aside from what Sagiro has already posted on this, Aravis does not have the MMM spell.

Piratecat: And we're bitter about it. He's such a slacker, I swear. In fact, when we played last night and slept overnight in a *rope trick*, Flicker was complaining about this very thing.

Aravis: Okay, okay! I feel really bad now. I promise, I will learn MMM and use *all* of my 7th, 8th, and 9th level slots for it... you know, just to make up for being such a slacker and a selfish lout...

Joshua Randall: Sagiro: "The massive army of extraplanar ickiness swarms towards you, and..."
Aravis: "I cast *magnificent mansion*. We all pile in."
Sagiro: "But... the bad guys..."
Aravis: "Screw them. We're comfy in here."
Sagiro: "Uh... fine. Eventually you'll have to come out."
Aravis: "I've got eight copies of it prepared. I'll just keep recasting them every couple hours, one inside the other, then resting and refreshing spell slots. We're safe in our infinite recursion of *mansions* and there's nothing you can do about it."
Sagiro: "Noooooooo! All my years of work, wasted!"

In all seriousness, I don't see anything in the spell description that says you can't do this. Other than the fact that it's suuuuper cheesy.

Aravis: Now that I have stopped laughing, that sure would get that look from Sagiro that we sure do enjoy.

It does beg the question about what happens to an extradimensional space when the extradimensional space that it was cast within goes away... I am sure the answer can be found in Onions...

Davek: I think as DM I would allow it, but when the party finally does exit the last MMM they would not be where they started (some random extradimensional place).

Lord Pendragon: If memory serves, doesn't placing one extradimensional space inside another cause both to be destroyed, and form a vortex into the Astral Plane?

StevenAC: Sagiro, I remain in awe of your ability to bring back old plot threads and integrate them into the current story without any hint of railroading. In this installment alone, we have three old threads coming back into focus in an entirely natural and believable way. Firstly, there's Lord Dafron being behind the current assassination attempts on the party. Then, that mysterious warning from the Crosser's Maze to Aravis about Parthol's *simulacrum* (session #121 of Part One) is now revealed as coming from the part of Aravis left behind in the Maze when he gave it up. (Interestingly, something along these lines was speculated by various people at the time.)

Sagiro: This supposition, while logical and cool, is not *necessarily* correct. I would have had to know, way back then, that Aravis would leave a piece of himself in the Maze. While I've been able to anticipate some of the PCs' actions, that would have been a feat of prognostication well beyond my means! (In fact, Aravis's decision took me completely by surprise.)

What's going on with that vision/dream is, the piece of Aravis's mind in the Maze is having a conversation across the table with a mysterious benefactor, *who looks like Aravis because that's the only way s/he is able to communicate with him*. So, there are actually three "Aravises" involved:

- The mind-fragment Aravis who's now loose in the Maze.
- The benefactor, also in the Maze, who uses Aravis's voice and likeness to communicate. This might actually be some aspect of Aravis, as time is somewhat meaningless in the Maze, or it might be someone else in the Maze who wants to help out.
- The actual Aravis, not in the Maze, who (apparently) is receiving reports in vision/dream format from his wandering fragment.

StevenAC: Finally, and most satisfying of all, the solution to the mystery of Grawly and Thewana is revealed, and it explains what's happened to Tor as well – just brilliant!

Sagiro: Yeah, I'd been sitting on the Grawly/Thewana thing for a while, but they discovered it completely out of the blue. So, now they've added "rescue Tor from the Delfirians" to their huge to-do list.

StevenAC: It set me thinking back to that confrontation with Solomea in the Crosser's Maze (session #109), where the party were given a list of eight questions, from which they could pick one to be answered:

1. Why did Califax warn you not to trust Praska?
2. Why are people trying to kill Grey Wolf?
3. Who killed Grawly and Thewana?
4. Why are rats and ravens attacking Aravis, and why do cats think he's "like a cat"?
5. Where is the body of Sagiro Emberleaf?
6. What is the purpose behind the schemes of the Sharshun?
7. What is the full meaning of Step's poem?
8. Who is 'P'?

In the event, the party chose to ask for the answer to question #8, which alerted them to the threat from Parthol Runecarver. But in each of the other cases (except for #1, which I don't think has been answered at all, and #4, where we have some clues, but not yet a full answer), it's possible to see how, had the party chosen that question at this pivotal moment, they would have received information that would have sent the story off in a different, but equally satisfying direction. A really masterful piece of plotting.

Sagiro: Right now, in real time, the game is about 20-25 runs ahead of the Story Hour. And as of today, the party pretty much know everything about all the questions except for #7. (Though, technically, no one knows where Sagiro's body is now, or even if it exists at all!)

And, on reflection, there are nuances of the Sharshun's plots that the party don't understand, though it's safe to say that "changing time so the Emperor was never defeated" was far and away their main goal at the time the eight questions were presented. Of all the questions, that one (#6) would certainly have had the most drastic effect on the game's ultimate direction.

Joshua Randall: Er, wait. I thought that in light of (get it? *In light of?*) what happened towards the end of the party's Het Branoi adventures, we did know what Step's poem meant. [See page 134 of Part One for One Certain Step's first meeting with the party, and the poem itself.]

Everything in the poem seems to make sense, in the way of things once you know all the answers. (Which of course the players didn't at the time.) So what, if anything, remains to be explained?

Everett: No idea. But they wouldn't be visiting Thunder's stall if there were nothing left to discover about Step's storyline, now would they?

And WHY, oh why, do cats think Aravis is "like a cat"? Been waiting years for it.

Sagiro: I've said too much already...



What Happened to Lord Dafron

In their rooms back at the Golden Goblet (which they now enjoy gratis) there is much to say about Lord Dafron, most of it heated invective. Flicker is all for hunting him down and killing him, and this is not an unpopular sentiment. Ernie notes that the assassins were *trying* to keep them alive, probably to humiliate them later, so perhaps they should respond in kind.

"I don't care if he's humiliated or not," says Morningstar. "As long as he stops interfering with us."

Dranko looks thoughtful. "I wonder if the blue skin we gave him ended up permanent?"

Aravis gives him a sheepish smile. "I wasn't all that experienced an alchemist way back then," he admits.

"Let's just kill him," Flicker repeats. He's still shaken by his close shave, and the image of a dagger through his heart.

"He's a Lord," Dranko reminds him. "If we kill *him*, their government will want to kill *us*."

"What if the other Lords hate Dafron as much as we do?" asks Kibi. "He was extremely unpleasant."

"It won't matter," sighs Dranko. "If you kill one Lord, the other Lords get nervous, thinking you might do the same to them someday."

"What if he doesn't 'get killed'?" Aravis muses. "What if he just 'disappears'? I could send him to another plane."

The discussion takes a while to wind down, as they weigh all sorts of options, ranging from a stern talking to, to a *mark of justice*, to a painful execution. They reach no firm conclusion, though whatever they decide, the first order of business is to learn more about him and his current whereabouts.

Since the day is still relatively young, they decide to send Dranko and Aravis on a scouting mission to Mirj. Posing as a pair of well-to-do servants, and loaded down with defensive spells and protective magic items, the two of them *teleport* to the city of Mirj, 150 miles northwest of Djaw. The others remain telepathically linked.

Using his natural talents of fast talking and information gathering, Dranko soon gains an audience with a customs official who helps keep track of the city's imports and exports. The official, an unctuous man named **Stenin**, looks up from his desk.

"How may I help you?"

Dranko clears his throat. "I have been tasked by my master to find out about a gentleman he wants to do business with. There are some questions about his, um, reputation, if you know what I mean."

"Of course, of course," says Stenin, sensing an easy profit. "A merchant?"

"It's a Lord," says Dranko.

"Oh!" says Stenin, sitting up straight. "A member of the House of Law! I can help you, though sensitive information will be expensive, you know."

"I expect as much," says Dranko with a smile. "His name is Lord Dafron."

Stenin scratches his chin. "In the House of Law, you say?" he asks.

"Is he not known to you?" asks Dranko.

"Understand, I have only been in this position for the last six months, and the name is not familiar. Excuse me for a moment..." Stenin waves over an older gentleman, busy at another desk on the opposite wall.

"Stenin, what is it now?"

"**Bynum**, these people wish to do business with a Lord Dafron."

Bynum strokes his moustache, a drooping gray patch of hair that hides his mouth. "Oh, you do, do you?" he says, quirking a smile at Dranko and Aravis.

"You are clearly amused, and I don't understand why," says Dranko, all innocence. "What am I missing?"

"Tell me," says Bynum. "How did your master learn of Lord Dafron, and come to want to do business with him?"

"I am not privy to that," says Dranko. "But if there are questionable aspects...?"

Piratecat: A brief aside, although the Story Hour won't get there for two years. I was reminded this week why I'm so unbelievably pleased to have Sagiro as a DM. We were trying something important, and we thought we'd taken every possible precaution to stop the bad guys from thwarting us. They still showed up half-way through our plan. It was frustrating, and we chatted with Sagiro about it after the game.

So that night, in classic Story Hour form (and at the top of his writing game), he wrote a Story Hour-esque account of exactly what the bad guys did to figure out our plans and prep accordingly. Our characters don't know all this, of course. But the players do. And now we have a little insight into the minds of the bad guys (making us hate them *that much more!*), we no longer feel like the ambush is unwarranted, and we got a great cut-scene out of it.

Moral of story: I'm totally going to steal this technique, and I can't wait for next game.

Bynum forces a straight face. "Lord Dafron... is no longer a member of the House of Law."

"Oh, dear!" exclaims Dranko. "How is that so?"

"I believe he was voted out by the other members of the House," says Bynum.

"Has he lost all of his money?" asks Dranko, aghast.

"I don't know what has happened to him. I suspect he is no longer allowed in the Upper City. There were rumors... interesting rumors..." Bynum trails off with a sly grin, shared with Stenin.

Dranko understands. "Would forty miracs continue this conversation?"

Dranko, Aravis and Bynum slip into a storeroom, used to temporarily house merchandise confiscated from smugglers.

"You understand, all of this is off the official government record," says Bynum.

"Of course!" says Dranko, who would never think otherwise.

"Though there's not much more to tell. I never saw the man, but the rumor I heard most often was that he... engaged in inappropriate activities with... um... livestock. And contracted a terrible condition. Reputation is everything in the House of Law, and the other Lords grew dissatisfied with the taint on their own reputation by association with the man. And since he also apparently suffered some hideous physical affliction as a result, his business prospects began to dry up as the stories spread... One even that he had offended the Gods, and his affliction was a curse, which is why his skin turned colors. That was about a year ago, and I don't know what became of him after that. But you should tell your employer that he should find a new business partner... perhaps even Lord Traber, who has taken Lord Dafron's seat in the House."

"So his mansion and belongings..." prompts Dranko.

"I don't know what happened to his personal effects," says Bynum. "But his mansion in the Upper City was most likely auctioned to someone else, the proceeds going to the House of Law."

Dranko makes a show of tearing up his forged agreements. "My payment for this meeting was very well spent. You have doubtless saved our master tens of thousands of miracs. Here..." Dranko hands Bynum another ten miracs. And with that, Dranko and Aravis depart the customs house.

Ernie pipes up over the mind-link. *Well, that explains his anger. We really ruined his life!*



Dranko spends the rest of the day combing the Lower City of Mirj for more information about Lord Dafron. It's a cold trail since the topic is a year old, but he gathers a handful of rumors, none of them proven:

- A card-shark opines that Dafron is still hiding in the Lower City, but no one has seen him since his expulsion. At night he sneaks out of doors, wearing a hood to hide his still-blue face. If he were recognized, he'd get torn apart by a mob after all of the public executions he authorized as a Lord.
- A cook's assistant in a seedy tavern claims that Lord Dafron has long since fled the city, and he's planning revenge, probably in Djaw.
- A servant for an alchemists' guild says Dafron has expensive diviners on personal retainer. No one knows why, but it proves he has kept at least some of his personal wealth.
- A butler claims that Dafron made him a very generous offer to be his personal servant, but he turned it down, not wanting to offend the gods.
- A local sell-sword heard that Dafron hired **One Strong Shield**, a well-known and expensive bodyguard from Djaw.



As evening falls, Aravis and Dranko *teleport* back to the Golden Goblet. The party discuss their new pile of intelligence. "He must have retained at least *some* wealth," figures Aravis, "since he was able to hire highly competent assassins."

Kibi strokes his beard. "I had been thinking the best revenge might be to get him thrown out of the House of Law," he says. "But I guess we've already done that."

"I almost feel badly," says Ernie.

"He was a horrible, horrible man!" exclaims Dranko. "Don't you remember how horrible he was?"

"And don't you remember how he tried to have us killed?" adds Flicker.

"He's living only for revenge," says Dranko. "He's hiring diviners to find us, and a bodyguard in case we find him first."

"That's what's so sad," says Ernie.

"If we deprive him of his ability to harm us," says Aravis, "that being his money, I don't see any reason to kill him, too."

"I do," says Morningstar flatly. "All he's ever done is harm other people. Even if it's not us, he'll eventually find someone else to prey on. It's what he's done his whole life."

"If we kill him now, he goes to Hell," says Dranko. "If we let him live, he could atone and go to heaven someday."

"Just what I'm trying to say," says Ernie.

"And in the meantime, how many people will he harm who can't defend themselves like we can?" asks Morningstar angrily.

"How many chances does he get? How many more lives do we let him ruin?" Round and round they go, reaching no consensus.

Aravis tries to *scry* him, but gets nothing; Dafron is almost certainly in the confines of a *private sanctum*. Done for the day, the Company relax for the remainder of the evening, but for security's sake they don't actually sleep in the Golden Goblet. Instead they *teleport* out into the wilderness between Djaw and Mirj, open up the Lucent Tower, hide it with *mirage arcana*, and surround the whole thing with a *private sanctum* of their own. So protected, most of the Company go to sleep.

Morningstar first goes into a trance and visits her temple back in Tal Hae – easy to do now that Posada's Boundary is dissolved. She warns them that Drosch, Kivian God of Death, was scared enough of *something* to flee Abernia. It seems like something they should know. Then, almost on a whim, she tries to find Lord Dafron's dreams. Against the odds she discovers them, recognizing his unpleasant mental signature. He is dreaming, and the dream is disturbing: over and over again, someone is plunging a dagger into Dranko's chest. After many stabs, with Dranko's body lying in a bloody stew, Dafron leans over him with a fancy teacup in hand. "Would you like more cocoa?" he asks. Morningstar senses he's happy.

Thinking that she should tell someone about this, and figuring she should keep her dream-visitation skills sharp, she finds Ernie's dreams as well – pleasant, chaste dreams of Yoba. She tries to intrude, to tell Ernie that Dafron still dreams of revenge, but makes a muddle out of things. Finding Dafron was more of a strain than she realized, and she only manages to change Ernie's dream into a nightmare in which he's *stabbing* Yoba. He wakes with a shriek, and this rouses everyone else from sleep.

Morningstar tells the others about Dafron's dream, and what happened with Ernie. "He dreams of murdering Dranko, and he's extremely happy about it."

"He's stabbing Dranko?" says Aravis. "Why wouldn't he be happy?"

Dranko, sleepy, misses the context. "Wait a minute!"

Ernie is still horrified by his modified dream. "Someone check me! Am I evil?"

Aravis glances at him and gestures idly. "No, you're not."

"Hey!" Ernie accuses. "All you did was wave your hand."

"Ernie, you're not evil," Morningstar assures him.

"Check yourself, if you're worried," says Dranko.

"Does that work?" asks Ernie, both alarmed and groggy. They all go back to sleep.



Aravis awakes with a clear memory of an extremely vivid dream – another communiqué from the Crosser's Maze.

You are back in the tavern again, sitting across from yourself. You have the distinct feeling that, in the Maze, much subjective time has passed since the last time you were here. Also your double's face seems to shimmer and shift slightly, as if someone – you? – is struggling to see what he really looks like. You get the distinct impression that it's not you. It's someone you've never met, but you did meet them, once, in a strange place that's much like where you are now. It's very confusing.

"...found something for you," says your double. "It's disturbing. I won't go back there again – too dangerous. And I don't know what it means. Here, I'll share it with you." Your shifting double reaches forward and grasps your hand, and you are wrenched into another vision – a vision within a vision.

In the inner vision, there is a place of black madness, and something is trapped there. There is an exit from that place, but it is closing rapidly, a hole that is sealing itself, and the being trapped there won't escape in time. In its anger it reaches a hand through the hole, and the hole closes, and the hand is severed, and so detached it flies through a great void, falling, falling through the ages...

You snap back to the tavern, sweating, shaking. Your double has been speaking again, and you only catch the last few words. There is a wistful expression on his face. "...miss the ocean."

Atanatotatos: Now this is creepy...!

Tamlyn: I'm blanking on his name, but what about their sailor friend who sacrificed himself to help make peace between the two sea-gods? He certainly would be willing to help Aravis.

energy_One: If they could somehow reach him in some meaningful way...

Aravis: You are thinking of Makel. I sincerely doubt that is who is speaking, but we shall see...

Aravis has a hard time explaining it to the others. He figures that the part of him that remained in the Maze is talking to someone, and that someone is providing him information.

Dranko guesses that the dream is about whatever horrible enemy the Black Circle was trying to contact in Het Branoi.

"And that hand," says Ernie. "Maybe the hand is the source of the black goo. It landed, and got all... spattery."

Aravis disagrees, thinking that the hand is a metaphor – but for what, he doesn't know.



Ernie casts *find the path* to "Lord Dafron's sleeping chamber." Unsurprisingly, the direction indicated is directly toward Mirj, and they *teleport* themselves back to the nasty little city, disguised as a merchant lord and his retinue via a *veil* from Kibi.

The *find the path* is pointing up toward the Upper City. The party make their way through the narrow, dirty streets of the Lower City, enduring the smell of sewage and filthy beggars lurking in the doorways of dilapidated buildings. Ernie's spell takes them into a particularly squalid neighborhood of houses crushed up against the thick stone wall that separates the Upper and Lower Cities. It indicates the doorway of a grimy hovel.

Morningstar casts *detect thoughts* and gets nothing inside, so in they go, not being particularly quiet or stealthy. Ernie's spell leads them into a tiny kitchen, and the foot of a free-standing stove. He moves some dirt aside with his foot and reveals a rope handle, which when pulled lifts a trapdoor in the floor. There's a ladder leading down into the darkness.

Morningstar detects a thought, some fifteen feet below them. A man is thinking: *Oooh, noise! Better go!* The thought cuts out, and the party hear hastily retreating footsteps followed by the sound of a slamming door. "I suggest we hurry," says Aravis.

The party slide down the ladder as fast as they can, hoping to catch the person and stop them from raising an alarm. It's dark at the bottom, so Aravis pulls out a magical torch. They're in a small room not more than ten feet on a side, with three doors leading out of it. *Find the path* and conspicuously fresh footprints both indicate the same door, so through they go.

Morningstar picks up no sign of the mind she detected, which is not surprising given that her spell wouldn't go around corners. They go down a short hallway and reach a second door, which the spell indicates is trapped, but with a small catch beneath the knob. And this door opens into a very strange room.

It's nice. Someone has taken an old smuggler's storeroom and lined the floor with expensive stone tiles. There's a freestanding claw-footed bathtub, and exquisite artwork and tapestries on the walls. Thick carpets cover up most of the dirt floor. Another door out, and a short hallway beyond, adorned with fine paintings and more tapestries. Someone has taken great pains to convert an old smuggler's hideout into an opulent dwelling, with limited success.

Another door, locked. *Find the path* indicates that a key is needed to open it. Flicker moves forward to ply his trade, but Aravis preempts him with a casual *knock* spell.

"You know," says Flicker, "I've worked for years honing my craft, to the point where I can pick almost any lock you can imagine. And he does it with a little spell."

"To be fair, he also trained for years," says Grey Wolf.

"Well, no, not really," admits Aravis. "Not for the *knock* spell specifically."

"Think of it this way, Flick," says Ernie. "You can do it all day long. Aravis runs out of spells."

A thin, reedy voice comes from the far side of the door. "Hm. Come in?"

Flicker pushes the door open. Beyond is a posh living room, over twenty feet on a side. It has a fireplace, rich carpets, a writing desk with a beautiful antique chair, and a table with the leavings of a recently eaten meal. The walls are hung with tapestries depicting bucolic outdoor scenes, and more tapestries hang on the ceiling, these combining to show a blue sky with puffy white clouds and a cheerful sun. In a way, it's heartbreaking. On the far side of the room, a man in a fine silk robe sits hunched in a padded chair. His skin is a mottled shade of blueish purple, and conspicuously lumpy.

Kibi drops the *veil*, and Lord Dafron's eyes grow a bit wider. "Ah, yes," says the former luminary of the House of Law, his voice resigned. "Well, come in. Let's get this over with."

"Didn't your diviners tell you we were coming?" asks Aravis.

"No," says Dafron sadly.

"You don't pay them enough," says Dranko.

"But I guessed you would find me, sooner or later."

"You also don't pay your assassins enough," adds Ernie.

"Apparently not."

Aravis sees that there is a door right next to Dafron's chair, a door to which Dafron cannot help but glance every few seconds. There is no bodyguard in sight; the room is empty save for the pitiful blue man. Aravis strides quickly into the room and casts *arcane lock* on the door. "Don't worry about what's in there," he assures Lord Dafron. "It won't bother us."

"I guess it won't," says Dafron, his shoulders slumping further.

Dranko looks around the room through his magical eye patch, expecting to see someone invisible, but there's no one. But Morningstar recasts *detect thoughts*, just to be sure. As she does so, Dafron straightens up and declares: "I guess you have me *dead to rights!*" And on that signal, the waiting assassins drop down from their hidden niches above the tapestries on the ceiling, and attack.

wedgeski: Terrific, and even a brief commentary on one of the more publicised complaints about 3E wizards. Someday I'd love to get an inside look at the mechanics of a campaign like this: what sort of prep. you do, and for how long, how much of the developing plot is planned, and how much improvised at the table, and so on. With such a nicely written Story Hour, it's easy to forget how difficult this stuff is to do well.

Atanatotatos: Yeah... I wonder what the party would look like in 4E...



No Remorse

The tapestries themselves are part of the trap – they have weights sewn into their edges and come down like nets. Most of the Company avoid them, but Kibi and Ernie become covered and entangled.

Two of the assassins drop down on either side of Morningstar and strike her with vicious sneak attacks. The damage is gruesome, but there is a silver lining: thanks to Ernie's *heroes' feast*, she (like all the party) is now immune to the virulent poison that drips from the enemy blades. A third assassin – a spellcaster – strikes Aravis with a *dimensional anchor*, and the wizard glows green. "No escape this time," he hisses through his black mask.

Lord Dafron himself rises smoothly from his chair, and makes a motion like he's drawing a sword. He doesn't seem to *have* a sword – it looks like he's now brandishing a piece of paper – but he swings at Aravis and strikes him with an invisible blade.

I don't think that's Dafron, Aravis thinks to the others over the mind-link.

Probably the bodyguard with an illusion, thinks Grey Wolf.

Yet another assailant zaps Morningstar with a wand, and she too becomes *dimensionally anchored*. It looks like the previous enemy's assessment is correct, and the party will not be teleporting away this time.

To end the surprise round, a cleric among the assassins casts *greater command*, but the Company prove highly resistant. Only the weak-willed Flicker succumbs to the order to **HALT**. (It turns out the caster himself also has to make a Will save, as the spell is turned around by Dranko's *necklace of mind-spell inversion*, but he resists.)

Dranko, recovering first from the sudden attack, slides into a flanking position and lashes with his whip. Alas, the more experienced assassin is not perturbed in the slightest by his tactical position, and Dranko is unable to strike with extra precision.

One of the assassins next to Morningstar smiles behind his mask, and slips his short sword through a joint in her armor. Already heavily wounded, Morningstar drops unconscious to the tiled floor. Another assassin attacks Grey Wolf, and though he only manages a single hit, it's excruciatingly painful. Yes, these are clearly the same trained professionals that nearly killed them just days earlier.

Grey Wolf thinks he has the answer. He uses his Spellsword ability to load *greater fireburst* into Bostock, and Bostock's ability to Maximize it. He strikes true with the blade, and a roaring pillar of fire erupts from the point of impact, enveloping the assassin. But when the fire clears, his enemy is only mildly singed, having evaded the entire effect. Damn!

More painful indignities are visited upon Aravis, as he's struck blind by a *power word* from one of his foes, and then slashed by "Dafron," with a sword blow that also leaves him fatigued.

Ernie looses both a *spiritual weapon* and *Beryn Sur* out from beneath his tapestry, while Kibi casts *xorn movement* and escapes into the ground beneath the floor. Seconds later he pops up on the other side of the room and casts an *earthbolt* into a concentrated knot of enemies.

The other assassin standing over the unconscious Morningstar takes a casual swipe across her throat before moving over to Aravis, a sure killing blow to the Ellish priestess. But Dranko staves off her death with *close wounds*, bringing her back from the brink into the realm of the merely unconscious.

Kibi is targeted with another wand-fired *dimensional anchor*, but it's negated by the dwarf's *mantle of spell resistance*. Grey Wolf is not so protected, and joins the ranks of the *anchored*. It's one of those moments in battle where things look extremely grim. Surrounded by trained killers, with their main cleric down, Flicker *commanded* into inaction, Grey Wolf badly injured, and Aravis blind and near death himself. And with multiple party members locked down, there will be no hurried escape under fog cover, as is the party's preferred means of getting out of this sort of scrape.

Pewter, thinks Aravis through his pain. *I need you to be my eyes.*

You got it, boss, answers his familiar. *And I know where you're going. Your best bet is to step straight back and turn right about thirty degrees. You'll get just about all of them. And Grey Wolf, but that can't be helped.*

Grey Wolf, thinks Aravis. Prismatic spray coming. Duck!

Aravis follows Pewter's instructions and casts his spell, catching seven of the assailants in the blast. He knows it's a gamble – three of the possible beams are easily evaded by assassins of this caliber. But luck is on his side today:

- One assassin is driven insane.
- One assassin vanishes, sent to the Astral Plane.
- One assassin starts foaming at the mouth, turns a sickly mustard color beneath his mask, and drops dead.
- One assassin becomes statuary.
- Of the remaining two assassins, one is mightily sickened by poison though manages not to die. Only the leader – a no-nonsense woman named **One Swift Death** – is entirely unaffected by the spell.

The man posing as Lord Dafron (who, as the party surmise, is really the hired bodyguard One Strong Shield) considers himself lucky to merely be burned by acid. And Grey Wolf comes out just fine, resisting the spell's calcifying energies. Following his fantastically efficacious blast, Aravis uses his *tongue stud of potion quickening* to gulp down a healing draught.

So, in three short seconds, the battle has gone from near-certain disaster to practically the mopping-up phase. Dranko heals Morningstar back to consciousness, Flicker snaps out of the *greater command*, and Grey Wolf wraps up a number of bad guys in *dancing chains*. The most effective attack the enemies manage to launch for the rest of the battle is a *feeblemind* – but that is cast by the insane guy, directly at the bodyguard! One Strong Shield starts to drool.

Empowered *cone of cold* from Kibi. Pewter-guided *lightning bolt* from Aravis. Massive sneak attack from Flicker. One of the wand-wielding assassins, soon finding himself the last villain standing, throws his hands in the air and drops his wand. Grey Wolf looms over him. "You should start thinking of a way to stop me from taking your spell components."

The assassin looks confused. "I do not have any spell components on me, good sir."

Grey Wolf, whose spell *assassin's senses* requires assassin fingers as components, begs to differ. He starts to count them: "One, two, three..."

The assassin goes pale. "What do I have to do?" he asks with some desperation.

"Let's start with our stuff," says Grey Wolf, "the stuff that you gentlemen acquired from us during our last encounter."

"I know nothing about that!" the assassin protests.

"Then start knowing!" says Ernie.

"I cannot!" the prisoner implores. "I would, if I knew anything!"

Dranko clears his throat. "It is fair to say that we are displeased," he says darkly.



They do their heavy questioning under a battery of spells: *zone of truth*, *detect thoughts* and *discern lies*. Dranko gets right to the point. "Where's Dafron? The man who hired you?"

"I don't know anything about the man who hired us," says the assassin (whose name is **Two Graceful Leaps**). "I was taking my orders from her." He points to the body of One Swift Death.

"Where was she getting her orders from?" demands Dranko.

"Our employer," Leaps says, honestly.

"Then tell me about him!"

Leaps sighs. "I already told you. And while I know you will kill me, the truth is I cannot, because I don't know anything about him."

The various truth spells indicate that this is so, so Dranko tries another tack. He motions to One Strong Shield. "Tell me about this man who's dribbling."

Two Leaps glances at the *feeble-minded* man-at-arms. "Our leader, Swift Death, told us that our employer would also have his own man working alongside us. That is him. I don't know any more about him."

"How is that you knew we would be here *now*?" asks Dranko. "How long have you been waiting for us?"

"We have been waiting for some time – since the previous attack on you failed. I was not present at the previous encounter; in fact, this was my first assignment. Swift Death said: 'Take this wand. Point it at our targets, and zap.' I am sorry I cannot tell you more. Though I have a question for you: if I continue to answer all of your questions, and truthfully, are you still going to kill me?"

"We don't know," says Morningstar wearily.

"You see," says Dranko, "we don't kill people as a business. We kill people because they annoy us."

Two Leaps looks solemn. "I am familiar with men of your profession," he says. "You roam around the countryside, looking for deeds to do, often involving the killing of people. Sometimes you are paid for this, yes?"

Gods, it's going to be one of *these* discussions. While some in the party take part in the interrogation, the others set themselves to the looting. Grey Wolf wasn't kidding about the fingers, but figures dead ones will do.

That is unseemly, Bostock declares. Grey Wolf sighs and pulls out a dagger.

I was not referring to my own personal involvement, the sword clarifies. *I find the harvesting of body parts distasteful.*
Perhaps you should not be casting a spell that requires human digits.

It makes me a better attacker... Grey Wolf begins to protest.

I'm not sure it's worth it. And while I'm on the subject, your barbed chains are also disturbing. Are you aware that they are possessed of a somewhat evil necromantic nature? You have great fighting prowess, and formidable arcane abilities, but perhaps you should choose your spells from among the less unsavory. Grey Wolf rubs his temples.

Flicker, one of the most efficient looters on Abernia, stands and frowns. "Our stuff isn't here," he says, annoyed.

Back to the interrogation. Morningstar steps forward and gets in the assassin's face. "Here's our dilemma," she says. "We'll let you go, and Ernest here will count on this experience having changed you, and he'll hope you live a life of doing good deeds. On the other hand, our experience tells me that you'll probably just go back to being a hired killer."

Reading his thoughts, Morningstar hears this: *If the Guild discovers that I've fled, alive, from a job, they'll hunt me down and kill me.* She shares that with the others.

"You don't have to flee," says Flicker. "We could kidnap you!"

"Intriguing," admits Two Leaps. "Where would you take me?"

"We could drop him off on some other plane," suggests Aravis.

"Look, give us a reason why we shouldn't kill you," says Dranko.

"Because," says Leaps, "after today I'll make sure you never see me again." Reading his thoughts, Morningstar knows that while this is technically true, his first order of business would be to get back into the good graces of the Assassins' Guild.

"Are you in the Assassins' Guild?" asks Dranko. "And if so, how did you join?"

Leaps nods. "I was invited, because of my success as a cat burglar. I said yes, because the pay is good, and there are poor consequences for saying no."

"What's your name?" asks Aravis.

"Two Graceful Leaps."

There's more mind-link bickering among the party, most notably between Ernie (advocating mercy) and Morningstar (failing to understand why Two Leaps is still breathing). Sending him to prison is a poor option in Mirj, where the jails are as porous as the bribes are numerous. In the end they reach a compromise: Aravis casts *polymorph any object* and turns Two Graceful Leaps into a cat. That taken care of, they move on to the slack-jawed One Strong Shield, still under an illusion spell that makes him look (presumably) like Lord Dafron.

Morningstar casts *memory read*, targeting the memory of "the last time he received orders from Lord Dafron."

The memory takes place in the very room they're already in. Lord Dafron sits across from him. Strong Shield in his normal aspect is a tall, broad-shouldered, battle-hardened guy who takes pride in his conditioning.

"Do you understand?" says Dafron. "We will go over this one more time. You are going to be made to look like me. They will hopefully come right in, and will probably try to arrest me. They are do-gooders, and are unlikely to simply attack you unless provoked. The team will be hiding in the room upstairs. Between you and them, and their new recruits, you should have enough combined might to take them out. There will be a lot of chaos. The people you will be fighting alongside are very good in close quarters. Plus, they will be slowly draining away the strength and vitality of your enemies, as their blades will be poisoned. Do not touch them, or get nicked. Do you understand your orders?"

"Yes I do," says Shield.

"Are you happy with your payment?" asks Dafron.

"Yes I am."

"Very good." Dafron stands. "Now, if you'll excuse me. You may be waiting here for some time, as we don't know exactly when they'll be showing up. You may be bored for a day or two. If I learn anything more, I'll let you know."

Dafron leaves through the same door that Aravis *arcane locked* right before the recent melee.

Aravis now unlocks that door, and Morningstar goes first so that she can cast more *thought captures*. Ten feet down a short hallway she bumps a low tripwire that triggers a scything blade from a slot in the wall. It slashes across her stomach.

"Morningstar!" yells Dranko. "That's so cool! I've never actually seen one of those before. Now, hold on..." He heals her.

They proceed with more caution, Flicker out in front this time. Two more *thought captures* don't reveal any recent or emotional thoughts. As they move down a particularly long stretch of tunnel, Kibi senses that they're passing under the wall, and into an area below the Upper City. They find another well-furnished study, and a particularly opulent bedroom. A third room is actually being used for storage; two large trunks have been pushed up against a far wall. One contains about half of their missing stuff, and has a note along with it that says "O.S.S." The other trunk contains the rest of their pilfered belongings, along with some gems and trade bars. Both trunks are lined with lead.

After about half an hour of moving slowly through the extensive tunnel network, they come to a stout wooden door that looks different from the smuggler doors. After Flicker disarms a poison needle trap, Dranko casts *omen of peril* before they open it. Seeing an hour into the future, the result is SAFETY. So emboldened, they walk through and into a large basement – better

maintained and more well-built than the smugglers' rooms. It's full of furniture, paintings, statues and similar upper-class decorations.

Morningstar casts another *thought capture* here and gets one: *I hope that Lord Traber follows through on his promise.* A second spell gets a second, more optimistic thought: *I know they're going to succeed this time. They have to!*

There's a staircase leading up out of the basement. Before they ascend, Dranko turns to the rest of the Company. "What are we going to say to Lord Traber when we find him?" he asks.

Aravis has a simple answer. "That he can tell us where Lord Dafron is, or we'll expose their deals."

At the top of the stairs, Dranko slowly pushes a door open. A man dressed like a butler is standing there in a wide, well-appointed hallway. He stares at Dranko, but without showing alarm.

"Ah," he says after a second's pause. "The Lord has been expecting you. Will you please come this way?" The butler turns his back on the armed and bloody half-orc and walks away down the hall.

Morningstar casts another *detect thoughts* and finds that the butler, while thinking that this is all highly irregular, has strict orders from Lord Traber. Some group of strangers would be coming up the stairs, fresh from battle, and whomever was in that group should be escorted to the Lord's office.

They arrive at a large oak door and the butler knocks. "Lord Traber, you have visitors."

"Well, let them in."

They recognize Lord Dafron's old office right away, though the furniture is different, as is the man behind the desk. **Lord Traber** is a large and powerfully built man, with sandy blond hair and a deep voice.

Morningstar's *detect thoughts* picks up a stray mental note, coming from behind a wall. *I can't believe he just let them in here!*

Lord Traber looks at the assembled Company. "I assume you are here for Dafron."

The thought changes: *What the hell is he playing at?*

Lord Traber smiles and gestures to the wall. "He's hiding in a hidden closet, right there."

My Gods! No!

"I admire a pragmatist," says Dranko. "Are you aware of the smugglers' tunnels connecting your house to the Lower City?"

"Yes, of course," says Traber.

"And by handing over Dafron," says Ernie, "your position here will be more secure, regardless of your association with him."

"Association?" says Traber. "Hardly. He just ran in here and begged me to hide him in the closet."

That lying son of a %\$#!

Flicker easily finds the catch to the concealed closet door, and pops it open. In a little cabinet, cowering in the back, skin a sickly blue and splotchy, is Lord Dafron, hunched over and wild-eyed. "Poor little guy," says Kibi.

"Oooooooh, no!" says Dranko.

"I beg you not to kill me!" pleads Dafron, in his distinctively high and nasal voice.

"Where are your assets hidden?" demands Aravis.

My assets? Ah, crap. They're going to worm out of me where I'm keeping all of my stuff!

"Just understand," says Dranko. "Your assassins are dead. Your bodyguard is drooling. And we are very displeased. You can buy our favor by telling us where you keep your assets."

"You are going to kill me anyway, and I don't wish to tell you," says Dafron defiantly.

"That's a shame," says Ernie, "because you could have done some good with your assets."

"I spent almost everything I had, to see that you were destroyed, in return for what you did to me," spits Dafron.

Morningstar nods. That's the truth.

"You ruined yourself!" says Ernie. "With your own greed, your willingness to subject others to addiction, and pain, and suffering."

"And that business with goats!" adds Flicker.

Dafron's eyes narrow. "I knew it was you, who spread that vile rumor that got me kicked out of the House of Law."

Ernie answers. "Dafron, if you had been a good man, and had the respect of your colleagues, do you think they would have been swayed by something as small as an unfounded rumor? Do you think you would have fallen so low if you hadn't stepped on so many people on the way up?"

Dafron is hardly listening. He gestures to his own ravaged skin. "If *this* hadn't also happened, there would have been no substantiating evidence. You are the ones responsible, admit it! Which one of you was it that mixed that vile concoction?"

"You mean the one that cured you from the addiction to your own drug? That one?" asks Dranko.

"I am the one who cured you," says Aravis.

"Tell me," asks Dafron. "Was the 'extra' potion – the one in which you used... wild bluevine... was that part of the cure, or an extra knife blade in the back?"

"It wasn't supposed to be permanent," says Aravis.

"I have a sensitivity to wild bluevine. My father had it as well. By the time the healers arrived, its effect was part of me, and there was nothing left to cure. I *was* blue."

"And a fine shade, I might add," says Aravis.

"And the rumor? The absurd, humiliating rumor?"

"That was me," admits Dranko.

"See?" screeches Dafron. "This was not my responsibility. It was yours!"

"You brought it on yourself," says Aravis. "If you had not created the powder, you would never have drunk it, and would have had no need to drink our cure."

"Irrelevant!" shrieks Dafron.

Ernie disagrees. "Extremely relevant! The person you are, the things you do with your life, are all choices you make yourself. And you've made nothing but bad choices."

"Yes, yes apparently I have," says Dafron, more calmly. "I made enemies of those who would seek to humiliate me in the worst possible way, and take away from me everything that had meaning in my life. And now that you're here, go ahead. Kill me."

Morningstar, reading his surface thoughts throughout this exchange, is all for that. None of his thoughts show even the slightest iota of guilt or true remorse. There is only anger and humiliation.

"We'll give you this choice," says Dranko. "Tell us where you keep your remaining wealth, and we'll at least kill you here, quickly. Otherwise, we'll just hand you over to those in the Lower City, and they can dispense your justice."

"I see," says Dafron. "Having destroyed me is not enough for you. You have to compound my suffering until the very end."

"I don't mean to interrupt this touching reunion," says Lord Traber, clearing his throat, "but I am having a meeting with some visiting merchants here in about ten minutes. Can you resume this somewhere else?"

"We'll only need five more minutes," Dranko promises. Morningstar casts *memory read* on Dafron, targeting the memory of "when he last saw the main part of his remaining wealth." She gets a memory of a warehouse, and thinks she could *find the path* to the place later.

Dafron, who relives the memory along with her, becomes wholly deflated. "Fine," he says. "Take what little I have left. You'll find it's not much."

"You could have chosen another path," says Morningstar. "Even now, you could show a little remorse."

Dafron stares back at her, eyes now gone vacant. "There is no room left in my heart for remorse."



Back in the smugglers' tunnels, the Company dispense justice. In the manner in which he executed so many others, Dafron is hanged by the neck until dead.

el-remmen: Tongue stud of potion quickening? What the heck is that and how does it work? In my last campaign, one of the BBEG had a tongue stud of hell breath...

Jackylhunter: Very very cool, thanks for the update!

RangerWickett: So now there's a cat burglar assassin cat on the loose? Ye gods, but this party sure does love creating enemies who can come back and bite them in the... ankles later.

A note marked O.S.S.? It doesn't match any of the names I recall.

Piratecat: One Strong Shield, the bodyguard posing as Lord Dafron. (Note that Dranko's Kivian alias is One Slippery Slope, but this time it wasn't him.) This was a brutal game, and we didn't leave it feeling at all heroic. Very conflicted, very bittersweet. We wanted to reform the bastard or at least bring him to some sort of justice, and in a way I guess we did. But he was sad and pathetic and eaten alive by his own bitterness, in a way that was very real for us. We were glad we survived (go Aravis!). But when we think back on great victories, this isn't one of them.

RangerWickett: I want an NPC contact to show up, named One Cool Customer.

wedgeski: LOL! Joke du jour. A great update, and such a textured finale to Dafron's sorry little tale.

Joshua Randall: Methinks Lord Traber came out of this whole nasty business the best off.

EroGaki: Justice is served!



This update, and likely the next one or two to come, encompass a period of relative downtime. But don't worry – the action will pick up soon after, and in a big way.

I have fallen farther behind the running game than I thought. The following update is from run #195, and the next session (this coming Thursday) will be #223. Time-wise, I am almost two-and-a-half years behind. But I will continue to chip away, one post at a time.

Five Silent Crow

To make a further statement, the Company take the body of Lord Dafron and hang it from the public gallows outside the gates to the Upper City. The next morning it draws a crowd of curious onlookers, some of whom remember the rumors from a year earlier. There is little sympathy for his fate.

The *feebleminded* mercenary One Strong Shield is divested of his wealth and magic items, gotten roaring drunk in a seedy Lower City tavern, and then *healed*. When he finally sobers up hours later, and pieces together the likely turn of events that brought him to that place, he counts himself lucky to be alive. After all, Lord Dafron had warned him of the bloodthirsty and merciless nature of the foes whom he expected to come calling.

Two Graceful Leaps, the assassin-turned-cat, turns out to have had some kind of magical protection against mind-affecting spells. That protection, while insufficient to prevent his *polymorphing*, was enough to safeguard his human personality and intellect. Under further truth magic he pledges to the Company that he will turn a new leaf, and not rejoin the assassins. Aravis instructs him to go forth, do good deeds, and redeem himself.

Morningstar looks mildly disapproving. "You're entirely too comfortable playing at being a god."



With no pressing agenda, the Company decide it's time for some rest, training, magic item creation, and information gathering. The Golden Goblet in Djaw offers them a discount for an extended stay, and kindly extends to them the private use of several function rooms. With Charagan and Kivia now only a *greater teleport* away from each other, the party spend the next few months fairly evenly split between the two continents.

Three days after their arrival back in Djaw, a letter arrives for them – as a group – at the Goblet. It is an invitation to lunch that afternoon at the Enchanters' Hall, and it is signed "Five Silent Crow."

"Hey, I remember that guy!" exclaims Dranko. The others do as well – Five Silent Crow was an old and dying wizard who underwent an experimental magical procedure to transfer his mind into a golem. An unfortunate turn of events led to him "waking up" inside the golem's head, but with no body attached. The subsequent centuries-long stay in an abandoned closet had driven him completely insane. The Company had delivered his golem-head to the Enchanters' Guild in Djaw and hadn't thought much about him since then.

On paranoid principle Dranko casts *omen of peril* before they leave for the lunch date, and is relieved at the result of SAFETY. The city is alive with exotic sounds and smells, and warm for early March. Kibi is unable to enjoy himself; the city's many

dwarven slaves are not something he can let slide. The Company draw their usual allotment of stares, being both obviously foreign, and heavily armed and armored.

The trip to the Enchanters' Hall takes them through the Court of Cats, and Aravis is understandably popular. Pewter perches on the wizard's shoulder and proclaims: *Loyal subjects! The God of Felines is among you!* Morningstar rolls her eyes.

"I should grant my worshippers the miracle of *no hairballs*," says Aravis with a smirk.

"Wouldn't that kill them?" asks Ernie. "I mean, if they couldn't cough up the hairballs?"

"See?" says Morningstar with a wry grin. "Not so easy being a god, is it?"

Aravis admits the point. Probably every god's first lesson is that of Unintended Consequences.

Soon, they reach their destination. The Enchanters' Guild is a cluster of tall marble buildings inside a circular iron fence. A human slave greets them politely at the door, his red iron collar conspicuous around his neck. Five Silent Crow is expecting them. The slave leads the Company into the main building on the Guild grounds, a three-story library with an airy interior. "Mr. Crow, your guests are here."

"Good!" comes a voice from behind a bookshelf. "Send them in, please."

Inside the library's main atrium one table in the middle – far from any books – is set with a large and inviting meal. And then Crow comes into view, his golden emerald-eyed head resting upon a human body. He holds a book in a well-manicured hand. Something about his movement isn't *quite* right – it reminds the Company a bit of Eddings' illusory eyes.

"Mr. Crow, how nice to see you!" exclaims Ernie. "And they found you a way of moving around!"

"I'm actually doing it myself," says Crow.

"That's delightful!" says Ernie, impressed.

The book floats out from Crow's hand and comes to rest lightly on the edge of the table. "The body is only an illusion," admits the wizard.

"Really? It looks absolutely real!" says Dranko.

"Thank you," says Crow, affecting an awkward bow. "I am still working out the kinks. It doesn't ambulate about in exactly the way people expect. I had done it most of my life, and you might think I'd remember, but constant control over this kind of illusion takes hard work and practice. And I keep my head aloft through a modified *telekinesis*, which also requires some concentration. At least the golem's facial expressions are part of its innate enchantment and need no upkeep."

"And how do you *feel*?" asks Morningstar.

"I feel wonderful! I have been doing great research here, all thanks to you. Would you like to sit and eat?"

Hours pass as they trade stories and reminisce. Crow wants to hear all about their adventures following his rescue from the golem city of Repose. He remarks once on Step's absence and bows his golden head on learning of the paladin's fate.

Ernie asks him what he's been doing with his time (other than mastering his body), and the answer is surprising. "I have been working on achieving immortality," he says, some pride evident in his voice.

"Aren't you already immortal?" asks Dranko.

"Alas no," answers Crow. "The spells that keep my consciousness and personality inside this metal head will start to fail in ten or twenty years."

"Can't they just pop you into another head?" asks Dranko.

"It is my mental essence that is collapsing," Crow explains. "Even the most advanced artificial head will not be sufficient to the task. The enchanters here tell me it is a minor miracle I have already lasted this long. So, I am working on ways to extend my own life. There are ways I could do it now, but they involve me becoming a lich, which I am not prepared to do."

"Good!" says Ernie with a laugh. "Because we'd hate to have to come and smite you."

"Don't you need a body to become a lich?" asks Dranko, fascinated.

"There are types of liches that do not need a body," says Crow.

“Really?” exclaims Aravis.

Ernie looks over nervously at his friend. “Aravis, I don’t want to smite you either.”

“Not that I’m an expert on necromancy,” says Crow. “I have Shredded Veils for that.”

“Who?” asks Grey Wolf.

“My assistant. Veils! Could you attend me, please?” A pale, thin, and downright creepy wizard comes stalking from an anteroom, his robe predictably black. Ernie has to resist the urge to smite him on instinct.

“There are some necromantic elements to any extension of life,” says Crow, “and since Veils here is an expert on the subject, he has been assisting me.”

Ernie forces himself to be polite. “Very nice to meet you, Mr. Veils.”

Two Shredded Veils nods. “I understand that you are the ones who rescued my master and ended his terrible ordeal. We are all in your debt. Five Silent Crow is a great thinker. We are enriched by his presence.”

Dranko asks of Five Silent Crow: “Why do you *want* to live forever?”

Aravis answers for him. “Because there’s so much to learn!” Crow nods at Aravis in agreement.

“But what if the same thing happens to you again, and you end up trapped in a closet for centuries?”

The light gleams unsettlingly in Crow’s emerald eyes. “What are the odds of that?” he asks.

“But,” says Ernie, full of genuine concern, “if you live forever, you’ll never get to heaven!”

Crow doesn’t answer, and his golem’s expression is hard to read. “Ah,” he says after an awkward several seconds of silence. “Your water has run out. Ingot! Ingot, come here please!”

A dwarven slave walks over to them, and Kibi’s brows knit into a thunderhead. “Yes, sir?” says **Ingot** brightly. “What can I do for you?”

“Can you fetch more water for our guests please?”

“Of course, sir.” He turns to leave, but does a double-take at seeing Kibi standing there – a dwarf without the collar.

“How do you do,” says Kibi. “My name is Kibilhathur Bimson.”

“He’s a dwarf who’s *not* a slave,” says Dranko helpfully, prompting Ernie to step hard on his foot.

Ingot grows sullen. “Good for him,” he growls.

“Good for everybody!” says Dranko.

“I should get your water.” Ingot stomps away.

“We’ll set him free,” says Ernie.

Kibi turns on him, eyes fierce. “When?”

“As soon as we figure out how,” says Ernie.

“Excuse me,” says Five Silent Crow, annoyed. “You’ll do no such thing!”

Ernie looks Five Silent Crow right in the emeralds. “If you’ll excuse me saying so, Mr. Crow, it seems a very cruel thing that all of the dwarves in Djaw are enslaved.”

“If one regrets being a slave,” says Crow dryly, “then perhaps one should have not committed a crime.”

“But aren’t all dwarves enslaved just for being dwarves?” asks Kibi.

“Of course not!” says Crow. “The dwarves who are slaves, like the human slaves, are either serving out a sentence for crimes committed, or possibly working off a debt.”

“Have you seen any dwarves here who *aren’t* slaves?” challenges Kibi.

“Well, no,” admits Crow. “But it would be an uncomfortable place for a free dwarf to live, don’t you think? And they have their own kingdom.”

"Five Silent Crow," says Dranko, "For someone who is such a great thinker, I wonder if maybe you haven't seen enough of the world."

"Who told you these things about how slavery works?" asks Kibi.

"It's simply the law, and commonly known. Ingot here would not be a slave if he were neither a debtor nor a criminal."

"Where are these laws written?" demands Kibi.

"They are the laws of the Jewels of the Plains," answers Crow, sounding honestly taken aback. "It is how slavery works."

"Is there a term?" asks Kibi. "A limit to how long they serve?"

"For minor crimes and small debts, I understand the term is limited," answers Crow. "For major crimes or significant debts, it is for life."

"And all the dwarves have major debts, or are severe criminals?" asks Morningstar.

"As far as I know, yes, the dwarven slaves are all criminals, serving for serious crimes."

"In that case, there must be a record somewhere of what crimes they've committed," says Dranko.

"Do you know if they are found guilty here in Djaw, or in their own homeland?" asks Aravis.

"In Gurund, I assume," answers Crow, clearly growing annoyed. "They'd then be turned over to the Guild of Chains."

"Thank you, Mr. Crow," says Ernie quickly, before his colleagues can press the matter. "We had not known that, and your answers are very illuminating."

Crow's golem face smiles indulgently. "He's a fine fellow," he says, gesturing after Ingot. "He works very hard."

"I hope you treat him well," says Ernie.

"Of course I do! He's still a person. But I'll thank you not to free him in contravention of the law."

"I'm sorry this unpleasantness has crept into our relationship," says Dranko.

"Not at all, not at all," says Crow, waving one illusory hand in the air.

Ingot comes back with water. "This enough, sir?" His tone is not so friendly as it was.

"Yes, excellent," says Crow. "If I need you again I will call for you."

"Yes sir," he grunts, and leaves quickly.

"Ingot is quite remarkable for a slave," says Crow brightly. "Do you know, he's even literate! I have him doing work copying non-magical scrolls and texts; his handwriting is most pleasing."

"You are an unusual collection of people here," says Dranko.

If Five Silent Crow notes the same about the Company, he keeps it to himself. "Yes, I suppose. The Enchanters do give me the run of the place, though many of them find me quite the curiosity. But that's understandable. And they give me access to all of their research materials, and as you might imagine there are numerous enchantments and theories thereupon which are vital to my work."

"What do you think is your best bet for immortality?" asks Dranko.

"There are a few avenues of magical inquiry which could prove fruitful. There are two main ways. One is finding or creating a new material that will slow or stop the degradation of my mind. The other is to actually work on the mind itself, and (pardon the pun) make immaterial what it's encased in. The matter that makes up my personality and intelligence – the essential particles – would stop degrading on their own."

Dranko grows excited, thinking that maybe gartine could be the answer to his problems, but Five Silent Crow has already explored that possibility. "By its very nature," Crow explains, "gartine slows *everything* down – the passage of time, but also the thoughts of the mind inside. It would send me into a kind of pseudo-stasis, and while such a head would endure for a long time, it's not really what I'm looking for."

The meal has ended by this time, so Five Silent Crow finally gets to the real reason for the lunch invitation. "When I found out

you were in town, I asked the Master of the Hall, **Two Blue Rock**, for a favor. I have convinced him to let the wizards among you have the run of the spellbooks here. And they have a full collection – not only enchantments. Don’t go crazy, mind, but understand that they have been willing to indulge me thus far. I have vouched for your fine character.”

“Right,” says Dranko. “Pants stay on.”

“Yes...” says Crow uncertainly. “Pants stay on. Is that... um... usually a difficulty?”

“Just for him,” says Grey Wolf, shooting Dranko a glare. “And we greatly appreciate such an opportunity.”

energy_One: Thank you, Sagiro!

el-remmen: I love the “downtime” stuff. Heck, seems like every third installment of my own story hour is about the PCs talking to somebody (maybe that’s why I get so few readers posting...), so a little break from the heavy-hitting spell action should be a good temporary change-up. I don’t remember this golem-head guy though... Anyone want to fill in the details of where/when this was?

Aravis: When we were looking for the Crosser’s Maze we were told to look in the City of False Life. We thought that might have been a city of golems known as Repose. That is where Ernie got killed by a golem. In one of the buildings there we discovered Five Silent Crow’s disembodied head in a closet.



Information

The discussion as they leave the Enchanters’ Hall largely concerns the Guild of Chains. There is general agreement that something is rotten about whole arrangement, and that they could probably dig up some dirt if they went back to Gurund and got hold of specific criminal records. Ernie opines sadly that if there is something amiss, it’s likely an open secret among the parties involved; after all there’s money to be made, and slave ownership is popular among the upper classes.

Regardless, the party spend the next three months engaged in a number of different activities, often splitting up and separated by the gulf of the ocean. Here is a summary of their activities through early June...

Aravis receives another communiqué from his aspect in the Crosser’s Maze:

Your dream is a vision, clear and cold. You have discovered a vast and lifeless city, and there are tombs here, underground crypts not meant for mortal remains. Through the Maze you have arrived, but you are not meant to be here. Gods fought, and gods died, and here are gods interred.

“They called it Naslund, the Great Necropolis,” says the voice of King Vhadish XXIII, who stands nearby. “But who will tend it, with its Caretakers gone?”

He relates this to the others, and they ponder the introduced mysteries. “Brush up on your turning,” suggests Grey Wolf to the party clerics.

“Wait... Gods died?” asks Morningstar. “I mean... I never envisioned that they could have bodies that would need burial.”

“If gods can fight, gods can die,” says Dranko.

“Many of your human gods fled from the Great Enemy,” Ernie points out. “Why would they have fled, if they couldn’t be killed?”

“I’m not disturbed by the thought that gods can die,” says Aravis – which is an ironic comment for a couple of reasons.

“Think of it, though,” says Ernie. “If you can take a dragon’s toenail and use it for powerful spell components, what could you do with a god’s body?”

“And imagine the loot that might be buried in a god’s tomb!” adds Flicker.

“Er... maybe it was just an actual bad dream?” suggests Kibi, not at all comfortable with the topic.

Aravis sighs. “I wish it were, but this was clearly a vision from the Maze.”

“I wonder,” says Morningstar, looking thoughtful. “If the Caretakers were the ones who just left – the ones we gave the Maze to...”



Dranko checks briefly on his grandfather (who is still in good health), but spends most of his free time administering the Undermen in as visible a way as possible. He consults with Lucas Blackwell about their nascent trading company, reviews some

new recruits, talks with Greta Smith about the state of the Guild treasury, and learns to his delight that the Undermen sponsor their very own adventuring party – a group of mid-level heroes who style themselves “the Overmen.”

He also finds the time to visit Harmon, his old mentor at the Tal Hae church. Dranko tells his friend the entire tale of his adventures, including the particularly disturbing news from their encounter with Belshikun.

“One of the gods in Kivia is fleeing,” he says as a closing remark.

“From... the Adversary?” Harmon can’t mask his skepticism.

“We don’t know,” admits Dranko. “But we think so.”

“I really doubt that,” says Harmon. “That the Adversary would have only found us now, after all this time? And if he has, we’d all be dead.”

“You know how when you go into a cave, you carry a canary,” says Dranko, “and if the canary dies, you know you’re going to die too?”

Harmon grunts and shakes his head. It’s too much for him, really, but he presses on. “So what god fled?” he asks.

“The God of Death,” says Dranko.

“The Kivian God of Death has left his people behind, and the world, you say. But the gods live in the Heavens. Are you saying that the Kivian gods are abandoning Heaven?”

Dranko exhales, “I don’t know. We don’t know.”

“These things are far beyond my knowledge and experience,” says Harmon.

“Well, there’s also the demon who wants to destroy my soul.”

Harmon sighs. “Dranko, didn’t I tell you that if you didn’t watch your tongue, someday you’d lose it?”

“Hey! I did the right thing!”

“Yes. You are extremely brave, forthright, and luckier than any man has a right to be. And if he does decide to come after you? What are you going to do?”

“My plan,” says Dranko, “is to become as saintly as possible, so the church will send in its most powerful heroes to save me.”

Harmon chuckles. “First, my understanding is, you *are* ‘the most powerful heroes.’ Second, when are you going to start acting saintly?”

A little guiltily, Dranko says, “Er... Well, I have a bunch of people who are ready to spread rumors about how pious and good I am. Does that count?”

Harmon says nothing for a moment, his expression growing more serious. “Dranko, can I talk to you about something?” He stands, crosses the room, and closes the door. “Dranko, I’ve been hearing things. Disturbing things. That... you’ve been associating with the... Undermen. Is that true?”

“Why would I be doing that?” asks Dranko.

Harmon is not fooled. “I know that you’re a good man at heart. Be careful when you deal with such an unseemly lot.”

“If I *were* associating with them, it would be with the ultimate goal of trying to redeem and improve them,” says Dranko. “We all serve Delioch in our own way.”

“Do not become ensnared in their unsavory dealings!” warns Harmon.

“As of right now, I feel that I am in control of the situation,” says Dranko.

Harmon cracks a smile again. Is this really the same half-orcish scamp who terrorized the clergy all those years? “Dranko, you know that I will always trust you to do the right thing.”

“And that’s why I look up to you more than just about anyone else in the world,” says Dranko with a grin. “You have been a beacon of goodness to me. Do you think I should tell Tomnic about any of this stuff?”

Harmon is surprised by the question. “Of course you should!”

“Will he believe me?”

“He’ll know if you speak the truth, Dranko. He is the leader of our church.”



Morningstar visits several churches throughout Charagan, feeling out the delicate political fabric that her journey and subsequent elevation made inevitable.

In specific, she is concerned about how the ranks of newly-minted Daywalkers are being integrated into the church proper. Technically it’s over and done with, declared as Law by High Priestess Rhiavonne. But while most of the rank-and-file sisters are relieved that the tension of the Schism has been relieved, there is still grumbling from some quarters and more political maneuvering than Morningstar is comfortable with. Amber, the clear choice, has been put in charge of the Daywalkers in Tal Hae, and Morningstar sits down with her one sunny afternoon.

The snores of the sisterhood come faintly from the dormitories. Amber herself sits behind a jet-black desk piled high with scrolls and notebooks. “It’s what I’ve gotten myself into,” she says to Morningstar with a helpless gesture. “Administrative nonsense. I liked the fire and brimstone better, but it’s Ell’s will. And how are you?”

“Well, thank you,” says Morningstar. It’s such an odd conversation to be having. With a start she realizes that it’s the first day of April – four years ago to the day was her summons by Abernathy. (And relatively it seems even longer, what with her time spent in the past.)

“Should I add your name to the local rolls?” asks Amber casually.

Morningstar considers. “I suspect I’ll always be out and about.”

“But your name ought to be recorded *somewhere*,” presses Amber. “You are the *de facto* leader of the Daywalkers, and most would say of the Dreamwalkers as well.”

“I am the ‘Child of Darkness and Light’,” says Morningstar with an exaggerated sigh.

“Many of us are, these days,” says Amber, laughing. “We are hoping for a half-dozen Daywalkers at every major temple and shrine, but you are not personally affiliated with any place. It would be an honor to connect you with Tal Hae.”

Seeing that Amber won’t take no for an answer, Morningstar relents, and Amber wastes no time adding her name to the official record.

“So, what’s next?” Amber asks. “I’m glad that things have worked out so well, but I almost feel deflated. Like we’re preparing for an unknown future, with no fixed goals.”

“Octesian is still out there,” Morningstar reminds her.

“Do you have any leads?”

“No,” admits Morningstar. “But finding him would be a fine goal in itself. And training up as a cohesive fighting force is always advised. Remember, you can train with other priestesses; you are still allowed to associate with those who are not Daywalkers.”

Amber steeplest her fingers and touches her lips. “There is... some pressure against that, unfortunately. We are seen as a specific, separate unit, if you take my meaning. It is the price of a begrudging tolerance. But... small steps. Small steps. We are certainly making progress.”

“It’s not very exciting,” says Morningstar, “but our highest priority should be to gain the trust and acceptance of the main body of the Church.”

“And the best way to do that is to do good works, and serve Ell without reservation,” says Amber. “And by doing, not seem so separate. For better or worse, we were considered militant at best, and heretical at worst in some quarters.”

She looks thoughtfully at Morningstar before changing the subject. “I understand you’re going to be writing some scrolls... some new chapters of our holy texts. That’s very exciting! Just think, a thousand years from now, the Scrolls of Morningstar will be read alongside the papers and prophecies of Therena, the Lady Vesper, and all the other prophets and seers of the ages. Have you given any thought to what you’ll write?”

“Some,” says Morningstar, as non-committally as possible.

"If you want help, just to bounce ideas off, I am at your disposal," says Amber, a gleam in her eye.

"I haven't started the process yet, but thank you," says Morningstar gratefully. And to change the subject herself, she asks: "Have you had a chance to visit Kivia, now that anyone can do that?"

Amber looks ruefully at the stacks of papers on her desk. "Maybe I'll take a vacation. Get out from under all of this, and take a trip, see the world. There are ships making the crossing now, several weeks long I understand. There's a lot to see under the sun, and it's my job now to see it."



When Morningstar relates her conversation with Amber to the others, Dranko chuckles at Amber's lack of subtlety. "Everyone wants to be famous," he says, speaking from the heart.

"And we *are* famous!" says Flicker. "We're the Heroes of the Kalkas Peaks!"

That makes Dranko nostalgic for their keep in the Norlin Hills – technically 'Longtooth Keep,' though he refers to it, as always, as 'Castle Blackhope.' He, Flicker and Kibi take a quick *teleport* to visit the place, and find that it's looking extremely spiffy and refurbished. There is still a team of fifteen dwarven craftsmen there, reinforcing the bailey, building new stone stairways to replace the old crumbling ones, and making numerous small repairs and improvements. The old squatter, Fergus, is still there doing odd jobs and yard work, and calling himself the official caretaker.



In the name of due diligence, the Company make sure that the Null Shadow Cauldron is still secure in Kallor, and that the Evil Black Book remains protected in the Greenhouse. Both are as they were last left.



Two weeks after his vision about the Necropolis, Aravis has a new dream from the Maze:

You are back in the tavern again, its time and place unknown. You sit across from yourself, though it is not yourself, but rather that elusive someone whom you both have and have not met. He has been speaking to you.

"...history. I find it rather tragic." Your double grasps your hand, and again you are plunged into a vision within the vision.

A tall man dressed in kingly garb stands in a dead and lonely field. He glances to the sides, as if fearing he was followed here. The full moon illuminates his handsome face.

The field is not simply dead. It is corrupted, its grass black and reeking, and this man of royal countenance wrinkles his nose even as he takes slow steps inward. He stops when he reaches the center of the field, his feet at the edge of a still black pool hardly bigger than a puddle. He looks down at the pool intently, as if it is whispering and he strains to hear what it's saying.

The man's lips quirk. "What do you want?" he asks in a trembling voice. "Why have you called me here?" He listens again to the silent field, and then reaches down to touch the surface of the pool...

The vision ends abruptly, and you are jarred awake. It is the middle of the night.

"The Maze should send you something happier," says Flicker, when Aravis tells them about it over the morning's *heroes' feast*.

"That black pool is probably the 'black goo,'" guesses Grey Wolf. "The stuff from Het Branoi."



Six weeks into their hiatus, on a night when all the Company are enjoying the plush comforts of the Golden Goblet, there comes a great cacophony from the streets. It is dogs – dozens, hundreds of dogs, baying and barking and howling in loud and mournful tones. The sound comes from all directions, so it's not localized to any one area. As far as the groggy party can tell, every dog in Djaw is raising a ruckus. It continues for over ten minutes, punctuated by numerous human shouts of annoyance, before it starts to die down.

The next morning everyone in the city is talking about it, though no one seems to know why it happened. Aravis and Dranko immediately *teleport* back to Charagan and look up Octavius Hightower in the capital city. Octavius is the leader of the Starshine Players, a troupe of bards in the employ of the Undermen. And the bardic spell list includes *speak with animals*.

"How urgent is this matter?" inquires Octavius, upon hearing Dranko's unusual request.

"Very," says Dranko. "Dogs forget things very quickly."

Octavius soon introduces them to a tall, skinny bard with a thick drooping mustache and a parrot perched piratically on his shoulder. **Georg** is his name, and he bows when he learns he's speaking directly to the Oracle himself. "It's truly an honor to meet you, sir," he says.

"Rawk!" says the parrot. *"Suck up! Suck up! Rawk!"*

They intend to ferry Georg back to Djaw, but find to their surprise that the dog-barking episode also occurred in Charagan! So the party quickly round up a dog from the street, and Dranko puts his *headband of intellect* around its head. He asks his questions while Georg translates.

"Why do you look so sad?" asks Dranko. And it's true – the dog's tail is dragging, its movements sluggish.

"There has been a great tragedy," says the dog. "An important dog has died."

"The God of Dogs?" asks Dranko, thinking of Aravis.

"It was one of the Great Pack," says the dog.

"How do you know he died?" asks Dranko.

"All the dogs felt it," says the dog. "Didn't you?"

"Where did it happen?" presses Dranko. "Who killed him?"

The dog looks puzzled. "I'm not sure where it was. But one of the Great Pack was killed, by a shadow."

"How many dogs are in the Great Pack?"

"I don't know. I can't count."

"Are there more left?" asks Dranko.

"There must be," says the dog plaintively.

Dranko takes back his headband, exchanging it for a soup bone. The dog wags its tail and licks his face.

Aravis looks troubled. "Maybe they'll be after me next."



Two weeks after the barking dog incident, Aravis receives yet another piece of mental correspondence from the Crosser's Maze:

The tavern is starting to become familiar, and your ally sits across from you. Still he wears your face.

"Once again I have something to share," he says. "It's disturbing. And this is relatively current."

He touches your hand, and in another vision you see two figures in silhouette, one short and wide, the other tall and lithe, both fully armored. The short one hands the tall one a tiny vessel, like a thimble, filled with...

"Drink it," the short one hisses. "And be grateful you are found worthy of such an honor."

The tall person drinks, convulses, gasps. The short person chuckles. "There. Now you'll survive the trip."



Kibi is able to find a learned sage named **Ten Twisted Words**, who specializes in Djawish legal matters. The dwarf retains his professional services, seeking information on the following related matters:

- What are the specific legalities (or lack thereof) of enslaving someone? What determines the circumstances of enslavement, and the duration of the sentence? Is there anything unusual about the enslavement of dwarves from Gurund?
- What is the extent of connection between the Guild of Chains and the ruling body of Djaw? What is the general attitude of the government toward the Guild and its activities?

A week and 100 miracs later, Twisted Words delivers Kibi a summary:

To Mr. Kibilhathur Bimson:

Pursuant to your request for services, I have prepared this document in order to address your questions regarding the Guild of Chains.

The Guild of Chains (hereafter, 'the Guild') is a long-established and well-respected organization that provides a valuable service to the city of Djaw, the other Jewels of the Plains, and several surrounding states. They are granted an official charter, renewed annually by the office of the Emperor, may he live forever, to acquire slaves in accordance with Djawish and local laws, and make those slaves available for auction. They are charged additionally with holding the slaves between purchase and auction, carrying out the auctions, and making delivery of product.

Specifically, the Guild is authorized to purchase and enslave persons who fall into one of two categories:

- 1) A person who has acquired debts and lacks the ability to make repayment within the contracted time. By presenting the contract in question before a lawfully appointed magistrate of Djaw, the creditor may legally sell the debtor to the Guild for a sum of miracs equal to the amount of the debt owed. The Guild may then sell the slave at auction. The period of enslavement is based upon a strict schedule correlated with the amount of the debt. For instance, an unpaid debt of 500 miracs will result in 5 years of enslavement. Slaves who fall into this category must live within the generally accepted geographical boundaries of the White Sun Kingdom.
- 2) A person who has been found guilty and convicted of a crime, and is being held by a local government, may be purchased by the Guild from that government and sold as a slave at auction. In this case, the government in question need not be one within the White Sun Kingdom; the Guild has purchased criminals from Gurund and Dir-Tolia. (There are conflicting reports of criminals purchased from Seresef.) There is a minimum local population requirement of 50 persons in order for the Guild to agree to a slave transaction. Any criminal held in a village of fewer than 50 persons may only be sold by an authority of an encompassing district, town, county, city-state or country that in total contains over 50 persons.

Price is negotiated directly between the Guild and the governing authority in question. The relevant crime need only be considered such by local law, and not necessarily by Djawish law. The Guild is authorized to consider each case individually, and purchase any slave who they agree has committed a crime in his or her local jurisdiction. A written report of the crime and its circumstances are said to be filed and kept at the Guild of Chains administrative center in Djaw, though it is not available to the public. The Guild theoretically determines the length of enslavement based generally on the severity of the crime, but they have complete authority to decide individual cases as they see fit, and a majority of criminals-turned-slaves are given lifetime sentences of enslavement.

As stated, the Guild is officially sanctioned by the Royal Court of Djaw, and their charter is signed personally by the Emperor, may he live forever. Among the nobles at court, many have political and financial ties to the Guild, and most own one or more slaves, though there is typically a minority court faction that would prefer the Guild to be dissolved and slavery made illegal.

Regarding Gurund, and dwarvish slaves: the Guild typically purchases around 100 criminals annually from Gurundian authorities and sells them at auction in Djaw. Dwarves are highly sought after and command higher than average prices, as their quiet and taciturn natures, along with their physical strength and knowledge of various trade skills, make them ideally suited for ownership. Dwarvish slave contracts always run for a full life term, a Guild discretionary decision likely based on maximizing their selling prices.

Should you wish to extend your inquiry, I am at your disposal.

Yours in knowledge,

Ten Twisted Words



Seeking more information on the topic, Ernie pays a visit to Yale, advisor to King Crunard IV of Charagan. His wait for the appointment is less than an hour; such is the privilege of a Knight of the Spire Guard. In a small meeting room in the King's Palace, high atop a hill in Hae Charagan, Ernie explains to Yale that he'd like to find out more about the slave trade. "And while I and my friends have many talents, we lack diplomatic subtlety. But you must already have representatives over there; can you tell me anything about the Guild of Chains, and the enslavement of dwarves in particular?"

Yale looks down at her hands. "I have seen the preliminary reports," she says. "The slave trade of Djaw and the surrounding lands, while distasteful, seems completely legal according to all local laws."

"May I be allowed to speak to your diplomats?" asks Ernie. "I mean, about what they learn of the ins and outs of the slave trade?"

Yale fixes Ernie with an even gaze. "We are disinclined to start pressing that sort of issue with a foreign government, in such early stages of establishing ambassadorial ties. Our diplomats already have extremely complex agendas. But, yes, we will certainly share with you anything we learn on the topic of slavery among the Jewels of the Plains."

"That will sure be better than having Dranko talk to everyone," says Ernie.

Yale laughs. "Now *there*'s a mission we might ask you to undertake for your kingdom."

"To stop Dranko from talking?"

"To mitigate the effects therefrom," says Yale.

"I'll try," says Ernie. "But Dranko has certain financial interests in expanding trade in that regard, so I... er..."

The halfling turns bright red as he stammers to a halt. Yale leans forward. "Financial interests? Really?"

"I can't say any more!" squeaks Ernie.

"I could order you to say," says Yale quietly.

"Yes," Ernie acknowledges. "But then I'd be very sad and conflicted."

Yale chuckles. "We have suspicions, but perhaps they don't bear looking into at this time. You understand that the Spire Guard, including Dranko, have our full confidence."



Toward the end of the three months, having learned so much and still with many, many questions, Morningstar and Ernie each cast separate *communes* – Ernie at the Yondallan church in his home of Dingman's Ferry, and Morningstar at *her* home temple of Kynder Hold.

Ernie is unable to cast his divination with any privacy. He is a hero of incredible proportion in his tiny home village, and a crowd of novices (along with an assortment of laity) crowd around the temple kitchen to see what it looks like when someone *communes* with Yondalla. He casts his spell, and the Goddess is with him.

"Is Aravis a divine figure to cats?"

YES.

"In Kivia and Charagan, dogs mourned the death of one from something called the Great Pack. They think he was killed by a shadow. Is the shadow related to the Black Circle?"

YES, RELATED.

"Does the death of the member of the Great Pack mean that Aravis is also in danger from that shadow?"

PROBABLY.

"Does Tor now serve the Delfirians?"

YES.

"Was Tor's mind altered, or was he otherwise coerced into serving the Delfirians?"

YES, ALTERED.

"Does the spirit of Davarian Firemount now inhabit the body of Thewana?"

YES.

"Do we have the ability to rescue Tor now?"

ONLY HIS BODY.

“Do we have the ability, or know anyone who has the ability, to undo what was done to Tor’s mind?”
NOT AT PRESENT.

“If we attempt to rescue Tor’s body, and hold him in some way, will the Delfirians try to recover him?”
ALMOST CERTAINLY.

“Do we have the ability to deal with Darkeye’s stronghold now?”
WITH GREAT DIFFICULTY.

“Are Darkeye’s actions or plans related to the departure of Drosh, or the death of one of the Great Pack?”
NO.

“Are there Black Circle members still active among the priestesses of Ell?”
I DON’T THINK SO.

“Is Sagiro still alive?”
THAT QUESTION CANNOT BE ANSWERED.

“Does Darkeye know where Sagiro is?”
NO.

“We’re trying to determine what to do next. Of the possible activities: find Darkeye’s stronghold, investigate Aravis’s visions from the Maze, investigate the death of the Great Pack member, or investigate the Guild of Chains and try to free the Kivian dwarves, is there an action that we should not yet attempt?”

THE QUESTION IS TOO VAGUE.

“Would our rescue of the dwarves enslaved in Djaw be a disastrous distraction from the danger that caused Drosh to flee?”
NO.

“Thank you.”
YOU ARE WELCOME. CONTINUE TO DO GOOD WORKS.

His spell complete, Ernie lets in the onlookers. They all want to cook as much they can while the spirit of Yondalla lingers.



Morningstar casts her *commune* later that day, kneeling before the altar in the Ellish fane at Kynder Hold.

“Is there a place where a God is buried, on either Kivia or Charagan?”
NO.

“Are Drosh or his followers responsible for guarding the burial area of the Gods?”
YES.

“Are we needed to find the next Guardians of this burial area?”
UNKNOWN.

“Is the dark area on the Kivian map related to where the Gods are buried?”
NO.

“Is the Entity that the Black Circle was calling to in Het Branoi, related to the reason why Drosh is leaving?”
YES.

“Is this the Adversary?”
UNKNOWN.

“Is the dark liquid seen in Aravis’s dream related to the black liquid we saw where the Slices were being created in Het Branoi?”

I CANNOT SEE ARAVISS VISIONS.

“Is the black liquid we encountered in Het Branoi related to the burial area of the Gods?”
IT COULD BE USEFUL THERE.

“Useful to us?”
YES.

"Is Aravis Divine?"

YES, IN A SMALL WAY.

"Is Aravis Divine in the same way as the recently murdered member of the Great Pack was Divine?"

YES.

"Was the member of the Great Pack who was recently killed a human?"

NO.

"Is the death of the member of the Great Pack related to Drosh leaving?"

EXTREMELY TANGENTIALLY.

"Is Octesian in Charagan?"

NO.

"Is he in Kivia?"

YES.

"Through inattention, we allowed Darkeye's plot to change time to succeed. Is there a similar plot that we should be attending to now?"

UNKNOWN.

"Is Aravis human?"

YES.



And while all of this is going on, the majority of the Company's time and effort is spent on making magic items in the Greenhouse basement laboratory. (Dranko also takes the time to find buyers for a number of items the party has outgrown or has no use for.) Between the recently acquired haul from Dafron's assassins, and a number of newly crafted items, the Company come out significantly upgraded in terms of their enchanted armamentarium.

But it's inevitable that, when a group of adventurers like Abernathy's Company spend too long avoiding trouble, trouble comes searching them out. With a few days still remaining on their crafting itinerary, Morningstar receives an ominous *sending*:

This is from Cobb. Bad news. Burglars broke into estates, stole something from basement forbidden room which is now empty. Orders for Cobb?

Morningstar replies:

Tell Cobb to leave the area as untouched as possible. We'll be right over.

She tells the others of this message, as they eat lunch at the Golden Goblet. They all look at one another, and come to the same grim conclusion.

The Null Shadow Cauldron has been taken.

StevenAC: Fortunately, looking back through the collected Story Hour (specifically, the end of chapter 18 in Part Two), I have managed to solve this crime...

Piratetacat: We played last night, an "interim" session where we trained (to 17th level!) and cast *communes* (man, are we in trouble, but it's that vague sort of trouble that means something horrible is coming although you won't be able to identify it until it is possibly too late) and made items. Lots and lots of items. In fact, we spent 235,000 gp in making items – woot! We're now poor but mighty, festooned with magic gewgaws.

Which is sort of a shame, considering that we ended the game learning that someone stole from us the evil cauldron that summons null shadows...

el-remmen: Jeez, man! I just borrowed it! I'll have it back next Tuesday. That's the last time I borrow an evil artifact from you!

el-remmen... J'accuse! Great update, Sagiro!

Atanatotatos: WWWW! So many updates in such a short time! Way to go! And, yes, great update Sagiro. Amazed, as always.

Halford: I am with you Ata! Long may the oodles of updates continue! I always find the down time updates hugely entertaining and this is certainly no exception.

Joshua Randall: I sure hope the party purchased LoJack for the Cauldron o' Evil.

Piratetacat: The next session? A giant flood of badness, wherein extremely annoying secrets are uncovered and death comes on little null shadow feet. Look for it!

Sagiro: You'll have to wait until the next update for the annoying secrets, but this one sure does have null shadows in it!



Null and Void

Less than an hour after receiving the *sending* from Cobb, the Company stand in a tastefully decorated foyer. They have teleported directly to the Cosnor Estate in the Silent Quarter of Kallor. Below them is the former Black Circle headquarters, where the Company prevented Mokad and his fellows from expediting Emperor Naradawk's arrival in Charagan.

"We could just have Morningstar cast *miracle* to get the cauldron back," says Dranko. And the idea has some merit, but is ultimately discarded because it wouldn't tell them *who* stole the cauldron, or *why*. Instead, Morningstar fills all of her empty spell slots with *thought captures*, and then everyone arms themselves with non-magical weapons (in case the cauldron was used before being stolen) before descending into the basement. Morningstar casts her thought-gathering prayers every few yards as they go, but none of the thoughts are interesting or illuminating.

When they reach the room that once housed the Null Shadow Cauldron, no one is surprised that, in fact, it's gone. The 20'-by-20' room is empty, its darkness entirely non-magical and completely native to the Prime. Only a faint trace of unease remains, the last vestige of the horrible creatures that were once conjured here. There are circular patterns chiseled and gouged into the walls, with flakes of rock scattered on the floor below them, as if someone had hastily pried out some round ornamentations or other wall-mounted objects. Similarly, there are three ragged holes in the center of the floor, as if some large object had been bolted to the ground and then ripped out. The stone below where the cauldron had squatted is predictably discolored.

Morningstar casts another *thought capture* in the doorway to the room while the others wait outside. Nothing. Then she goes to stand next to some of the holes in the wall and casts again. Finally, she gets a thought – and it's addressed to her! *Hello, Morningstar. You had something of mine, so I came to get it. Have fun.*

And that's when the null shadows come boiling out of the holes, accompanied by waves of psychic nausea. The five of them completely surround Morningstar and attack, their vaporous arms flailing. The analytical part of Aravis's brain (as he stands in the hall looking in) notes that these null shadows are different than the previous ones they've encountered. Heretofore the shadow creatures have been a flat black, but these are a deep, dark green, as if a sickly jade light were glowing in the center of each roiling smoky mass. The primal part of his mind is screaming with unreasoning terror.

Morningstar tries to ward them off with her shield, but due to its magical properties, the arms of the null shadows go right through it, and indeed, through *her*, as if each smoggy appendage is reaching into her body and pulling out bits of her life force. She resists in part, but her vitality is slightly reduced, on top of the stinging wounds that leave black smears on her skin. Despite the horror of the moment, the Ellish priestess retains a smidgen of humor and thinks over the mind-link: *Oh, crap! A Null-Shadow-o-Gram!*

"Morningstar!" shouts Dranko. He immediately activates his *boots of haste*, moves into the room, and unleashes a flurry of whip-cracks at the closest shadow creature. With the final snap the monster disperses, leaving a faint haze of sickening green smoke behind. Grey Wolf runs into the room himself, heedless that his arcane nature makes him a choice target for these creatures. He slashes a mundane longsword at another of the monsters. He thinks he's wounded it, but it's hard to know given the null shadows' lack of discernable anatomy.

It gets worse. Another four null shadows stream out of the cracks in the walls, bringing their total number to nine. Their gut-twisting wrongness washes over everyone in the party, and Grey Wolf finds himself beset by all four newcomers. Shadow fists reach into his body and yank out life-force, and not only is he drained of Constitution, but spells are forced painfully out of his head. The rest, with no arcane targets within reach, attack Morningstar and Dranko. Dranko mostly shrugs off the assault, but Morningstar's knees start to buckle. (She is now down six points of Constitution, on top of the significant damage from the monsters' fists.)

Aravis casts a *mass haste* on the party; against creatures utterly immune to magic, maximizing weapon swings seems the best use of his abilities. Flicker tumbles into the room and attacks, while Ernie activates his *winged shield* and flies in high along the ceiling. Kibi casts a *wall of stone* that blocks off all of the holes in the walls, in case there are more null shadows waiting to emerge. He follows this up with a self-targeted Quickened *bear's endurance*. His earth elemental familiar Scree is yammering cautionary words over their *empathic link*. *Kibi, don't go in there! Those things eat wizards. You'll be killed!*

Morningstar attempts to cast her newly-acquired *mass heal* for the first time, but cannot muster the concentration for so complex a prayer, surrounded as she is by null shadows. With a grunt of frustration she casts an additional Quickened *cure critical wounds* upon herself.

Dranko again executes a deft series of whip-cracks; another null shadow is destroyed, and an additional one is (presumably) wounded. Grey Wolf swings his sword again and a third monster is slain.

Seven null shadows still remain, and these swarm around Grey Wolf. Five of them are able to attack him, eagerly pummeling such a ripe arcane target. Grey Wolf practically vanishes in a cloud of green-black smoke, twisting in pain as they tear at his essence. By some miracle he stays conscious by the thinnest thread, his exposed skin a mass of dark smears. He drops to one knee, blinking, reeling from the psychic stench, feeling that death cannot be far away. Through bleary eyes he thinks he sees Morningstar and Dranko under attack from the remaining two.

Aravis bestows a *dimension door* on Pewter, with instructions to rescue Grey Wolf. *Are you serious?* demands the cat. *In there?! You know, if you weren't some demigod of cats, I'd...*

Just go! urges Aravis, and the cat does so, weaving in a panic through the null shadows and touching Grey Wolf, returning to the relative safety of the hallway.

Flicker and Ernie launch full attacks on the null shadows, but with their non-magical shortswords (and in Flicker's case, inability to sneak attack these creatures), cannot muster the damage to slay even a single one of the remaining enemies. Morningstar activates her magical necklace that makes her immune to attacks of opportunity, and gets herself out of the room in a hurry. Once out, she Quicksens a *restoration* on herself to restore her decimated life force.

Dranko is the most effective null shadow-killing machine in the party: another series of whip strikes, another null shadow dispatched. Half a dozen still remain. Out in the hallway Grey Wolf fumbles out a healing potion and gulps it down. Dranko and Flicker are now in the doorway, blocking access to the hallway where the rest of the party (including all the wizards) are apprehensively waiting...

The null shadows vanish, fading away into nothing over a two-second span. Dranko peers around the room with his magical eye-patch. "Heads up!" he shouts. "They're gone, and not invisible."

"It's possible that their additional strength came at the expense of a shorter lifespan..." says Aravis, though no one really believes that. Ernie takes advantage of the enemies' absence to fly into the hallway and cast *restoration* on Grey Wolf, who despite the potion, really really needs the lift. Morningstar casts *mass cure serious wounds*, also popular.

Aravis casts *greater arcane sight* and looks around the room and hallway – nothing. Dranko does a quick perimeter of the room while Kibi scoops up some of the flaked rock, thinking he can cast *stone tell* on the rubble even if they're forced to flee this place.

Whether the null shadows retreated momentarily into the Ethereal Plane, or just shifted briefly into the Plane of Shadow, none can say. But they do reappear – *in the hallway, next to the wizards*. Kibi is overcome with horror and veritably snowed under with null shadows. He can feel the stinging, smeary wounds gouged in his skin, the pain of his six most potent dweomers forced from his head, and life-force pulled grotesquely out of his body. In seconds he is reduced from full health to near death. The remaining two attack Aravis, hungry for his powerful arcane core. As the Company remember from their previous encounters with null shadows, the creatures' physical attacks are much more devastating against wizards than against divine casters and non-magical types.

Flicker and Ernie gamely hack away at the null shadows with their vanilla swords, and Ernie gets lucky, landing two hits on one of the monsters that was previously damaged. It deforms into a harmless green cloud. Five monsters remain.

Morningstar casts *heal* on Kibi, which takes care of the damage but not the ability drain; the dwarf is still dangerously weakened. Aravis has the idea to *polymorph* into a hill giant, better enabling him to deal damage, and simultaneously improving his fortitude. He has to duck a bit to keep his head from hitting the ceiling. Kibi, at the frantic urging of Scree, casts *xorn movement* and sinks safely into the ground. *Just stay here and wait it out*, urges the little elemental. *Up there, you're just a target.*

Dranko methodically annihilates another null shadow with his whip; now only four remain. It seems like the Company may finally be turning the corner against their ghastly assailants.

One of the remaining null shadows attacks the giantish Aravis, and even that is staggering. The remaining three vanish. Everyone looks around frantically. Flicker and Ernie fail to eliminate the one enemy still visible, while Morningstar moves to protect Aravis. Aravis himself rips a nearby door off its hinges and smashes the remaining null shadow, destroying it.

Tony Vargas: One thing 3E didn't do was 'fix' the problem of casters dominating at high level. This is an awesome campaign, and very well run, but you'll note all the PCs are casters, even if multiclassed like Dranko. That was never unusual, and it does lead even the best DMs to coming up with new challenges, like null shadows, specifically to thwart casters.

Piratecat: Flicker is a single-classed rogue. Oh wait, he's an NPC...

To be fair, this campaign started in 2nd Edition, when you *really* wanted to be multi-classed. Dranko would have fewer levels of Cleric if we'd started in 3E, mostly for story reasons. (At this point in the campaign Dranko had just hit 17th level, a Cleric 5 / Rogue 8 / Lasher 4 with a Wisdom of 14 and a 9 Int. He's currently level 18, having added one to his Rogue level. Sneak attack, baby! It's all about having a *fireball* in a can with every hit. Not that this helped against the null shadows.)

KidCthulhu: Ditto. I don't think I would have put any levels in Fighter if we were building these characters in 3E. I would have gone straight Cleric, because nothing matches the power of raw 3E cleric.

Dinkeldog: Except maybe raw 3E druid.

The three null shadows reappear, all adjacent to Aravis. That turns out to be a crucial tactical problem – with his increased giantish size, the rest of the party cannot surround him for protection. Grey Wolf and Dranko take readied attacks as the monsters appear, but do not kill them.

And then the three null shadows rip out Aravis's life. Their smoky limbs reach into his oversized giantish body and make a quick, horrific end of the wizard. He reverts to his own body upon death and slumps to the ground, the black smears on his skin so ubiquitous, it looks as though he's been dipped bodily in tar.

"Aravis! No!" Ernie screams. But his voice is further drowned out by Pewter's piteous meowing over his master's death. Kibi, overwhelmed with guilt that he was hiding while Aravis fought on, emerges over Scree's protests and tries too late to administer a healing potion to his friend. But Aravis's facial features have been smeared so thoroughly, Kibi can't even *find* his mouth.

Morningstar and Flicker, numb at the sight of their slain friend, manage to kill one of the remaining three null shadows. Dranko, likewise in shock, kills another with his whip. The last null shadow vanishes, and this time, given a few seconds pause, they entirely surround Grey Wolf, while Kibi retreats back into the ground.

The remaining null shadow, unable to find a spot to reappear that offers access to an arcane caster, settles for an arrival point next to Morningstar. It doesn't matter; numerous readied attacks are launched, and Flicker delivers the killing blow. Pewter continues his caterwauling, and now, in the silence that immediately follows a violent scrum, the party can hear something else. High above them on the streets of Kallor (and indeed throughout all of both Charagan and Kivia), cats everywhere are wailing with grief.

Everett: Ha! From the run prior to the null shadows – very clever.

"I'm not disturbed by the thought that gods can die," says Aravis – which is an ironic comment for a couple of reasons.

Joshua Randall: [From page 398 of Part Two:]

...the highest-level characters have recently hit 17th level, and thus have 9th level spells. Speaking of which, Morningstar is likely to try one of them out next game. The bad news is: after the horrific events of last game, said spell is true resurrection.

Dun dun DUNNNNNNN...

Samnell: Aw. I don't suppose *true resurrection* would work on a feline divinity. Poor Pewter; he's lost his pet.

Kaodi: Wow. When was the last time someone bought the farm? Seems crazy to have lived through so many fights just to have Aravis go down to a bunch of measly null shadows, even if they are juiced-up versions.

Everett: The last death was One Certain Step. This was rather more random.

RangerWickett: One Certain Step sacrificed himself. Aravis was murdered.

Piratecat: This game was *awful*. Not awful as in "we weren't having any fun," awful as in "our tactics were bad and even expecting this we got caught unprepared." The only reason Dranko was able to kill them was because he has two bonus attacks per round via the Lasher PrC and *haste*. It still wasn't enough. At the end of this game we really, really wanted to kill whoever left us this lovely parting gift.

KidCthulhu: Yep, I remember that being a frustrating evening. Ernie actually rates to do pretty well against null shadows, but my dice were stone cold, and with the poor tactical position I remember that I spent the whole battle running from place to place, just in time to have the little bastards disappear. If this had been a comedy, Ernie's frantic dashing about would have been hilarious. As it was, it was a tragedy. Party front line fighter? Out of commission due to short legs.

EroGaki: Good grief, that fight was brutal! Poor Aravis! Poor Pewter! And poor cats! So do null shadows ignore magical effects that normally protect from touch attacks, such as *mage armor*?

KidCthulhu: Null shadows are immune to *all* magic. Magic armor bonuses and spells that increase AC are nothing to them. Even *mage armor*. If the bonus comes from magic, it doesn't count. Even if the bonus adds to your natural armor. Magic sword? Goes right through them. They don't just ignore the magical bonus. They ignore the item if it has any magic associated with it. Ditto magical armor, rings of deflection, etc.

I know Sagiro posted their stats somewhere [see page 282 of Part One], but I don't think he's posted these new and "improved" versions. Have I mentioned we hate null shadows?

Aravis: I went home that night and as I was getting ready for bed, my wife groggily looked up at me and asked how it went. I said, "Aravis died," and then went downstairs to make sure lights were off and doors locked.

Needless to say, she was fully awake and really annoyed at me for saying that and then leaving her hanging. I then told her the whole story.

LightPhoenix: Haha, true love! Also... don't think of it as death, think of it as apotheosis...

Everett: Anyway, what did that message to Morningstar mean?

Aravis: It meant that someone obviously felt they had property rights to the Null Shadow Cauldron. Our position was that it was clearly abandoned property that was left in the house when we took ownership. Admittedly, we took ownership by force after killing all of the previous occupants. In our defense, they were really, really bad. Like, coal in the stocking, only a mother could love, even dogs bark at them kind of bad.

Halford: This is D&D; that is a completely legitimate way to acquire property, and very economical too...

Tony Vargas: Was the Null Shadow Cauldron some kind of hard-to-destroy artifact or something? Even if it was, wouldn't every caster in the universe want it destroyed?

Aravis: Yes and yes, unless you own the cauldron, are evil, and have enough chutzpah to believe it will never be taken from you and the null shadows turned upon you.



CHAPTER 23

The Search for Praska

RangerWickett: So is Aravis getting the Mrs. Horn treatment, or are you going to just play a very vengeful 'swarm of cats' for a few sessions?

KidCthulhu: Actually, we were all so depressed about his death that we didn't want to play anymore. The campaign just kind of came to an end around then. We still get together, play board games and such, but it's not the same.

Everett: Well, what kind of favors would you need from the ether to bring back a deity of cats? Let's muse until the next update, shall we?

Zustiur: *****! What a totally awful update for me to catch up on! I've been reading through from page 90 in the previous thread to catch up. And *this is where the updates finish!* MAN, that sucks. But must have sucked more for you. I'd say Aravis is my favourite character, but that would be ignoring the fact that they're all my favourite characters. Please tell me there's a resurrection coming?

Scrubkai: Wait, my 3.5 knowledge is getting a little rusty but... if Aravis is a god, doesn't that make him an outsider and unable to be resurrected?

It would be nice if I was wrong, but I've been assuming that we had just heard the end of our favorite mage...

Everett: We'd previously been informed that a *true res.* was coming, long before we knew who it was for. And whatever update you catch up on is a sucky place to finish: do you have any idea how long some of us have been reading this campaign?

Zustiur: I've been following since about run 30; I just took a long hiatus because I thought Sagiro had stopped writing. What I mean by sucky place to finish, is that had I stopped one update earlier, there was no cliffhanger/character death. Just 'mundane' downtime events.

Jackylhunter: Does anyone remember (off the top of their heads) when Aravis became 'the God of Cats'? I'm usually better at retaining these tidbits, but this one is eluding me.

Caliber: I don't think he "became" a god of cats at any point. Cats were just always weird about him, and when Pewter asked they said he was a god. The party has been wondering about that for a while, I think.

Everett: Correct – he didn't become a god, the party discovered (in a *commune*) that he is divine in a small way. We don't know any more about that as of yet. Why cats thought that Aravis was "like a cat" was one of a number of unanswered questions the company has had on their plate for hundreds of runs.

Piratecat: We first knew that something was really weird about Aravis when we visited the Court of Cats in Djaw, which is where we met One Certain Step. We've also had other hints, such as being threatened by those damn rats. Revelations about Aravis's cat-like nature will certainly be coming.

Aravis: The Court of Cats is where Aravis first got Pewter to be his familiar.

KidCthulhu: Well, we started to get suspicious when he kept licking himself and throwing up hairballs.

RangerWickett: No, we're talking about Aravis, not Piratecat. Easy mistake.

Joshua Randall: Piratecat/Dranko only licks other things/people, not himself. I hope.

Shmoo: Nine lives?

Aravis: I was going to say that I certainly hope so, but actually I hope they aren't necessary.



Regarding Praska

A sickly green mist hangs in the air, all that is left of the departed null shadows. Morningstar sits down heavily against a wall and thinks hard about the voice she heard in the *thought capture*. It was female, she's almost certain, and vaguely familiar.

Kibi has his own method of getting information in this kind of environment. Putting his grief and guilt out of his mind, he casts *stone tell* on the wall of the cauldron room. A consciousness forms in the rocks and speaks ponderously into Kibi's mind.

KIBILHATHUR.

Oh! The dwarf wasn't expecting immediate familiarity. **You know my name!**

ALL THE STONES KNOW YOUR NAME.

Kibi blushes beneath his beard. **I hope you don't think of me poorly.**

No, OF COURSE NOT.

I'd like to ask you some questions that are very important to us.

SPEAK, THEN, says the stone.

Somebody gouged holes in you, says Kibi, **and vile null shadows poured out of them. Can you tell me anything about who did this?**

I HAVE BEEN HERE FOR AN ENTIRE LIFESPAN OF THOSE THINGS, answers the stone of the wall. Its voice is deep and lugubrious. **MY BODY LAY EMPTY WHEN IT WAS BUILT, AND THEN MANY PEOPLE CAME, CHANTING, SINGING, AND DRAWING CIRCLES UPON MY FACE. THEY BROUGHT IN A METAL VESSEL AND SET IT DOWN. THEY CHISELED SYMBOLS INTO MY SKIN. THE CHANTING CONTINUED, AND THINGS WERE PLACED INTO THE VESSEL. THEN THIS ENTIRE SPACE,**

MY BEING, WHAT YOU CALL A ROOM, WAS FILLED WITH A STRANGE SHADOW-STUFF, A TERRIBLE THING THAT LEECHED AWAY MY SUBSTANCE, MY SOLIDITY, AND REPLACED IT WITH VAPORS AND NOTHINGNESS.

That's terrible! says Kibi, with genuine feeling.

PEOPLE WOULD COME BACK FROM TIME TO TIME AND CHANT OVER THE VESSEL, continues the stone, AND BLACK, SMOKEY CREATURES WOULD EMERGE. THE CHANTERS CAUSED THESE THINGS TO GO INTO SMALL CONTAINERS, AND THEN DEPARTED. THEN FOUR PEOPLE CAME, ONE SHORTER THAN THE OTHERS WHO HAD BECOME BEFORE, AND THEY CHANTED OVER THE CAULDRON. THEY SMASHED THE WALLS, TO OBSCURE THE SYMBOLS ONCE CARVED THERE. VAPOROUS CREATURES AGAIN EMERGED, BUT THESE WERE MADE TO REcede INTO MY BODY, INTO THE HOLES THEY HAD MADE, AND TO THE SPACES BEYOND. THEY TOOK THE VESSEL, AND THE HORRIBLE NOTHINGNESS DEPARTED, AND I WAS LEFT ALONE, UNTIL TODAY.

Are there more vapors? asks Kibi.

No. They have all emerged to assault you.

Can you describe the four people? presses Kibi. **Did one of them wear robes?**

IT IS HARD FOR US TO DISTINGUISH, BUT THEIR HEIGHTS WERE CLEAR. THREE TALL, ONE SHORT. SLIGHTLY TALLER THAN YOU.

Do you know what they were wearing?

Wearing? I do not understand. There is rock, and non-rock, and they were non-rocks.

Did they say anything about where they were going? asks Kibi.

No, answers the rock. **They were chanting. The short one made a strange sound. It sounded like: 'Ha ha ha ha ha!' as it put the shadow things into the walls.** The stone's rendition of evil cackling would be funnier if Aravis's corpse wasn't sprawled nearby.

Is there anything I can do to make you feel whole again? asks Kibi.

I ENJOY THESE WALLS THAT YOU HAVE MADE TO JOIN ME, answers the stone, referring to the *wall of stone* that Kibi cast during the battle. And with that, the interview comes to an end. Kibi relays his conversation to the rest of the Company.

"Stersa and Meledien were both tall," says Kibi, while the others ponder the new information.

A couple of minutes later the color drains from Dranko's face. *And one short...* "Oh, no. Morningstar, the voice you heard in your *thought capture*. Did it sound like Praska?"

Morningstar thinks for a second. "Yes! I knew it seemed familiar."

"Argh!" Dranko lets out a howl of anger. The last any of them had heard, Praska was a happy priestess living at the Temple of Delioch in Hae Charagan.

Morningstar goes to Aravis and casts *gentle repose* as Pewter continues his sad meowing. "Don't worry, Pewter," she says. "I'll bring him back."



The Company spend a few minutes talking through what they know about Praska. She had once been kidnapped by Mokad and then released, and ever since has been a faithful priestess at the Temple to Delioch in the capital city. Califax had warned the Company not to trust her, and that warning had prompted the High Priest Tomnic to oversee a battery of divinations cast upon her. Nothing had turned up as abnormal or suspicious, and so it seemed that Califax's warning had been unfounded. By all reports she has been as spunky, smart, excited and hard-working as ever. And still at the temple, as far as they know.

Edgar, Grey Wolf's little monkey familiar, looks with sympathy on Aravis's body. *Don't die*, he says to Grey Wolf. The spellsword says nothing, but scratches the monkey's head with affection.

They carry Aravis's body up and out of the evil basement of the Cosnor estate. His face is completely disfigured by the black smears from the null shadows, and from certain angles his facial features appear to be missing.

Like most places in Kallor, the manor house has a small shrine to Ell, though it went long unused while the place was co-opted by the Black Circle. Morningstar uses it to cast *commune*.

"When we try to resurrect Aravis, will some person or spiritual force attempt to hinder us?"

NO.

"Does Aravis want to return to the living?"

YES.

"Was Praska responsible for this?"

NO.

"Was Praska involved in this?"

NO.

"Is Praska a girl?"

YES.

"Can you detect Praska?"

YES.

"I detected Praska's thoughts before we were attacked. Was that a trick?"

PROBABLY.

"Are you aware of who set the trap?"

NO.

"Is Praska still under the influence of the Black Circle?"

NO.

"Can you detect where the missing cauldron is?"

YES.

"Is it in Charagan?"

YES.

"Is it in Kallor?"

NO.

"Is it in Lanei?"

YES.

"If Praska were being shielded from divination, would you be able to tell?"

POSSIBLY.

"Is the cauldron on the western half of Lanei?"

YES.

"Is the cauldron in Hae Charagan?"

YES.

"Is the cauldron within the grounds of the Temple of Delioch there?"

NO.

Morningstar frowns at the surprising and contradictory answers. Dranko opines that the results of those questions can't be trusted, since Praska is clearly shielded from divinations. Not to mention that by considering the answers as a whole, it provably *was* Praska who set the trap for them.

"I can't bring back Aravis until tomorrow," says Morningstar.

"Can I cut off his finger and wear it around my neck?" asks Dranko. "Cats would love me!"

Only Flicker laughs.



theskyfullofdust: Just finished reading the whole lot, from the very start, all the way to here. It's taken weeks. But I've enjoyed every moment. This is a terrific campaign, excellent characters, and great players and DM too.

I know this Story Hour is a couple of years or so behind the actual play, but I was wondering if it has reached an end yet, and what level the PCs are now? And eagerly looking forward to the next update...

Piratecat: Thanks for the kind words! We're level 18. We're back on an every-other-week playing schedule (although the holidays were a bit rough), and just finished a really satisfying series of adventures. We're currently hip-deep in more badness that links way back to One Certain Step's vision. The Skysteel Hole (or whatever it is) has finally become relevant, with unpleasant results. Shudder.

Everett: What's that? Doesn't ring a bell.

Aravis: That is a reference to a Gartine Arch. It is from One Certain Step's vision.

Joshua Randall: Okay, this has been bugging me for years. Every time I read the phrase "Gartine Arch," I cannot help but think of some lines from the Leonard Cohen song *Hallelujah*:

*I've seen your flag on the marble arch,
But love is not a victory march;
It's a cold and very broken hallelujah.*

Of course, in my mind's ear, "marble arch" is replaced with "Gartine Arch." So now I've got this mental image of ol' Lenny singing about Sagiro's D&D campaign, and it's just... funny as heck, actually. There. I feel better, having gotten that off my chest.

Atanatotatos: Beautiful song, that.

KidCthulhu: Thanks, now I've got it stuck too. Good song.

Piratecat: Big game last night in Sagiro's campaign! We have just:

- confronted an army of 10,000 undead;
- found the "skysteel hole" mentioned in Step's dream;
- met our first dracolich;
- had one of our members splatter into unrecognizable body parts;
- had another one of our members take enough damage to drop them to -86 hit points;
- confronted the most powerful member of the Black Circle that we know of;
- come face to face with the Emperor.

Uh huh. It was quite a game. And for those keeping track of such things, it was game #226.

Atanatotatos: O____o!!!

EroGaki: Holy crap!! You guys have been busy! Now I want an update even more... Curse you, P-Kitty!!! Curse you!!!!

energy_One: Yeah, Piratecat. Stop taunting us with the truth.

Everett: We won't see the run he's talking about for a year, anyway...

"Is the cauldron on the western half of Lanei?"

YES.

"Is the cauldron in Hae Charagan?"

YES.

"Is the cauldron within the grounds of the Temple of Delioch there?"

NO.

Morningstar frowns at the surprising and contradictory answers. Dranko opines that the results of those questions can't be trusted, since Praska is clearly shielded from divinations. Not to mention that by considering the answers as a whole, it provably *was* Praska who set the trap for them.

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Only Flicker laughs.



Morningstar visits the High Priestess Rhiavonne at the Temple of Ell, to discuss the casting of *true resurrection*. "There hasn't been a casting of that miracle in any temple of Ell for at least a century," the old matriarch tells her.

Morningstar sighs. "I really don't want this to turn into a circus. I'm enough of a curiosity already."

"I can arrange to keep the audience limited," offers Rhiavonne.

"Will that make people think me haughty?" asks Morningstar.

"Not if they think it's *my* choice. I could simply invite the various High Priestesses from other temples around Charagan – perhaps half a dozen."

"Whatever you think is best," says Morningstar. "But discreet would be better, since the Black Circle might not know that their trap has been triggered."

"It will be hard to hide the event from all of the local priestesses who make their homes here," reminds Rhiavonne. "*True resurrection* can take some hours; there will be gossip, if the main chapel is locked off for the duration." Morningstar agrees to the reduced headcount, but is nonetheless awed and dismayed at the thought of performing the miracle in front of even a small number of Ellish dignitaries.

Dranko is waiting for her outside of Rhiavonne's office. "Did you guys talk at all about your memoirs?" he asks her. "You know, the holy scriptures you're supposed to write?"

Morningstar shakes her head, at which point Dranko produces a black leather case with an Ellish symbol on the front. It comes with a silvered goose-quill pen, and a set of custom nibs. "These are for you. Try writing."

She writes, and the magic of the pen not only improves her handwriting, but brings to her mind more elegant grammatical constructions for her thoughts. "Did you make this?" she asks, immensely pleased.

"I had it made for you," admits Dranko. "I thought you'd want to be better remembered for your posterior. Posterity. I mean posterity."



Kibi volunteers for the job of procuring the diamonds needed for the casting of *true resurrection*. Still feeling guilt over his decision to stay hidden underground while Aravis was in danger, he contributes 10,000gp of his own personal funds to the expense.

The plan is straightforward. Kibi, Dranko, Grey Wolf and Ernie will *teleport* to Hae Charagan, where they will procure the diamonds and do a *locate object* sweep of the city for the cauldron. The others will stay behind with Morningstar while she prepares to bring Aravis back to life.

There's a slight hiccup, as Grey Wolf's teleportation goes slightly awry. He was aiming for the common room of the tavern he had frequented on his previous visit, and they do end up in a tavern, but it's not the right one. The four of them find themselves surrounded by dozens of seedy, criminal-looking types, patrons of the Happy Harpoon, one of the most run-down, dangerous waterfront dives in the city. They listen as the conversations die down to nothing. Fifty thugs stare at them, sizing up their wealth and weaponry.

"Where are we?" Dranko demands of the crowd. He is met with laughter. With lightning quickness he snaps his whip and yanks a beer mug right out of someone's hand. He catches the mug in midair and takes a quick drink before asking again, "Where are we?" (Morningstar, following the proceedings over the mind-link, looks down at Aravis and says out loud: "You don't want to know.")

Several of the Harpoon's customers get to their feet. A dozen weapons are drawn. Dranko sighs. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way," he says to the crowd. "The easy way is, you tell us where we are, and we buy a round of drinks for the bar. The hard way is, you try to attack us, and we kill most of you. What's it gonna be?"

The tension is palpable. One on the one hand, it's fifty-on-four. On the other hand, those four are armed to the teeth, and did just appear from nowhere. But one of the more far-gone customers at the bar makes the decision for everyone. "Drinks for everyone, on the new guys!" he shouts, and with that, all is forgiven. The members of the Company soon learn that they're in the right city but the wrong bar. They leave a pile of coins with the barkeep and make for the exit.

The cauldron-finding team has no luck. *Veiled* as birds, and *wind walking* in a spiral pattern with *locate object* cast, they get no hits. Kibi has more success, finding the diamonds he needs. He notes with interest that many of the moneylenders and jewelers have new signs up in the windows indicating that they'll exchange Kivian currency.

Their missions over, the group *teleport* back to Kallor. Next up: new life for Aravis.

EroGaki: Yay! At long last!

Mathew Freeman: Really interesting to see *resurrection* taken seriously in a campaign, with all the political and spiritual ramifications played out in game. Beats "I cast the spell and spend the diamonds" any day of the week.

Innocent Bystander: Very happy to see an update, with hopefully more to come soon.

theskyfullofdust: Woo hoo! Update! Just had to go back and read the last couple of entries to remind myself what was going on. Looking forward to more, hint hint...

Cerebral Paladin: I don't follow the reasoning in concluding that it definitely was Praska who set the trap for them. I understand why those answers would be consistent with a set of divination shielding effects used to conceal Praska's role in this. But I don't follow why it couldn't be the case that somebody is using great power to make it appear that Praska was responsible.

Sagiro: I agree with you – but that's the conclusion my players came to after reviewing the answers.

Piratecat: It struck me as an emotional truth, rather than necessarily a *true* truth. Dranko is generally convinced that life is an uphill slog through deep mud only made easier by good friends and boatloads of cash. If something particularly bad and personal can happen, it will. When the possibility of his best childhood friend Praska being behind this (purely a shot in the dark that I think surprised Sagiro) occurred to him, he immediately concluded that it was true because he couldn't think of a crappier alternative.

Like Grey Wolf, Dranko is a pessimist, but he views that as a personal challenge.

Everett: How far back in the Story Hour does Praska first appear?

Piratecat: Right at the beginning; she's almost certainly referred to in the first or second game. As pretty much the only actual friend he had prior to meeting the Company, she was key to Dranko's backstory.

StevenAC: Praska was first mentioned in session #5 – thirteen and a half years ago!

Everett: Wow. 1996. Golly.

Piratecat: Incidentally, Dranko's got about a 50% record on his clever epiphanies. He got it exactly right when he realized that the Company was trapped within a bottle ("Void in the glass, I return to thee"), and he nailed it when he guessed Praska out of the blue. On the other hand, he was completely and utterly wrong when he guessed that the evil archmage Parthol Runecarver and the dwarven archmage (Kibi's grandfather) were one and the same.

He has concluded that the reason Praska has turned to the Black Circle is extreme jealousy that Dranko married Morningstar instead of staying close to Praska. Bitter jealousy pushed her over the edge. He couldn't be more mistaken – and man, is he full of himself.



Dead Boring

Midnight in Kallor. The perpetual twilight of the day has given way to a sky bright with stars and a nearly full moon. On such short notice only a few clergy from out of town have arrived to witness history: Milanwy and Clariel from Tal Hae along with Amber and Previa; church leaders from Minok and Hae Kalkas; and of course Morningstar's proud parents, Domira and Rodvin. Still, there are enough local priestesses and political figures in attendance that the crowd numbers nearly two hundred in the large chapel.

Morningstar has spent hours studying the prayers and rituals involved in casting *true resurrection*. She expects that the ceremony will last from midnight until dawn; it is no quick thing to call a soul back from the afterlife. Bells ring the midnight hour and the murmurs of the congregation fade as Morningstar begins to cast, Aravis laid out upon the altar before her in a ceremonial black robe. Moonbeams stream in through the skylights and play over Morningstar's hands as she prays. The attendees settle in for a long night of spectacle.

Twenty minutes later, Aravis's eyes snap open. Morningstar blinks, confused. "Aravis?"

"Yes?" answers the mage groggily. Pewter leaps up joyfully onto Aravis's chest and starts to purr, while the onlookers mutter uncertainly. Morningstar can hear at least one of the priestesses whisper, *Maybe he wasn't dead!*

Morningstar peers down at Aravis. "You, er, were really dead, right?"

"I'm pretty sure," says Aravis.

"I'm only twenty minutes in," says Morningstar, half to her friend and half to herself. The audience starts to grow loud again until Rhiavonne strides forward to join Morningstar behind the altar.

"We have witnessed a miracle within a miracle," she says, voice raised in authority. But to Morningstar she whispers: "Perhaps a ceremonial conclusion might be in order, for the sake of the audience."

Morningstar continues to chant and pray for another thirty minutes before finishing with her head bowed in silence. Many in the congregation come forward to put their hands on Aravis's head, who endures it with good grace. Previa studiously records every detail of the event. Any skeptics in the chapel are cowed by Rhiavonne's stern glare; but to most, there is no doubt that the power of Ell has flowed mightily thorough Morningstar, Her servant. Her parents are over the moon with pride and joy.

Morningstar herself looks taken aback, almost embarrassed. “Aravis is a person of great personal power,” she says to the curious throng. “It’s likely that that was a factor in this quick resurrection.” There is much nodded agreement.



Later, when the Company have carried the weary Aravis to a private room, the newly-revived wizard reveals the unexpected explanation for Morningstar’s remarkable feat. “I stayed where I was,” he says.

Dranko scratches his scarred jaw. “What do you mean?”

“Where I died,” says Aravis. “When you guys left, I was still there. In the basement. Death was boring!”

No one knows quite what to say. “That means you were a ghost!” says Dranko after a moment. “Did you haunt anyone?”

“I was stuck where I was,” says Aravis. “There was no one to haunt!”

“We stuck around for a while after the fight,” says Dranko. “Did you haunt us?”

Aravis sighs. Kibi wonders aloud if Aravis’s stationary afterlife was because of the null shadows. Dranko further muses that perhaps Aravis would have turned *into* a null shadow had he not been raised.

“I didn’t feel any different,” says Aravis, skeptical. “Just bored, and non-physical. I guess it could have been the null shadows, but more likely it was because of my unusual nature.”

“What if they were trying to trap you there,” asks Morningstar. “And they were going to come back later for your soul? They were planning on bringing back Grey Wolf against his will, remember? Maybe they could have done the same thing to you.”

Those are all reasonable theories... and all of them are wrong. It will be some time before the Company figure out the truth.



Aravis feels better after a full night’s rest, and they reconvene the next morning to discuss their next step. Dranko’s idea for capturing Praska is straightforward: disguise the Company as something like street urchins via illusion, wait for her to leave the temple on an errand, and jump her *en masse*. “I figure if we do it in public, she won’t be able to summon her demonic minions without everybody seeing it.”

Talk turns to the confusing results of the recent *commune*. Aravis can’t help but wonder aloud: “Do we think that the Black Circle is really trying to be *so* tricky, that instead of simply blocking divinations on her, they’re feeding us false answers through a *commune*? ”

“Yes, I think that,” says Dranko. “I think that Praska has had powerful magic placed on her that makes it impossible for divinations to work on her. Then she came and set this trap for us, with the expectation that we wouldn’t figure out who it was.”

“How powerful do we think Praska is, anyway?” asks Aravis.

“Before?” says Dranko. “I didn’t think she was powerful at all. Now? Very.”

They *teleport* back to Hae Charagan, this time choosing the Happy Harpoon on purpose. Shouts of “Drinks on the new guys again!” start ringing seconds after the crowd has registered their arrival, and as they leave the Company hear some rumors about just who they are. “Mad mages from Kivia,” says one man. “The Archmagi in disguise,” insists another. Kibi smirks as he hears one grizzled dockhand tell another, “You know who the leader is? It’s that pile of rocks that follows the dwarf around...”

Before heading to the Church of Delioch to kidnap Praska, Morningstar casts *circle dance* to verify their quarry’s location. She gets the direction of due east, which does *not* point to the church. They try it again from a quarter-mile to the south, and get the exact same bearing. Aravis figures this means that Praska is thousands of miles to the east, which happens to be the direction of Kivia. Even so, the church is the next logical place to make inquiries. Dranko dons his seldom used priestly robes and they walk through the city. At the gates to the temple compound, two door-wardens bow respectfully. “Good afternoon!” one says to the group.

“Greetings,” answers Dranko. “Do you know if Sister Praska is currently on the grounds?”

“I’m sure she’s not,” answers the guard cheerily.

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“She’s off in... what’s it called?”

“Kivia,” says the second guard.

“What’s she doing there?” asks Dranko, forcing himself to maintain a casual facade.

“I heard she was going on a spiritual journey,” says the first guard. “She was curious to know if there were any worshipers of Delioch over there. I gather that there was some magical artifact discovered in Kivia that indicated that there were. I also think she was interested in learning about the Kivian God of Healing.”

“Do you know who I could talk to about this trip of hers?” asks Dranko. “We’ve come a long way to talk to her, and I guess my timing was horrible.”

“She was friends with an older priestess named Marigold, I know that,” says the second guard.

“Great,” says Dranko. “And how long ago did she leave?”

“Weeks, I think,” says the first guard. He glances at his compatriot, who shrugs.

Weeks. Okay, then. Dranko is immediately mistrustful of this Marigold. “Flicker, do me a favor,” he says. “While we talk to Tomnic, go search Praska’s room. See if she left anything incriminating. Just don’t set off any hideous traps.”

“Or get caught,” adds Ernie.

“The thing is,” says Dranko, “going off to explore Kivia is exactly the kind of thing Praska – the Praska I know – would actually do. So maybe she’s fine, and the Black Circle is setting her up. I need to talk with Tomnic.”

Tomnic the Follower is the highest authority of the Deliochan church extant on Charagan, and Dranko is at first told by an under-priest that the wait to talk with him is three hours, unless it’s particularly urgent. “Tell him it’s Dranko, here to speak on the same subject as last time.”

“When he learns it’s Dranko,” Grey Wolf mutters, “the wait’ll become six hours.”

But Tomnic is no fool, and the Company are granted an immediate audience. Dranko bows respectfully upon entering the office of the High Priest of Delioch, a man of about 50 years with silver hair and ruddy skin. Tomnic is immaculately dressed.

After Dranko makes a round of introductions, Tomnic leans forward. “I take it this is about Califax, then?”

“Indirectly,” says Dranko. “It’s more about Mokad. Or his disciple.”

“His disciple?”

“Either it’s Praska, or someone using Praska as bait, and making us think she’s our enemy.”

“Do you think she’s in danger?” asks Tomnic, concerned.

“I think she *is* the danger.”

They tell Tomnic the whole story, including the results of Morningstar’s recent *commune*. When they are finished, worry is showing clearly on Tomnic’s face. “You know,” he says gravely, “that we took Califax’s warning very seriously. I spoke myself with an agent of Delioch and posed piercing questions about Praska. I learned that she was untainted.”

“Your Grace,” says Dranko, “do you understand fully what the Black Circle can do? Have we told you how they changed history?”

“No, but I have the story secondhand. And if it’s true that the Black Circle can foil the miracle of *commune*, then it puts all of our previous divinations into some doubt.”

“You see why I interrupted your studies today,” says Dranko. “I’m sorry.”

“You interrupted a meeting with a bureaucrat. No apologies necessary.”

“You understand that we have no proof,” says Morningstar. “Just that I heard her mental voice through a *thought capture*.”

“Could that mental voice have been imitated?” asks Tomnic.

“Yes,” Morningstar admits. “In which case someone is setting a trap, and they want us to go after Praska. She is in Kivia right now, where the Black Circle is stronger than it is here.”

“Praska told me she was very excited to visit Kivia, now that it was possible,” says Tomnic with a sigh. “She knew that you had been there.”

“Who told her there was a God of Healing there?” asks Dranko.

“We endeavored to learn everything we could of the pantheon of Kivian Gods, since the boundary came down,” says Tomnic, pointing to one of the books on his desk. “Heros is a Goddess of healing and mercy – the closest thing to Delioch they have.”

“But not as Good,” says Dranko with a smirk.

“It’s not my place to say,” says Tomnic, though his face betrays agreement.

“Do you know that their God of Death, Drosh, is leaving? He believes that the Adversary is coming back.”

That requires another lengthy bit of exposition, as they tell Tomnic about how the Black Circle in Het Branoi was trying to set up a beacon to call the Adversary. Tomnic listens intently.

“But they failed, in the end,” the High Priest says, when the Company have finished their tale.

“But Drosh is still leaving,” says Aravis. “Because he’s scared.”

“Forgive me,” says Tomnic. “I don’t doubt your word... but do you have corroborating evidence?”

“Er... Other than the fact that we talked with a powerful servant of his?” says Dranko. “Uh. No.”

“I only ask, because a powerful servant of the God of Death might well have been lying to you.”

“If he was, he was a better liar than I was, and I’m a pretty good liar,” says Dranko. He goes on to warn Tomnic that the Null Shadow Cauldron is still in the city, and that Tomnic may himself be a target. He requests of Tomnic that the high priest cast *commune* himself to determine the cauldron’s whereabouts.

“I will do that much for you,” says Tomnic, “though I also have some questions of my own, particularly regarding Califax. Say an extra prayer for him, Dranko.”

“I’m sure his heart is true,” says Dranko.

“His heart is not in question,” says Tomnic. “His affliction is more dire.” He pauses and looks thoughtful, as if looking for a tactful way to convey something horrible, but there’s no other way to say it. “He has no soul,” says Tomnic simply. “He complained of that from the start, and I thought he was mad and raving. After all, such a thing is not possible while the body still lives. But his complaints, as far as we can tell, are true. He has no soul in him. I thought perhaps you had an answer, when I heard you were here for an audience. When Aravis was killed, did anything happen to *his* soul?”

“He still has a soul,” says Dranko. “Though... and this is going to be hard to explain, your Grace, but technically Aravis is a God. Of cats. He’s worshiped by cats. He’s...”

“Dranko? Stop. Please.” Tomnic is giving him an incredulous look.

“Can you cast *detect lies*, your Grace?”

“I could. But instead I’m going to ask you flat out. Because I know that while you’re a person of great power, and great wisdom, and great fame, as are all of your friends, I would not put it past you personally to play some kind of colossal prank upon me. I would hope that given the grave nature of...”

“Your Grace, I’m not lying!” exclaims Dranko.

“Aravis, are you a God of Cats?” asks Tomnic.

“I was told during a *commune* of my own that he was... in a small way,” says Morningstar.

“I can’t say whether I am or not, your Grace,” says Aravis. “Cats think that I am.”

“And are you responsible for the unexplained hue and cry of every feline citizen of this city?” asks Tomnic.

“I believe that coincided with my death,” says Aravis.

Tomnic bows his head. “Then, Aravis, I should be honored to be in your presence.”

“The honor is mine, your Grace,” says Aravis humbly.

“And when you died, your soul stayed put,” muses Tomnic. “Perhaps Abernia was not prepared for a God to die upon its surface.”

“Do you mind if we talk with Marigold?” asks Dranko, getting back on track.

“Not at all,” says Tomnic. “Though that reminds me: she asked me about ten days ago for a *sending* scroll. She wanted to know how Praska was doing on her journey. Marigold did not afterward report that Praska was up to no good, or anything like that. You know that Praska is willful, impetuous, prone to getting into trouble. Marigold has been here as a priestess for over thirty years, and took it upon herself to be a kind of protector to the girl. She misses Praska terribly. It’s understandable that she was worried about Praska being so far away, in a strange land.”

Over the mind-link, Dranko thinks to Flicker: *Where are you?*

I’m in Praska’s room, the halfling answers.

Find anything?

There’s nothing to find, thinks Flicker.

Check Marigold’s room.

Got it.

“Your Grace,” says Dranko out loud, “we think that Marigold might be a danger, in league with Praska.”

“Before today, I would have thought you mad for suggesting that,” says Tomnic. “I still don’t think it’s likely. Marigold is as nice a lady as you could ever hope to meet.”

“Yeah, and I’m a jackass, but I’m on the side of Good,” says Dranko with a grin. “You never can tell.”



With Friends Like These

The results of Tomnic’s *commune*, to questions on the topic of the Null Shadow Cauldron, are moderately useful: the thing is in the northeast quadrant of the city, and underground. Relatedly, Marigold’s *sending* scroll had nothing to do with the cauldron or the theft thereof. Tomnic was unwilling to press Delioch further with narrowing-down questions, and he keeps any answers concerning Califax to himself.

Dranko jokingly recommends that they hire the drunks and malcontents from the Happy Harpoon to scour the city sewers for the cauldron. The ones who don’t come back will indicate the likely location by their absence. Even though Ernie knows it’s a joke, he lectures Dranko anyway.

The following exchange deserves its own aside:

ARAVIS’S PLAYER: “Do I think the cauldron was in the Plane of Shadow?”

DM: “Well, the room that the cauldron was in had a weird feel about it; it was *partially* in the Plane of Shadow.”

DRANKO’S PLAYER (Piratecat): “But it wasn’t like that when the cauldron was gone.”

DM: “Correct. It was just an empty 20x20 room.” (pause) “Well, admittedly it had some null shadows in it.”

PIRATECAT: “Let the record show that I’m flipping Sagiro off.”



Morningstar figures this is a good opportunity to do some scouting in *Ava Dormo*. She drops into a trance and enters the Dreamscape while the others guard her body. Her first stop is the inn at which they met with Mokad so long ago – when Praska had been kidnapped. It is no longer shrouded in magical dream-protections, but her scouting indicates that the place has likely been long abandoned by the Black Circle.

While exploring the northeast quarter of Hae Charagan, her memory is jogged by the sight of the Rock, the dwarven tavern beneath which Parthol’s minion Manzanill had been excavating a gartine arch some years earlier. She swoops down into the tunnels and caverns, finding them much like she remembers – remnants of the Emperor’s old city of Poal Cathan. The gartine arch itself is still there, albeit partially buried beneath a small cave-in. She does find something interesting: a new, narrow tunnel has been built out the back of one of the buildings near to the arch. It snakes through the rock for a hundred feet or more before emptying into a wider, older tunnel, and thence into another large cavern. She makes a mental note of its location.

Kibi then sends his earth elemental familiar, Scree, to investigate in the real world. He keeps up a running mental report to Kibi, describing at first the underground locales they remember from their previous excursion there. As he moves to the new subterranean features, he describes small buildings mostly collapsed and crushed by stone and time.

Everything seems unremarkable, thinks Scree to his master. I sense a large cavern up ahead, probably the one you were talking about. I'll just... whoa! Oh goodness. I'm backing into the stone...

Be careful! thinks Kibi in alarm. Maybe you should come back...

No, it's okay, thinks Scree. I'll just poke my eye back in for a little bit.

Don't be over-brave, admonishes the dwarf. What was it that made you startle?

Well, when I emerged into the large cavern there, I thought I smelled null shadows. Not strongly, but still. And I didn't see any. Don't worry though... I'm back in the rock.

Scree returns, and the Company formulate an attack plan. The elemental describes where he's been to Aravis (who has cast *tongues*), so the mage can *teleport* them in. While Scree's explanation is presented mostly in terms of different types of rock, and more by what's solid than by what's air, Aravis is smart enough to get a mental picture.

"Also, Aravis," says Scree, "you are an excellent wizard. I haven't had the chance to tell you in person before now."

"Thank you," says Aravis. "And you are an excellent familiar."

"You're too kind," returns Scree.

The plan is to *teleport* to the cavern with the gartine arch, and to walk from there to the newly-discovered location. Just before going, Dranko casts *omen of peril* and gets a clear result: PERIL. "Hey, there's danger in the next hour," he tells the others. "I know. Delioch told me."



They arrive in complete darkness, but Aravis quickly casts *mass darkvision*. The Company look around. Able to take a closer look, Kibi concludes that someone *engineered* the collapse under which the old gartine arch is buried. They all have flashbacks to the battle they had here against Parthol's minion, the wizard Manzanill. Aravis, Kibi and Grey Wolf – the party's three arcanists – can all detect a faint whiff of null shadows.

Peering carefully into the monochromatic gloom, the Company walk down the new narrow tunnel that leads from the back of a mostly collapsed building. Ten minutes of a single-file meandering march brings them out into a small cave, with another tunnel leading out on the far side. It's all as Morningstar saw in her scouting mission in *Ava Dormo*. The uneasy sense of null shadows grows steadily as they progress, and before too long the divine casters can detect it as well. Ugh.

There's a final straight shot where the tunnel widens and goes for about sixty feet before emptying out into the new large cavern. They cast some preparatory spells – *xorn movement*, *detect thoughts* and *true seeing* among others – and the sounds of their casting echo up and down the tunnel. Dranko and Flicker hustle forward on point. They're first to reach the large cavern, which extends past the range of their darkvision. Dranko's stomach churns with the nausea of proximate null shadows, though none are in evidence. Several ruined buildings jut into the cavern, and from one of these Dranko thinks he sees a faint flickering light. He relays this to the others over the mind-link.

The others move forward. Grey Wolf sniffs at the door with *assassin's senses* and gets a whiff of something nasty. It's not null shadows, or anything else he's familiar with. After Ernie and Flicker check the door, Dranko slowly pushes it open. Beyond is a very large room – probably a guild hall in the old city of Poal Cathan. The ceiling is supported by stone pillars, and rotting wooden tables dot the musty floor. The whole is lit dimly by magical torches on the far walls.

And speaking of the floor: there's a large *symbol of weakness* inscribed thereupon. Dranko makes his save, but Ernie and Flicker are sapped of strength, Flicker falling like a marionette with its strings cut. Ernie drops to one knee, unable to stand under the weight of his armor. *I can't move!* thinks Flicker in a panic over the mind-link.

Dranko activates a magic ring and covers the *symbol* with a hemispherical *wall of ice*. *I've bought us seven minutes*, he thinks to the others.

I really can't move! repeats Flicker. *I'm so weak, I can't even wiggle my toes.*

Flicker, it's a symbol! thinks Dranko.

This is no time for literary references! Flicker shouts over the mind-link. *I can't move a muscle!*

Aravis moves quickly into the room to help his comrades, and that's when five null shadows appear. They're the sickly-green life-sucking kind, and four of them swarm around Aravis. Dranko, protecting the wizard with *shield other*, feels the pain as his

friend is pummeled and drained. Worse, other black shapes – wraiths – rise from the shadows on the ground, and these carry the unmistakable taint of the undead. The wraiths launch a frenzy of attacks, and although these are largely ineffective against the higher-level Company, the effect of null shadow nausea mixed with the foul wrongness of the undead is nearly overpowering.

Morningstar *turns undead* through the door, and three of the wraiths are obliterated. She then charges through the doorway herself, enduring attacks from others, and casts *shadow blast* hoping it will have some effect on the null shadows. Alas, their sovereign immunity to magic makes the spell a useless gesture.

Grey Wolf launches a *chain missile* into the mass of wraiths, and Edgar, imbued with casting ability, lobs a *fireball*. Two more wraiths are dissolved. Kibi follows up with an *earthbolt* that finishes off another half-dozen. He Quickens a *magic missile* and destroys one more. Only two wraiths remain.

But the wraiths and null shadows are soon joined by another dangerous adversary. From the darkness behind the party comes an increasingly loud clanging sound, as some large creature smelling of rust lumbers into view. It's a large construct made of corroded metal and covered in long, sharp iron spikes. "Another creature immune to sneak attacks," Dranko groans.

The rusting automaton grabs Grey Wolf around the waist and lifts him off the ground in its huge metal hand. Ernie would like to help him but he still can't get to his feet. He looses the dancing sword *Beryn Sur*, and *turns* the last two wraiths.

Dranko pulls out his non-magical whip and in three deft cracks annihilates one of the null shadows. Flicker doesn't see it. He's flat on his back, his strength reduced to nothing. He can see the spiked construct looming over him. *You all see that thing, right?* he thinks.

Aravis tumbles back through the doorway, squeaking past (and slightly *through* – ugh!) a null shadow and slams the door closed. With all the recent maneuvering, that leaves Dranko alone with several null shadows, while the others are in the cavern with the construct.

You okay in there? Morningstar thinks.

Yeah, just fine, answers Dranko. *Just me and a bunch of null shadows! I'm sure Aravis wouldn't have left me if I couldn't handle it.*

You told me they'd need me more out there! thinks Aravis.

And that may be true, but then a *wall of stone* appears, sealing the doorway and more thoroughly cutting off Dranko from the others. The caster appears to be a null shadow itself, one which follows up with a *searing light* to Dranko's chest. Dranko doesn't have much time to ponder this new turn of events – a spell-casting null shadow? – before the other null shadows swarm him. *Update,* thinks Dranko. *I am in deep and serious shit. You can't open the door, because there's a wall of stone blocking it. And how come a friggin' null shadow is casting magic spells?!*

Morningstar casts *flame strike* on the spiked construct, but it's entirely unaffected. It swings a spiked arm at her and she ducks beneath it, as she sprints to Ernie and Quickens a *restoration*. Strength floods back into the halfling's muscles.

Grey Wolf squirms with all of his might but cannot escape the (literally) iron grip of his foe. Then the automaton lifts Grey Wolf up high before smashing him down onto the spikes on its back. Facing outward, the impaled Grey Wolf can see spikes protruding through his shoulder blade and thigh, and his blood dribbling down the side of the construct. The monster reaches out with its other hand and grabs Aravis.

Kibi decides to even the playing field a bit. He *summons* a huge earth elemental that immediately tries grappling the construct. Ernie, reinvigorated, launches a full attack against Mr. Spiky with both *Beryn Sur* and his shortsword *Coiled Viper*. Though the thing has some resistance to the damage, metal plates and large flakes of rust fly from its legs. Each strike sends vibrations through the construct's body, and Grey Wolf feels like someone is turning a knife in his guts.

Dranko takes quick stock of his quandary, and it occurs to him that he's never seen a null shadow climb, let alone fly. One of the room's old pillars isn't far from him; he burns his *divine insight* to better see the few handholds and footholds it offers, then scampers up and clings to the stone like a treed cat while the null shadows roil in frustration below. The one spell-casting null shadow moves directly to the opposite side of the pillar, out of Dranko's sight.

Everything's okay for the moment! Dranko thinks to the others.

You all know that Grey Wolf is stuck to that thing's back, right? And that Aravis is about to join him? Flicker is far from thinking that everything's okay.

But Aravis has himself covered, at least. He *dimension doors* out of the construct's grasp and back to the ground, while the monster's fist closes reflexively. Morningstar invokes *greater visage of the deity*, sprouting wings of solid shadow and transforming into a veritable Angel of Ell. She follows with a Quicken *mass cure light wounds*.

Grey Wolf, concentrating through the pain, follows Aravis's example and *teleports* off the spikes, and puts himself so that Kibi's earth elemental is between him and Mr. Spiky. Kibi himself, thinking that leaving Dranko trapped and alone in a room of full of null shadows is a bad idea, dives into the ground and pops back up next to the *wall of stone*. He casts *stone shape*, making a gap big enough for a half-orc. Meanwhile, the earth elemental and the construct have begun a titanic grappling match. The elemental roars in pain as spikes are driven into its body, but it doesn't let go. "**You are mighty!**" says Kibi encouragingly.

I AM! agrees the elemental. **BUT THIS CREATURE IS SPIKY, AND PAINFUL TO CRUSH!**

Ernie manages a few sword hits on the grappled construct, but his damage is minimal – the foe is resistant to mundane damage as well as magic.

Back in the old guild hall, Dranko starts to relax as he realizes the null shadows can't touch him. Even better, he takes out his *immovable rod* and makes himself a little seat, where he can brace against the pillar and whip the null shadows from safety (though first he uses a wand of *cure critical wounds* on himself). Also, he warns the others that two of the null shadows have clearly noticed the new hole in the *wall of stone*.

"Why is no one helping me?" whines Flicker from the floor. He has nearly been stepped on several times by the grappling giants above him, and figures it's only a matter of time before he's smashed to jelly.

Aravis fires a *disintegrate* at the construct. No effect. He sighs as he mentally revises his assessment of the enemy from "magic resistant" to "downright immune."

Just as Dranko is getting comfortable on his perch, the odd null shadow steps back into his view and pegs him with another *searing light*. Dranko peers at it. *What the heck?*

Some of the null shadows grow tried of flailing uselessly below the half-orc and move through the *wall of stone*. They attack Kibi, smearing his skin with stinging black wounds and forcing the *forcecage* spell out of his head. Morningstar, having retrieved her non-magical weapon, moves to defend the dwarf.

The elemental and the construct continue to roll around, locked in a grappling embrace. One of the construct's spikes gets driven into the ground right at Grey Wolf's feet, as he moves into position next to Flicker. Ernie drops *Coiled Viper*, draws his gartine shortsword, and destroys one of the remaining null shadows. Dranko destroys another one with his whip, and beckons to the spell-casting one to come closer. It doesn't oblige.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH! THUD! CRUNCH!

That's the sound of both the elemental and the construct falling upward into the ceiling, propelled by Aravis's *reverse gravity*. Their epic struggle continues high above their heads, as pieces of rock and corroded iron debris rain down. *There's something you don't see every day*, thinks Flicker to himself.

The null shadow caster points a black finger at Dranko and hisses a *greater command: FALL!*

"Bite me!" rasps Dranko, resisting the compulsion.

Ernie and Morningstar finish off the final null shadow on their side of the door, and Dranko pops the last one at the foot of his pillar. Now only the caster remains. It targets Dranko with a *flame strike*, but the half-orc deftly uses the *immovable rod* to swing around the pillar, avoiding all the damage. The null shadow hisses in frustration, but Dranko notices that the flames also melted the *wall of ice* covering the *symbol*. He mentally warns the others.

A spike from the construct snaps off and plummets downward. Flicker's eyes grow wide, but his strength is still gone and there's nothing he can do. It impales itself... in the ground, inches from the halfling's head. "Save me that spike!" calls Dranko. "I want a souvenir."

I'm going to kill you! thinks Flicker over the mind-link.

Ernie dashes into the room to help Dranko, and with his *true seeing* still up he sees what Dranko cannot. "That's not a null shadow!" he cries. "It's Praska!" And so saying, he casts a *flame strike* of his own on Dranko's childhood friend.

Dranko tumbles down from the pillar and lands directly next to Praska. “I thought better of you,” he says, before tripping her up and scoring her with a flurry of whip snaps.

“Then you’re still an idiot,” Praska hisses.

“Idiot?” Dranko lets disappointment fill his voice. “Who’s the one that’s taken up with evil, horrible people? You’ve taken the cheap and sleazy way out. Like I said, I thought better of you. And, face it, you’re jealous ’cause I married Morningstar.”

Praska chuckles. “Actually, I always thought you’d do better.”

Aravis moves in, avoids looking at the *symbol* and casts *chain lightning* on Praska. Ernie sees that she is entirely unharmed. Praska stands up, dusts herself off, endures another whip-crack from Dranko without flinching, and casts *harm*. Wounds sprout all over Dranko’s face and body.

Grey Wolf finally gets around to casting *restoration* on Flicker. “It’s about time!” Flicker shrieks.

“Yes, yes,” says Grey Wolf. “Now go help Dranko.”

Kibi *summons* another earth elemental, but when it tries to grapple Praska she slips from its hands as if greased.

“I just don’t get it,” says Dranko, moving into flanking position with the elemental. “Why do you want to work with the people who were so cruel to us? Unbelievable!”

Praska smiles, though only Ernie can tell. “Dranko, I could fill a book with what you don’t know.”

Dranko launches a devastating series of whip attacks that ought to kill her – but after the third crack of the whip a bright silver circlet around her head glows briefly before turning to a dull gray and falling to the ground in pieces. As it does so, all of her wounds heal.

Flicker finally gets into the action and charges at Praska... only to be brought up short by some magical effect that prevents him from approaching. He screams in frustration while futilely pushing toward her.

“Confession is good for the soul,” Dranko says to his old friend. “It’s not too late to tell us why you’ve chosen this path of evil, and repent. Delioch will forgive you.”

Praska chuckles. “Because we will win, is why.”

“And what do you get if you win?”

Praska smiles knowingly. “Favor.”

Dranko scoffs. “That’s a sucker’s bet.”

Aravis centers a *greater dispelling* on Praska, and luck is with him. He manages to dispel the *symbol* but not Kibi’s earth elemental. He also gets rid of the *repulsion* that was keeping Flicker away from Praska. He stumbles forward towards her.

Ernie fires off a *dimensional anchor*, but Praska was specifically prepared for that. It dissipates harmlessly into her *spell immunity*. Praska realizes that her tactical situation has finally become wholly untenable. She takes a step back and says to Dranko: “Tell Califax we say hello.” So saying, she casts *word of recall* and vanishes.

“Crap!” Dranko exclaims.

Into the momentary silence that follows comes a huge clattering, as if a cartload of rusted machinery had been dumped into a quarry. A booming and satisfied voice comes from high up in the other room, speaking in Terran. **NEXT!**

Atanatotatos: What a great update, Sagiro!

EroGaki: Those null shadows are no joke! *shudder*

Great update, Sagiro! Looking forward to the next.

coyote6: Ah, the fully prepared, high-level cleric enemy. So much fun.

Innocent Bystander: So the party was right, Praska was responsible. Does them having access to all those high-level divination spells take some of the fun, or at least surprise, out of it for you?

Sagiro: Given the party’s willingness to cast *commune*, *augury*, *omen of peril*, *thought capture* and *find the path*, I consider it a bonus when I manage to keep *anything* secret for any significant period. But I try to structure the campaign *assuming* they’ll learn things by divination spells. Also, the Black Circle’s main schtick is divinations and the thwarting thereof, so I do have ready-made and plausible countermeasures when I want them. It’s all good.



Shadows of the Past

After the party exchange celebratory words about the effectiveness of grapple-happy elementals, Kibi looks thoughtful. “That was great, but weren’t we here looking for the cauldron? I thought our divinations told us Praska was in Kivia.”

“Good point,” says Dranko, grimacing. He’s still a bloody mess from Praska’s *harm*. Morningstar heals him up, and she and Ernie top off the rest of the group.

Morningstar casts another *circle dance* to divine the direction to Praska, and gets the same reading as last time: east. Also, the direction is *not* sharply up, which means she’s either underground as they are, or extremely far away. Perhaps she teleported back to Kivia? Or maybe she never was in Kivia at all, and has some means of foiling the spell. Who knows?

Kibi, focused on the main goal, casts *locate object* to find the Null Shadow Cauldron. He expects it to be shielded, and so is surprised to get a clear reading – off to the southwest, and downward. “Huh,” he says.

“What do we do with it when we find it?” asks Morningstar.

“Give it to Abernathy so he can suck the magic out of it,” Dranko jests.

“Or store it in the basement with our other evil stuff,” Flicker laughs. “Heck, we can keep the other stuff inside it.”

Aravis rubs his hands together. “It won’t be too much longer before I can cast *Mordenkainen’s disjunction*.”

“Isn’t that a bad idea?” Dranko asks. “I mean, if the thing’s an artifact, couldn’t you lose your powers?”

“That’s a chance I’m willing to take,” Aravis answers. “Besides, what better way is there to follow in the footsteps of the Archmagi, than to lose all my powers?”



There are other doors leading out of the ancient subterranean guild hall; Flicker checks the one most likely to lead in the direction of Kibi’s spell, and finds it neither locked nor trapped. He gently pushes it open and the Company peer inside.

It’s a fairly large space – maybe twenty-five feet on a side – with a number of tables and desks pushed up against the walls. All are empty save one in the far corner, upon which rests a quill pen and an overturned ink-pot. The last of the ink is still dripping onto a fast-drying stain on the stone floor. Before anyone can contaminate the scene, Morningstar strides over to that desk and casts *thought capture*.

She recognizes Praska’s mental voice: *Crap. Crap crap crap crap! How did they find me?*

Interesting. So they had taken her by surprise. She casts a second time. *I bet that stupid halfling is going to... wait... dammit! Stop thinking!* Morningstar can’t help but chuckle. And it makes sense, since Praska clearly knows and expects that Morningstar can cast thought-scooping divinations.

She casts a third time, and gets a follow-on thought to the first one. *...find me? Crap.* Then there’s a pause. *Son of a... the stupid cauldron! It must have been the cauldron that they found!*

Considering that Praska might *also* be able to cast *thought capture*, Morningstar thinks very deliberately: *Yes, Praska. It was the stupid cauldron.*

Dranko issues the following *sending* to Tomnic via Ernie:

From Dranko: Praska is confirmed powerful Black Circle. Recommend that powerful, trusted priests apprehend and strip all her friends, including Marigold. Use vast caution, speed.

Tomnic replies:

Thank you. I will take that under advisement. Do you know where she is now?

Since Ernie only had the one *sending*, Morningstar casts the next one as Dranko dictates:

Licking her wounds. In Kivia? Not sure. All divinations are suspect. She’s as powerful as Morningstar, and you know what that means. Dranko. (Feeling a need to convey some humility, but with only two words remaining, Morningstar appends:) *Huh? Morningstar.*

Tomnic’s answer:

Morningstar, we know how powerful you are. You have a reputation. We will set to work on Praska, and double-check everyone inside the temple.



While the *sendings* are being composed and delivered, Flicker has been sitting and thinking hard. “Which one of us do you think is the stupid halfling?” he asks out loud, but mostly to himself. While Ernie stammers modestly, Flicker thinks some more before standing in a hurry. “Ooooh!”

He starts investigating the perimeter of the room, carefully tapping on the walls and running deft fingers along the stone. While the others look on he does a completely thorough search of the space, and just when they think it’s probably a fool’s errand, he crawls under one of the tables. The rest of the Company hear a clear *CLICK!*, and a small piece of stone swings inward to reveal a small cubbyhole filled with parchment. “Ha!” they hear the halfling shout. “See? She was afraid I’d do that. Who’s stupid now, Praska!”

The many pages of parchment are covered with scrawl, and Flicker stows them safely in his pack. He spends another few minutes completing his search but there’s nothing else of note, and specifically no sign of the cauldron.

With Kibi (and his ongoing *locate object*) navigating, Flicker continues to take point on the exploration. There’s a small complex of rooms and short hallways, and in one of these they find a table with various containers upon it: a lead bottle with a stopper; a small metal tub with a hinged lid; and three wooden boxes. Flicker checks them for traps, while others check for magic and evil. All tests are negative, so Flicker opens each one.

The bottle contains a thick liquid with an eye-watering vapor rising off it. The alchemists in the group guess that it’s a contact poison, probably potent. Flicker hastily puts back the stopper. The metal tub is half-filled with mercury.

The first of the wooden boxes contains a handful of emeralds – their particular shade of deep green is highly reminiscent of the null shadows recently encountered. The second box contains about thirty carefully chiseled flakes from various types of gemstones: emerald, sapphire, topaz, even some diamond flakes. Flicker guesses that the flakes alone could fetch twenty-five thousand gold pieces if he worked the market. The third box contains finger bones. Ew.

Another room en route to the cauldron is small and empty, but with a large black circle inlaid into the floor. It glows faintly of teleportation magic. Aravis casts *arcane lock* on the door, in case something teleports in while they’re searching.

Finally they find the room with the cauldron – a 20-by-20 square chamber nearly identical to the room in which the cauldron resided back at the Cosnor estate. The room itself is full of shifting shadows, and indeed is partially *in* the Plane of Shadow. The Null Shadow Cauldron, source of so much suffering, sits in the center. There are no null shadows to be seen, but the taint of them is palpable.

Morningstar is prepared for this: she casts her second prepared *shadowblast* into the room, and the shadows ripple and vanish. The cauldron itself still squats there like a black iron toad. The tang of null shadows has been diminished but not eliminated; they can see a shimmering “lid” of sorts still across the opening of the cauldron. The thing is still a gateway to Shadow, but Morningstar’s spell has, for the moment, sealed it off.

After some quick debate as to the best way to be rid of the thing, they decide to try the simple and direct method first. Aravis casts *greater dispelling* on the cauldron, and it seems to work: at least it no longer detects as magic to Ernie.

Then, with the rest of the party backing out of the room in case of emergency, Aravis pegs it with a *disintegrate* while its magic is suppressed.



Just like that, the Null Shadow Cauldron is reduced to metal filings. “Can we do a *sending* to Praska?” asks Ernie. “I want it to say: *Destroyed your cauldron. Neener neener neener.*”

Aravis suggests: *You don’t have to worry about us finding you through the cauldron any more.*

They spend another hour clearing out the rest of the place. There’s nothing as interesting as what they’ve already found, though they do find Praska’s bedroom and procure a few strands of hair from her pillow along with her spare Black Circle robe. There’s also a standard Black Circle Ritual Chamber™, with the expected inlaid circles and mathematical equations written on the walls.

Finally, in another mostly intact building that centuries ago was a large inn, they find signs that it was more recently inhabited by somewhere between 25 and 50 people. They appear to have all left a couple of years earlier. Morningstar goes to the biggest of the rooms and casts a final *thought capture*. *I'm sure not going to miss this place. I hear our new headquarters is in a mansion in Kallor.*

Ha! So, with the cauldron taken care of, the Company agree on their next priority: find Praska.

Ananatotatos: Very, very interesting. Also these shorter, more frequent updates are a reliever!

Innocent Bystander: I'm sure the party is beyond happy that the cauldren is gone... or is it?

Awesome update Sagiro, and any update, even a smallish one, is a welcome update.

Aravis: Yes, yes we are. Although that is tempered by the knowledge that there is another one still out there somewhere.

Innocent Bystander: Like any powerful artifact/device, if one is good, two must be better. With 'good' and 'better' being relative terms of course.



Not On the First Try

The Company *teleport* back to the Greenhouse. With Posada's Boundary dissolved and the Uncrossable Sea not so uncrossable, teleportation magic makes the world a much smaller place. They have noticed an odd phenomenon, though: when they go from Kivia to Charagan, time seems to shift. The sun moves eastward in the sky, and it seems to be several hours earlier. When they blip the other way – from west to east – it gets later.

For a couple of hours the wizards pore over the papers found in Praska's underground hideout. There's much that is useful, interesting, and disturbing, but the most relevant information falls into four different categories:

- Praska's desire for the Null Shadow Cauldron was driven (ironically) by a desire not to be discovered. Specifically, she sensed that the Diviners' Guild of Hae Charagan was on the verge of finding her out, and was planning on sending null shadows to eradicate them. (The Company had enlisted the Guild some years back to scry Mokad, after the Black Circle had kidnapped Praska. The diviner who they retained, a fellow named Ragnir, had been assaulted *back through his scrying spell*, an occurrence so shocking that he dropped the assignment and claimed never to want to see the Company again.) Ever since that day, the Diviners had been attempting to discover the identity and whereabouts of the Black Circle presence in the city. Praska was convinced that the Guild was about to discover her hiding place, "despite my countermeasures." There are some brief notes outlining her plan to steal the Cauldron from the Cosnor estate in Kallor: what spells and scrolls she'd use, the best time to strike, etc.
- There is a leather-bound book containing full operating instructions for the installation and use of the Null Shadow Cauldron, along with the rituals required for preparing a "Shadow Chamber." There are several kinds of null shadows that one can call forth from the Cauldron – what you get depends on what material components you throw in while performing the rituals. There are seven different kinds of null shadows, all of which are immune to magic, but which have different abilities and powers. Ones made with emerald chips (as they discovered) can drain Constitution. Topaz chips generate disease-causing null shadows. The sapphire flakes would produce null shadows with limited spell-casting powers. There are occasional references here to "the other two Cauldrons."
- There are numerous outlines of ideas for how the heck one might rescue Emperor Naradawk from the prison-Prime of Volpos. Along with each one is an admission to the effect of "that'll never work." Praska seems to think that Mokad's plot to align Volpos and Abernia was their best shot, and now it's pretty hopeless. She also writes that "There may be other ways in the main library, but that's locked up in the Spire's impregnable bakery in Tal Hae." (On this last topic, she also refers to "the numerous times we've tried and failed to get inside.")
- She writes that "the collaboration with the others is going poorly." She goes on to bemoan the lack of cooperation from these others: "they only turn on the circle once a month, they act unnecessarily mysterious, and they tell me nothing." In particular, she refers to "that thing that leads them."

The Company ruminate over this new intelligence. Most disturbing is the fact that there are still two more Null Shadow Cauldrons in existence, though it doesn't seem like Praska has access to them. But the party are gobsmacked at the reminder that they have the Black Circle's "main library" squirreled away in the Greenhouse. Aravis thinks for a minute that might simply be a reference to the Evil Black Book they have locked in a trunk, but Kibi remembers that after defeating and killing Mokad, they ransacked a whole room full of papers, books and scrolls from the Cosnor estate. Those were stuffed into a closet and forgotten, but surely a thorough reading of those materials should be a near-term priority!

It's news (though not surprising) to the Company that the Black Circle have been trying to force their way into the Greenhouse, and they all thank Abernathy for his potent warding abilities. (It has been heretofore impossible for anyone to enter the Greenhouse uninvited.) Dranko wonders if their house-keys are a potential liability.

But... finding Praska is still the highest-priority item on the agenda. Morningstar casts *find the path* to "the location where Praska fled using her word of recall." The spell points her due east – just as her earlier *circle dances* had done. Aravis *scries* Praska, expecting her to be shielded, and is shocked to see her clear as day through the scry sensor.

She is sitting on a bench, surrounded by a green lawn – maybe in a park? – and reading a book. She looks neither injured nor perturbed. The party don't trust the image one bit. Aravis casts *detect magic* through the sensor, and there is some magic on her in small amounts – conjuration, divination and enchantment.

The party make their plans – to teleport around while the *find the path* is still up, in order to triangulate on Praska's position. Aravis is well stocked with *teleport* spells, so off they go, first to the grounds of the Golden Goblet in Djaw. They arrive behind a hedge in the expansive back yard where they hope to go unnoticed. As expected, it's six hours later than it was when they left – getting on towards evening. The *find the path* is now pointing southwest instead of east. They consult their map of Kivia, seeing what's in that direction. The most likely target now is the coastal city of Kai Kin.

A gardener comes around the hedge, sees the seven of them standing there, and drops his spade. But he quickly recognizes them – they're the incredibly rich guests who were assaulted here not long ago, the ones Balthazar said should be showed respect and deference no matter what they do or say. The gardener bows low, picks up his shovel, and asks if there's anything he can do to make their stay behind the hedge more pleasant. The party politely decline.

Their next *teleport* stop is the abandoned and ruined golem-city of Repose, one of the stops they had made while questing for the Crosser's Maze. It's exactly as they remember; a dry wind blows through, stirring up the untraveled dust. Not much of a tourist destination, Repose. A golem trundles up dragging the disintegrating remains of a cart behind it, and silently awaits further orders.

Now the *find the path* is pointing north-east – directly back to Djaw! "If she's in the southwest corner of Djaw, we're going to be really embarrassed," Dranko mutters.

Aravis is out of *greater teleports*, but he still has two more of the normal variety. He casts again, intending to bring them just outside the northern wall of Djaw. But, as any wizard will tell you, teleporting is an inexact science, and mishaps are an inevitability if you make enough trips.

There is pain, and the awful experience of being more or less mashed together. Someone's arm is sticking straight out of Grey Wolf's chest, and Morningstar's left leg seems to end in three different feet. But a moment later they become untangled, the pain subsides, and they are outside the towering wall of... "That's not Djaw," Grey Wolf says, pointing up.

The flags flying on the city walls clearly display the symbol of the God Nifi, and there are numerous Delfirian guards patrolling the top. One of them sees a group of armed intruders down below and yells, "Halt! Put down your weap..."

But Aravis is already casting again, and this time there are no screw-ups. The wall of the Delfirian metropolis of Firebrand is replaced with the very similar wall of Djaw.

"I feel like someone reached into my stomach and swirled their fist around," Dranko says.

"I feel like... ooooooh." Ernie looks distinctly green.

"Hey, does this mean Ernie's no longer a virgin?" Dranko asks, grinning. "Because I think my...."

"Oooookay!" Aravis says, desperately wanting Dranko not to finish that sentence.

The *find the path* is in fact pointing back into Djaw, and there's some group head-slapping at their unnecessary detours. Once inside the city walls they *wind walk*, and less than a minute later they are descending onto one of the manicured green lawns stretching between buildings in a large campus of church buildings. They land next to a park bench, which Morningstar's spell indicates is where Praska went after casting *word of recall*. It's also the bench upon which Praska was sitting (according to Aravis's *scry*) less than ten minutes earlier. There's no sign of Praska.

A priest, comfortable in a white silk robe with gold trim, walks calmly toward them. He had watched the party wafting down from above and then turning solid with great curiosity. "Welcome," he says pleasantly. "Are you in need of assistance? Are you wounded?"

“Where are we?” Flicker asks.

“You are at the Temple of Heros, Goddess of mercy and healing,” the priest says, bowing.

“Hey!” Dranko exclaims. “I’m from the Church of Delioch, God of healing, from beyond the Uncrossable Sea!”

“Yes,” says the priest, smiling. “We just learned about that three days ago.”

“From a young lady?” Dranko asks, trying to sound unconcerned.

“No. From Father Stone.”

Dranko snorts. “Is he related to Brother Tree?”

Aravis describes Praska in some detail, and the priest listens intently, but he’s never seen her before.

“It’s an honor to meet you,” Dranko tells him, “but we can’t stay. One of our priestesses has turned evil, and we kind of thought we... um, well, it’s a long story.”

The priest regards him curiously. Dranko has an idea and changes his approach. “Say, actually, while I’m here, can you show me around the grounds? I guess I should learn as much as I can about the Kivian God of Healing, after all.”

The priest is happy to oblige. The grounds are extensive, as Heros is one of the more popular deities in the Kivian pantheon. While he gives Dranko the tour, the others cast *detect magic* on the bench. There is the faint glow of a *hallow* all around them but no specific magics on the bench itself. A *thought capture* from Morningstar reveals no interesting thoughts.

They fire off a final *sending* to Tomnic back in Hae Charagan, letting him know of their progress, and that divinations on Praska are almost certain to be invalid. Tomnic replies that he’s not surprised, but it’s good to have that confirmed. Also, that Marigold has been detained in her room under heavy guard.



They spring for a night at the Golden Goblet – no great hardship, especially considering they still get a discounted rate. It’s beautiful and luxurious and with not an assassin in sight. The service is exceptional.

The staff do look oddly at Kibi, as though they’re waiting for him to do something unusual. “Can we get you anything?” one servant asks him slowly, as though talking to a child.

“No,” Kibi says, discomfited. “And I can understand you quite well, thank you.” The servant smiles indulgently and excuses himself. Kibi glares at Dranko, who can’t stop himself from smiling.

“Well,” Dranko says, “you see, when you made my *gloves of dexterity* cause my finger to get stuck in my nose...”

“Only if you were *picking* your nose!” Kibi interjects.

“Yeah,” Dranko says. “So, later, I made myself look like you, and ‘activated’ the gloves again. And I may have given the impression that you lacked any sense of personal hygiene...”



From the foolish to the extraordinary: that night, Kibi dreams, and in his restless slumber the world itself speaks to him.

KIBILHATHUR BIMSON, CHILD OF GELA, CHILD OF CRANCHUS. YOU ARE STILL THE OPENER. THE SPLINTER HAS ENCASED ITSELF, I AND IT CRYING OUT TOGETHER. IT MUST BE YOU WHO CRACKS ITS SHELL. BLESS IT WITH ITS LOVER’S KISS, THE WATCHER’S HOUR COME, AND TOGETHER WE WILL CLEANSE ABERNIA.

EroGaki: Never a dull moment for Team Abernathy.

Innocent Bystander: I guess the teleportation side trek was the 2% mishap roll? Has the party gotten too powerful to do the little things in life, like go for a walk?

Aravis: Why, not at all. Just last night Dranko went water skiing... Of course, he did it by tying a rope into a *Mordenkainen’s magnificent mansion* that was hanging a few feet off the stormy ocean and activating an item that gives him *water walking*...

Piratecat: Aravis is right about the little things in life! We were doing something ridiculous last night – teleporting our *folding boat* into the middle of an ocean storm and casting *Mordenkainen’s magnificent mansion* so that we could dreamwalk to find an island that we learned about from a dead goddess, en route to almost making a horrible mistake, and that was the simple part of the plan – and Morningstar says wryly, “Does it seem to anyone that our life has gotten a little bit weird?”



Why You Should Clean Your Basement

Ernie pops a sweet fig into his mouth. “Oh good,” he says between chews. “A new delivery of proper nouns. We haven’t had one of those in a while.”

They debate the meaning of Kibi’s dream over brunch. “The Watcher” is a term oft used for the mysterious goddess Uthol Inga, little worshiped in Charagan. The myths surrounding Uthol Inga and Her role in the escape of the Travelers from the great Adversary are contradictory. Her proponents maintain that Her liaison with the Adversary was a ruse, that She played the part of the Adversary’s consort merely to learn his designs and gain his trust. When the Travelers fled, She delayed the Adversary long enough for the others to successfully imprison the Dark God. Her detractors, most notably the Church of Werthis, claim that She truly was allied with the Adversary, and only fled with the others Travelers when Her lover turned on Her and tried to destroy Her.

Beyond that, the Company have no further insights into the dream. Kibi finds the notion that he’ll need to provide a “lover’s kiss” somewhat embarrassing.



It stands to reason that if Praska feared imminent discovery by the Diviners’ Guild of Hae Charagan, said Guild would be a good place for the Company to go next in their search for her. After their meal Aravis *teleports* the group back across the Now Easily Crossable Sea. Because of the time difference it’s early morning when they arrive; the gate to the Guild mansion is closed and locked. There’s no one on guard.

The party stand restlessly outside on the street for a couple of minutes, unsure of how to proceed. “You’re diviners!” Dranko grumbles. “Shouldn’t you know that someone’s here?”

Grey Wolf scratches his chin. “Maybe they know it’s us specifically, and that’s *why* there’s no one out to meet us.”

Ernie nods. “The one guy we talked to *did* tell us he never wanted to see us again...”

Flicker examines the gate at Dranko’s prodding. It’s clearly trapped with some kind of incendiary spell. At Dranko’s further provocation, Flicker pops the lock, bypassing the trap. When Aravis takes him to task, Flicker protests, “But I was only doing what Dranko told me. And he’s my boss!” In a stage whisper he adds, “He’s the Oracle!”

“When you’re on his business, fine,” Aravis admonishes. “But we’re part of a different organization, and you should do what we *all* decide is best.”

“Want me to lock it back up again, then?” Flicker sulks.

Morningstar casts a *sending* to Ragmir, the diviner with whom they previously did business:

It’s Morningstar, Dranko, Ernie and company. We had a recent run-in with Praska and the Black Circle. Would you be willing to talk? We’re outside.

The groggy reply:

Mmm? Huh? What? Oh, Morningstar. [yawn] Yes, I remember you. You’re outside? I’ll be right out to let you in.

“Flicker, lock the door again,” Dranko says quietly.

Three minutes later a disheveled man in pajamas comes walking down the front path. He’s tall and portly, hair a shock of black curls. Ragmir stops at the gate and looks askance at the lock.

Dranko quickly explains. “The... er... the trap on your door is no longer active.”

“How do you know that?” Ragmir asks, eyes narrowing.

“We disarmed it,” Dranko admits. “It was... um... it was dark, and we were worried about you! But then Morningstar got a hold of you, and you sounded okay, so we figured we’d just wait out here. And anyway, we thought someone as skilled as you would know to expect us!”

Ragmir opens the gate. “Your name is Dranko, right? Well, let me tell you something that I’m surprised you don’t know already. We are about a dozen diviners of significant skill. We do spend our time researching divinatory spells, and much of what we do is get paid to divine things our clients wish to know about. But we do *not* know every single thing that is likely to happen, going to happen, or will happen, even here on the grounds. I don’t know what you had for breakfast, and I don’t know what you’re going to have for breakfast tomorrow, and frankly I don’t care.”

"Then what good is being a diviner?" Dranko asks.

"When we *want* to know something, we have an excellent chance of learning it." Ragmir looks like he's had to give this kind of speech before, but to children. "But it doesn't mean we just *know* things."

Dranko harrumphs. "I feel cheated."

"Dranko," Aravis says, "We're about to ask these people for help. Preemptively asking them what good they are seems a bit counterproductive, don't you think?"

Ragmir clears his throat. "Now, you said something about someone... Praska, of the Black Circle? Why don't you come in."

Dranko makes small talk as they head down the front walk to the Guild house. "Yeah. She was getting ready to assassinate some of you. Because you were getting really close to finding her out."

Ragmir nods, keeping up a calm front, though some alarm shows in his eyes. "There is *someone*, we know, that has been keeping up Black Circle activities in the city."

"That's her," Dranko confirms.

"It's a 'her' then? That's good to know."

"We also have some of her hair," Dranko adds. "And we nearly got *her*, but she got away."

"Hair? Even better!" Ragmir obviously finds this significant, and it's odd to hear his voice so upbeat as he adds, "And she was going to attempt murder on us?"

"Yeah," says Dranko, as they step into the foyer. "But we destroyed the thing she was going to use as the murder weapon."

"Thank you!" exclaims Ragmir.

Ernie then provides a full description of null shadows, leaving out no gory detail. Ragmir listens intently.

Aravis glances at the steep spiral staircase leading to the upper floors of the mansion. "It might be in your best interest, if you happen to come across one of the other Cauldrons, that you prepare non-magical defenses."

"Big brutish bodyguards with mundane weapons," Ernie suggests.

"Anyway," Dranko says, "she was awfully worried that you were getting close to discovering where she was."

"She should have been. And we *are* getting close."

"When we try to divine her, our spells all get redirected," Dranko explains. He tells Ragmir about the park bench in Djaw.

Ragmir nods again. "We've seen that bench through some of our spells, though there was no sign of this Praska. I'll tell you what we *have* learned – mostly one very important fact. We know what's protecting her from divinations. It's something called a Tome of Deceit. And *that* is what we're getting close to finding. Find the Tome, and I'll bet you can find Praska. I would have said we were two or three weeks away from tracking it down, but if you have hair, and a likeness, we might be able to narrow that to days."

Ernie laughs. "Sir, I would like to give you lots of money to continue that work."

"**Belinda** has been responsible for most of the progress on this case," Ragmir says. "She is our most powerful diviner, and leader of the Guild."

"I suggest we bodyguard her until this is finished," Dranko says. "Though... you don't still want us never to come back, do you?"

"No, no," Ragmir answers with a laugh. "I'm sorry about that. It was heat of the moment. I had never been assaulted back through a divination spell before. Since then we have made a study of the Black Circle. I doubt we know much more than you, but they are a cult of necromancy and divination; the Emperor, who nearly made egress at Verdshane, was a worshiper of it. Suffice to say it is a religion of foul folk who are up to no good. We didn't want them practicing their cult in this city, *and* we have had missives from high up in the nobility, that it would be a good use of our time and money to suss them out. We have been trying for almost a year and half. It is boggling, the layers of protection they have. They are divinatory masters themselves. It has taken every ounce of our effort and knowledge to make any headway. We've lost two members questing for rare reagents to power our spells. But we are close. We are very close to finding the remaining superior of the Black Circle, operating here in the city."

Dranko frowns. "How the heck did she end up being in charge? Praska's just a kid."

"She applied herself?" Aravis deadpans.

"And we killed everyone else?" Grey Wolf adds.

Morningstar chuckles. "We did puree a whole bunch of them down in that basement."

Their talk turns to Kivia. The party explain that across the sea, the Black Circle is mainstream and not considered evil. In fact, people of all religions give them life energy in exchange for knowledge. Ragmir raises his eyebrows in disbelief. "I don't know anyone who would be stupid enough to do that!"

"You do now," Flicker says sheepishly.

"Over there it is a common thing to do," Aravis explains.

"They should stop!" Ragmir says, shaking his head. "Can you imagine any good thing that the Black Circle might be doing with a huge store of 'life energy'?"

"We think they were using it to bring the planes into alignment," Ernie says. "Which is ironic, when you think about how that ended. They lost a whole lot of life energy in Kallor."

"Excuse me for changing the subject," Kibi says, thinking of his recent dream. "Do you know anything about a splinter in Abernia? I dreamed that Abernia was in pain."

"You mean the world?" Ragmir asks, confused. "I wasn't aware it had emotions, so no, I don't know about that."

"Abernia speaks to Kibi sometimes," Dranko explains with a grin.

"Odd," Ragmir says. "But then you are a dwarven wizard, which shouldn't be possible in the first place."

"I'm not the only one, you know," Kibi says.

Ragmir smiles. "If you're referring to Cranchus, our divinations indicate that he is a myth. There is no such person."

Kibi opens his mouth, but closes it again without answering. It would take too long to explain everything. Best to keep the diviners focused. Ragmir, for his part, has become lost in thought and doesn't notice Kibi's expression.

"So," says the diviner brightly. "Hair?"



The Company sit with Ragmir and two of his fellow diviners and share everything they know about the Black Circle. Morningstar warns them ahead of time that some of this knowledge might be dangerous for them to have, but Ragmir is undaunted.

"Yes, I'm aware of that," he says gravely. "We deal in knowledge, day and night, night and day. Not all of it is safe to know. Sometimes we learn things that powerful forces would not wish us to have. But that's our job."

The full dissertation is a lengthy one, as they leave out no detail from their sojourn in Het Branoi. When Aravis opines that the ultimate purpose of Het Branoi was to open a Gate to the location of the Adversary, Ragmir takes a sharp breath and holds up his hand. "You mean the monstrous evil god from whom it is said that all the other gods fled? And you think the Black Circle is the Adversary?"

"No," Aravis clarifies. "But those who call themselves the Black Circle seem to worship Him."

Talk turns also to the Sharshun. Ragmir is aware of the Masking, and that many people cannot keep the name 'Sharshun' in their heads. He himself can, and knows to be cautious.

"The Sharshun also worship the Black Circle," Dranko says, "but they don't work well with Praska. Their leader is 'Darkeye,' who is crazy stupid powerful, and may be some kind of monster."

Ragmir nods. "Yes. And their base of operations is somewhere in or around the Greatwood, though it's heavily warded and we've never even been able to pinpoint its location, let alone learn anything about it."

As the discussion comes to an end, and Ragmir announces that there's no time like the present to get started on a new divination ritual to find Praska, Dranko makes an offer. "I said this before, and I wasn't joking. If you're all going to be tied up chanting and casting and stuff, I'd like to offer my services as a bodyguard."

"How much do you charge?" Ragmir asks.

"We charge that you find Praska," Dranko answers. "And that you give me a scroll of *sending* while I guard Belinda, so that I can quickly summon the others in an emergency."

Flicker agrees to stay with Dranko at the guild house, while the others *teleport* back to the Greenhouse. Ernie makes a report of all their recent findings to Ozilinsh via the crystal ball. Of special concern is the discovery that Thewana (Abernathy's former apprentice, who was later sent to work with the Archmage Grawly) was not only still alive, but working with the Delfirian military (and Tor) while calling herself 'Davarian.'

Ozilinsh is quick to put the pieces together. Back when Abernathy and Thewana drained the Delfirian throne, Tor's ancestor Davarian Firemount must have transferred his consciousness into Thewana's mind. Eventually he took over the body, killed Grawly, and fled to Delfir. Ozilinsh's best guess is that Thewana is effectively dead, and that Davarian is likely the only mind in Thewana's old body.

Dealing with Tor and Thewana is still very much an item on the Company's "to do" list.



Before long the floor of the Greenhouse basement is strewn with clutter. The wizards have been excavating the closets, piling up workbenches, alembics, test-tube racks and other accumulated oddments as they look for the papers pilfered so many months ago from the Black Circle's HQ in Kallor. Left alone for the nonce are three closets in the far back corner – the ones that contain various evil objects picked up on their adventures. When Grey Wolf strays close to one in particular, he can feel palpable Evil radiating through the door. The Book, wrapped in a blanket and locked away in a thick trunk, is emanating a muffled malice.

After an hour of excavation, Kibi finds what they've been searching for – a locked chest filled with books and scrolls. He hauls it over to a large table that Dranko uses when enchanting armor. "I can't believe I forgot about this," the dwarf mutters.

He, Aravis and Grey Wolf start to spread the small library out on the table. When they've taken full stock, they realize it could take weeks to carefully read every page. (Especially true since the writing is in an unknown language of unknown characters, and slightly magical on top of that. With both *comprehend languages* and *read magic* active, the mages still have to read slowly and carefully to figure out what they're looking at.) But, there's no need to spend weeks. Several hours should get them a basic skim of the material, and from there they can home in on topics of particular interest. Morningstar offers to help keep things organized. They set to work.



Concurrent with the party wizards studying their Black Circle reading materials, the Diviners Guild of Hae Charagan is starting the long divinatory spell that will (they hope) reveal something about Praska. Dranko and Flicker watch as Ragmir and his cohorts gather up scrolls, components and an assortment of glass jars, setting them up in a detailed pattern as directed by their leader Belinda. Praska's hair is set in the center of a chalked circle, in a small pot of some magical bubbling goo.

The rogues watch with detached interest; they are more worried about watching the door, and keeping an open eye for any teleporters who might breach the building's defenses.



One thing becomes evident at once: about 80% of all the Black Circle papers are related to one specific subject: the casting of the spell that was meant to merge Abernia and Volpos. There are sheets and sheets of mathematical scribblings, and many derivations of equations used to model the synchronization of something called "planar shadow spheres." Some of the end-point equations match what the Company found inscribed in the Black Circle's enormous ritual room. Other math relates to accounting for residual localized magic from "nearby operations." Morningstar, around midnight, casts a *sending* to Dranko:

Dear Goddess, this is boring. Thank goodness my religious practice doesn't involve a lot of math.



Back at the Diviners' Guild, all ten of the resident diviners are hours-deep into their spell. Ragmir has told Dranko that they should be on track to have an answer the next day. There's some speculation, that Dranko cannot help overhearing, that Belinda might not be strong enough to crack the protection on the Tome of Deceit, even with the lock of Praska's hair. Worse, she could be in personal physical danger if the spell fails. The others are confident that she'll hold up.



In addition to all the math, the Black Circle archives contain copious notes for the exceedingly complex magic ritual that accompanies the equations. This is pretty clearly the spell Mokad and co. were engaged in when the Company so rudely

interrupted them. The wizards figure that if they were inclined to spend half a year studying this ritual, a year or so in preparations, didn't mind invoking the Black Circle, were willing to expose themselves liberally to that Evil Black Goo (called "Essence" in the literature), and felt like sacrificing Grey Wolf after all, they could probably arrange to merge Volpos and Abernia for real this time.

But of the greatest interest is this: there are books and scrolls outlining what is necessary to cast the spell of *forced resurrection*. (The Black Circle had decided that the surest way to guarantee Grey Wolf would be alive and in place when they needed him, would be to kill him ahead of time and then forcibly bring him back from the dead, in custody.) The notes on *forced resurrection* describe the preparation of the clear oily liquid discovered in a pit (which is mostly 'humors from slain Fiendish priests,' apparently), the necessity of having numerous objects from the subject's life (bones of the parents are specifically recommended), the requirement of 'the sacrifice of a traitor,' and of a Soul Shard created in something called a "Necromantic Forge." One thing is abundantly clear from the description of the spell: the soul of the traitor is kept trapped in the Soul Shard, and is annihilated when the spell is cast. (But, of course, the spell was *not* cast, since Grey Wolf was never killed.)

The traitor, they know, is Califax. And Tomnic the Follower has recently concluded that Califax has no soul. The notes on *forced resurrection* even include a picture of a Soul Shard – a chunk of glistening, greasy black rock, about the size of a grapefruit. Just like the one the Company took from the room where they found Califax, and which they still have in the basement. It's right over there, in one of those back closets.

It's now three in the morning; Morningstar and the wizards have done enough reading for one night. But Morningstar casts one more *sending* to Dranko:

Um. Dear? We should have read this stuff sooner. Apparently we have Califax's soul in the basement.

coyote6: That's hilarious. I love it when that happens, as both a GM and a player (albeit in a DOH-facepalm kind of way as a player). Sounds like it's definitely time to take inventory!

Did you have the forced resurrection thing set up all along? I don't remember how resurrection worked pre-3E, and I don't remember whether they got the Califax rock before or after the campaign changed editions.

Tamlyn: When I read "Tome of Deceit" I immediately thought of the eeeeevvviiilll book in the basement of the Greenhouse. Wouldn't that be a kick, if they had the object blocking divinations all this time? In addition to Califax's soul!

Piratecat: Oh my goodness, we were so embarrassed. How do you tell a guy he's gone around soulless for a year because we forgot to look in a closet? Major faux pas.

The Axe: And Sagiro (the DM, not the NPC) is snickering and twirling his handlebar mustache wondering when the Company would get around to figuring it out.

Note to self: Don't play poker with that guy...

thegreyman: All you have to do is tell Califax that it required reading to find his soul. He'll understand; after all, no one likes to read... Besides, I think he'll have more of a negative reaction when you tell him that his soul is currently in the form of a large greasy, bad-smelling chunk of rock.

Innocent Bystander: Very informative update. Sounds like it was one of those why didn't we do this sooner moments. It also feels like this is a bit of a calm before the storm.

nakia: All caught up, after being away from ENWorld for a long time. As always, a pleasure to read and very inspiring.

Joshua Randall: Before the stuff hits the fan (show of hands if you think Belinda & co.'s divinatory spell is going to go smoothly), can someone remind me in a bit more detail who Mokad and Califax are? I know I could look this up in StevenAC's archive, but I'm feeling lazy. Thanks.

Sagiro: Sure. Quick summary:

- Mokad was once a member of the Church of Delioch (God of Healing, of whom Dranko is a cleric). He became corrupted and recruited by the Black Circle, and was later placed in charge of rescuing Emperor Naradawk from his prison plane of Volpos. This plan was thwarted by the Company, and Mokad was killed in the climactic battle.
- Califax is also a member of the Church of Delioch. He was Dranko's disciplinarian for many years, and Dranko had always assumed him to be a bad guy. And, in fact, Mokad recruited him away to the Black Circle for a short time. But Califax never went all the way over, as it were, and with Dranko's help he turned away from the Black Circle. Mokad later kidnapped Califax and (as it turns out) removed his soul as part of the world-merging ritual that (fortunately) was never completed. The party rescued Califax and returned him to High Priest Tomnic, where he has been convalescing in an empty despair ever since, what with lacking a soul and all.

Duncan Haldane: Bump! And a congratulations again on such a good game, Sagiro. Been a while since I caught up (actually missed the thread change and wasn't subscribed to the new thread), but I'm glad I did.

I started reading this story when it was first being posted, so returning to read more adventures of Abernathy's company is like picking up a new novel by a favourite author.



Old Acquaintance

The wizards are up early the next morning to continue their studies. They pursue more about "Soul Shards" and learn that freeing the soul trapped therein is a dicey proposition. The only way is to melt down the Shard in the Necromantic Forge where it was made. That should release the soul and return it to the body of its owner.

"Maybe we have a Necromantic Forge in our basement too," Kibi mutters. "Has anyone checked recently?"

They continue to read.



Flicker and Dranko cannot help but overhear a heated argument among some of the Diviners. They have reached a point in their ritual where they can go two different ways, one of which is more dangerous to Belinda personally but has a greater chance of success. Belinda herself is arguing for that riskier path.

Dranko knocks on the door. When no one answers (or even seems to have heard), he opens the door to the ritual room and interjects: "I recommend that you cast the spell in such a way that you don't become hideously evil, such that we have to stop you. That's all. As you were." He closes the door again.

"Is that likely?" asks one of the younger diviners.

"Of course not!" snaps Belinda. The argument continues.



Several hours later Kibi finds what they're looking for, written on one of several scrolls on necromancy. One flaking parchment in particular outlines methods for creating undead creatures. On the subject of "artificially" creating types of undead that would otherwise have to come about spontaneously, it says:

Where the Black Mountains fork, beneath the ancient wooded graves of the Bur-Kesh, there lies Nazg Hodeth that houses the Necromantic Forge. It is here that some of the mightiest of risen dead were made in a time long past. A Skulltower was made without abyssal bones. Gravecrawlers were brought forth in great numbers. And the emanating power of the Forge itself was enough to create the Walking Necropolis that now lies sleeping. For those Necromancers who desire to call forth the most potent undead, seek the Forge in Nazg Hodeth.

"Walking Necropolis?" Morningstar echoes dubiously.

"We're doomed," Grey Wolf sighs.

"We are so going to that place!" exclaims Aravis. "We have to free Califax's soul, after all." He leaves unspoken his desire to kill bugbears (sometimes called 'Bur-Kesh'). He doesn't talk about it much, but his own parents were killed by bugbears from the mountains, who sacked his family's estate while he was away studying. Regardless, the Black Mountains are easily found on their maps of Charagan. The place described is not far from the city of Sentinel at the kingdom's far western border.

Beyond the information on the Necromantic Forge, the Company find two more pieces of notable information on the Black Circle. First is a blurb about Null Shadows and the cauldron that created them.

Gurthin's greatest claim to fame was his forging of the Three Cauldrons: Shadow, Smoke and Lies. In the Great War he used the first two to produce fell soldiers to counter the Spire's greatest heroes. Their wizards quailed before the Null Shadows, and their priests uttered oaths at the sight of Smoldering Ghosts. But it was the Cauldron of Lies that was his greatest achievement, for knowing lies, one discerns truth. Of course, while lies are treacherous, the truth can be even more so. The story is told that when Naloric stirred the Cauldron of Lies, it told him that he would be trapped forever in the Prison of Volpos. Perhaps it would have been better for him had that been true, since he was slain by Alander soon after his escape. Let us hope Darkeye makes better use of it.

The Company make a note to move Darkeye up a few pegs on their list of enemies.

They also learn something about the boundary between Volpos (the Prime where Naradawk is imprisoned) and Abernia. There used to be a conspicuous weak spot between the two, at Verdshane, but Aravis fixed it just in time. Other theoretical weak spots exist (though not as severe as Verdshane), and these could be forced open with a sufficient quantity of focused life energy. According to the Black Circle's notes, it would take dozens of Black Circle mage-priests decades to gather that much life-force, and there simply aren't enough Black Circle practitioners in Charagan to do that.

Ernie gasps. "But they *are* doing that in Kivia!"

These new discoveries are interrupted by a *sending* from Dranko, that Belinda and her diviners are ready to start their ritual. The others stop their studies and *teleport* to the Diviners' Guild in Hae Charagan. Belinda announces that they have decided upon the more dangerous version of the casting – one that has a higher chance of success, but could result in insanity or death for Belinda. She declines an offer of *false life*, not wanting any necromantic spells upon her while divining for a necromancer.

(In a similar vein, the Company are asked to leave any magic items with powerful divination or necromantic magic in a lead-lined room so as not to interfere with the ritual.)

The Diviners first go through a brief “trial run” of the key parts of the spell, where they don’t actually expend the rarer components. Confident that they have it down, they start the ritual for real. There is an etched triangle in the stone floor, with Belinda standing at one angle as the focus. A dozen other diviners all have their parts to play, chanting and striding and burning components and reading passages from divinatory scrolls.

Less than a minute before the ritual’s completion, a fuzzy image of a book appears above the triangle – unmarked and unremarkable, bound in black leather. It’s the Tome of Deceit, that’s foiling any divinations aimed at Praska.

Belinda, sweat rolling down her face, utters the final syllable of the spell. The book vanishes from the triangle as her eyes roll up in her head. She falls backwards and her head cracks loudly on the stone floor. Ernie rushes up to check her, and finds her dead as a doornail. “Yours,” Dranko says to Morningstar. Morningstar nods and casts *revivify*, which can bring someone instantly back from the dead if cast quickly enough.

Belinda’s eyes flutter open and she sits up groaning, while the other diviners crowd around in concern. “Damn it,” she hisses. “I’m not strong enough. We need a more experienced diviner than we have here. The ritual... it worked! But I couldn’t break through at the end.”

“Does Praska know you came that close?” Dranko asks.

“I don’t think so,” Belinda answers. “Unless the Tome itself has a consciousness. I doubt anyone outside this room was aware of our spell. I was not attacked – it was simply a built-in defense of the book itself. I’m surprised it didn’t kill me.”

“Er...” says Ernie.

“Your soul was on its way out,” Morningstar says. “I put it back.”

Belinda looks at the other diviners, who shrug uncomfortably. “She did cast *something* on you after you... blacked out,” one of them confirms.

“Thank you for that,” says Belinda. “You are indeed as powerful as we’ve heard. But I don’t suppose you know any *diviners* of transcendent power?”

The Company talk among themselves, not sure if they do or not. Then Kibi perks up. “Didn’t we meet a powerful diviner in Het Branoi?”

“Yeah!” Dranko exclaims. “That guy!”

“Chiswick,” says Aravis.

Indeed, Chiswick was a very old diviner they had met at the Eye of the Storm; he had sent the Company the Lucent Tower as thanks after Het Branoi was dissolved. And the party wizards remember clearly that he had divination spells beyond the normal 9th-level valence.

While Morningstar casts *heal* on Belinda (just to be sure), Ernie *sends* to Chiswick.

Chiswick, Ernie here. Want to get back at people who made Het Branoi, and help us save the world? Many thanks.

A few seconds later he gets a response:

I’d like to help. I’m too weak to travel. My world is ‘Therris.’ Plane shift key is salt. Elgo Farm, country of Rehma. Find path.

It’s unclear what Chiswick will be able to do from a different plane, but they’re eager to find out. Despite the late hour they make quick preparations before casting *plane shift* to Therris. Instead of using *find the path* and *wind walk*, Morningstar *sends* again to Chiswick asking if he minds them using *scry-and-teleport* instead.

All right. Give me ten minutes to lower my wards.

An hour later Aravis finishes casting *scry*, and sees the wizened little wizard reclining in a deck chair, next to a cleared-out space where the other chairs have clearly been pushed aside. Aravis *teleports* the party to that spot, and they find themselves on the deck of a large farmhouse. It’s early afternoon here, with a warm sun casting its rays across verdant fields. The air smells of fresh apples and horse manure.

"What a pleasure to see you in a place that isn't a bounded demi-plane," Dranko says.

Chiswick peers at him. "Where'd you learn that kind of fancy talk?"

Dranko points at Aravis. "I copied him."

It's evident that Chiswick's health has deteriorated noticeably since they saw him in Het Branoi. He's grown extremely gaunt, his skin is a pasty white, and his limbs quiver when he shifts his weight.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Morningstar asks, voice full of concern.

Chiswick smiles wanly. "Old age is the one malady for which there is no cure, my dear."

"Unless you count reincarnation!" Dranko says brightly.

"I don't wish to come back," Chiswick sighs. "I think I've earned myself a good long retirement in some heaven or other."

"I think you have too," says Ernie.

The Company pull up chairs and regale the reclining Chiswick with tales of all their recent adventures, and their attempt to locate Praska. Chiswick listens with eyes a-twinkle; whatever the degradation of his body, his mind is still as sharp as ever. He's especially interested in how the Company brought about the dissolution of Het Branoi.

"When Het Branoi was dismantled," Chiswick tells them, "the Eye of the Storm ended up in its home plane. *I plane shifted* back here that very hour. I was eager to get home." He grows silent for a moment before continuing. "I do miss not aging. My time is nearly up. But I've got a few weeks left, and what better way to spend them than to help you with your problems? I'm sure I can dig up something that can be of assistance. Could someone help me up? My servant is off tending the horses."

"Why don't you just use a *fly* spell and float around?" Dranko suggests. "I figured gratuitous use of magic is the reason you become a wizard in the first place."

"I try not to use magic unless I have to," Chiswick answers. "I find it very tiring. It takes a lot out of a person, casting spells. It's something you'll realize when you get to be my age."

His shoulders have slumped as he explains, but after a moment he perks up again. "You're trying to divine something that's heavily warded, right? I've dealt with that sort of problem from time to time over the years. Do you have a diviner already of reasonable skill?"

The members of the Company look at one another, and there is a round of virtual head-slapping. Why didn't they bring Belinda with them? Fortunately they have the spells prepared to cover up their oversight – more *teleports* and *plane shifts*. Kibi, Aravis and Morningstar go back to collect Belinda. "Like I said," says Dranko with a grin. "Gratuitous use of magic."

Chiswick chuckles, a weak but earnest laugh that collapses into a coughing fit. When he's recovered, he asks, "Did you get my presents?"

The Company gush with thanks, specifically about the Lucent Tower which they adore. Ernie tells Chiswick about how they used it when last confronting Shreen the Fair.

Soon enough the rest of the party return with Belinda, who was more than willing to meet Chiswick. Immediately the two of them set to talking shop while the party sit nearby on the deck, basking in the warm afternoon. The diviners' discussion is interrupted only by another of Chiswick's coughing fits, after which his personal servant shoos everyone away for a couple of hours while she takes the old wizard upstairs to his bed. When he recovers he sends a servant down to fetch Belinda while another farmhand prepares a hearty lunch for the Company. They talk among themselves, enjoying the beautiful weather and rare opportunity for relaxation.



Sometime in the early evening Belinda comes down from the farmhouse's upper floor, where she has been deep in private conversation with the old diviner. She's wearing an enormous and gaudy pendant on a gold chain.

"Taught you all about bad fashion sense, did he?" asks Dranko.

"Yes," says Belinda, fingering the pendant. "And he also gave me this, with which I'll tear through the Black Circle defenses like wet paper – to use Chiswick's exact phrasing."

"What does it do?" asks Dranko.

Belinda takes a deep breath. “I need to activate it with some lower-level divination spells, but it is specifically made to break through divinatory abjurations. It can only be used once. Chiswick said he made it many years ago for some specific need that it turned out was unnecessary. It’s been in his attic unused since then. He says I’m powerful enough to make use of it, which is kind of humbling. I wish I had another year with him. He’s going to send me as many of his notes as he can collect before he passes on. I think I used up a lot of his remaining strength just talking to him.

“Given that we’ve gone through the ritual once already, and that everything is set up, it should only take an hour to recast. And when we’re done, I’ll know where that stupid book is, and we will find Praska, and then we will break the Black Circle.”

RangerWickett: Cool. Man, don’t you ever run out of ideas? Heck, can you imagine going back to the beginning of the campaign and telling your friends and players all the details of the world you’ve created over the years?

You’ve made an excellent setting, and the players have made wonderful characters. Thanks for sharing it all.

theskyfullofdust: I agree. This has been my favourite Story Hour from when I first read the very first session and spent weeks catching up. I feel like I know the characters and setting better than my own games...

Thanks for sharing these tales with us all, Sagiro, they’re fun to read, interesting, and inspiring. I look forward to the next update with eager anticipation.

Sagiro: I appreciate the kind words, as always. The Story Hour is still a couple of years (and about 35 runs) behind where the game is now, so there’s lots still to come. Writing this competes with a bunch of other things for my scarce time, but my intent is still, as it always has been, to chip away, one update at a time, until I’ve told the entire tale.

As for the campaign itself: I think I’m still on track to finish it up in the next couple of years. The PCs are one good boss-fight away from reaching 20th level, they’re festooned with epic and near-epic magic items, and they have only a couple of loose plot-ends to tie up before effectively triggering the end-game. It’s a strange feeling.

The Axe: This is pure happiness to those of us who have already been reading for several years – however long it takes.



Cloaks and Hoods

The sun has now set over Chiswick’s farm; the Company have been awake for twenty hours straight. They set up the Lucent Tower on the old diviner’s front lawn and are woken the next morning by the crowing of a rooster.

Belinda is extremely eager to get back to the Guild, and as the Company don’t wish to wake Chiswick from sleep (even would his servants allow it), they leave him a note of thanks and *plane shift* back to Abernia. At the Diviners’ Guild, Belinda strides through the halls, knocking on doors and shouting. “Up! Wake up! We’re trying again!”

Various diviners in their pajamas appear sleepily in doorways. It’s five o’clock in the morning. “What makes you think it’s going to work this time?” asks Ragnir, rubbing sand from his eyes. Belinda just smiles and beckons.

As the diviners file into the ritual room and start to prepare the spell, Belinda details her meeting with Chiswick, eyes flashing with anticipation. She almost seems possessed, though without losing her innate sense of rigor. They carefully step through a trial run – just as well, with some of the diviners still groggy at such an early hour.

They start the ritual. Once again, near its conclusion, the Tome of Deceit appears in the circle. The ungainly pendant around Belinda’s neck starts to glow, and sweat beads on the diviner’s brow. Her face contorts for a moment as though she’s engaged in a great mental struggle; Morningstar readies another *revivify*. But Belinda smiles suddenly, closes her eyes, and in a voice several registers lower than her own, intones:

**THE TREE IS HIDDEN IN THE WOODS, DISGUISED AS A TREATISE ON CLOAKS AND HOODS.
FOLLOW A SEAMSTRESS, A MAID OR TAILOR, DISCOVER THE TRUTH, AND HER WORDS WILL FAIL HER.**

Her eyes snap open. “Yes!” she shouts with glee. “What did I say? Did someone write it down? Tell me you wrote it down!” Then she sits heavily, her strength spent.

“From what Chiswick told me,” she says, “Praska still doesn’t know we’re onto her. She may have other divinatory protections beyond this book, but this is the key – her main line of defense.”

“Thanks very much!” exclaims Kibi. “That was well done.”



The Diviners, the exhausted Belinda included, go back to bed. The Company stay in the ritual room for a few minutes debating their next move. They can think of three immediate courses of action at this point: continue their current pursuit of Praska; go to the Necromantic Forge to free Califax’s soul; or investigate the recent death of a member of the Great Pack. They decide to go with what’s most current – Praska.

There is swift agreement that Belinda's little rhyming riddle means the Tome of Deceit is hidden in a library. There are two such likely places right here in Hae Charagan – the library at the Temple of Delioch, and of course the Vault, the largest repository of written works in the Kingdom. "Time to look for books about cloaks and hoods!" Dranko exclaims.

"Yeah," Aravis says wryly. "Maybe for once in our careers it'll be that simple."

They first try the library at the church. Dranko and his friends are let onto the grounds without question, and they march straight to the repository which is housed in some basement rooms beneath the main courtyard. Most of the collected works are religious in nature – there's a separate wing for holy writings and scripture – but there's a small room with a few dozen books and scrolls on a variety of topics. There is only one book about tailoring and sewing to be found, though it's not about cloaks and hoods specifically. Half the book concerns the creation of church robes, and the other half the tailoring of courtly finery.

Just to be sure, Dranko makes a small tear in one page. He gets raised eyebrows from his fellows. "If this is a powerful tome of the Black Circle, it's probably indestructible. Tell me I'm wrong!"

Leaving the library, Dranko seeks out the priest who does most of the odd domestic jobs around the grounds, including the mending of robes. "Say," he says. "If you needed a book on cloaks and hoods, and we didn't have it here, where would you go?"

"I'd probably go to the Vault, if I could afford it," answers the man. "They have books on everything there. Do you need me to make something for you?"

Dranko grins. "I might. I admire your work. The clerics here are better dressed than in most of the churches I've visited. Say, do you know if Praska ever visited the library here?"

The man frowns. "Not sure. Don't think so. I don't recall that young scamp having much interest in reading."



So... to the Vault! En route they discuss strategy, including the possibility of sending *prying eyes* into the library. The thinking is that a book immune to divination might show up as a blind-spot.

"Excuse me!" They're interrupted by a street vendor, a young man with a small cart. "Can I interest you in one of these fine dragon souvenirs? Only five silver pieces."

"Souvenir of what, exactly?" asks Ernie.

"Of what?" The man looks incredulous. "From the war! The one where our armies fought off an invasion of dragons in the Greatwood!" He holds up a carved wooden dragon of middling quality. It looks more like a gold-painted lizard.

"Hey," says Dranko. "That's the dragon we killed!"

"Can't speak to that, sir," the young man smiles. "But I have it on good authority that the finest heroes in the Kingdom fought off a small army of dragons. Surely you went to one of the parades afterward?"

"I'm not sure it's worth five silver pieces," says Dranko, tuning over the figurine in his hands. "Five coppers, more likely."

"Not likely at all!" says the young man easily. "For five coppers I might as well keep it on my mantle."

Aravis interrupts the haggling to hand the young man a gold piece. "We'll take it."

Dranko is aghast. "Don't you know to play this game?"

The dragon-carver goggles. "Want a second one free, then? For your kids?"

Dranko rummages around in his *bag of holding* and fishes out a large claw from the dragon they fought at Verdshane. "Son, I'll tell you something. There wasn't an army of dragons at the battle. Just one. But it was plenty, trust me." The young man nods, mightily impressed.

"Off to the library then!" says Dranko, dropping the claw back into the bag.

"To save the day?" asks the vendor. "Is the library in trouble?"

"No," says Dranko. "But sometimes to do great deeds, you have to read boring books."

"Ah. So you're sort of a bunch of warrior poets."



The Vault is unimpressive from the outside, but the party know from experience that its subterranean expanse of rooms is without equal on Charagan. Not even the Sages' Consortium in Hae Kalkas can boast such a collection of written works. They know the drill: you pay an entrance fee, and then an additional fee to have a "walking curator" lead you around. No one is allowed to wander freely in the Vault. A man at the front desk inquires as to the subject of their researches, and assigns to them a nice old lady named **Jenwha** to take care of them. Weapons are left at the door, though security seems lax – most of the group manage to secrete backup arms before heading into the library.

Dranko makes small talk as Jenwha leads them down a flight of stairs and into the Vault's labyrinthine interior. "Out of curiosity, what was your profession before you joined the staff here at the Vault?"

Jenwha looks pleased to be spoken to. "That was a long time ago," she says in a cracking but lively voice. "Did you know I was a seamstress to royalty?"

The party exchange glances; it's looking more and more like Chiswick's bauble did the trick. "Really!" Dranko exclaims.

"Yes, really," Jenwha answers, taken aback by Dranko's enthusiasm. "Would you like to hear about it?"

"We sure would," Dranko says amiably.

So she tells them all about her time spent in the court of Duke Nigel's father, while she leads them down more stairs and past many small rooms, each containing books and scrolls on some specific subject. They pass some labeled LIVERY, ARMOR-SMITHING and WINEMAKING before Jenwha stops beneath an archway labeled SEWING AND TAILORING. "The Vault sections on crafts are not large," she explains almost apologetically. "If you have the subject matter narrowed down, this shouldn't take long at all. Do you have a specific book in mind, or are you just looking for general information?"

"We're looking for a treatise on cloaks and hoods, specifically," Aravis explains.

Jenwha nods. "We have one of those," she says. "It's my specialty, don't you know. I'm not in charge of a very large section of the Vault, so I know it all pretty well." She walks over to a shelf that contains about a dozen books of various sizes, and pulls down one made of black leather. Clearly printed on the spine it says *Cloaks and Hoods*. It's about the same size and shape as the book seen in the diviners' ritual.

"How long have you had that book here at the Vault?" Morningstar asks.

"Since I got my job here, and that was over a decade ago."

"Do you recall anyone else wanting this book in the last several years?" asks Dranko.

"Yes, I do. Last time someone wanted that book was about four months ago. A very respectable tailor named **Jonas**, who comes here from time to time. His shop is only about six blocks from here."

"One of my old friends may also have come here looking for it recently," Dranko says. "A nice girl, on the short side."

Jenwha shakes her head. "Not that I've seen," she says.

Dranko takes the book. It's not suspiciously heavy, or throbbing with malign magic, or unusual in any way. He turns his back to Jenwha and surreptitiously makes a small tear in one of the pages. It tears. Morningstar, meanwhile, casts a Silent, Still *detect evil* and gets no pings.

Aravis turns to Jenwha. "Are we allowed to cast spells in here that will help us read better?"

Jenwha hesitates before answering. "I don't see why not."

Aravis casts *detect magic*. As he does so, another walking curator walks past their room and stops short in the hallway at the sound of casting. "Miss Jenwha!" he exclaims. "What are you...?"

Then he sees her clients and goes a bit red. "Oh, sorry. My mistake," he mumbles before hustling away.

Jenwha looks sheepish. "That was nothing. You're fine." When Dranko presses her further, she leans in and whispers, "Most folks aren't allowed to cast spells in here, but we make an exception for you. Your description is unmistakable; folk of your stature are allowed a certain latitude." So saving the world has some perks after all!

Cloaks and Hoods doesn't detect as magical, though another book does – a short, fat book describing how one might modify the *unseen servant* spell to do complex sewing. Dranko tears a page of that one too. "What's the point of having a magic book if the pages tear?" he complains.

“Because most people don’t want to destroy books,” Grey Wolf says dryly.

Kibi casts *prying eyes* and has them do a quick sweep of the room, but they report nothing different from what they see with their own eyes. The dwarf takes *Cloaks and Hoods* from Dranko and thumbs through it. He makes three observations.

First, it’s a boring book about cloaks and hoods, and how to sew them. It has some nice drawings of patterns in the back, along with sketches of finished garments, but for the most part it’s exactly what it claims to be.

Second, he finds it odd that there is no author’s name written anywhere, inside or out.

Most notably, Kibi finds that there are no tears in any of the pages. The book has mended itself.

“Dranko will be crowing about this for months,” Grey Wolf whispers, as Dranko continues to chat up Jenwha.

“Gods, we’ll never hear the end of it,” Aravis agrees.

Dranko overhears, sports a huge grin, and instinctively lights up a cigar. “Sir!” Jenwha exclaims. “Is that necessary for your investigation?”

“No!” answers every single other member of the Company, in unison.

“I can’t really say ‘yes’ now, can I?” Dranko grumbles.

“May I ask you to put it out?” Jenwha asks, careful to keep her tone neutral. “We prefer not to have open flames in a room full of books.”

Morningstar casts *true seeing*, but *Cloaks and Hoods* seems no different to her under the spell’s effect. Grey Wolf opines that it would be worth trying to *dispel* the thing, but worries that it might have countermeasures.

“Is there any way we can just borrow this book for a while?” Kibi asks Jenwha.

“Especially if it’s a horribly evil book?” Dranko adds.

“For you, we can make an exception to Vault policy,” says Jenwha. “Do you have a discreet way of removing it from the premises? And how soon might we expect its return?”

“Probably no more than a week,” Aravis answers. “Assuming we don’t need to destroy it for the good of the kingdom.”

Morningstar adds a request. “If anyone else inquires about this book, can you let us know?”

“Of course,” Jenwha answers.

“Thanks,” Dranko says jovially. “You’ve been extremely helpful. Can we offer you any additional… compensation?”

The old curator peers at him. “You did save Charagan, didn’t you? No further payment will be required. Good luck with any additional tailoring you need to do.”

Dranko slips a few gold pieces into her pocket anyway.



Back on the streets of Hae Charagan, Morningstar sighs. “We have another artifact. Yay.”

“Let’s lock it in a trunk in our basement,” Flicker says.

“And forget about it,” Morningstar adds.

They cast *locate object* to see what happens when they try to find the *original* copy of *Cloaks and Hoods*, and find to their surprise that it indicates their recent check-out. When Dranko jogs away to get the book out of the spell’s range, it detects nothing at all.

“You know who can probably help us crack this thing?” Dranko says. “A bunch of really powerful diviners.”



Back at the Guild, Aravis hands the Tome of Deceit to Belinda. She thumbs through it, frowning. “You’re sure this is it?”

“Watch this,” Kibi says, reaching out to tear a page of the book.

“Now cast *detect magic*,” Aravis prompts.

Belinda does so. "Nothing," she reports.

"Now find your tear," Dranko says. Belinda cannot.

"Who would make a self-repairing book that doesn't detect as magic?" Aravis asks. "Plus, it matches the name and likeness of the book we saw during your ritual. *And*, we followed a seamstress to find it."

Thinking that they might be able to detect Praska just because they're now in possession of the book, Belinda casts *scry*, but she still sees Praska sitting on the park bench. That doesn't change when the book is placed in a *bag of holding*.

Dranko turns to Aravis. "You're a sort-of god. Can't you just smite it?"

Aravis does his best, trying *greater dispel magic* on the book, twice. It fails. Morningstar does the same, with the same disappointing result.



Dranko spends the remainder of the afternoon and evening on the rooftops, spying alternately on Jonas's tailor shop and the Diviners' Guild itself. After Jonas closes up shop and leaves for the night, Dranko breaks into the store and scouts around. He does find a rack of hooded cloaks near the back that were clearly made from one of the patterns in the book.

The wizards, meanwhile, read *Cloaks and Hoods* cover to cover, combing it for hidden codes, cyphers, or any other disguised messages. With their mighty combined intellect, they conclude that there's nothing, unless you want to learn how to make a decent hooded cloak.

The next morning, having exhausted nearly every other approach, they decide to get heavy-handed. Belinda grants the Company a nearly vacant stone room to work in, and Morningstar urges the others to stand back. Placing the book on a table in the center of the room, she casts *antimagic field*. Her magic items grow a bit heavier and her *ioun stone* plinks on the hard floor. Aravis, who has been casting *scry* and timing it so that he finishes as Morningstar casts, still cannot locate Praska – but this time the spell simply fails, instead of showing the image at the park bench.

Morningstar gingerly picks up the book. It looks no different from the outside. She opens it up... and the inside is completely different! Tiny, foreign characters fill almost every page, and it's written upside down and back-to-front. The wizards, casting *comprehend languages*, can't get close enough to Morningstar to read the cramped letters without stepping inside the *antimagic field*. Dranko solves that problem by walking over, picking up the book, and carrying it to the very edge of the field. He holds it open while the mages engage in speed-reading, and the trick works because *comprehend languages* is cast upon the reader, not the writing. Aravis reads out loud so the rest can hear.

Cloaks and Hoods turns out to be a biography of Praska's life. The early material is accurate to the tiniest detail as far as Dranko can tell. It even includes some episodes that feature him, and he's amazed at its fidelity to events he remembers. When the narrative of Praska's life reaches that fateful dinner with Mokad, it says that she left with no lasting ill-effects, and then continues on to describe her life, as they've heard described, at the church here in Hae Charagan.

It's all there – the friends she's made, her plans to explore Kivia, her actual *travel* to Kivia – even a description of her meeting members of the Church of Heros, and how she spends much of her time reading on a park bench inside the Heros church grounds in Djaw. The next-to-last page ends the story: "...she expects to split her days between Kivia and Charagan, and to become a bridge of good will between the churches of Delioch and Heros."

The Tome of Deceit is part truth, part fiction, and every divination aimed at Praska has been redirected to the events contained therein. Dranko turns to the final page, which contains a single, curious three-word sentence. "Mokad is dead," Aravis reads.

Dranko blinks for a second before comprehension dawns. "Aaaaaargh!"



Everett: A Sagiro update: what a yummy way to start the day. Hope there's more soon. The ending lost me – if Mokad died when the Company prevented the Emperor's return, why is Dranko surprised by this?

Abciximab: I'm not sure, but I wondered if it was because of this: "The Tome of Deceit is part truth, part fiction..."

Fajitas: Presumably because it means Mokad isn't really dead. He faked his death, and the book is now backing up that hoax if anyone attempts to confirm it by divination... which suggests that Mokad is not only not dead, but also in on it with Praska. Yes?

Both genius and evil, by the way.

coyote6: That's what it sounds like to me. I hope somebody immediately wrote some "truths" of their own in the book.

Innocent Bystander: Who would have guessed that a trip to a library would be that entertaining. Great writing as always, Sagiro. Eagerly awaiting further updates.

Piratecat: Mokad (the head of the Deliochan Scarbearers cult and the primary Black Circle traitor within the Church of Delioch) definitely didn't fake his death; when we stopped the Black Circle from killing Grey Wolf to bring Abernia and Volpos together, in the same incident where Califax was left soulless, we killed that SOB by trapping him in a *passwall* pit that we mostly covered by a *wall of stone*. When the *passwall* was dispelled, he did a creditable imitation of a tube of toothpaste, following which we beat on him with Kibi's axe. Mokad was the most powerful Black Circle priest we'd met, and having him dead was a tremendous relief. If Praska felt the need to write "Mokad is dead" in the Book of Lies, then you can be sure he didn't actually stay that way. That's a bad, bad thing.

Sagiro: A couple of tiny corrections to Piratecat's previous post. The actual chronology of Mokad's last few seconds of life was:

- ...dropped into a pit created by a *passwall* from Aravis. He catches the edge and hangs onto the lip.
- ...fingers whipped by Dranko; falls to the bottom of the pit.
- ...struck by a magical axe thrown by Kibi.
- ...casts a *wall of stone* himself to prevent line of sight by the party. It covers most but not all of the opening, so he could still escape if necessary.
- ...expelled violently (and indeed toothpaste-like) when Aravis dismisses the *passwall*. Still alive, though.
- ...barely survives a round of spells and attacks from the Company. Tries to fly upward through the open ceiling to escape.
- ...killed by a hammer-blow from Kay, flying in pursuit.



Scratching at the Edges

The Company return to Tal Hae. Dranko receives a cryptic *sending* from one of the Undermen and excuses himself, while the rest enjoy a lunch courtesy of the Icebox and served up by Eddings. They discuss the Tome of Deceit, and what their next move should be.

"We ought to tell the Gods that someone's messing with their miracles," says Ernie, between bites of roast chicken. "In the meantime, I wonder if we can re-attune the book to someone else. Dranko in particular, since someday that Demon Prince is going to come looking for him."

"We could write a story in the book about us always being in some particular place," Morningstar muses, "and then heavily trap that place."

"We don't necessarily have to re-attune it," Aravis points out, "as we know it can affect multiple people simultaneously. On the other hand, I doubt we can just write anything we want and have it become protected knowledge."

The fact remains that while they've figured out how to suppress the Tome, Praska is still shielded – probably by *mind blank*, *private sanctum*, or both. At least now their divinations won't be giving them patently false information.

"If we do find her," Ernie says, "what do we do with her? Kill her outright? Question her? Try to redeem her soul?"

"We never just kill anyone," Morningstar sighs.

"I have no problem with killing her," Aravis says with some vehemence. The memory of his death at the hands of her null shadows is still fresh. "But we should wring any useful information out of her first."

"Say," says Kibi. "Where's Grey Wolf?"

"In the basement," says Flicker. "He realized he didn't have *antimagic field* written in his own spellbooks, so he's copying it out of one of the books we found in Het Branoi." Which makes sense, since anything they do to find Praska will have to take place while the Tome of Deceit is deactivated.

Ernie finishes his meal and also departs, desiring to pay an overdue visit to the Temple of Yondalla here in Tal Hae. (Also, he doesn't mind the celebrity status he enjoys there whenever he visits.) Aravis, Kibi and Morningstar continue to talk about Praska without any revelations. If Praska truly is *mind blanked*, there's little they can do to find her through magic. Morningstar halfheartedly wonders if they should try divining her every hour on the hour in an attempt to catch Praska in any gaps between applications of the spell. But Aravis points out that she could very well *also* be in a *private sanctum*. He frowns. The beginnings of an idea are forming in his head, but it's all so indirect...

"I couldn't help overhearing," says Grey Wolf, up from the basement for a quick drink of water. "But if Praska is in a *sanctum* but not *mind blanked*, then *commune* will work while the book is suppressed."

The door to the Greenhouse swings open; it's Ernie, back sooner than the others expected. His face betrays a great concern.

"What's the matter?" Morningstar asks anxiously.

"I learned something disturbing while I was at the temple," Ernie says, sitting down. "One of Sunblossom's adventuring under-priests, Tolo, was killed in the field; some monster or other that they think got loose with the Masking breaking down."

"I'm sorry to hear it!" says Flicker.

"That's not the disturbing part, though," Ernie continues. "For one thing, his friends killed the monster, and for another, High Priestess Sunblossom raised him from the dead. But apparently Tolo's soul didn't go anywhere, just like Aravis's. So it's not that there was anything wrong or strange going on with Aravis in particular; it's likely that *no one*'s souls are going on to the afterlife! Which means it's something more sinister."

"Maybe a Black Circle plot," Kibi surmises. "Maybe that's how they intend to gather up a huge amount of life force?"

"Wouldn't that make it 'death force?'" asks Flicker.

Who can say? Well, maybe Yondalla can. After the Company mull over some possible questions to pose to a divine agent, Morningstar and Kibi fly out to an empty field on the outskirts of town, taking the Tome of Deceit with them. (No one wants to find out what happens if an *antimagic field* is invoked in the Greenhouse!)

While the Tome is being suppressed, Ernie casts *commune* in the Greenhouse kitchen. The scent of fresh bread fills the air, and a holy presence speaks into Ernie's mind.

ASK YOUR QUESTIONS, MY SON.

"Are you receiving souls from this plane, from those who have died?"

NO. NO ONE BRINGS THEM.

"Is Mokad alive?"

I CANNOT TELL.

"Has the soul of Mokad left whatever afterlife it went to after his death?"

IT WAS NEVER THERE.

"Is Praska protected by a Mordenkainen's Private Sanctum?"

I CANNOT TELL.

So she's almost certainly protected by a *mind blank*, whatever other safeguards she might have. Drat! They have other questions lined up that are no longer worth asking. Aravis feels like he's almost figured out a solution, but he hasn't quite put together all the pieces...

"Is Sagiro well?"

SAGIRO DOES NOT EXIST.

"Wait!" exclaims Aravis. "I've got it! Ernie, repeat these questions..." Aravis dictates the next set of inquiries.

"Has anyone spoken to Praska recently?"

After a long pause:

YES.

"Was the person who spoke to Praska most recently, in Hae Charagan?"

NO.

"In Kivia?"

YES.

"In Djaw?"

NO.

"In Het Branoi?"

NO.

"In Il-Drosh?"

NO.

"In Tev?"

NO.

"Someone we know, or know of?"

NO.

"Within 300 miles of Djaw?"

NO.

"In the Endless Wood?"

NO.

"Is the departure of Drosh the reason why souls are no longer traveling to the afterlife?"

YES.

"Is the departure of Drosh related to the death of the member of the Great Pack?"

NO.

Interesting.

Interesting that Mokad's soul never even made it to the afterlife after he was killed in Kallor.

Interesting that it's Drosh's departure (presumably into the Crosser's Maze) and concurrent abdication of duty that's preventing souls from ascending to the afterlife.

And, to Aravis, interesting that you can divine people by their *associations* with someone protected by a *mind blank*. He sits and has a good long think about how to leverage that.



Kibi returns to the Greenhouse while Morningstar reports this new knowledge to High Priestess Milanwy. She's surprised to find that they already know. "We're aware of the situation," Milanwy says. "But we're unsure of what to do about it. It turns out Drosh has been the shepherd of souls in Abernia, and he is no longer doing his job. Souls are not ascending to the afterlife. It is troubling, but not our business; we have faith that the Gods will figure something out."

Dranko returns briefly to the Greenhouse as most of the Company are going to bed. "I've got to go attend to some Undermen business in Kivia," he says. "Apparently we have a huge opportunity to make some inroads into the Seresef gem trade, but they'll only negotiate with the leader of the Undermen. I've got Morningstar's doo-hickey so I can return to you guys in an emergency, and you can always keep me up to date with *sendings*. Probably shouldn't be more than a day or two."

And with that, he's off again.



Aravis, Morningstar and Grey Wolf are the last folks awake. Grey Wolf is still copying *antimagic field*, while Aravis sits on a couch in the living room, thinking furiously.

"Aha!" he says out loud. He realizes that the *commune* has given him the bare minimum knowledge necessary to *scry* on "the person who had last spoken with Praska at the time of the *commune*." He casts, and it succeeds – but all he can see is the blackness indicative of a *private sanctum*.

Undeterred, he rouses Ernie from sleep. "Ernie, I need you. I want you to cast *find the path*, targeted on "the area protected by the *private sanctum* that's around the person I was just trying to *scry*."

Ernie casts, and gets a direction: practically due east, and the tiniest bit south.

"Great," says Aravis. "Now I want you to fly due north as fast as you can."

Ernie blinks.

"Due north," repeats Aravis.

"Aravis, I'm still mostly asleep. Can I at least change out of my pajamas?"



Ernie flies, and the direction indicated by the *find the path* doesn't change, which means the person is in southern Kivia. Even better, tomorrow Aravis can *teleport* the whole party to Kivia and find the protected area, and that is a significantly better lead on Praska than he had any right to hope for, given her copious defenses.

Thanks, Ernie, he says over a *telepathic bond*. *You can come home now. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day!*



Morningstar is the last to fall asleep that night. She can't shake the image of hundreds of souls, lingering and confused and not ascending to heaven as they should. Because Drosh, God of Death, has fled.

Because they gave Drosh's servant the Crosser's Maze – a decision for which she shares a heavy burden of responsibility.



Aravis is already at the table when the rest of the Company come down for breakfast. "Anyone up for a field trip?" he asks brightly.

Grey Wolf quirks an eyebrow. "Where are we going?"

"Kivia," says Aravis.

"And finding Praska, and giving the Black Circle a good stern talking to," Ernie adds.

"That will show them, Master Ernest," Eddings says, clearing some dishes.

"If we don't come back, blame the Black Circle," Morningstar adds.

"Do try to come back," Eddings replies. "It would be lonely without you."

Their morning meal done, the excited Aravis casts *greater teleport* without even telling the rest of the party where they're going. He lands them in Kivia outside of the city of Levenmud, on the road that rises towards the mountains to the east. They can smell the swamp to the west of town, the stink reminding them of the Sea of Snakes. There's some discontented muttering; no one particularly cared for this region of Kivia during their last visit.

"This is great!" Flicker says. "You know what I was thinking we were out of this morning? Snakes!"

Aravis glares. "Might I suggest at this point, a *wind walk* and *find the path* would be a good idea?"

Ernie gets a direction toward the location from the previous night – the place inside the *private sanctum* that prevented Aravis from *scrying* the last person to have spoken with Praska at the time of Ernie's *commune*. The spell is leading more or less in the direction of Kai Kin, a city on the southern coast, in the country of Ocir.

Over Kibi's inevitable grumbling, they *wind walk*, following the Eternal River. The land below them becomes greener and more arable as they fly, and for the nearly three-hour duration of the spell the direction does not waver.

They continue for another hour on the same heading before landing and recasting *find the path*. It turns out they have overshot their target, but after a few minutes of backtracking the spell is indicating a straight downward direction. They are directly above the small town of Opal in the country of Seresef.

They land behind a hill outside of town and Kibi casts a *veil* to make them look like local birds. (So now they look like *wind-walking* crows.) They pop off a *sending* to Dranko to apprise him of their whereabouts. As they approach the town they can hear an odd cacophony; it sounds like a hundred horses all neighing at once.

Which turns out to be exactly what it is. Every horse in town is raising a ruckus. A horse-drawn carriage has overturned on a main street; several men are trying to calm the horse that was pulling it.

Grey Wolf says what they're all thinking. "I'll bet a horse-god just bought it."



Dranko can hear it too, in the city of Kingstown, capital of Seresef. He glances up at the window in the office, as does the man he is meeting with. Dranko immediately understands what happened but keeps it to himself; **Trevin Olfkir** frowns and looks puzzled, but redirects his attention toward Dranko after a second or two. He extends his hand. "So, it's a deal, then?"

Dranko has been deep in negotiations for many hours now. Kingstown is only about 100 miles south of Djaw, but is on the Seresef side of the Kingstown River and thus not included in the loose confederacy of city-states known as the "Jewels of the Plains." Dranko has heard more than once since arriving in town that "there would be no jewels in Djaw if not for Seresef."

The northern spur of the Greytower Mountains lies within the boundaries of Seresef, and from there comes the source of the Kingdom's wealth – precious gems of a great many varieties. There is speculation all throughout Kivia that the surfeit of gems isn't natural, that no stretch of mountains could have that many quality veins of that many gem types. The Merchant-Princes of Seresef are cagey on that point – it's hard to know the truth of the matter.

Trevin Olfkir is the current First Merchant; effectively the King of Seresef. He's a rotund but humorless fellow with profit seemingly his only concern. The Kingdom's economic policies are rigidly enforced at the highest political levels, and so it has fallen to Trevin personally to negotiate such a unique opportunity. He had already been approached by none other than Olorayne Firemount (Tor Bladebearer's father and Baron of Forquelle) seeking to prevent a deleterious competition between the two by hammering out some terms, but Trevin had soon figured out that his operation was much bigger than Firemount's, and that he could do better by waiting for the right opportunity. He and his inner circle had decided upon the Undermen. Specifically – though he doesn't quite phrase it this way to Dranko – he wants the Undermen to be his fencing operation.

He'll sell his gems to the Undermen, and they will in turn sell them (at a tidy markup) directly to gem merchants around Charagan. Dranko is enjoined to not tell them where the gems really come from, to circumvent certain possible trade restrictions for as long as possible. (In fact, he encourages Dranko to think creatively about setting up front companies and *faux* mining operations that could claim to be the sellers.) While it's possible that King Crunard could get around to passing (or trying to pass) increasingly restrictive laws, Trevin is confident that once the nobles of Charagan get a taste for his product, they won't support that sort of thing.

Dranko gets the sense that, long term, Trevin intends to buy out the Forquellian operations entirely and then start slowly jacking up the prices. It's not clear that he'd still need the Undermen at that point, but that's a long way off and there's a lot of money to be made between here and there. The only drawback is that it's going to take a large up-front payment to Trevin to get the first shipments of goods. The more funds Dranko can raise, the better a bulk discount Olfkir will offer, and obviously the bigger the discount, the bigger the profit.

As for the product itself: breathtaking. Flawless diamonds. Silk-surfaced opals. Jade so luminous you could mistake it for emerald and rubies so deep red they look like you could squeeze juice from them. And the teardrop-shaped translucent white gems called Moontears (coveted by Morningstar), they have in relative abundance. Dranko is reasonably certain that there was no illusion or similar magic involved, and while Trevin was probably showing him the best of the best, it's a good bet that Seresef gemstones are of generally higher quality than Forquelle's finest.

Dranko takes the First Merchant's hand and shakes it with vigor. "You won't regret it," he says, smiling.

"No, I won't," Olfkir says with a toothy grin of his own. "Now, as I promised, I'll have one of my associates cast *wind walk* upon you, so you can rejoin your friends. I'll be in touch via *sending* to work out logistics. And one more thing: if you can find a trustworthy wizard associate who can cast *greater teleport* with any regularity, it would save you a lot on shipping costs and security."

Dranko thinks he might know a guy.

Everett: Why does Morningstar feel she bears more responsibility than the rest of the party for giving up the Crosser's Maze? As I recall, they only surrendered it after doing everything possible to ensure it wouldn't be misused by the obviously evil recipient, and they didn't really have much choice in the matter.

And if the Maze is the reason why souls aren't going on to the afterlife, wouldn't Aravis know it via the fragment of his intelligence he left inside?

Sagiro: Morningstar doesn't feel she bears more responsibility than anyone else – she just is feeling the guilt more keenly.

And the Maze *itself* isn't the reason souls are staying put – it's Drosh's abdication of duty. (If Drosh had fled to the Astral Plane, you wouldn't say the Astral Plane was the reason...) Also, Aravis's fragment isn't omniscient, Maze-wise – it's just wandering around inside, scouting space-time for useful info, as is the mysterious ally who's helping on occasion.

theskyfullofdust: I do love this campaign... Question for you, Sagiro: how much of this do you prep beforehand and how much of it is ad-libbed as you go along? I get the impression that you have copious notes, events planned out, then make the rest up as you go with the flow of the party's adventures; but really I have no idea how much work you put into it, but I am intrigued.

Sagiro: I probably spend 2-3 hours, in total, preparing for a typical game session. I also will occasionally spend an evening brainstorming about the over-plot, things I can do to foreshadow other things, and reviewing old Story Hour entries looking for loose plot threads I'd meant to pick up later. I try not to fill in the lowest-level details until the last possible minute, in order to maintain plot cohesion, take player actions into account as much as I can, and (most importantly) not waste prep work.

I'm not that great at plot-improv, and at this point the plot is complex enough that there's great risk of causing continuity glitches when I just start making stuff up mid-game. It happens sometimes, though – this most recent post being a prime example. I had no idea the party was going to go after Praska via the "last person she talked to" route, so I just thought on the fly about what she would have done following her escape, whom she would have talked to, and where.

theskyfullofdust: That's a great way to do it. I've been trying something like that myself, keeping a vague over-arching plot, then filling in the details as necessary to take into account PC actions, potential twists and the like. I guess it must be hard sometimes to pick out all those loose threads that are strewn through all the Story Hour sessions; there are so many of them!

Look forward to the next update. And thanks.

Piratecat: Having given it some thought, I think Sagiro is a little better at plotting than I am, and I'm a little better at plot-improv than he is – although he's always so well prepared that it's impossible to tell.

Also, his bad-guy voices blow mine away. We're about to fight Octesian next game, and that guy gives me the willies just remembering how he speaks.



Peer Pressure

Putting aside for the moment the echoing equine lamentations, the Company stay focused on their immediate goal – following a lead toward Praska. The *find the path* is specifically pointing to a innocuous store on one of Opal’s main streets. They land on the road outside the shop, still *wind walking* and *veiled* as crows. Kibi makes Morningstar invisible and she slowly opens the door to the shop. Right away Kibi sees her *invisibility* become dispelled, though it’s not entirely unusual for fancier stores in Kivia to have that sort of protection. And the *veil* seems to be holding.

Morningstar sees that the shop sells glassware of notably fine quality. She hears someone call out from a back room in an unfamiliar language. Kibi, under the effect of a *tongues*, understands the words. “Hello?” There is some shuffling, and an old man emerges from a workshop in the back of the store.

“Hello? Is someone there?” he says, looking around. He doesn’t notice the crow, hidden behind a counter.

Morningstar casts a Silent *brain spider* on the man and starts digging around in his mind. There are no images of Praska floating in his surface thoughts, and no memories of her. The priestess frowns.

The old man shrugs, looks around once more, and goes back to his workshop.

Morningstar continues to root around in his head. He has recent memories of talking to a relative, of a married couple (tourists) who wanted to buy an expensive opal, and some local customers. She searches back another day and finds more of the same sorts of memories. There’s nothing about Praska, the Black Circle, or anything else even remotely sinister. The only interesting nugget is that several days ago, guards from Kingstown came around asking if he’d seen any foreigners. But even that is routine; the man has many such memories, since that’s standard practice in the xenophobic country of Seresef.

Ernie suggests that perhaps Scree could search for secret rooms in or around the shop, and some minutes later Kibi hears the voice of his familiar in his mind. *Did you know that there’s some sort of hidden chamber under his shop? It’s not very big. Maybe twenty feet on a side, and made out of stone. The odd thing is, it’s completely sealed.*

Morningstar confirms that the shopkeeper has no memories of such a chamber. He does have a basement storeroom, but Scree’s chamber is beneath it. “They must teleport in and out,” she concludes. “This glass-maker probably doesn’t even know the room is there.”

Oh, here’s something else, thinks Scree to his master. *When I look through the ceiling of the room, I see a black circle in the floor. I must have poked my eye up through it, though nothing happened to me.*

Come back, please! answers Kibi, alarmed.

They spend a few minutes discussing the discovery, coming to the conclusion that it’s most likely a way-station or safe-house for the Black Circle. Aravis notes that the scarcity of foreigners in this town makes it a good locale for such a place. There’s some talk about going into it, maybe even perpetrating a bit of sabotage (or at least vandalism), but they decide they’d rather not risk Praska discovering the discovery. (And there’s also the possibility of another trap.)

As due diligence they make a fly-through of the rest of Opal before landing a hundred yards outside the town. It doesn’t seem like a hotbed of Black Circle activity, whatever else it might be. It’s upscale, with citizens in well-tailored clothes and streets almost completely free of sewage. As the party (still looking like a cluster of crows in a field of short grass) discuss possible next steps regarding Praska, they notice a dog is approaching them from the direction of the town. It’s a handsome golden retriever, walking slowly and with an almost regal bearing. It sniffs the air and looks around curiously.

It sees a bunch of crows, and freezes. A low growl starts deep in its throat, and it starts to back away. Aravis, an idea leaping to his mind, casts *greater arcane sight*. The dog has several spells upon it: *telepathy*, *tongues*, and some minor enchantments. Satisfied, Aravis flies over to it.

“Hello,” he says to the dog. The dog stiffens and turns to the crow.

Aravis? The dog speaks directly into his mind.

Why do you look like a bird? continues the dog with clear disapproval. *That is extremely unseemly.*

“We felt it best to remain hidden from sight,” Aravis explains.

The dog snorts. *That may be, but it is an unfitting disguise.*

“And who might you be, may I ask?” Aravis asks politely.

I am Arkin, says the dog. *I am of the Great Pack.*

“I see,” says Aravis, his suspicion confirmed. “You’ll have to pardon what you may see as a *faux pas* on my part, but I am only newly aware of my status.”

Arkin’s voice betrays no sympathy. *I would not let the rest of the Conclave see you in such an illusionary raiment.*

“I will endeavor to follow that advice,” Aravis answers humbly. “You realize that my normal raiment might be considered unseemly by some.”

You are a human, Arkin says. *That is what makes you extraordinary.* When Aravis doesn’t immediately answer, the dog adds: *I would have expected the divine spark to give you knowledge.*

“I would have expected that too,” Aravis says.

Do you have somewhere safe we can talk? Arkin asks.

“Yes, I do. May I inform my Company of who you are?”

Do you trust them? asks the dog.

“With my life.”

Aravis shares the discussion with the others, and then casts *rope trick* at a low height. Arkin bounds gracefully through the dimensional opening, and Aravis follows, pulling up the rope. The rest of the Company remain outside, both to keep an eye out, and to respect Arkin’s request for privacy.

Settled in the extra-dimensional space, Aravis sits and watches Arkin carefully. “So, you were looking for me.”

Yes, says Arkin. He notices Pewter for the first time, emerging from Aravis’s pack and resting on the wizard’s shoulder. *I have been. I share an affinity with all of my kindred, so I was able to find you. I’ve come a long way. My legs are tired, and I am hungry.*

Aravis digs out some jerky from his pack and offers it to Arkin.

Better, says Arkin as he chews. (His speech remains telepathic.) *So, what do you know?*

“I know that I am considered a god by cats,” Aravis answers. “That is the extent of my knowledge.”

Arkin is incredulous. *That’s all?*

“I know that someone is killing various other animal deities,” the wizard adds.

We are not deities, Aravis. We are divine, but we are not deities. Spirits. Paragons. There are more fitting terms. Aravis nods.

Now, Arkin continues gravely, *for the first time in history and memory, there are two fewer of us. One of the Great Pack was killed, and only hours ago one of the Noble Herd was also slain. I don’t know for certain, but if one of the Feline Conclave was born into the body of a human, I can’t believe it’s a coincidence. So. Why aren’t you doing something?*

Arkin makes no attempt to hide the accusation in his mental voice. Before Aravis can think of an adequate response, Arkin asks another question. *Do you know your history? Do you know of Quarrol?*

Aravis thinks the name sounds familiar, but can’t place it. “No,” he admits.

Arkin puts his paws on his head, a clear gesture of disbelief.

“You have to understand,” says Aravis. “I...”

I understand, Arkin interrupts. *You are a cat, in a manner of speaking.*

Pewter can’t keep silent at the rebuke. *Are you going to take that from him, Boss?*

Aravis puts a hand on his familiar. *Now is not the time, Pewter.*

But he’s being a jerk! Pewter protests.

I want information from this dog. I don’t want to annoy him.

Pewter sulks. *For the record, he annoyed you first.*

"Until a few months ago," says Aravis to Arkin, "I thought I was only human."

How could you not know? Arkin can't keep the disbelief from his voice.

"All I knew was that cats liked me, and rats hated me. The Council of Nine wanted to kill me."

Yes. Yes, they would, Arkin answers somberly. *And the Unkind also want to kill you. The Noble Herd and Great Pack are mostly on your side.*

"Who are the Unkind?" Aravis asks nervously.

The ravens.

"And thus, your comment about my current appearance," Aravis says, understanding.

As for Quarrol, Arkin goes on, *He is the Kivian God of Nature, Himself a creation of Posada.* Arkin pauses and shakes his head. *How is it that I am giving this lesson to a human?*

"For two reasons," Aravis explains. "One, I am a mage, and not well studied in religious matters. But also, I'm not from Kivia. Until recently there has been almost no travel or communication between Kivia and my Kingdom of Charagan."

Arkin lets out an almost-human-sounding sigh. *Well, there must be something about you, because Quarrol has chosen you. In centuries long past, Quarrol in His great wisdom imbued five species of animal with a divine nature: horses, dogs, cats, ravens and rats. One cannot fully understand His purpose about that last one. Quarrol decided that each of these races would always have nine of their number infused with a divine spark. They would have greater leadership, intelligence – they would guide their races, protect and advise them in times of trouble. These nine are spirits that are constantly reborn in generation after generation; when one dies, the spirit is returned to nature and then immediately reborn in a younger member of the species. There are always nine.*

Arkin pauses before continuing. *At least, until very recently. When the member of the Great Pack was killed, his spirit was not reborn. It was annihilated. We suspect the same thing is true of the horses. Spirits are meant to travel from generation to generation, but now there are only eight. Something is killing us.*

"Do you know where the member of the Great Pack was killed?" Aravis asks.

Yes. In a human country called Bederen, although I don't think that is material. Clearly this thing can strike anywhere.

"Do you know the exact spot?" Aravis presses.

No, Arkin admits. *We don't know. He was traveling.*

"I ask because recently, when humans have died, their souls have not gone to their respective afterlives."

Arkin nods. *Ah, yes. Drosch's mysterious absence. It is not of particular import to us, but I try to stay abreast of current events. Quarrol guides our souls. Not Drosch. I can tell you, if it matters, that the member of the Noble Herd was killed in the town of Waterhold, north of Djaw. Again, I don't know the exact location.*

More silence, as Aravis and Arkin contemplate. Then the dog speaks again. *I assume from the fact that you are here, and not in the Wood, that the Feline Conclave has not contacted you.*

"No, they have not."

Arkin growls. *I ask rhetorically: why not? They should have done so immediately. It should be obvious to them that you are of great importance. In only one in fifty generations are any animal spirits born into the bodies of humans – only in times of exceptional need. Humans can master greater power than we can. Quarrol must believe that there is great danger to us all – to cats, at least. And yet the Feline Conclave has not summoned you to them. Why?*

Aravis sighs. "I have no idea. I assume a summons from them would be impossible not to notice..."

They would come to you as I have, says Arkin. *I knew where you were; you share the divine spark. They would know even better – you are one of them, after all. They share the ability to detect other sparks – despite their lack of focus and capricious nature.*

Pewter fumes. *Can I swat him on the nose on general principle?*

Aravis ignores his belligerent familiar. "Do you have any clues as to what or who is killing us?" he asks the dog.

Arkin shakes his head. *We know nothing, save that it is likely very powerful. We strive to know its purpose but we have no leads.*

“Why specifically was it that you were seeking me out?”

Arkin growls again, frustrated. Are all cats this dense? *Because you are an animal spirit born into the body of a human – the only one among the cats, dogs and horses. And yet, you have not contacted the cats, and they have not contacted you. We are being extinguished. You are human because Quarrol knows we have great need. So I come to you asking, if not telling, you there is great need and you should do something. Perhaps you need to go visit the Conclave.*

“I suspect you are correct,” Aravis answers. “Can you teach me how to seek out others of our kind?”

It's innate, says Arkin. *If you lack the skill, I cannot help you.*

“I'll do my best,” says Aravis. “For when I meet them, are other bird forms inappropriate, or just ravens and crows?”

The finer points of feline illusionary etiquette are beyond me, says Arkin dryly.

“Of course they are,” says Aravis with a wink. “After all, you're only a dog.”

Nice one, boss! thinks Pewter. *Now swat him on the nose!*

I'm not here to trade insults with a member of the Feline Conclave, says Arkin without betraying any humor. *Consider that advice to save you embarrassment later on. So, do you have a plan?*

“You mentioned the Wood,” says Aravis.

The Endless Wood. Yes. That is where the Feline Conclave resides, though I cannot be more specific.

Flashback, to eighteen months previous...

The Company are traveling through Kivia in search of the Crosser's Maze. Returning to Djaw from the Golem City of Repose, the party is beset by swarms of rats that focus their attacks on Aravis. A semi-humanoid rat creature, sent by something called the Council of Nine, gives Aravis a warning: do not approach the Endless Wood for any reason, or be killed. It is all very mysterious.

Before Aravis can do more than think to himself *Those dirty rats!* he gets a *sending* from Morningstar. (With the *rope trick* closed, it's the only way she can communicate with him.)

There's a flock of ravens headed our way. A big one. Can you let us in?

Aravis shares this with Arkin as he opens the *rope trick* and lets down the rope.

Are they moving to attack? asks the dog. *The Unkind may have had similar thoughts as I, though not to the same ends. How many are there? And how far away?*

Morningstar had neglected to include that level of detail in her message, but the answers would be “yes,” “thousands,” and “imminent.” No sooner have the rest of the Company pulled themselves up into the extradimensional space, than the swarm of birds reaches them. They can see dozens of birds actually swoop under the opening, frustrated at the disappearance of their quarry.

Aravis makes hasty introductions to Arkin. *I am more powerful than a normal dog, but not strong enough to withstand what you have described,* Arkin says. *But you, Aravis, are a wizard. How powerful a wizard are you?*

Ernie fields that one. “If wizards were thunderstorms, he'd flatten trees.”

After Aravis has summarized what he has learned, Kibi turns to Arkin. “Why do the Unkind want us dead?” he asks.

Perhaps they are the ones who have found a way to kill other Animal Spirits, Arkin ventures. *We have always been at odds with them, but heretofore that would have been fruitless. Now, though, the rules have changed. If the Council of Nine or the Unkind did discover a way, I'd not be surprised that they'd use it. So they could be coming for you, or for me, or both of us.*

Aravis ponders. “Even if they are not the ones responsible, they may believe that killing me will cause the spirit to come back as a cat, which would weaken the cats.”

Arkin nods. *So... I repeat... what are you going to do about it?*

Ernie knocks his fist against his helmet. “I'm armored. I could try to parley.”

"Great," says Grey Wolf. "You're just going to stick your helmeted head into a swarm of ravens."

"Okay!" Ernie lies down on his stomach by the opening. "If I tug on the rope, pull me back in!"

"I was joking!" exclaims Grey Wolf, but it's too late.

Ernie sticks his out out of the *rope trick*. He is not even given sufficient time to shout "Ravens, what do you want with us?" before he is battered and buffeted, pecked and scratched by a hundred frenzied birds. The others quickly pull him back in.

Ernie finds his wounds to be filthy, and he continues to take damage from them until he casts *cure light wounds*. So much for parley. "There are big ones out in the swarm," he says, confirming what they saw during the ravens' approach. "Dire ravens, bigger than any of us. At least a dozen of them, mixed in with the flock."

They Company plan and plot for a few minutes before acting. Ernie casts *prayer*, releases *Beryn Sur*, and drops down. Aravis also drops down from the *rope trick* and, like Ernie, finds himself in the middle of the swarm. Concentrating hard, he casts *lightning ring* around himself, and the birds start to crisp.

Grey Wolf drops out next, and clears out some of the birds with a *fireball*.

Aravis, and only Aravis, is assaulted by dire ravens; Grey Wolf and Ernie are ignored. He is bitten and clawed and nearly knocked to the ground, though in a moment of unexpected comedy two of the huge birds collide head-on and fall stunned to the ground. But this is all meaningless lead-up, really, to the main event.

Morningstar drops down from the *rope trick* and casts *prismatic sphere*, forming a large hemisphere that wholly encompasses the extradimensional opening. Lots of awful things happen to lots of ravens. Gruesomely, dozens of bird corpses come popping into the sphere with them – some on fire, some melted by acid, some crisped by lightning, and some skeletonized by several of these at once. A few are made of stone and fall with little thumps into the grass. The lucky ones that manage to survive the trip *in* are still blinded, and don't survive the trip *out* the other side of the sphere as they flap around in a panic. One dire raven comes hurtling in, petrified and smoldering. It rolls to Aravis's feet.

After about ten more seconds the birds stop coming. The ground is an avian abattoir. There's some brief, lopsided combat as the two stunned dire ravens regain consciousness.

Kibi casts *xorn movement* and leaves the prismatic oasis, and pops up on the far side to take a look. While he's there he casts *prismatic spray*, and while this causes a similar swath of carnage through the ranks of ravens, there are way too many for a single spell like that to seriously thin their ranks. Kibi is dive-bombed and somewhat shredded before retreating again into the ground and back to his friends.

So, they wait it out, and after a few minutes the frustrated assault force departs. The Company can hear the retreating cacophony. They stay in the *prismatic sphere* a bit longer, just to be on the safe side.



A few minutes later they hear a voice outside. "You guys had a barbecue and didn't invite me. I'm hurt."

It's Dranko. Scree confirms it's really him, and Morningstar drops the *prismatic sphere*. There is a brief reunion and brain-dump. Dranko starts to tell them news of his excursion.

"Things went great! I've sewn up the market for gem imports. It's going to make me... make us... I mean the Undermen... a lot of cash. And I..."

He stops. Kibi is holding up his hand.

Flashback even farther – over two years ago...

The Company are approaching God's Thorn on their quest to free the Yrimpa, when Kibi abruptly vanishes, having been summoned away to another world. Here is his experience from that moment:

Kibilhathur is standing on a white marble floor, and specifically within a wide grey circle drawn on that floor. Nine candles burn at various points around its perimeter. Around him is a wide chamber with a high ceiling; the walls are marked with glyphs and patterns written in a grey, swirling hand. The room is lit by hanging lanterns, and through a round glass window at the highest point in the ceiling he can see a full red moon in a black night sky. In front of him are two people: a tall, imperious-looking woman in a brown and white robe, and a small man with spectacles, holding a large book.

The woman speaks: "Something must have gone wrong. This is a dwarf!"

The man frantically looks through the book. "No, we did it right. I'm sure of it."

The woman answers. "Dolt! The Opener is a mage. It has to be! And dwarves are incapable of magery. We must have made a mistake."

"Perhaps this one isn't. Maybe he's... oh, I don't know. And besides, this one has to be the Opener. The *summoning* wouldn't have worked on anyone else."

He flips to a page near the back of the book. "I'll read it again, milady, in case you've forgotten. 'When the smoke of nine is set beneath the Sigil of the Sky, and four of Tirat's children align themselves behind the moon, the Opener will be brought from an echoing world. He is the wizard who will move the World Stone. He will bridge the Earth and the light, and force the gates of yesterday.'"

"I told you," says the woman frowning. "It says 'wizard.'"

"Hm," says the man. He looks at Kibi. "Well? Are you a wizard?"

The dwarf feels as though he couldn't lie, even if he wanted to. "Of course," he says, affronted.

"Ah," he says. "Well then. Good. What is your name?"

"Kibilhathur Bimson."

"Well, Kibilhathur Bimson, know this. You have been summoned by the Lady Serpicore, Mistress of the Wizards' College, and by her humble apprentice, Maudrin. You are under our control for as long as the task takes. When your task is done, you will be released to your home. We will not mistreat you, but if you resist us, we will compel you, and that might cause you discomfort. Your task is dangerous, and though we will give you assistance, and protect your life however we might, there is no guarantee that you will survive. Understand that the fate of Cafille, our world, hangs in the balance, and that if you fail, you will perish with the rest of us."

Will you assist us willingly, or will we be obliged to compel you?"

Kibi nods.

And now, years later, he hears this *sending* in his head:

Kibi. Must move World Stone. Ruby is plane shift focus. Hurry... minutes before we're overwhelmed. Teleport to the world arch. Bring help if possible. Hurry!

Mathew Freeman: Which is, of course, exactly what you want to hear at a time like this...

Awesome stuff! Some old pigeons finally coming home to roost, if you'll excuse the bird-brained pun.

wedgeski: There's something about a dog holding counsel with a flock of crows in a field that I find very agreeable. This is such great stuff.

Innocent Bystander: Sagiro, did you plan for the *sending* to take place at this particular moment or did you decide that after 'x' number of days/months from the original summoning it would happen regardless of what the PCs were up to?

Sagiro: Not the latter, I assure you.

What I did was, I kept the Kibi World Stone thing in my pocket for years, waiting until I was fairly sure the players (especially Kibi's – my wife, as it happens) had forgotten all about it. Then I looked for an opening. The party had kind of petered out on the whole Praska thing, which for the time being was a dead end, and hadn't yet made any specific plans to find the Feline Conclave. Seemed like a good time for a pace-changing one-off.



Blood, Death, and Rats**World Stone**

Kibilhathur Bimson, during those brief times spent *summoned* to the world of Cafille, had never actually *seen* the World Stone. As is typical of heroic quests, there had been a number of preliminary steps necessary before the main event, and Kibi hadn't made it past even the first of those adventures before snapping back to Abernia for good.

He *does* recall seeing the World Stone's location on a map – in a canyon that, according to a dire warning on the parchment, could not be entered by living creatures. Worse, he recalls that the World Stone itself was said to be blocking the World Arch, which must not be opened lest the world be destroyed. Kibi never received a clear answer to his questions about why his summoners *wanted* him to move the World Stone, or how he could survive in the canyon that housed it; the Lady Serpicore was still muddling through prophecies at the time that were supposedly going to reveal the details. All she knew was that the world of Cafille was going to be threatened by something called the “Bleeding Scourge,” and that moving the should-never-be-moved World Stone was the only way to stop them.

Kibi responds to the *sending*:

I'd like to come and help, but we cannot survive in the valley. That's where we'll plane shift, though; correct me if you want me somewhere else.

Then he tells the others what he has heard. Dranko snorts. “You know if we go help them, it’s going to be like four months before we get back here.”

“Another thing I don’t understand,” Kibi adds. “You can’t *plane shift* into Cafille. The plane has some odd temporal properties that make it impossible. That’s why they had to *summon* me the way they did.”

“Maybe it’s an enemy, luring us to certain doom,” Morningstar posits.

“I can’t take the chance; I need to go!” answers Kibi. “I have to help those people.”

While Flicker digs a ruby out of his pack, Aravis points out a potential snag. “Depending on how big the canyon is, we may end up *inside* it if we *plane shift*. Which will be a problem if we can’t survive there.”

Kibi receives another *sending*:

You can survive... it's the great syzygy! You... argh! Augh! Hurry, please! Agh!

“We’re jumping into a fight,” Grey Wolf sighs. “We’re *always* jumping into fights.”

“We have to go now!” Kibi exhorts. “But I don’t have a *plane shift* prepared. Who does?”

It turns out that no one does, but Morningstar uses her *gem of recall* to get one in a hurry. Off they go to Cafille! Upon arrival they drop fifteen feet through some tree branches and land with a collective thump on a soft forest floor. The smell of a new Prime fills their nostrils: rich, cold, coniferous. Morningstar stands up and brushes pine needles (or something like them) from her robe. “What’s a syzygy?”

“I think it’s a kind of worm,” Dranko answers. “A sea worm.”

Morningstar blinks, then turns to Aravis. “It’s an alignment of planets, in a row,” the wizard explains.

“Or maybe that,” Dranko concedes.

Kibi has no idea where they are; it’s not a part of Cafille he remembers. Worse, Kibi doesn’t have a *greater teleport* readied, and Aravis has already used his for the day. Time is passing, they’re between five and five hundred miles from their destination, and the Company have no way of reaching the World Stone! Kibi tugs his beard with agitation. They quickly review and discard options: *scry* takes too long; *clairvoyance* doesn’t have the range; Morningstar has *mass heal* ready instead of *miracle*.

“Wait,” says Ernie. “I have an idea. Kibi, I’m going to fly you up.”

Flying? “What? No...”

Ernie grabs the dwarf around the armpits and flies him straight up, through and above the trees and into a beautiful clear sky. They’re at the edge of the forest, and abutting the wood is a steep cliff dropping off to the east. Beyond the cliff is a series of box canyons stretching away nearly to the horizon.

Way out above one of the canyons, maybe a dozen or more miles away, Kibi and Ernie can see a wispy stream of smoke rising upward, a pencil-thin thread of gray against a deep-blue backdrop. Kibi breathes a sigh of relief. Assuming that's his spot, a normal *teleport* is back as an option. *Seen once*, he thinks. *Good enough for now.*

Ernie lands, and they hit everyone with *fly* spells who's not already so endowed. Kibi takes a deep breath and casts *teleport*.



They arrive high in the air above a large box canyon, near to the dead-end. Below them – well, there's a lot to take in. The canyon itself is almost eighty feet wide directly below, though it tapers down narrowly. They cannot actually *see* the very end, as it's covered with a rocky roof – the canyon effectively ends in a cave. The walls of the canyon rise up at least a hundred feet. There are numerous battered and broken defenses scattered across the canyon's expanse: slabs of stone and wood, partially filled trenches, hastily constructed and now mostly wrecked barricades. It's as if someone wanted to slow an advancing army and didn't have long to set things up.

Also, there's an advancing army. It looks like they had brought some siege towers with them, but those have all been destroyed. One is on fire and producing the smoke seen from afar by the Company. The soldiers in this army wear no uniforms, or indeed any clothing at all, and while humanoid are clearly nothing like human. They are taller as a rule, standing seven or eight feet, and have brown rubbery skin reminiscent of troll-skin. Scattered here and there are some truly Giant specimens of the type, towering at nearly fifteen feet tall. They have long sharp claws, and all of them, shorter and taller, have something wrong with their faces; the Company are too high up to see exactly what.

The floor of the canyon below is scattered with hundreds of bodies of these creatures, along with an even greater number of slain men and elves. Sounds of battle ring out where the badly-outnumbered defenders are still holding off the tide of advancing monsters. And that tide is clearly going to overwhelm them soon, as the canyon extends back as far as they can see, and it's filled with hundreds – no, more like thousands – of attackers.

There's no sign of the World Stone, but given that the army is pressing toward the cave at the end of the canyon, the Company have a fairly accurate impression of what's going on. As they descend, they take in three more details about the battlefield: first, there are some defenders standing here and there who have not died, but who are also not fighting back. They're standing or sitting, glassy-eyed and comatose, weapons fallen from their slack hands.

Second, there's too much blood. Even for a battlefield with hundreds of bodies, there's *much* too much blood. It's not just that the shattered barricades, corpses, monsters and defenders are splattered with dark liquid; the ground itself looks like it's a few inches deep in the stuff. Some of the trenches are practically filled with it. *Guess that's why they're called the Bleeding Scourge*, thinks Kibi.

Third, the Company see what's amiss with the faces of the monsters: they have no traditional features. Instead, across the otherwise smooth face of each member of the Scourge is a single carved rune, distinct in its edges but weeping blood. Dranko grimaces. "Nothing good ever comes from guys with runes instead of faces."

Kibi immediately drops a *wall of force* that *almost* entirely blocks off the cave mouth; he leaves a small gap at the top that he and his friends can fly through. He shouts to the others that he has done this (as the party are not mind-linked at the moment) and then flies himself through the gap and into the cave as a wave of monsters smashes into the base of the wall.

The back of the cave is not far in – maybe thirty or forty feet from the mouth. Set into the rock wall at the back are the columns of a large arch, and completely *filling* the archway is an enormous white marble stone. It's a perfect sphere, about ten feet in diameter, and so white it seems to glow from within. No dirt, blood, or grime marks its perfect smooth surface.

Near to the Stone and off to the side is a man in leather armor, hunched over slightly and fervently praying inside a little translucent force bubble. A tall woman in plate mail, badly wounded, is guarding the man in the bubble. Some monsters had gotten into the cave before Kibi's *wall of force* went up and are battling the few remaining defenders there. A tall elf dressed in long red robes stands nearest to the Stone; he has just finished casting a healing spell on a number of the soldiers.

"I'm Kibilhathur Bimson," Kibi announces as he lands. "I understand you have a stone that needs moving. Oh, and I dropped a *wall of force* over there."

The priest looks up and nods at Kibi. "Walls won't hold for long against the Scourge." Then he points to the World Stone and adds, "Move that!"

The rest of the Company move in to assist the defenders outside the wall (though Flicker follows Kibi, to serve as a bodyguard). Dranko drops an *ice storm* to help slow down the Scourge, then moves down just out of reach of one of the giant-sized monsters.

Aravis sighs. "He always gets in the way," he mutters to himself. Out loud he shouts, "They're in a perfect cone formation, but Dranko is..."

"I'll dodge it, whatever it is," Dranko calls back. "Don't worry!"

"You'll dodge a *prismatic spray*?"

Ernie, meanwhile, drops a *flame strike*, accompanied by the battle cry: "Back off, you nasty-faced... things!" It's modestly effective, though the Bleeding Scourge seem to have some resistance to fire.

"Do what you need to do," reiterates Dranko. Aravis sighs, shrugs, and blasts a *prismatic spray* straight downward, catching a huge swath of Scourge in its cone. The angle is such that the *wall of force* protects those in the cave, and Ernie is high enough to be out of the blast. Only Dranko catches some friendly fire, and he *does* – barely – manage to avoid going insane. Four of the smaller Bleeding Scourge vanish, ten die from various damage types, and another three are petrified. Four big ones are also caught: one sucks up a large amount of electrical damage but doesn't quite die, another does drop dead from poison, and the remaining two are unaffected.

Some of the Scourge pressing against the *wall of force* turn and start yammering in horrible screechy voices – maybe it's a language? And the ones already inside the cave advance and attack. Two get through to Kibi and rend him with their claws, but that's not the worst of it. Huge gouts of blood spray from the runes in their faces and splatter the dwarf from head to foot; it burns his skin and sets his clothes to smoking. He manages to resist some further ill effect but bellows in agony nonetheless.

Two more Bleeding Scourge overwhelm and kill the bodyguard standing over the man in the bubble. Another monster sprays an elven defender with acidic blood, and the effect is even more gruesome: a bloody rune draws itself across the elf's face, his body jerks around uncontrollably, and a second spray of blood spurts out of his face, directly at one of his wounded compatriots. His ally screams and smolders. Kibi turns green; he's seen quite a few revolting creatures in his time, but this... ugh! The surviving soldiers fight back and slay one of the beasts, but it's the Scourge who clearly have the upper hand.

Outside the wall, the Scourge continue to pour down the canyon toward the World Stone as the Company thin their ranks with magical firepower: a *fire storm* from Morningstar obliterates a couple dozen, and Grey Wolf sets up an *iron storm* as a precursor to Aravis's inevitable *chain lightning*.

Two of the Giantish members of the Scourge jut their heads toward the cave, and from each of their runed faces springs a thin beam of gray light. There's a flash where the *wall of force* stood, and the front line of monsters stumbles forward. "Wall's down!" shouts Kibi.

While the fellow in the force-bubble continues to crouch and pray, the red-robed priest casts another healing spell on his allies before turning to Kibi. "Move it!" he barks. "Do what you have to do!"

Kibi throws up his hands. "I don't know what I have to do!"

The priest goes white and a look of panic crosses his face. "You don't know?!" he cries, frantic.

"I thought you'd know!" Kibi answers, equally frustrated.

"I don't know!" exclaims the priest. "You're the Opener! There's the Arch. Open it! Move the damned Stone!"

Kibi looks again at the World Stone: a towering sphere of perfect, unstained marble. Not knowing what else to do, he puts a hand upon it. Immediately the dwarf realizes it's saturated with Earth Magic, and its power starts to intermingle with his. The World Stone starts to glow in earnest as energy rushes between the two, and Kibi realizes he couldn't pull his hand away even if he wanted to. Kibi thinks at the Stone: *Move! My will is that you move!* It doesn't budge, but a surge of Earth Magic flows through him when he concentrates. "Protect me!" he cries to his friends. "I'm going to be busy for a bit."

They're *all* busy for a bit. Aravis unleashes his *chain lightning* into the *iron storm* with predictably destructive results. Grey Wolf and Ernie pound the attackers with spells while Morningstar heals the good guys. Dranko uses his ring to place a *wall of ice* across the cave entrance – another delaying tactic – and then catches sight of a monster smashing through the force-bubble protecting the chanting man. The rune-faced horror rakes the man's neck – it would be a death-blow, but Dranko casts an interrupting spell of wound-closure to save his life before other elven soldiers bring down the beast.

The *wall of ice* comes down, *disintegrated* by one of the giantish Bleeding Scourge. Another one blasts a cone of blood from its face into the cave, drenching them in stinging gore. Most of the Company resist the accompanying horror, but Flicker is overwhelmed. He sits down quietly, expression vacant, and drops his sword. Behind them, the blood sheets down the curve of the World Stone and puddles onto the ground beneath it.

Another smaller member of the Scourge leaps forward and tears at Kibi, but the dwarf keeps his hand on the World Stone. He continues to concentrate, willing the Stone to move while channeling Earth Magic into it. More blood splatters upon him, this time from the lacerated face of a horrified human defender. *No good*, Kibi thinks, and so he casts *xorn movement* and sinks into the ground, keeping his hand in contact with the very bottom of the World Stone. Surrounded by the earth of Cafille, his power grows stronger, and he knows that somehow he is changing the very physical nature of the great marble sphere, though the details are still beyond his grasp.

The attackers press in, while the Company and the ever-dwindling ranks of native defenders fall back to guard the back of the cave. Dranko goes invisible and annihilates one of the giants with his whip. Ernie grows in stature with a *righteous might* and hacks away with his blades. “Nice to see something other than kneecaps for a change!”

Aravis casts another *prismatic spray*. Grey Wolf blasts a *cone of cold*. Morningstar heals the robed priest and moves to protect the chanter. “Good!” shouts the priest. “We have to protect Baylor at all costs, or all of this is for nothing. Now if...” He looks around and doesn’t see Kibi. His face falls. “The Opener! What happened to the Opener?!”

What’s happening is, Kibi is finally figuring it out. With a last massive surge of Earth Magic he understands the link he’s formed with the World Stone, and how he’s affecting its nature. Specifically, he’s changing its weight. Suddenly, to him, it’s as if he’s holding not a hundred-ton rock but a thin shell of balsa. With his wrist and hand still above ground, he moves the World Stone off to the side as easily as if it were made of *papier mâché*. (Since Kibi cannot see what’s going on above ground, he fails to realize that he has slammed it right into Ernie. And while the *weight* of the World Stone is lessened, its *mass* is entirely unchanged; Ernie is knocked backward against one of the cave walls, stunned.)

The World Arch now stands unblocked; it is filled with a deep purple light. The man **Baylor**, who has been praying for the wellbeing of his world while waiting for this moment, stands upright. He looks at the red-robed priest, sighs, and with an expression reminiscent of the last one seen on the face of One Certain Step, shouts “I die for Cafille!” before dashing straight into the Arch.

Purple light blasts outward and fills the canyon, diffusing into the air above and filling the world with a mauve tinge. The Company are overcome by a odd feeling as the light washes over them, odd and familiar. They feel as they did while traveling back in time using the Eyes of Moirel. They feel that something is wrong with how time is anchored to space.

The Bleeding Scourge are physically blasted backward and as they stumble they fade out of existence. Even the corpses vanish. Within five seconds there is not a single specimen of their kind left on Cafille, alive or dead.

A few seconds after that, the same thing starts to afflict the Company. They feel like an inexorable hand is shoving them backward, and their physicality starts to falter. The priest looks around frantically. “Where did he go? He has to put it back!”

Kibi emerges from the ground to see his friends looking only semi-solid, and he hears the priest yelling loudly, “Put it back! For the love of Balt, put it back!”

The dwarf moves the World Stone easily back into position, blocking the Arch and cutting off the source of the purple light. The fading stops. Morningstar realizes that the priest is the only defender to survive the attack, but casts *revivify* on the last soldier to have fallen.

Kibi looks confusedly at the priest. “Can you explain what this is all about?”

The priest turns from Kibi to the now-lifeless canyon and then back again. “Gods be praised!” he shouts, and engulfs Kibi in a bear hug.

Mathew Freeman: This group is so awesome, they save worlds without even knowing how!

theskyfullofdust: Love the rune-face monsters; pretty gruesome, yet cool. What effects did the blood spurts have?

Everett: They really ought to do something about Flicker's Will save.

blargney the second: Greater Heroism seems like a good fit.

Everett: Flicker rarely if ever gets buffed in combat.

Piratecat: Yeah, poor lil' fella. This was one of those fights where Dranko felt relatively useless – area effect spells were *definitely* the order of the day – but which made for a spectacular session. One of the facets of good pacing is to know when to completely swap the feel of the game for a session. We had been pretty frustrated trying to track down Praska and fight swarms, and the change of pace was a delight.

Everett: No doubt. The battle had a wonderfully epic feel to it.



This is not an action-packed update. I can't say the same about the next one...

You'll Get to Them All Eventually

An odd quiet settles over the canyon. Almost directly overhead is a remarkable sight, heretofore ignored by the Company what with the ground-based distractions: the Great Syzygy. Four celestial bodies are visible – moons or planets of increasing size, overlapping in the sky like concentric colored marbles – though there may be more hidden behind those. Slowly, very slowly, they are shifting out of alignment.

Dranko squints upward. "Do we all die when those are no longer lined up?"

The priest doesn't look up; his gaze is still cast upon the canyon itself, now blissfully free of monsters though the seas of blood remain. "If you are still in this canyon, yes. As will I, and **Enric** here." He motions to the one other soldier who survived. "I would suggest that you return to whence you came. The Great Syzygy will not just affect the canyon; it will also prevent..."

He looks at Dranko, and wonders if the crude-looking ally of the dwarf will understand. "Cafille is out of temporal phase from the rest of the universe. That is why Kibilhathur had to be summoned with an elaborate and time-critical ritual the first time. People cannot simply *plane shift* to and from Cafille. You could come now because of the Great Syzygy. But we will soon become bombarded with... it's too technical."

Dranko clears his throat with conspicuous annoyance. "You're forgetting to say something important. How about, 'Thank you, Kibi, for saving the world. Here's your loot.'"

The priest gives Dranko a sour look. "Perhaps, young man, I was getting to that, but thought that other matters, like you all being confined to Cafille for the rest of your lives, might be worth mentioning first."

Grey Wolf quirks an eyebrow. "How much time do we have left?"

The priest looks up at the planetary alignment. "I would estimate about half an hour, give or take five or ten minutes. It's hard to tell without a telescope."

Morningstar starts to pray for another *plane shift* while the priest explains recent events to Kibi. "That was the Bleeding Scourge," he says, gesturing to the bloody canyon. "They took advantage of the unique nature of our Prime to stage an invasion. The World Arch emanates a temporal energy that's building up all the time. When one releases the World Stone it floods the world with that energy, with theoretically devastating effects. Fortunately for us, the Great Syzygy, which allowed the Scourge to invade, also allowed you to survive here long enough to fend off that invasion. Though ordinarily, the Bleeding Scourge would be immune to the energy from the Arch."

"Really?" says Kibi. "Because they seemed pretty affected by it to me!"

"Yes," sighs the priest. "That was because of Baylor – the man who gave his life to save us all. He had spent the better part of the year living in a cauldron filled with a complex magical liquid. It altered his nature such that when he leaped into the Arch, it changed the temporal energy slightly to a type that would send the Bleeding Scourge back to their home world."

"Couldn't they come back?" asks Kibi.

"Yes – in another 6,000 years, when the next Great Syzygy is upon us."

Aravis cuts in. "A little more warning would have been nice, you know. We almost couldn't get here at all!"

"Also, you should have told me I was also the 'Closer,'" says Kibi.

The priest chuckles. "I only warned you when the time was right – and indeed it was, judging from the results. According to prophecy, the right time to send for you was when I was blinded by light through the eye of the needle." He gestures to the top of the canyon, where the sun has now moved a few degrees off from a small gap in a jumble of rocks. "I was standing here guarding Baylor when the sun shone upon me through that hole."

The priest turns to Kibi and bows low. "I am the High Priest **Sipe** of the Sun God Balt, and I am most grateful for your timely arrival, prophesied or not. The late lamented Lady Serpicore, Gods bless her soul, was correct about you after all. She perished in one of the previous attacks of the Bleeding Scourge – as, I'm sorry to say, did every one of your former party of adventurers with whom you spent so little time on your previous truncated visits.

"We have lost most of our greatest heroes, knights, warriors, and priests. I'm afraid I have little to give you by way of thanks, but you may have this." He takes off a necklace with a red and glowing bauble on the end of it and presses it into the dwarf's

hand. “This is a holy relic of the Sun God Balt. The chain is not necessary; you may keep it in your pocket if you wish, though I feel that would be disrespectful. It has long since been used by those here who need it. Think of it when you need something badly. It will only work once for anyone, but it will work, once, for everyone. Even him.” He gestures at Dranko.

We use Action Points in our 3.5E game, and the necklace grants a theoretically infinite number of Action Points, with a limit of one per person per lifetime.

coyote6: So, if you die, and get revivified/raised/resurrected/etc., does that count as another lifetime? Your first lifetime ended at death...

Piratecat: I totally forgot we had this!



The party fly Sipe and Enric up to the top of the cliff above the canyon, since they have no magics left to flee before the Great Syzygy ends. Then, it having been a very long day, they *plane shift* back to Charagan and *teleport* to the Greenhouse to sleep...

...except that with nothing but normal *teleports* left, there's a small mishap. The Company arrive not at the door to their home, but in the fine sucking sands of the Mouth of Nahalm. Ernie and Kibi have sunk nearly up to their necks before Aravis casts a second time, this time with perfect accuracy. At least, for Eddings' sake, they cast *clean* cantrips to banish the caked-on blood and sand from their clothes before going inside.

The butler is happy to see them, as always. Dranko greets him a question that's not as unexpected as it should be. “Eddings, what day is it?”

Eddings scowls. “You haven’t been time traveling again, have you?”

“*Plane shifting*,” says Grey Wolf, plopping into a chair and putting up his feet.

Ernie lets the cat Argol scamper up to his shoulder. “And the place we shifted to had a different – temporal signature?” He looks questioningly at Aravis. “Is that it?” Aravis nods.

It takes them a few minutes to figure things out, particularly given the time change between Kivia and Charagan, but they come to realize that their time spent on the world of Cafille was actually passing more quickly, and so very little time has passed here at home since they *plane shifted* away.

While Kibi examines the necklace from High Priest Sipe – the bauble is a beautiful and stylized sun with tiny solar flares – Dranko takes a small pouch from his pack. “Almost forgot,” he says with practiced nonchalance. “When I was negotiating with the gem merchants in Seresef, they gave me a few free samples.” He empties four stones onto his palm – a diamond, two opals, and a moontear. He hands them to Flicker. “What’s your professional opinion?”

Flicker starts with the diamond, taking out a magnifying lens and giving the gem a careful examination. After several minutes he mutters longingly, “I think I need to be alone with this one.”

Dranko nods. “So?”

Flicker spends a few minutes with each gem before delivering his verdict. “In my professional opinion, these are suspiciously flawless.”

Dranko raises an eyebrow. “Suspiciously?”

“Unusually,” says Flicker. “Startlingly.”

Dranko laughs. “They have mountains full of these things, and lots of people are suspicious. They won’t confirm if the source is magical, but I can tell you that the gems themselves are not. But they are, in fact, flawless.”

Flicker exhales. “I imagine the nobles of Charagan will be falling all over themselves to own these, once word gets out.”

Dranko grins broadly. “You don’t say!”

Aravis interrupts. “When do we grind them up for spell components?”

Dranko and Flicker reply in alarmed unison. “Never!”

Aravis smirks. “Then how interesting can they be?”

“As a member of your Small Council and a close personal friend,” says Flicker to Dranko, “I could look after these for you.”

Dranko takes the gems back from the halfling. "You can have visiting rights on weekends." Then he turns to Morningstar, who has been watching all of this in silence. "You may be married to the mob, but it's a really *rich* mob, swimming in gems."

"You may want to give the moontear to your wife," says Flicker in a stage whisper. "She loves them, you know."

Dranko looks affronted. "Are you implying I can bribe my wife's affections with mere gemstones?"

"Well, it would work on me," Flicker replies.

Morningstar laughs. "You two would make a lovely couple."

They discuss the gem trade for a few minutes, and the talk eventually turns to how Dranko's new business will probably end up hurting the financial fortunes of Tor's family – nobles of Forquelle who own most of the precious stone business on Charagan. That leads to wistful talk of Tor himself, and how they should try to rescue him someday. "But I think the Necromantic Forge comes first," says Dranko.

"Let's have a good dinner before anything else," says Morningstar. "Then we can figure out what we're doing tomorrow."

"Before that, I need a bath," says Dranko. "*Clean* cantrips can only do so much."

Ernie smirks. "If you want the dinner to be good, you'll let me go first."



Cleaned and fed, the Company lounge in the living room of the Greenhouse and debate their next move. Dranko makes an impassioned plea to waste no more time in freeing Califax's soul. "The man hasn't had a soul for a year, because we forgot we had it in our basement. That sort of makes it our responsibility."

Aravis answers. "As much as I agree that we should release his soul, the fact is that members of the Noble Herd and Great Pack are being killed *right now*."

Grey Wolf nods. "I agree. I say we go find the cats."

"Actually," says Aravis, "if we're considering *all* of our options, we should keep going after Praska. We're on her trail. It's what we were in the middle of doing before we were interrupted by dogs and World Stones. Why are we giving up?"

Dranko leans forward. "It seems to me that we hit a dead end on that one. And we don't know *how* to solve the problem with the animals dying. But we *know* how to free Califax's soul, and we know where to do it. We can go in, find the Necromantic Forge, free the soul, and then move right on to the Feline Conclave."

Morningstar shakes her head. "I'm much more worried about the problem of souls not going to heaven now that Drosh is gone. The Black Circle could very well have plans for those souls."

Flicker scratches his head. "But it's not the Black Circle that's causing the souls to be stuck. Is it?"

"No," Morningstar admits. "But think about it. Drosh is fleeing because the Adversary may be coming. And who's summoning the Adversary? The Black Circle. Given how good they are at divinations, is it a stretch to think they're planning on scooping up all these souls for their own evil purpose?"

"But there's nothing we can do about that!" says Dranko. "Look, we're talking about the soul of the man who risked his life to prevent the Emperor from returning. We owe him."

Morningstar exhales. She hates this kind of debate. "His soul isn't getting any *more* trapped, is it?"

That provokes some bitterness from Kibi. "Yeah. And the dwarves aren't getting any *more* enslaved... I don't think I like that line of reasoning."

"The problem is," says Ernie, "every time we say something can't get any worse, and we turn our back on it, it gets worse!"

"I understand that we have a number of important things to do right now," Dranko says plainly. "I ask that we deal with Califax first so I can stop feeling guilty about it."

Ernie blinks. "Okay," he says. "But we should vote on it."

Aravis votes for finding Praska. Morningstar wants to deal with the un-ascending souls. Grey Wolf and Kibi vote for seeking out the Feline Conclave. Dranko and Ernie vote for the Necromantic Forge. "Looks like you're the deciding vote, Flick," says Ernie.

“No way!” Flicker protests. “In that case, I vote we go figure out how to free the dwarf slaves in Kivia.”

After a few more minutes of bickering, Kibi changes his vote. “If Aravis isn’t going to vote for the cats, then I’ll change my vote to rescuing Califax’s soul. Let’s just get it over with.”

Before going to sleep, they review the materials they have on the Necromantic Forge, which pinpoint its location and function but say nothing about what it looks like. The descriptions of the undead made there are unsettling.

“Walking Necropolis,” repeats Grey Wolf, looking at their notes. His comment is the same as when they first read about the place. “We’re doomed.”

It won’t be long before they find out if he’s right.

Piratecat: The next fight is a thing of glory: horrible, leprous, terrifying, undead glory.



Graveyard Shift

The next morning, they prep spells with three goals in mind: location, travel and undead slaying. Before heading out, Aravis goes to the basement and retrieves the Soul Shard, a chunk of flat black rock slightly smaller than a human skull. The stone housing the soul of Califax is rough-looking and irregularly shaped, and greasy-feeling even though it’s objectively dry. To a seasoned adventurer like Aravis the thing is, beyond question, capital-‘E’ Evil.

Having secured the Shard in his pack, Aravis *teleports* the party to a spot he recalls outside the town of Feslin, not far from where he grew up. Ernie immediately casts *find the path* to “Nazg Hodeth”; to his relief it points in exactly the direction they expect. Off they fly, the green countryside below covered with stately manor houses and their surrounding well-tended grounds, though after a time these give way to knobbly pine-covered hills that rise quickly to the Black Mountains. The name of these mountains, clear to see from this height, comes from the nearly-black dark green color of the evergreens that cover them. The peaks are not high; there is no tree line, no snowy peaks. The pines cover them to their hidden tops.

The Company drop altitude and fly for a time closer to ground level, and they discover that beneath the trees lurk a number of bugbear villages. These settlements are physically sprawling though sparsely populated, as if once there was a great civilization of the monsters here, but no more. Now the local populations resemble skeleton crews, going about their bugbearish business in villages of empty and collapsing buildings, the forest encroaching everywhere.

The party pay them little mind, and if a few bugbears here and there are alarmed by seven ghostly humanoids zooming among the trees on a magic wind, nothing ever comes of it. Finally the last of the habitations are left behind, and half an hour later they overshoot something red painted on several of the trees. They turn around, go back, and discover that at a distinct boundary the same symbol has been drawn in red on dozens of tree trunks. Aravis casts *comprehend languages* and learns (to no one’s surprise) that it means “danger” in the language of the bugbears. Undaunted, they continue to follow Ernie’s spell.

Ten minutes later, zipping through the trees on a steady upward grade, they burst out into a huge gently sloping clearing. Clear of trees, at least; there are gravestones here aplenty. At the same time, they feel the temperature drop a good thirty degrees, from summer warmth to a cold chill. Overhead, where the sky had been sunny and clear an hour earlier, the sun struggles to shine through a thick ceiling of slate-gray cloud. Crude and crudely-marked tombstones stretch away from them up a slope of dirt and dead grasses, dotted here and there with larger monuments and small mausoleums. Dranko mutters, “Delioch’s blessing be upon this place,” but it’s obvious that the next time will be the first time.

They discover with some quick triangulation that the *find the path* spell indicates the center of the graveyard, so they drop out of wind form to be better able to defend themselves. The cold takes on a sickening edge and seeps into their bones. They pick their way slowly among the crooked slabs and pitted earth, wary for the inevitable appearance of the undead.

It doesn’t take long. After trudging less than a hundred feet up the slope, the ground shifts beneath their feet and starts to rise violently around them. At first the party think that some huge creature is pushing its way up through the dirt and gravestones, but after a few seconds it’s clear that what they’re facing is the dirt and gravestones. The creature – and they all guess correctly that this is the “Walking Necropolis” referenced in the Black Circle literature – hulks upward of forty feet, a generally humanoid form of earth and stone with bones and tombstones sticking out all over. Dranko rises with it, trapped for the moment in a huge mouth with graven stone slabs for teeth. “Very... painful...” he gasps, trying to avoid a gruesome crushing. The stink of the dead is everywhere around him, a stench not lost on the others as it rolls off the Necropolis in putrid waves.

Grey Wolf loads a *greater fireburst* into the sword Bostock and takes a mighty swing at the monstrosity's "leg." He makes contact and takes out a large clump of sod, but the Walking Necropolis is naturally resistant to magic and shrugs off the *fireburst*.

Dranko, who at least has his hands free, retrieves the Lucent Tower from his pack. For some reason he mistakenly thinks he'll end up *inside* it when it's activated.

StevenAC: Let me guess, he's been reading (contact)'s *Temple of Elemental Evil Story Hour* [<http://www.enworld.org/forum/story-hour/25093-retro-story-hour-contacts-temple-elemental-evil-2-a-6.html#post426094>], right?

(That bit's still one of the most hilarious things I've ever read... "*It should have been you, Jespo.*")

Piratecat: Ha! Yes, in fact, that's *exactly* the reason. I was dumbfounded at the time when Sagiro showed me that it was never in the rules; (contact) had made such an impression on me that I was sure that was how the item had always worked.

Aravis looks up in alarm when he sees what Dranko is doing. "No, that's not the way it..."

Dranko invokes the command phrase. "Crystal Rise!" The Lucent Tower quickly expands to its full size of twenty feet long and fifteen feet around; within seconds it is sticking out in two places from the Necropolis (roughly the chin and shoulder blades). Bones, rocks, dirt and tombstones spray out in all directions, while Dranko is slammed into the air. *Feather fall* slows his descent, though he finds that a detached skeletal forearm is still grasping his own arm. The Walking Necropolis bellows in annoyance, an unearthly noise that's part low screech and part grinding of old stone.

Kibi quickly *summons* a huge earth elemental, instructing it to grapple the walking graveyard. The elemental looks up dubiously at the much larger enemy, tries gamely, and only ends up getting poked with jutting bones for its trouble. Kibi follows up with an *earthbolt* that, like Grey Wolf's *fireburst*, splashes harmlessly off the monster's spell resistance.

"I could *maze* it," calls Aravis. "And we could get the hell out of here."

"No," says Dranko, trying and failing to shake loose the skeletal arm. "It's a monstrosity. It's our *job* to destroy it." Aravis sighs and casts *disintegrate*, with no more luck in affecting the creature than the other party wizards.

Figuring they'll get through if they keep trying, Ernie casts a ringed *blade barrier* around the Necropolis, eight feet in the air so the Company can still attack beneath it. Flicker preps his ice dagger and tumbles into melee position, and as he does so nearly a dozen new undead creatures burst up out of the ground in true horror movie fashion. At least these are less formidable than the Walking Necropolis; they look like rotting bugbear corpses, dirt caked into their rancid flesh and exposed bones. They glow a deep green.

Morningstar grimaces. *It always gets worse before it gets better.* So thinking, she makes things a bit better by casting *undead to death*. The burst of positive energy is powerful enough that gravestones tilt away from its epicenter, and five of the newly risen bugbear corpses are blasted to fine powder. She follows up with a *searing darkness* that penetrates the Necropolis's defenses and knocks a bunch of dirt and skulls out of its midsection. A stone-grinding growl comes from its massive unnatural bulk.

The Necropolis reaches a massive arm through the *blade barrier*, and Ernie is gratified to see the whirling force blades slice away chunks of rock and bone. He's less thrilled as he watches the monster pluck Grey Wolf up off the ground and bring him through the *blade barrier* as well. Crushed in a tombstone-filled fist and slashed up horrible by blades, Grey Wolf looks barely alive as he stares up into the dead, cavernous eyes of his enemy.

Dranko activates his *boots of haste* and tumbles into a flanking position with Kibi's earth elemental. He lashes out once with his whip but the attack goes awry; the skeletal arm still clutching his own arm has thrown off his balance. Annoyed, he smashes the clinging hand away with the butt of the whip.

Aravis shakes his head before flying up under the *blade barrier*, avoiding a swing of the Necropolis's other arm, grabbing Grey Wolf's exposed foot, and casting *dimension door*. POP! The two wizards arrive safely back on the ground, at the edge of the battle.

The earth elemental tries to bull rush the Necropolis; it digs in with its huge stone feet and pushes with all its considerable might, enduring the cutting blades of Ernie's *barrier* as it does so. It *barely* manages to nudge the undead mountain backward, but it's enough – the Necropolis stumbles back and gets a fresh set of wicked slices from the *blade barrier*. Skulls and clods and stone chunks fall out of its body by the dozen. Dranko just barely manages to dodge out of the way, taking some harm from the falling detritus but keeping his feet.

"Hey Dranko!" calls Kibi. "Can you dodge of *cone of cold*? You're kind of in the way."

"Yeah, go for it!" Dranko shouts back.

Kibi shifts to an optimum casting position and blasts, the cone of ice catching many of the smaller bugbear corpses as well as the Walking Necropolis. Dranko does evade the whole of the blast, ducking behind a large tombstone as body parts and dirt and some rotting entrails go flying past.

Grey Wolf, wobbly on his feet but still able to concentrate, pegs the monster with a *sonic lance* that blows a gaping hole through its chest. The creature roars again, somehow managing to maintain its cohesion despite having taken some massive abuse. Ernie steps up beneath the *blade barrier* and swings his sword multiple times into the Necropolis's ankle. He carves another hole that reveals one of the many rotting corpses inside of it – and the corpse moves, like it's trying to escape! Ernie glares for a second before a final stroke of his sword beheads the smaller body. “Uh, guys? I think there’s something inside this thing. When it goes down, we may want to stand back...”

Flicker runs up and discharges his ice dagger into the monster, but the magic is repelled and the physical damage is pitiful. Finally, the recently risen bugbear corpses shamble forward to attack. Two swing their rusting weapons at Morningstar, one of which scores a gash on her face. Another opens a wound in Kibi’s leg. Two of the corpses have less luck with Ernie, their weapons scraping off his plate mail, while another two fail to penetrate the rocky hide of the earth elemental. The remaining four swarm around Dranko, with two of them landing blows.

Morningstar grasps her holy symbol and effects a *greater turning*; three more of the bugbear corpses are blown to dust. Then she Quicksens a *mass cure light wounds* that restores some vitality to both Grey Wolf and Kibi. And a good thing, too, as the Necropolis, headless of the Lucent Tower still sticking out of its neck, targets the little creature that damaged it with the *cone of cold*. It smashes an enormous fist down repeatedly on the dwarf before picking him bodily up and *stuffing* him into its own body. Kibi can feel a dozen skeletal arms grasping him and trying to force him further into the mass of dirt and graves. Scree cries out in alarm.

But now Dranko has the opening and the opportunity he’s been waiting for. He casts *gravesstrike*, which allows him to sneak attack the undead. And he’s still flanking with the earth elemental. With his lasher training he delivers a devastating series of blows with the whip; with each hit, huge chunks of dirt and stone shower from the creature’s body. By the time Dranko makes his last whip-crack, the Necropolis literally has no leg left to stand upon. It crumbles apart as it falls, the Lucent Tower crashing down upon its remains (and barely missing Kibi, who ends up buried beneath a pile of heavy earth).

From the Walking Necropolis’s dissociated rubble, some thirty bodies rise to attack.

theskyfullofdust: Ooooh...

blargney the second: Was this a rebranded tarrasque? It kind of feels like one...

coyote6: I think it's a critter from MMII. Corpse gatherer, I think.

the Jester: I think so too. I was envisioning the pic of it the whole time I was reading!

theskyfullofdust: I might have to use one of those in my own game. The players will love me for it...

Shmoo: Wasn't there a grave elemental or grave golem or something back in 2E, part of the *Ravenloft* stuff?

the Jester: Yeah – mist, pyre, grave and blood elementals, IIRC. Bitchin' stuff.

The Warlock: More importantly, was this Sagiro's revenge for the Purple Ghoul Worm from Piratecat's old run?

SolitonMan: Hard to believe that I've caught up to the end of this thread! Awesome work everyone, thanks so much for sharing! I started in on this Story Hour back around Thanksgiving I think it was, reading the PDFs (thanks, StevenAC!) and finally today catching up to the current postings. Really enjoyable, although I'm already missing those halcyon days of last week when it seemed as though the tale would go on forever...

Anyway, I came across some commentary while reading that made me curious, and I apologize if this has been documented somewhere else I've failed to see, but Sagiro, what exactly do you do for a living? I saw comments about work on *Bioshock* (awesome game, BTW) from some time back (no idea how long ago in the real world). Do you work for 2K Boston? And related to *Bioshock*, I just started *Fallout 3* (yeah, I'm behind the curve on videogames, mostly) and the thing that struck me was how similar some of the illustrations seemed to the ones in *Bioshock*. Is there a relationship between 2K and Bethesda?

Thanks again for such a wonderful source of enjoyment, and may you and your players have many more happy gaming moments (which you'll share!) in the future.

Sagiro: SolitonMan, you surmise correctly that I design video games for 2K Boston (now Irrational Games again!), and I did work on *BioShock*. The aesthetic similarities with *Fallout 3* are entirely coincidental, and we have no relationship with Bethesda.

I'm glad you're enjoying the Story Hour! Don't worry – there's plenty still to come. I just haven't written it yet...



Remains of the Day

The air quickly fills with the semi-coherent groans of revealed undead – more bugbear zombies, though the newer set is fresher and more spry. They dig their way out of the enormous pile of tombstones, mausoleums, bits of rusted iron fence, rotting coffins,

bones and dirt. The hill of debris shifts as they emerge, which causes the Lucent Tower to slide a few feet. The Tower taps a teetering monument which in turn topples into a tombstone and cracks open. From a hollow chamber inside come fluttering a number of amorphous bird-sized creatures that flap and bob into the air, settling into a swirling cloud some twenty-five feet above their heads. It's hard to say exactly what they are, but they resemble little sickly-gray ghosts, dripping greasy droplets that evaporate before reaching the ground.

Three of these flying things fire beams of gray light at Kibi, who feels a sharp chill as strength is leeched from his bones. Morningstar, Grey Wolf and Ernie are each struck once, though Dranko is able to leap to the side and avoid one. Flicker dodges two beams but is struck by a third. Every touch of these beams drains away a small amount of bodily vigor. Flicker finds himself not far from one of the risen zombies and stabs it through the chest. It grunts and stays on its feet.

"*Mass heal* coming up," says Morningstar, prompting Grey Wolf to pick his way over the rubble to get in range. Dranko does likewise, and also casts *spiritual weapon*. A mace of Delioch forms in front of him; he sends it upward where it destroys one of the floating zappers in a single stroke. Morningstar's spell goes off, which not only heals all of the Company's wounds and lost strength, but also blasts a number of nearby zombies to ash, annihilated in a flash of darkness.

The lid of a coffin standing on its end splinters outward and a huge rotting and angry-looking bugbear steps out, clad in a patchwork of rusting armor and wielding an enormous morningstar. This is **Stighrk**, once a mighty barbarian and champion of the Bur-Kesh. A necklace of skulls hangs from his neck and a large metal shield dangles from his arm. Stighrk raises his weapon, steps forward, and smashes Morningstar heavily in the shoulder. She stumbles to one knee.

Ernie centers a *flame strike* on this new arrival. The column of holy fire is tall enough to vaporize a few of the little flying ghosts, and it also turns a few zombies to cinders. Stighrk's armored body is smoking but still very much on its feet. Kibi, who doesn't have a good line of sight on the barbarian, blasts a number of the lesser zombies with an Empowered *coldfire*. A couple of creatures that survived the *flame strike* are destroyed by the spell, and many more are badly damaged. He Quicksens a *magic missile* and finishes one of them off.

The zombies attack. It's been a while since they've had a live enemy to menace, which may excuse their dismal lack of effectiveness. Most of the their attacks are ineffective; only the halflings are heavily damaged by their fists and broken weapons. (Flicker finds one assailant, a short zombie wielding its own off-arm as a bludgeon, to be particularly vexing.) The Company don't grow complacent; they grow chilled, as two bone-white snake-like creatures worm their way up from the remains of the Necropolis. They resemble fat overgrown larvae, perhaps four feet long and a foot in diameter, and their bodies end in expressionless, human faces. It almost looks like they're wearing masks.

Aravis shakes off the chill but is zapped and strength-drained by two of the little flying ghosts. Assessing the battlefield and the various angles thereupon, he responds with an Empowered *cone of cold* that catches nearly every enemy in the fight. Most of the zombies drop, and Stighrk, Champion of Bugbears, is flash-frozen before he ever had a chance to get really riled up. The only disappointment is that the two white larvae seem to resist the spell entirely.

Flicker looks around at the mostly cleared battlefield, then back at his personal zombie nemesis which has somehow survived. "Why is mine still alive?!" he complains.

"I apologize," says Aravis. "I'll do better next time."

Grey Wolf is unable to resist the supernatural chill of the larvae-creatures. He can feel his muscles starting to seize up, and is reminded of nothing so much as his last moment of consciousness before he was petrified in Het Branoi. Figuring he could use some speed bumps to take some of the heat (or cold, in this case), he begins to cast *summon the pack*.

the Jester: For the record, I totally stole Dranko's name to use in my own campaign (he was a wererat that, with his buddies, kicked the PCs' asses and ransomed their lives). In the interest of full disclosure. Ahem.

Mathew Freeman: Did any of your players get it?

the Jester: Nah, I recently moved and none of my group up here read Story Hours other than the ones they are PCs in.

RangerWickett: Likewise, in *War of the Burning Sky* there's an immortal half-orc who rules the Ragesian Empire. Guess what his name is. And I didn't even realize it until a few months after we released the campaign, but apparently I'd taken the "Burning Sky" name from the flying carpet in Sagiro's game, but I'd forgotten it in the intervening six years. And there's a group of monsters named trillith, after a troll/illithid in one of Piratecat's first Story Hour posts.

I hope they see it more as homages than theft. *whistles innocently*

Shieldhaven: The Jester, that raises an important question. What do you do about a problem like T'Gri Dranko?

the Jester: If you mean "problems like the Dranko in my campaign," they surrender and pay a ransom...

Piratecat: Whoohoo, Dranko's in a musical! Oh yeah, *that's* going to end well. He's going out for a drink when Ernie has his solo, but there's a whole big comedy musical number based on treasure baths.

(Last night we watched the Defenders of Daybreak musical that Sagiro wrote for me, my absolute favorite moment of 2009. Thinking about a Company musical is the next logical step...)

StevenAC: Well, some of the songs are already written (see Part Two, chapters 1 and 2, of the collected Story Hour)...

Piratecat: Travel and holidays mean that we're playing in a week or so for the first time in almost two months. I have bad feelings about our upcoming fight with Octesian. Wish us luck.

Dranko and Morningstar resist the worms' freezing calcification, but their attacks aren't greatly effective. Dranko moves his *spiritual weapon* and lashes once with his whip but does only modest damage, while Morningstar's *flame strike* bounces off their spell resistance. Ernie has better luck, managing not only to avoid the heat-sapping aura but also to inflict grievous harm upon one of the worms with *Coiled Viper* and *Beryn Sur*.

Kibi is partially overcome by the cold auras, and irked that a feeling of ossification should be so objectionable. He has a moment of alarm as, just for a second, the back of his right hand looks as though it's turning into pure bone. He shakes it off and pegs both of the larvae with an Empowered *earthbolt*.

Flicker and his personal zombie antagonist exchange blows, while another rotting bugbear corpse flails harmlessly at Ernie. One of the larvae lashes with an unexpectedly quick tail-strike and slaps Dranko across the chest. The half-orc's bones stiffen slightly as fell magic infuses them.

Not wishing to see what prolonged exposure to these creatures will do, Aravis nails one with an *antimagic ray*. At once the ambient chill from the worms drops to about half its original intensity. In response, the remaining wispy ghosts above the battlefield bombard Aravis and Kibi with weakening rays. Aravis slumps, the weight of his cloth robe nearly dragging him to his knees.

Flicker, feeling like he's figured out the herky-jerky moves of the zombie he's been fighting, is startled to see an enormous dire wolf appear behind it. The wolf leans forward lazily and bites the zombie's head off. "Damn it!" Flicker yells. "I worked hard on that guy!"

Aravis rolls his eyes. "First you complain you're getting no help, and now you're complaining that we're helping? Make up your mind!"

As his wolves appear around the battlefield, Grey Wolf casts *chain missile* at one of the zombies, but it stubbornly keeps its feet. Dranko, now flanking the anti-magicked larva with a dire wolf, repeats his *gravestrike* trick, and annihilates the thing in a flurry of whip-snaps. But he's still within the aura of the second, and he shudders from the sickening chill. Grey Wolf glances at him, alarmed to see what look like bone-white lesions on Dranko's neck and cheek. Another round or two and his friend could be a bone statue.

Morningstar channels the power of Ell through her holy symbol and *turns*. The worm is too powerful for such measures, but the last zombie and one of the flying ghostlets are blasted to ash. Ernie hacks at the remaining worm with his blades while Kibi pops it with *magic missiles*; in response the thing burrows down into the remains of the Walking Necropolis and out of sight. Its chill fades. Aravis and Grey Wolf finish off the remaining fliers with *magic missiles*.



Dranko retracts the Lucent Tower, and there's a breath-holding moment of apprehension as the jumble of remains collapses further. The Company stand poised and ready to battle fresh undead, but there are no more to be seen. The gentle hill before them looks as if a giant's hand has scooped up an entire graveyard and then dropped it from fifty feet up. With time to take a closer look, they also see that it's speckled with glittering loot. Dranko rubs his chin. "Do you think given what just happened, it would count as grave robbing?"

"Not if the graves attacked you first!" says Flicker.

"They were bugbears," Aravis says flatly. "So I don't care."

After a few minutes of *heals* and *restorations*, Aravis makes Flicker and Dranko's lives easier by casting *detect magic* and walking around with them as they dig in the piles of remains. They collect buried treasure for several hours while the others stand an anxious guard; the unnatural chill may be gone, and the strangely thick cloud cover may have cleared, but it's still a graveyard of monsters, surrounded by somber evergreens. By the time the sun has set behind the trees, the rogues have collected a pile of magic items, coins and jewelry. Flicker has also discovered an ornate gold-plated dwarf skull with opals set in its eyes, over which there is some debate considering how much more valuable it would be if sold intact.

The Company agree to quit the graveyard for the night and set up a camp in the forest. Flicker badly wants to put up the Lucent Tower, but the others override him, opting for the safer option of *rope tricks*. Flicker grumbles, "Damn it! In the Lucent Tower I could make myself a comfortable bed. I'm sick up to here of stupid featureless *rope tricks*!"

Dranko snorts. "A comfortable bed, in which you will no doubt be attacked in the middle of the night by insubstantial undead."

Aravis looks over at the halfling. "A comfy bed? Have we really become that soft?"

“Yes!”

“Fine,” says Aravis dismissively. “You can sleep in the Tower by yourself.”

“No, you can’t,” corrects Dranko. “Too dangerous.”



That night, Aravis dreams of the Crosser’s Maze, or maybe it dreams of him.

Your wandering fragment of personality is once again at the now-familiar tavern, sitting across from its mysterious ally who still wears your face.

“I don’t know what he was trying to do,” he says. “Find someone, I think. His mind was incredibly strong – and still is, for what it’s worth – but it crumbled before he could make contact. He’s making his way back now, a long way yet from home, an insane wanderer flitting from dream to dream, scrawling his madness with the blood of passersby. I was close enough to hear him, just once, when he strayed into the waking world. His lunacy mixes with hate, and he spat the name of Morningstar.”



Hearing about this over breakfast, Morningstar sighs, and immediately guesses the person described to be Octesian. They haven’t run into the red-armored warrior since his assault on Semek’s tower in *Ava Dormo*.

“I was looking forward to a showdown with Octesian,” Morningstar admits, “but not so much if he’s insane.”

Grey Wolf looks at the bright side. “That could make him more dangerous, and so more satisfying to kill.”

“That reminds me,” says Morningstar. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to try.” She takes Dranko into *Ava Dormo* with her, manifests a dagger, and asks her husband to put out his arm. Dranko winces as she makes a small slice. Morningstar drops them back out of Dream and sees, to her grim satisfaction, that his arm is still bleeding.

Flicker makes a face. “There are things about your relationship that I don’t want to know.”

“You know what this means?” says Dranko with a leer. “It means that when we’re having sexy dreams, we’re *really* doing it!”

“That,” says Flicker. “That right there, for example.”

“What it means,” says Morningstar, “is that when I kill Octesian in *Ava Dormo* next time, he’ll be dead for good.”

While Kibi sets about identifying yesterday’s magic item haul, Morningstar returns to *Ava Dormo* to give her sisters warning. She finds Previa at the temple in Tal Hae.

“Morningstar!” the Chronicler of Ell exclaims. “How are you?”

“I have some unsettling news,” Morningstar answers.

“I guess it’s been weeks since the last such news,” says Previa. “We figured we were due.”

When Morningstar quirks an eyebrow at this, Previa adds, “We talk about you often. The Book of Morningstar? Really?”

“Yeah,” says Morningstar, without much enthusiasm.

“Can I read a draft?” Previa asks, awed.

“I would really appreciate it if you would,” says Morningstar. “I’m much better at fighting large ugly monsters than writing scripture.”

Piratecat: Convenient that Octesian just came up. We’re fighting him tonight.

We are so, so screwed.

The Warlock: Our pre-emptory condolences?

Coyote6: My condolences to the bad guy; the “we are so screwed” fights always turn into a horrible beat down for the other side. It’s like those million-to-one shots – they come up every time...

Kaodi: I do not suppose you could remind us why Octesian is so scary? I mean, I vaguely remember him as a very dangerous opponent, but you guys have gotten a lot more dangerous since then yourselves.

Piratecat: I can’t tell you without some serious spoilers. He tried to use Dream to go somewhere a human mind really, particularly shouldn’t go. It has not changed him for the better.

That being said, we don’t fight him ‘til next game! After not playing for six weeks no one felt really comfortable with a complicated, crazy-dangerous brawl, and Sagiro had already prepped a fun and interesting side adventure. One die was rolled the entire session – I rolled it and it was a Streetwise check – but we had to make decisions that would doom or save an ally that not everyone in the group likes. Good stuff.

Sagiro: It turns out the party didn’t actually fight Octesian tonight. Since it had been two months since our last game, and because Kibi’s player was stuck for a while on an emergency work call, the players collectively decided for a lower-key game, and to put off the Big Confrontation until next game.

To address the previous question: Octesian was a formidable opponent during the Battle of Verdshane, and while the party has indeed grown more powerful since then, so has Mr. O. In fact, the party learned this evening that he’s capable of killing dozens or hundreds of civilians in their sleep, all in one night, scattered around the kingdom. Plus, he’s now augmented with Cleaner Tentacle Powers™. And he’s insane.

So, yeah, the Company are terrified of him, and rightfully so. On the other hand, they realized today that since they’ll be fighting him in *Ava Dormo*, they can leave their physical bodies in a room full of healers, and basically get healed for free in the middle of any violent confrontation. Now, will Octesian have also thought of that, and have some counter? Or not, since he’s insane? Is he so powerful that the Company will need that kind of backup just to survive?

They’ll just have to find out in two weeks!

Previa laughs. “I’m sure that you’re good at all sorts of things. And just the thought of it... I don’t think anyone has written official canon in a century or more.”

Morningstar smiles. “Thanks. That makes me feel so much better.”

“So,” says Previa, looking serious again. “What did you want to talk about?”

“About Octesian. I have some indication that he’s gone mad...”

“Oh!” Previa interrupts. “That’s a terrible shame!”

“...and that he may be rampaging through Dream looking for me.”

“Oh. That *is* a terrible shame. I’m surprised word hasn’t filtered back to us if that’s the case. I’ll spread the word, and we’ll increase patrols.”

Morningstar nods. “If you have any sign of him, let me know immediately.”

“We will! There will be Dreamwalkers lining up to help you dispose of him once and for all, I promise. Is there anything else I can do? Avenues of research you’d like me to pursue?”

“Yeah, one thing,” says Morningstar. “If you can find out anything about Nazg Hodeth, that would be good.” She gives Previa a rundown of their current quest, up to and including their recent encounter with the Walking Necropolis.

Previa shakes her head. “I’m happy to say that I’ve never heard about it or anything like it, but I’ll see if I can dig anything up. Figuratively speaking, of course.”



Kibi holds up a leather belt with a tarnished silver buckle. “Doesn’t look like much, but it’s as powerful as they come.”

The haul from the graveyard includes a few nice pieces, about half of which were on the body of Stighrk, the flash-frozen bugbear champion.

- A *belt of strength* +6.
- *Chainmail* +3.
- A +3 *shield*, +5 vs. melee attacks from humans.
- A *necklace of bellows*, strung with skulls. Each skull is a charge, and allows the wearer to knock back adjacent enemies. (Most of the skulls are from animals, though one is that of a small human child.)
- An *ioun stone* that grants a +2 insight bonus to AC.
- A *bag of holding* that’s filled with bugbear corpses, some mummified and adorned with personal effects including jewelry. (Flicker takes that one, with a promise to clean it out himself.)
- A rich maroon cloak, that grants a +5 to Diplomacy checks, and possibly something else. Kibi’s not entirely sure, but guesses that more can be learned about it through use.

He finds the cloak very pleasing to look at. In fact, the more the party look at it, the nicer it seems. Morningstar admonishes her husband: “Don’t lick it.” For the moment, no one trusts it enough to put it on.



With the items identified, breakfast eaten and spells prepped, the Company head back to the graveyard. There are no signs of anyone having visited the place overnight; all of the chaos and destruction is exactly as they left it. Ernie casts another *find the path*, which points him up the hill towards a part of the graveyard undisturbed by the previous day’s excitement.

They don’t have far to go. Not more than fifty feet beyond where the ground was churned by the Walking Necropolis stands a mausoleum, ten feet tall and with a large stone door slightly ajar. Ernie’s spell indicates that the door leads to Nazg Hodeth – and is also trapped.

“Nazg Hodeth is smaller than I expected,” says Flicker as he gives the door a once-over. “Everyone stand back for a minute.” With a twist of his fingers he springs the trap, sending a poisoned metal barb zinging into the dirt.

It takes several of them to pull open the heavy stone door, which grinds against its frame as it grudgingly gives way. Inside the small single chamber is a stone coffin on a stout pedestal. When a quick search of the room fails to uncover anything else of note, Flicker and Kibi lever off the coffin lid. Inside is – surprise! – the skeletal remains of a bugbear. Ernie concentrates on his *find the path* and learns that the way to Nazg Hodeth is through the floor of the coffin.

They unceremoniously shovel the crumbling remains out onto the floor, after which Flicker leaps in and searches. Ernie is secretly glad that Yoba isn't here to witness such irreverence.

CLICK!

"Just as I suspected," says Flicker. "A trapdoor in the bottom of the coffin."

The others peer over the side to see a tiny winding staircase descending beneath the mausoleum. It's too small for a large bugbear, but they should be able to squeeze down single-file.

Aravis casts *mass darkvision*, and down they go.

Innocent Bystander: I don't want to say that sounded like an easy battle, but it sounds like the party made it through better than the last few encounters.

coyote6: It probably seemed easier because it was a party of high-level PCs versus a single monster, plus some low-level mooks (the zombies) – it's fairly safe to ignore the zombies and focus on the big guy, and it's very hard to have one monster stand up to a whole party in 3.5E, in my experience. On the other hand, someone used *mass heal*, so it couldn't have been too easy...

What were those worms? They seem familiar, but I can't place 'em.

the Jester: Gravewalkers – from either the *Fiend Folio* or *Monster Manual II*, I can't recall which off-hand. But they're cool!

Innocent Bystander: At least one *mass heal* per encounter seems to be par for the course. But that's why I said it didn't sound easy, just easier.

Piratecat: Sagiro was so, so upset when his bugbear barbarian went down like a punk! We barely noticed him, although I think he might have been a pain to stat up. The colossus inflicted a lot of damage, but those worms sucked. We went from "whee, fun ass-kicking" to "what the heck we're in trouble help help." I had no clue at all what they were, so I assumed the worst.

Of course, the fun is only just beginning.



Looks Like I Picked a Bad Day to Start Casting Status

Morningstar, fifth in the marching order, concentrates for a second on the conditions of her party-mates. For the first time she has cast the spell *status*, which lets her know if any adverse conditions afflict her friends. At the moment, they're fine.

The staircase winds its narrow way downward, and it's a tight squeeze for those in bulky armor. The descent is steep and the stairs themselves – like the walls – are slick with damp moss. In places the stone has crumbled away. It's slow going, with Flicker and Ernie (who's following the *find the path*) in the lead. Ernie stumbles occasionally, but Flicker is always there to steady him. After a few minutes of careful creeping, Flicker sees a greenish glow emanating from somewhere below. "Oh, come on," he whispers. "Could this get any more clichéd?"

Dranko chuckles. "I'll bet it comes from phosphorescent mushrooms. All the best light in creepy caverns comes from phosphorescent mushrooms."

Aravis agrees. "It's a classic. Though I wouldn't rule out undead lightning bugs."

One final twist of the spiral staircase brings them to an opening looking out onto an enormous room, almost a hundred feet on a side and thirty feet from floor to ceiling. The opening is actually about half way up one of the longer walls, and there's a narrow wall-hugging staircase that leads to the floor. The place is depressingly familiar, but with some new touches as well. The first thing the party notice is the enormous black circle, fashioned of obsidian bricks, set into the stone floor. They've seen something like this in almost every Black Circle edifice and ritual chamber they've visited, and it usually doesn't indicate anything good, but there are two other features of Nazg Hodeh that command more attention.

For one, the far wall is covered with smaller inlaid black circles and scrawled over with lines and equations. It's the same sort of arrangement the Black Circle had in Kallor for Mokad's ritual, though this one is vertical (being on a wall instead of the floor) and dotted with four-inch holes. Black obsidian rods jut out from about a third of the holes, and a pile of additional rods sits at the base of the wall.

But even that is not what draws the Company's collective eye. At the far end of the chamber huge ribs, from something dragon-sized or larger, seem to grow up from the stone floor to curve over a tremendous obsidian slab set upon a granite pedestal. A bright green fire plays along the surface of the slab, casting out a flickering light that illuminates the entire enormous room. There are also some open archways set into the walls at irregular intervals, but no light comes from any of these, and nothing stirs from them.

Grey Wolf gestures to the wall with the diagrams and holes. "Why can't they just get a blackboard?"

"We're here, by the way," says Ernie, in case anyone had lingering doubts. "Nazg Hodeth. Now, before anyone goes down, let me check something." He casts *true seeing* and looks around again, but detects no subterfuge, though the black circle on the floor has a magical aura, as does the wall with diagrams and of course the obsidian slab. Aravis casts *greater arcane sight* to get more detail: the wall radiates strong divination and necromancy, and the circle indicates conjuration and teleportation magic. The obsidian slab is an intensely strong focus of necromancy, which further strengthens their suspicion that it's the Necromantic Forge itself.

Morningstar casts *hide from undead* on the group as a precaution before Dranko goes into the room alone to scout. Down at ground level it's unnaturally cold, and he hears the crackle of the green flames which seem to offer no heat. He strolls toward them, a half-orc guinea pig fully cognizant that the first awful thing to happen is likely to happen to him.

By the time he gets halfway to the Necromantic Forge, he finds it impossible to look at it directly. The black slab with its poison-green flames is radiating the same palpable evil as the black book they found in Kallor, and the black-goo-infused column that housed the blue Eye of Moirel in Het Branoi. Still twenty feet out, he cannot even will himself to take another step towards it. He returns to the others and gets a *protection from evil* and a *death ward* from Ernie. So fortified, he returns to the Forge, and while its evil still beats upon his brow like a malevolent sun he is able to walk right up to it. The ribs tower overhead, casting shadows on the walls by the light of the flames. He peers as closely as he can at the flat obsidian table, squinting at the unnatural fire.

He turns back to the others and shrugs. "I don't see any instructions!"

The others beckon him back. He gives his report, and the Company decide to descend the stairs together and at least be closer to one another when they try messing around with the Forge. They skirt the black circle on the floor, entirely mistrusting. They still expect something horrible to happen. It's all too easy.

❧ Something horrible happens. ❧

Actually, to start with, *two* horrible things happen. There's a tiny hiccup in the flow of time around them, and when reality normalizes a split-second later there's an enormous bone construct looming over them. It's vaguely in the shape of a humanoid but has obviously been cobbled together from hundreds, maybe thousands of bugbear bones. Its complex interior is full of weird moving parts and rope pulleys that allow various sharpened bits to swivel around and stab outward. Animated bugbear arms stick out all over the place. The huge top section tilts down, allowing a synchronized array of over thirty bugbear skulls to look upon them – but they sweep back and forth, seeing nothing. Morningstar's *hide from undead* has foiled them for the moment.

The second awful thing is that Ernie has become entirely obscured by a cloud of greasy black smoke. For the first time Morningstar gets a ping from her *status* spell – Ernie's condition has changed to UNDEAD. *What?!* She's hoping she's just not sure how the spell works, but when the smoke drops from around Ernie like a magician's curtain, he has clearly been transformed. He still looks more or less like the halfling they know, but his face has become greenish and sallow, with glowing red eyes and fangs in a drooling mouth. He snarls at her.

"Let me get this right," says Grey Wolf wearily. "Any attack, even on whatever just did that to Ernie, and the big thing sees us?"

"Yeah, that's right," Morningstar confirms.

But whatever did cast the spell is not yet in evidence, so Dranko tumbles around to the far side of the bone construct and casts *spiritual weapon* (though for the moment he holds back its attacks). Aravis thinks for a second and postpones the tough decision: he casts *maze* on Undead Ernie, who blinks out. Grey Wolf looks about for whatever it was that cast *time stop* but sees nothing, so he casts *dragonskin* on himself.

Something new appears: an enormous fist dripping black blood. It congeals out of magic energy above their heads and comes smashing down upon Flicker, Morningstar, Grey Wolf and Kibi. None of them can dodge its brutal attack. **CRUNCH!** Aravis counts himself lucky for a second to have been spared by the *crushing fist of spite*, but he gets something worse. His heart starts to thump crazily in his chest and then – just stops. He drops unconscious from a sudden heart attack. In Morningstar's head, his *status* switches to DYING. Meanwhile, the fist has not dissipated as hoped. Instead it hovers menacingly above the bruised bodies of its victims, poised to strike again.

But now there's a target, as Dranko sees a weedy little man in black robes who stepped into one of the darkened archways to cast his spells. And while only Dranko sees the invisible assailant, they all hear his high maniacal cackle. "Ha ha ha ha! Welcome, welcome! You'll all make excellent subjects... except for the Yondallan. And what happened to the filthy little rat, anyhow?"

Morningstar drops a bomb of her own – a *mass heal* that restores to full health the four crushed by the fist, rouses Aravis to consciousness, and for good measure does massive damage to the bone creature. Bugbear bones are blasted loose inside its latticework construction and come bouncing down through its body like balls in a nightmare Pachinko machine. The whole construct lists a bit to its left, and twenty-some bugbear skulls swivel in unison to stare at Morningstar. She backs away.

Kibi *summons* a huge earth elemental and it attacks immediately, bludgeoning the bone creature with rocky fists. More pieces are knocked loose and its damaged tilt shifts to the right. Kibi then *Quicken*s a *coldfire* centered in the archway where he heard the cackling. Dranko gives him the thumbs up as he watches the little man wince in pain. Kibi then moves out from under the looming fist.

Ernie appears. Aravis curses. Ernie gurgles. Flicker looks frantically at the others. “Should I do something to Ernie?”

“Incapacitate him!” answers Dranko.

“Can I *do* that to the undead?”

“I don’t know… Just do it!”

“I’m sorry, Ernie,” Flicker says, as he smacks his friend with the flat of his blade. Ernie responds by sticking out a long green tongue and making a grotesque panting noise.

The bone creature, damaged but still operational, swivels around to face Dranko. A number of out-jutting bugbear hands grasp Dranko’s body and limbs and lift him off the ground. Dranko squirms and twists but cannot break free, and feels the pain of sharpened finger bones gouging his skin.

Aravis stands up and bestows a *dimension door* upon Pewter. “Climb up the earth elemental and jump over to Dranko. Get him out of there!” Pewter leaps from his arms and starts his climb. Dranko, grappled, makes himself useful while he awaits rescue. His *spiritual weapon* knocks a few of the bugbear skulls free from the construct’s “head,” and with a magic ring he drops an *ice storm* on the black-robed assailant across the room.

Grey Wolf *Quicken*s a *see invisible* and gets a decent look at their enemy – five-foot-four, dressed in ragged black robes, pasty skin, practically a skeleton himself. If one could forget about the high-level magics he’s been flinging around, one might mistake him for a homeless beggar.

The little necromancer cackles again. “It’s been so long since I’ve had any volunteers! Thank you!”

Dranko bluffs. “If we can take out Parthol Runecarver, we can take out you.”

He expects this to have an impact, but the little man merely blinks. “Who?”

Dranko tries again. “Condor, then. We killed him too.”

This at least gets a response. “Ha ha HA HA HA! Volunteers with a sense of humor!”

Grey Wolf shoots an *acid orb* at the man, but his aim is off, and the green glob splashes off the adjacent wall.

“Now, now,” says the man. He casts something on Kibi, who burns some charges of his *ring of safety* to resist what was probably a *Quicken*ed *feeblemind*. The necromancer harumphs in disappointment but cheers himself up by casting *maze* on Morningstar. The Ellish cleric blinks out. He directs the enormous fist to swing over to Kibi before he himself steps back into the concealing darkness beyond the archway and out of sight. Kibi looks up but cannot scramble out of the way. The fist comes down with bone-crunching force and knocks him sprawling to the floor.

Morningstar has never been inside a *maze* before. She thinks she sees an immediate way out of the shifting labyrinth but it turns out to be a mirage, and as the spell’s true complexity hits home it occurs to her that she’ll be lucky to escape before the entire battle is over. Kibi, his bone-cracked body going on pure adrenaline, puts up a *wall of force* that blocks off all of the archways on the far side of the room. Then he casts *xorn movement* and sinks into the soothing embrace of the ground.

The earth elemental spots a huge crack in one of the bone construct’s central femurs and takes two mighty swings at the weak spot. The second punch causes the entire thing to collapse in a heap and clatter of bones. Dranko, released all at once by the many hands that grasped him, tumbles far enough away that he’s only partially buried.

Ernie points a moist, sickly hand at Aravis, his red eyes glowing with menace. With an inhuman gurgle he rips the *disintegrate* spell out of Aravis’s head and then *casts it back at the wizard*. Aravis barely resists, though his body still shudders as the force of the spell rocks him backward.

"Let's try this again." Aravis casts a second *maze* on Dranko, who again vanishes.

Pewter reaches Dranko, but now the half-orc has a new plan. "Pewter, take me to the other side of Kibi's *wall of force*. Right where we last saw that wizard." Aravis's familiar does just that, and Dranko finds himself staring directly at the necromancer. Over his enemy's shoulder Dranko can see what's in the room beyond the archway – it's a long table on which rests a partially-constructed skeleton of some huge lizard. Each bone has been painstakingly tagged and labeled with pins and parchment.

"Ah, wonderful, wonderful!" exclaims the little mage. "You're so eager to start, you want to be first! Come in, come in!"

Dranko lets his whip do the talking, as he activates his *boots of haste* and unleashes a flurry of attacks, sending his enemy sprawling. The necromancer stands up, annoyed. "You're not cooperating!" he yells at Dranko. "But that can be fixed. You can be fixed, and I can remake you properly. The sooner the better. Look at you. You're ugly! Ugly!"

"Say," says Dranko, brushing off the insult. "What's your name? So I know what to put on your tombstone..."

"You don't know me?" gasps the man. "I am **Zeg**, Master of the Dead!"

To demonstrate his prowess, Zeg waves a rod at Dranko. The instrument squirms in his hand (uncomfortably reminding Dranko of Tapheon's rod *Despoiler of Flesh*) and some of Dranko's own flesh starts to rot. A piece of necrotized flesh falls from his arm. "Now," barks Zeg. "Wait right there." He casts a spell and vanishes.

Grey Wolf looks around him, dismayed at the attrition. Morningstar is gone. Kibi has fled underground. Ernie is... well, best not to dwell on that. And Dranko is now out of sight as well. It's just him, Aravis and Flicker. He *summons the pack*, just in case. Oh, and there's that one other thing. The enormous fist swings over and slams down on his shoulder, driving him to the ground and probably breaking some bones, judging by the sound and the pain. He could do with some healing, but all the party healers are AWOL.

Morningstar tries one more time to escape the *maze*, fails, and decides upon a new tactic, though it'll still take a few rounds. Kibi chugs a healing potion, which turns out to be possible for him even underground. Grey Wolf and Aravis spot Zeg lurking in the opening at the bottom of the stairs, where they first arrived in this place. Aravis pegs him with a *disintegrate*, but Zeg largely resists. "Just lie down!" screams the mad necromancer.

Dranko, left alone, has a few seconds to examine the lizard skeleton on the table. It must have taken Zeg years of work to assemble it; there are hundreds if not thousands of pins poking into the various bones, each with a little piece of parchment attached. The skeleton itself is huge – perhaps the creature when alive was a small dinosaur. With a gleam in his eye, Dranko cracks his whip and snaps off a few carefully-labeled bones from the tail. Then, shouting across the room, he yells, "Oops, I broke your skeleton!"

Zeg's eyes grow wide. "Leave that alone!" he shrieks.

"I wonder what *else* I can break?" Dranko shouts back. He sweeps a large portion of Zeg's project onto the floor with his whip. "This looks like it took a lot of hard work!"

"Leave that alone, I said!" shouts Zeg. "Stop it. STOP IT!" Dranko scampers up the wall and hides above the doorway.

Grey Wolf's dire wolves appear around the spot where Ernie will reappear if he escapes again from the *maze*. Speaking of which, Morningstar uses her *gem of recall* to prepare *plane shift*, then Quicks that spell to escape. Upon arriving in a forest somewhere, she notes that Dranko's *status* has changed to ROTTING. *I'm never casting that spell again.*

Dranko shouts again. "It would be terrible if anything *else* happens to this skeleton!"

"You know," screams Zeg. "I can replace its bones with yours if I have to!" And thinking that sounds like a splendid idea, Zeg teleports back to the room with Dranko. He looks around and doesn't see the half-orc hiding in the shadows, so he steps back and Quicks a second spell with no obvious effect. It's been a long, long time since he's been in a fight like this one, and it starts to occur to him that he might be badly injured. But more importantly, that impudent creature is smashing up his project! Meanwhile, Dranko's flesh continues to rot. He feels the tip of his chin fall away from his face.

Kibi emerges from the ground, makes a snap judgment, dismisses his *wall of force*, and casts *glitterdust* into the room with Zeg and Dranko. He knows that Zeg is invisible, and this should make him an obvious target to the rest of the party. But there are two problems with this: first, it turns out that Zeg had cast his own *wall of force*, which protects him from the spread of the glitter. Second, Dranko is *also* painted with sparkles, making it impossible for him to stay hidden. "Ah," says Zeg, seeing Dranko shimmering above the archway. "There you are."

“Kibi!” roars Dranko. “Not helping!”

Aravis casts one more *disintegrate*, this time dissolving the *wall of force* protecting Zeg.

“Here I am,” agrees Dranko. “And now I’m going to finish off this lizard model you’ve got going.”

He makes as though he’s going to whip off the head off the lizard, but it’s a bluff. Zeg falls for it, jumping forward to protect his beloved model, and that gives Dranko the perfect opening for a devastating sneak attack. The first four of his whip strikes shear flesh from Zeg’s old bones and knock him to his knees. As Dranko raises the whip for a final strike, Zeg says petulantly, “At least use my organs for something useful.”

Dranko stares at the crazed little necromancer. “No,” he says, and his final strike snaps Zeg’s neck.

theskyfullofdust: That sounded like it was an excellent fight. The multiple actions – are they just storytelling, or were the characters pulling off more than one action per round?

I do love this Story Hour. It’s a novel in its own right, fun, exciting, and full of ideas. Thanks for sharing this with us over the years.

Mathew Freeman: Full. Of. Awesome. So, what spells did Zeg cast during that *time stop*, then? I can only assume he killed Ernie and *reanimated* him, all during the spell. Ouch. Excellent dialogue as usual, particularly Dranko (“Not helping!”) and Zeg (“At least use my organs for something useful!”).

Now the Company only have a few problems: (1) Undead Ernie; (2) Morningstar is up to 500 miles away; (3) Dranko is rotting.

Is now the right time for the reinforcements to turn up? *evil grin*

Sagiro: I recall rolling poorly on Zeg’s *time stop* – I think he only cast two spells: the one that turned Ernie into an undead creature, and the one that summoned the bone construct. He may have also cast a buff on himself, but I don’t recall.

wedgeski: Wow! What an awesome scrap! I love the use of the *status* spell... One could think of all kinds of adjectives: PERTURBED, RED-BROWN WITH A HINT OF GREEN, A LITTLE TIRED BUT OTHERWISE FINE...

Everett: [Dranko bluffs. “If we can take out Parthol Runecarver, we can take out you.”] They did? Last I recall, he was still on the Company’s to-do list.

Piratecat: That’s why it was a bluff. Not an effective one, mind you.

It’s so much fun to read this; I remember us shouting all those things as we were getting schooled by Zeg. Boy, was I frustrated when I *dim-doored* behind the *wall of force* with no way back and he simply left. Ernie’s player wasn’t there this session, which means that Sagiro turned him into undead when the player wasn’t even present. There’s more going on than meets the eye. I’ll say for the record that me giving Sagiro a copy of the *Book of Vile Darkness* as a present was a STUPID STUPID THING I SHOULD NEVER HAVE DONE. Stupid. With extra stupid on top. Ouch.

Sagiro, how’d I manage to get a full round of sneak attacks off on Zeg at the end? I don’t think Dranko was flanking and I don’t remember how I managed it.

Interestingly, the 4E theory of “give the solo monster more than one action” is also really clear in this 3.5 fight. Zeg had Quickened spells up the yin-yang and cast spells that summoned or created more allies (like turning Ernie undead or summoning the fist). This was a great fight we felt lucky to win.

Joshua Randall: Nasty fight against the necromancer. *Time stop* is a lot of fun for the person casting it, and not so much fun for anyone opposed to him.

I do hope the PCs won’t abandon their pursuit of Praska. Remember what happened the last time they left something undone – viz. the Oasis Mage’s Guild? (Of course in reality, whatever the PCs decided to do or not do is already over with, but we won’t find out about it for a while.)

Also, regarding Kibi’s prophecy – one line stood out for me, namely: **IT MUST BE YOU WHO CRACKS ITS SHELL**. If you remember waaaaay back to session 49, when the party was in Sand’s Edge following up on the first prophecy of the Eyes of Moirel regarding the Ventifact Colossus, they ran afoul of some Utholites. One was captured and interrogated and revealed that...

The Utholites have their own versions of the two prophecies spoken by the Eyes of Moirel, and they clearly are following the “turtle must live” version.

Ventifact Colossus... turtle. Turtle... shell. This cannot be a coincidence. The last phrase of Kibi’s message says, **TOGETHER WE WILL CLEANSE ABERNIA**. Harking back to the Eyes’ prophecy, the purple Eye said, **HEED WELL MY WARNING. IF THE COLOSSUS IS KILLED BY THE WAR GOD’S CHILDREN, THOUSANDS WILL PERISH. ITS DEATH WILL HERALD THE COMING OF THE FIRE**.

Cleanse Abernia... Thousands Will Perish / Coming of the Fire... Sounds roughly equivalent to me. Yup. Should’ve let the turtles win.

Piratecat: Screw you, buddy! The future is written in water!

Minor spoiler: the resolution of Praska, however it turns out, is pretty much my favorite couple of sessions from the past few years. Sheer, brief panicked terror has a way of sticking in your memory.

Sagiro: To answer a couple of questions above: The combat is narrated accurately, round by round. Most of the Company have taken the Quicken Spell feat, which is why it seems like they’re getting extra actions fairly often. I use a variant for metamagic feats wherein players can apply them spontaneously to spells three times per day. Also, I use an Action Point system that, at the time of this game, allowed players to burn an Action Point for an extra standard action. I later decided that was too powerful.

A related answer: Dranko used an Action Point to get an extra standard action, which he used to bluff the necromancer Zeg. That allowed him to get a full round of attacks, one of which was a sneak attack. Mucho damage!

Everett: How far is the Story Hour behind the game at this point? About 40 updates worth?

Sagiro: The run with Zeg was the 207th of the campaign. The game I’m running next week will be the 240th. So I’m 33 runs behind, and with the shorter evening runs we have these days (as opposed to the old 6-hour Sunday mini-marathons), I’m generally covering about one full run per update. Looks like your guess is not far off.

Everett: And the game is a year or less from ending?

Piratecat: Pfft. Not if our dithering has anything to say about it!

Aravis: It would be wrong for the game to end before the players had accomplished their goals. Aravis’s goal is to ascend to his rightful place amongst the gods as the new God of Knowledge.

Everett: That sounds like a great deal of story content we haven’t seen yet.

Aravis: Not really. Mostly Aravis getting delusions of grandeur ever since finding out that he is a god of cats. And since the Charagan pantheon has no God of Knowledge, it seems a logical choice for Aravis.

coyote6: Be careful, you might end up the God of Knowledge of Cats.

Everett: What kind of skill check would that be? Knowledge (cats)? Or would it be DEX?

Piratecat: And you thought Dranko had an ego problem.

Everett: True dat. But it's still gonna be months before we poor beggars get to read it...



Short Circuit

The huge dripping fist swings over Aravis's head, but dissipates into harmless vapors before smashing down. As the wizard breathes a sigh of relief, Flicker receives a *sending* from Morningstar:

I'm out of the maze. Use your token to summon me to you.

Not lacking an inappropriate flair for the dramatic, Flicker breaks his *refuge* token while announcing loudly: "I'm a mighty Black Circle sorcerer. Watch as I summon a powerful priestess!"

Morningstar appears... in the middle of the black circle on the floor. Alarmed, she hustles out, and seems none the worse for it, though she glares hard at the oblivious Flicker.

A minute later, Ernie appears as well – not the horrible undead version, but the real original halfling they all know and love. He whips his head around. "Ooooh, let me at 'em! He *mazed* me, that... that..."

"That was me," says Aravis. Morningstar smiles as her *status* of Ernie indicates FINE.

Ernie turns on Aravis. "You did? What happened?"

Aravis doesn't sugar-coat anything. "You were turned into a horrible undead creature that tried to *disintegrate* me."

Ernie opens his mouth, but can't think of a good reply.

"You were undead," says Morningstar, "and these poor mages had to fight without any clerics. Let's go help them, okay?"



Zeg, Master of the Undead, is not actually undead himself. Dranko mutters last rites over his thin, frail body, then sets about divesting him of valuables. While the clerics heal up their injured comrades, the wizards *identify* Zeg's magical loot.

Unfortunately, most of it is Evil. The items are:

- A *flesh-eater rod*, which is what caused Dranko to rot (3d6 damage for 1d6+1 rounds on a failed DC 31 Fort save).
- A *robe of the archmage*, of Evil alignment. (They think a *wish* or *miracle* could switch it to Good.)
- A *deadwalker's ring* (turns a victim temporarily into a spell-stealing undead servant).
- A *headband of intellect +6*.
- A *ring of deflection +5*.

While helping identify the items, Kibi's attention also returns to the magic diplomacy cloak they found after the previous battle. He considers trying it on – after all, he'd look quite dashing in it – but his suspicious friends talk him out of it.

So now the Company find themselves alone in Nazg Hodeth, while the Necromantic Forge still burns with its eerie green fire on the far side of the huge main chamber. Without *protection from evil* spells, none of them can get close to it, and even looking directly at it causes headaches. But there are several unexplored anterooms to search. "Maybe there's an instruction book around here somewhere," says Morningstar.

One of the anterooms contains little besides Zeg's elaborate lizard model, now smashed up a bit. A second is filled with bugbear bones, mostly piled into barrels but also strewn about haphazardly. A shelf on one wall is full of books and papers, and more parchment is scattered on the dirty stone floor. Many of these papers have carefully drawn schematics, outlining different sections of the huge bone construct the party just finished fighting.

The third side room has a dozen barrels filled with organs preserved in a thick clear fluid. There are many long shelves here, but instead of books they hold flasks and jars full of nasty-looking and foul-smelling humors and extractions. One is filled with insect eyes. On a nearby table there is an assortment of alchemical equipment.

Finally there is Zeg's bedroom, a cramped little 10-by-10 space with a bed, bookshelf filled with books, wardrobe (with several identical black robes), and a little table and chair. The table has some more papers and a pair of glasses without lenses. Next to the bed (filthy but recently slept in) is an equally long slab of dull green glass on the floor. The party have seen slabs like it before; they usually indicate something is, or has been, in temporal stasis. Strewn on the floor are more papers along with dried-up inkpots and a few spent quills. There is also a bowl with a spoon resting on its lip. Lastly, there is a deep hole in the corner of the room farthest from the bed. The wizards opine that it was made with *disintegrate* spells; a faint whiff of sewage drifts up from it.

Dranko and Flicker scour the rooms for traps but find none. As for magic stuff, one book in the library radiates magic, as does most of the alchemical equipment, and the spoon. Morningstar does a walkthrough with *true seeing* up but sees nothing different.

Flicker does find a secret panel behind the bed, and a little wooden box in a space behind the panel. He and Dranko lean over it eagerly, expecting they have found Zeg's heretofore undiscovered cache of riches. What they find is a collection of teeth. There are about forty of them, mostly bugbear teeth, and they are only remarkable in that each one is perfect – no chips, nicely symmetrical, and free of cavities or other blemishes. None radiate magic. Dranko tosses the box onto the bed in disgust.

"He's powerful enough to cast *time stop*, but instead of money he collects *teeth*? Unbelievable!"



The wizards cast their *comprehend languages* and start researching the many written materials they've found. It takes hours – Zeg's handwriting is barely legible. There is a great deal of writing on the subject of building constructs out of bones – how to fuse them together, how to animate them, cantrips that help during construction, that sort of thing.

The papers on the table, which had the least dust on them, seem to be part of some research papers Zeg was in the midst of preparing. One is on the subject of keeping skeletal undead from decomposing when submerged for long periods. The other concerns what would happen if undead were to fight each other, and Zeg has been working out ways to make undead resist the attacks of *other* undead.

Dranko takes the one magic book and opens it himself, figuring that if it's trapped he has the best chance to dodge. He feels a twinge in his mind as he cracks the spine – it *was* trapped – but resists the effect. After Morningstar takes fifteen minutes to prepare a *remove curse*, Aravis looks inside. To the wizards' delight, it's a spellbook. To their dismay, most of the spells have the Evil descriptor. But there is *time stop*...

Taking a break from his reading, Kibi takes out the diplomacy cloak. He's been thinking about how nice he'd look in it, and he admits to himself that it *has* been hampering his concentration. Before Morningstar can grab it out of his hands, Kibi just goes ahead and puts it on.

There's no doubt about it – he *does* look good. Maroon's a good color on him. The others look at him with apprehension, but nothing untoward happens. Kibi himself feels no different, save that he thinks he'll be better at persuasion and understanding while wearing the cloak – which makes sense, given what he knows about it. He looks over at Flicker, and a soft voice sounds in his head. *You know*, says the voice, *Flicker always feels a little under-appreciated for all the appraising he does for the party*.

Kibi walks over to the little halfling. "Hey Flicker," he says. "I just wanted to thank you for everything you do for us. Especially appraising all the gems we find, but also for checking for traps. I really appreciate it."

Flicker is a bit startled as he looks up, but then he breaks into a grin. "Thanks, Kibi. It's nice to know someone's paying attention! I've been hit by some pretty awful traps over the years – like those *harm* spells in Mokad's place. It's nice to know you've noticed, 'cause, well, sometimes I feel like I'm just in the background all the time."



The shelves in Zeg's bedroom are where the good stuff is: hundreds of pages about the Necromantic Forge and its function. The wizards learn a great deal about this infernal machine, including instructions for many different rituals. While much of the necromantic theory is lost on them, they gather that by reconfiguring the obsidian rods in the various holes, and pouring certain unsavory liquids onto the burning slab in conjunction with different organs and bones, they could create all manner of undead horrors down here. Then they could use the teleportation circle to send them off to who-knows-where to cause trouble.

Aravis finds a stack of papers that deals with the topic of Soul Shards, and he and Kibi spend several hours poring over them. Even with their mighty combined intellects, most of what they read goes over their heads. It would take decades of training in the Necromantic Arts to fully understand how to make a Soul Shard, or (more relevantly) to get a soul out of one.

After a failed *speak with dead* on Zeg, the wizards argue for a few more minutes before deciding that at best they've got about a fifty-fifty shot at freeing Califax's soul. The silver lining is that the cost of failure would most likely be in time and components, and that nothing would stop them from simply trying again.

"And when we're done," says Aravis, "I'm going to *disintegrate* the wall with the holes. I doubt I can affect the Necromantic Forge itself, but I can do some serious damage to its control panel." They also consider *hallow* and *earthquake* as means to make sure no one follows in Zeg's footsteps.

The Company make "camp" right there in the main chamber of Nazg Hodeth; after placing a *greater glyph of warding* in the teleportation circle and *spike stones* all over the floor, they make a *secure shelter* at the far end of the room from the Forge and keep careful watches throughout a nervous night. No one disturbs them, though when the Company wake, all of them find that they have turned their heads away from the flickering green flames.



Kibi wakes up and immediately thinks about the cloak in his pack. What a classy piece of clothing! He puts it on while Ernie adds his own personal touches to the morning's *heroes' feast*. The cloak says to him: *You can never go wrong complimenting Ernie's cooking. It's what he takes the most pride in in all the world. He's heard it all before, but never gets tired of it.* The dwarf walks over and dips a pinky into the jam. "Ernie, you know I just love having a nice hearty breakfast, especially in a place like this."

Ernie smiles back, clearly pleased. "Thanks, Kibi! That's really nice of you to say."

The wizards are already up and studying for their necromantic foray. Grey Wolf is thumbing through a history of necromancy, a beautifully illuminated work titled *The Veil, Torn*. He thinks it would be quite valuable to the right buyer.

"This is the most boring selection of library books ever," Dranko complains. "Why do we never find books about the 'Secret Masters of Elf Porn'?"

Aravis smirks. "They're so evil, we couldn't even comprehend them. Thus, we go after the Black Circle."

"We could have gone to see Darkeye," says Morningstar. "Maybe there would have been some elf porn there."

Grey Wolf glances up from his book. "That's my great-great-grandmother you're talking about."

"You think Darkeye is related to you?" asks Flicker.

"It makes sense," says Dranko. "I'll bet Darkeye is Moirel, and we know Grey Wolf is descended from her."

"I wonder just how many of our enemies are related to Grey Wolf, anyway," says Aravis. Grey Wolf pointedly ignores him.



Aravis has the best grasp of the ritual they're about to attempt, so the others assist him. They rearrange the configuration of obsidian poles, moving some around and adding new ones. Each time a pole is inserted or removed, the flame on the Forge itself changes in hue and intensity, at times burning orange, blue, pale yellow and a deep purple. When they're finished, the fire is a bright white.

Aravis also dictates the precise quantities of alchemical reagents needed, all of which are found in abundance in one of the anterooms. "Three flasks of frogwort extract, two drops of liquified bugbear tongue, one flask of aqueous humor, four drops of demon-skin acid..." He reads out all of the ingredients in the precise order to be applied. Ernie helps with the measurements.

In order for Califax's soul to be freed from the Shard, it must be placed in the very center of the burning obsidian slab. Dranko, endowed with *protection from evil*, finds that he cannot reach far enough to place the Soul Shard properly without touching the Forge itself – something he is entirely unwilling to do. He returns to the room with the lizard skeleton and rigs a long femur into a paddle, which he then uses to get the greasy rock in position. Aravis realizes he'll have a similar problem drizzling the various components onto the Shard, but solves that dilemma by summoning an *unseen servant* to do the applications.

Morningstar issues a *sending* to Tomnic at the church of Delioch in Hae Charagan:

Speaking for Dranko. Trying to restore Califax's soul. Any minute now. Please send if there is any change. P.S.: Mokad is still alive.

The reply:

Understood. We'll keep a close eye on him, and I'll want to hear more about Mokad.

The *unseen servants* follow Aravis's careful commands, dripping foul liquids onto the Soul Shard in precise order, forming a little train of bobbing flasks that would be comical in less portentous circumstances. The party's faces are bathed in white light from the flames of the Necromantic Forge. As the last drop falls onto the Soul Shard, the black rock starts to shake and roll around on the slab. The flames leap upward and the Shard rises into the air – with a body materializing around it. It's a large deformed zombie, and the Soul Shard is jutting gruesomely from the side of its head.

"I think I screwed something up," Aravis gulps.

Kibi nods. "Yeah, I don't remember this part."

"*Yeeaaargh!*" groans the zombie, reaching up in a semblance of confusion to feel the rock growing from its skull.

Ernie instinctively *turns* the zombie, which is a big mistake. As the positive energy strikes the Necromantic Forge, the backlash blows Ernie backward a good twenty feet. Angry fire leaps up in protest at the effrontery.

"Fine," says Grey Wolf. He casts *telekinesis* and lifts the zombie up and away from the Forge. Morningstar *turns* and the zombie is flashed to powder. Dranko catches the Soul Shard but drops it just as quickly; it's burning hot and covered in foul slime.

"Well, that was fun," Grey Wolf comments dryly.

Aravis sighs. "Okay. I guess that pole should have gone into the second slot from the left, not the third. That was what I was least sure of going in. But everything else went right... I think. No reason not to try it again."

They do try again. Aravis is more confident this time around, though part of him is fascinated by the thought that he could make himself all sorts of low-level undead down here without much difficulty. As the last drop touches the Shard this time there is a loud hissing, followed by an uproar of blue-green flames that makes them all flinch away. When they look back, the Soul Shard is melting onto the obsidian slab. A puff of white smoke rises up and disperses, after which the flame dies back down to its green steady-state. Aravis requests that someone check him for Evil, just in case. He tests negative.

They *send* again to Tomnic:

Done! Us again. We're really paranoid. Check him for evil, and a soul. We really hoped this worked. Really. Hoped this worked.

The reply:

Califax just convulsed. Eyes wide open. Screamed, then fell fast asleep. Looks peaceful. Will detect evil, etc. Many thanks!

"Great!" Dranko exclaims. "Now let's knock this place down and go home."

Aravis is more than ready; this morning he slotted *disintegrate* into most of his higher-level spell slots. After Morningstar casts *dispel magic* on the teleportation circle on the floor, Aravis hits it with a series of *disintegrates* that destroys almost the whole thing. Ernie then "caps" the floor with a *wall of stone*.

One down, one to go. Morningstar concentrates hard and manages to *dispel* the wall with the holes and rods. A groaning sound issues from the Forge itself, as Aravis quickly follows up with a *disintegrate* that gouges out a huge chunk of the wall, wiping out a dozen holes and several obsidian rods.

The Necromantic Forge flares up. Its massive energy, heretofore kept in check these many centuries by the powerful enchantments in the controlling wall, is released in a runaway torrent. In little more than a second its entire end of the chamber is filled with roaring green flames. After another second the Company can't even *see* the Forge any more, and the flames are pouring toward them, a towering, encroaching wall of fire.

Kibi responds almost instantly, putting up a *wall of force* while the others bolt in panic for the exit. His spell isn't large enough to entirely seal off the Forge's side of the chamber, but now the fire's advance is at least slowed down as it comes spurting and cascading through the gap near the ceiling. Even so, they only have a few seconds before the entire room will be filled with the wrath of the Necromantic Forge. On the other side of Kibi's transparent wall they can see that the boiling flames are shot through with shadowy faces and swirls of black energy.

"Get us the heck out of here!" cries Ernie; it's clear that they won't be able to outpace the flames if they simply flee on foot. Kibi is able to *teleport* out with most of the party, and Aravis grabs Morningstar and does likewise.

Outside, it's a lovely morning. They have relocated to their last outdoor campsite, at the edge of the woods abutting the graveyard, and about a hundred yards from the stairs down to Nazg Hodeth. Ernie activates his shield and flies up and over the cemetery to get a good look at what's happening.

They all feel a rumbling in the ground, and Ernie sees the tombstones shiver below him. Dranko mutters nervously, “This is really, really bad.”

Ernie flies higher and moves off to the side. Then the mausoleum, the one through which they had gained access to Nazg Hodeth, explodes in a shower of masonry and green fire. A geyser of flames leaps up fifty feet in the air and then pours splattering down over the bone-yard. “Yondalla’s muffins!” Ernie shrieks. “We’ve made an evil volcano!”

As he flees, he sees that the green fire is forming into tendrils that are wrapping up corpses, as if a huge fiery squid is reaching up out of the ground with burning tentacles and grabbing at bodies. Dozens of dead bugbears are grasped and pulled back down into the hole where the mausoleum once stood. Thirty seconds later, the flames have entirely receded and all is quiet.

“I admit,” says Aravis, “we’ve stepped into unknown territory.”

Dranko laughs nervously. “Hey, something awful that isn’t my fault!”

“We have to go back,” says Aravis, “and find out what’s going on down there.”

The ever-prudent Kibi sends *prying eyes* down into Nazg Hodeth, with orders to come back staggered every five minutes to report. The first set comes back and shows Kibi a towering pile of bugbear bodies heaped on the Necromantic Forge, the fires of which have died down to their steady state, barely visible beneath all the corpses. The jumble of bodies is pressing up against, and squeezing through, the cage of giant ribs that surrounds the Forge.

The next set of *eyes* comes back and reports nearly the same – except that the pile of bodies is starting to glow. The Company don’t wait for the third set; they charge down the stairs again to put a halt to this new mischief before the Forge animates a pile of over a hundred dead bugbears into gods-only-know-what. They arrive in time to see a final spasmodic short-circuiting of the Necromantic Forge, as seven of the remaining obsidian rods come shooting out of the holes to smash against the far wall. The glow on the bodies dies out.

Kibi dismisses his *wall of force* and *summons* earth elementals to remove the bodies from the slab (though the first one tries climbing *onto* the Forge to do this, and is immediately reduced to small pebbles). Morningstar watches impassively as elementals hurl corpse after corpse onto the stone floor. “I love our job,” she sighs.

Aravis *disintegrates* the bodies, and now everything is more or less back to an acceptable calm status quo. Morningstar spends the rest of the day casting *hallow* (though she does not include the Forge itself in the area).

The next morning, Aravis persuades the others to let him cast one more *disintegrate*, to remove another chunk of the wall. Most of the others leave while he does so, though Morningstar stays back to protect him. He carves another divot out of the Forge’s control mechanism, but this time there is no catastrophic side-effect. Nonetheless, Morningstar convinces the party to spend one more night nearby, just to be sure.



Kibi finishes the job, first by using *stone shape* to weaken the support pillars in the Forge chamber, and then (once the party are all out) by casting *earthquake*. The ground collapses into the room, burying the Necromantic Forge beneath tons of rocks and dirt. Satisfied that the Forge has been effectively neutralized, the Company *wind walk* back to Hae Charagan to check on Califax. They find him lying in bed, smiling and asleep while Woundtenders minister to his health. High Priest Tomnic is sitting by his side.

Kibi hears the cloak talk to him. *Tomnic is sensitive about not being worthy of his post. Deep down he knows that what he lacks in charisma, he makes up for in efficiency and solid judgment. But he still worries that he's not a natural leader.*

Tomnic nods to Dranko as they come in to Califax’s room. “You have done your job well; he has been sleeping, peacefully, for days. He is quite healthy physically – and, I feel, spiritually as well.”

Califax stirs from sleep at the sound of Dranko’s voice, and beckons the half-orc to listen, his expression suddenly agitated. Still only half-conscious, he starts to whisper urgently. “I have to... something important,” he croaks. “Praska. She’s not... Mokad’s still alive.”

“We know,” says Dranko gently.

“No, no,” whispers Califax. “Mokad is... is Praska. Mokad *is* Praska. They performed a... morbid link, that... time he kidnapped her. Mokad formed a morbid link. When he died... she *became* him.”

Dranko’s eyes open wide. “What happened to *her*?”

"She's in there," whispers Califax. "But she's not in control. Don't kill him... don't just kill him, or she'll be destroyed as well. Please... Praska..."

"Everything's going to be all right," says Dranko soothingly. "We'll take care of it. Just sleep, Califax. Sleep, and enjoy having your soul back."

They leave the sleeping Scarbearer and adjourn to a private room, where Dranko starts swearing loudly. "Now I feel bad about all those mean things I said to her while we were fighting," he says. "It wasn't really her. It was Mokad!"

Aravis puts a hand on his shoulder. "She'll understand, Dranko."

Dranko fumes. "That man has an uncanny ability to utterly piss me off."

"Look at the bright side," says Aravis. "At least Califax didn't say that there was an easy way to get Mokad out of Praska's body using the Necromantic Forge."

coyote6: Now that would have been hilarious. To me, who is not a player in the campaign...

Thornir Alekeg: I agree. Sagiro, did you curse yourself for not thinking of that once Aravis's player said it?

Innocent Bystander: So Kibi's got an intelligent cloak of diplomacy?

iamwardicus: I've been following this thread for years - I'm glad to see the new updates! Out of curiosity - what are the more or less current player sheets like (class/level)?

Sagiro: At this point in the Story Hour, the party just leveled (after releasing Califax's soul) to 17th. I believe at that time their class/level breakdown was something like this:

Kibi: 9th level wizard/8th level Earth Mage (custom class whose levels-minus-one count toward wizard spell progression).

Aravis: 17th level wizard (Transmuter).

Grey Wolf: 3rd level fighter, 9th level wizard, 5th level spellsword.

Ernie: 4th level fighter, 13th level cleric.

Morningstar: 17th level cleric.

Dranko: some combination of cleric, rogue and lasher - heavy on the latter two, lighter on the first. Not sure of level breakdowns.

Flicker: 17th level rogue.

In real time (which is about two years ahead of the Story Hour), the party will almost certainly reach 20th level after the next session - at least, any of them who survive. The level/class breakdowns are pretty much the same except for Ernie, who [spoiler redacted].

wedgeski: *gnash*

Piratecat: At level 17 Dranko is a cleric 5, rogue 8, lasher 4.

RangerWickett: Spell-storing bladed whip with *inflict serious wounds/dispel magic* in it? Or better yet, *vampiric touch* courtesy of one of the wizards? Actually, that makes me curious; what sorts of prominent gear do you guys use?

Everett: What's Aravis's banned spell sphere (opposite of Transmutation)? Have never seen it referred to.

Aravis: Illusion and Enchantment.

Siusi: Aw, man! It's over? Now I join the ranks of everyone else who laments catching up at a cliffhanger, almost. This is still better than when I got to the end of the PDFs and went frantic over Kibi's side quest. (I then remembered that the actual thread might be farther along. Score!)

Sagiro, PC, KidC, Aravis, and the rest o' you fine folks, it's been a heck of a week and a swell read. Thank you all; without Abernathy's Company this would have been the slowest work week ever. And now that I have to wait for updates, maybe this won't consume my life anymore! The charm is broken, I'm practically free! ... Until the next post, of course... Thanks again, for sharing this w/ us all. Your game is truly mesmerising, Sagiro. Makes me sad to think what a jerk player I've been to DM's who've tried to do something similar. I must change my munchkin-y ways.

Piratecat: Siusi, I know how you feel - Morningstar and Grey Wolf's players have just become proud parents, so the game is on hold for a bit. I miss it!

And for anyone who wishes to be utterly appalled, last summer I totalled up the list of all the "excess loot" that no one had claimed but that we hadn't gotten around to actually selling. It's... er... disturbing, in that the purchase value is 1.1 million gp. To wit:

1 shield of spell turning +4	6 plate armor +2
1 heavy mace - strength drainer (1d6 STR on crit)	6 dagger +1
1 bracers of armor +6	1 ring of darkvision
2 ring of deflection +4	1 headband of ferocity
1 large shield +5	1 belt of metamagic harmony
1 breastplate +5	1 blue & green rolling marbles
1 cloak of resistance +4	1 ring of random energy protection
1 large shield +4	1 potion of cure serious wounds
1 belt of strength +4	1 wand - knock - 12 charges
1 breastplate +1	1 wand - hidden lodge - 17 charges
2 belts of strength +4	1 wand - indomitability - 1 charge
1 shield +3, +5 vs. human melee attacks	1 scroll - dispel magic (10th), greater dispel magic (17th)
6 large shield +3	1 scroll - harm, mass inflict moderate wounds, ethereal jaunt (11th lvl)
3 ring of deflection +2	1 plate mail of the brewing storm
6 longsword +2	gems - 244,000
5 amulet of health +2	stuff - 35,400
3 periapt of wisdom +2	stuff - 190,000
6 belt of strength +2	misc. magical stuff - 45,000

What do we learn from this? That XP loss (or action point loss for us) + time are far more important than money when it comes to constraining important magic item creation, that we have more magical doo-dads than we can easily track, that there's nowhere easy to buy or sell items (we gave a lot of these away to followers), and that everyone sort of has a schtick that cleave to closely, instead of trying to track lots and lots of items.

coyote6: [stuff - 35,400 / stuff - 190,000 / misc. magical stuff - 45,000] That right there is some impressive stuff. Clearly, you guys need to build some tombs, fill them with traps and oodles of treasure, and spread incomplete maps and rumors of them. Pay it forward for the next generation of adventurers.

Piratetcat: It's Dranko's only chance to [giant redacted spoiler]. I like it! Dranko's personal gear is varied, since he still clings to items he got at 1st level. My major and character-defining stuff includes:

*gloves of dexterity +6 (Finger inserted in the nose will stick there unless you say, "Kibi is a genius." I hate Kibi.)
+3 mithral shirt of true stealth (+15 Move Silently)
+5 buckler of moderate fortification
robe of blending
sash of transparency (improved invisibility 1/day, says "Miss Charagan" across the sash for anyone who can see invisible. Man, did I mention I hate Kibi?)
eyepatch of see invisible
Coaltongue (whip +2; +1d6 holy damage, +4 to trip, ignores alignment DR, with a few other enchantments on it. Usually made +5 by Ernie's greater magic weapon spell each day.)
Alazar's Tongue, a +5 whip that can shut down dimensional-traveling foes.
Truedeath crystal, allows the whip to sneak attack undead.
snooper's earring (+5 to Listen)
bag of endless rope (495')
pouch of accessibility
boots of haste
immovable rod*

At 19th level (the game in real time) he is a cleric 5, rogue 10, lasher 4 and has 191 hp, an AC of 36, and modified ability scores of 19 STR, 24 DEX, 20 CON, 09 INT, 14 WIS, and 08 CHA.

Cerebral Paladin: What I find most striking about this is the large number of mid-grade items just sitting around. There are some high-grade items (the +5 large shield, the +5 breastplate) but it's easy to see how those end up in a weird "We don't want to sell this, because it's really good and we might want to use it, but nobody actually wants to use it" category. In my experience, it often takes a while to reach the conclusion that those should be sold (unless they're sold in a handwave-y way right away).

But it's the 6 large shields +3, and the 6 plate armors +2, and the like that really get me. You could make some mid-level adventuring party or elite group of knights very happy with that stuff, and it's not like the Company is the only heroic group of adventurers in the world... (I totally understand why it happens, I just can't help imagining the group of mid-level adventurers suffering a TPK because their armor classes weren't a couple of points higher. Plus, they likely have +1 equipment that they might have passed down to starting adventurers. Okay, now I've convinced myself that you guys caused a cascade of good adventurer deaths by holding onto that stuff. For shame.)

Sius: Well. Only word I can think of is... agog. I am agog. 1.1 million?! And given to you freely and legally by the DM? I've only ever seen that level of cash by abusing *liquid pain*, *distill joy* and *masochism* on an accelerated time demiplane. And that wasn't until over 20th level... Talk Aravis, Kibi and Grey Wolf into making a spell that lets you dissolve another magic item, use its magic essence, and more cheaply enchant a different item. I mean, yeah, you could give it away to other adventurers, but that's not the Dranko thing to do.

The Warlock: I give you the *Rope of Transference* (because despite my stinginess, in my 13 year campaign, they got a LOT of magic they outgrew, or were beyond when they got it):

Rope of Transference (Constant Item, Min. Research 2 Weeks, DC 40)

Lesser

Transfer Magic Arms and Armor: Allows transfer of all magical properties of one magical weapon or armor of like kind – weapon to weapon, armor to armor, shield to shield, to an unenchanted masterwork item. Takes 10 minutes per "plus"/1000gp value transferred, draws 50% of the normal crafting XP from the user of the *rope*, and completely devastates the originating magic item. The slagged material can never be used in magic item creation.

Isolated Transfer: Allows the transfer of one magical property from a magical weapon or armor to a previously enchanted magical weapon or armor of like kind that is not fully enchanted. Takes 10 minutes per "plus"/1000gp value transferred, draws 75% of the normal crafting XP from the user of the *rope*, and completely devastates the originating magic item. The slagged material can never be used in magic item creation.

Need: Transference Feat, Min. Caster Level 12, 90000gp Unlimited use (Costs for per week use – 4: 85000; 3: 80000; 2: 70000; 1: 60000)

Standard

As *Lesser*, except *Isolated Transfer* instead drains from the source item a number of "plusses" equal to the transferred power +1. These drained plusses are lost randomly. If the source item retains at least a +1 enhancement bonus after the transfer it retains its basic magical nature. An item which cannot pay the "plus" cost, is devastated as per a *Lesser Rope*. Only one power may be transferred at a time, but so long as the source item remains magical, the *rope* may be used on it to transfer additional powers. Furthermore, the transfer costs twice the original power's XP cost to craft from the user, and takes 30 minutes per plus transferred.

Need: Transference Feat, Min. Caster Level 15, 125000gp Unlimited use (Costs for per week use – 4: 115000; 3: 105000; 2: 95000; 1: 90000)

Greater

As *Standard*, except as follows: *Isolated Transfer* drains plusses equal to the transferred power, and costs 5 times the original crafting XP.

Wondrous Transfer: The *rope* may be used in a fashion similar to *Transfer Magic Arms and Armor* with wearable non-armor constant items (garments, rings, etc). This takes 30 minutes per 1000gp value of the originating item, and costs the original XP crafting cost if the target item is metaphysically/thaumaturgically related to the magic in question, or 10 times if it is not.

Need: Transference Feat, Min. Caster Level 18, 275000gp Unlimited use (Costs for per week use – 4: 260000; 3: 245000; 2: 225000; 1: 200000)

Grand

As *Greater*, but gains the ability of *Wondrous Isolated Transfer*, allowing transfer of one power to a previously enchanted non-armor wearable constant item, destroying the source item, taking 1 hour per 1000gp value of the source item, and costing XP equal to 5 times the original crafting XP for thaumaturgically related items, and 20 times for non-related items.

Need: Transference Feat, Min. Caster Level 20, 400000gp Unlimited use (Costs for per week use – 4: 375000; 3: 325000; 2: 300000; 1: 275000)

They didn't use it as often as you might think, but the times they did use it made for some very excellent armor and weapons...

Joshua Randall: I think I can understand how the party ended up with so much extra magic stuff: paranoia. When I play a high-level PC, I'm always afraid that my PC is going to get disintegrated / dropped into molten lava (you die, no save) / otherwise completely destroyed... *along with all my stuff*. *True resurrection* brings your PC back just fine, but it doesn't bring back the PC's gear. So, keeping backups around is better than adventuring naked.

Hmm, naked adventuring...



Communiqués

Dranko opens his mouth to make an additional snarky comment about Mokad, but finds that no sound issues from his lips. Tomnic mouths: “What?” but his voice is also silent. All of the Company look at one another in great alarm, as each tries and fails to talk.

A moment later they realize that it’s not just them; the sounds from elsewhere in the temple, as well as outside the window, have ceased. Has someone cast *silence* in the room? It appears not; a glance out the window reveals confused townsfolk gesturing wildly. Whatever it is that’s suppressing sound is affecting the entire street, and possibly all of Hae Charagan. There is only one exception to the profound quiet: each person can hear, faintly, the sound of their own beating heart.

Then there is a sound, and they all hear it, like a thousand whispers being uttered in their ears. Behind it is a noise like a rising wind, and over the course of a minute both the sounds grow louder, though there is no accompanying breeze, and no obvious source of the whispers. But still no one can produce sounds of their own.

As abruptly as it started, the whispers and rushing wind noises die down. “...was that?” asks Tomnic, and they all hear him. From out in the town come numerous screams and shouts as the multitudes find their voices returned.

Grey Wolf looks thoughtful. “I bet that was all the spirits who have been hanging around.”

Tomnic nods. “I’m going to cast *commune* and find out.”

Morningstar looks worried. “Make sure that wasn’t the sound of spirits getting sucked into some dark engine of the Black Circle.”

“I love your optimism!” Dranko exclaims.

“What are the odds,” Morningstar responds, “that something bad just got nicely taken care of by someone who wasn’t us?”

But it looks like that’s the case. Tomnic casts his spell and reports his findings. “Grey Wolf is right. All of the spirits who were bound to Abernia have ascended to their proper heavens.”

“Good,” says Ernie. “But how?”

“Death is no longer on holiday?” asks Grey Wolf.

“Another god has taken over the duties of Drosch,” says Tomnic. “I don’t know the name; I could only ask yes or no questions. But I learned that it was a Kivian god whose intent was not malicious.”

“That’s the best news we’ve had in weeks!” Ernie says with a smile. “Thank you!”

Indeed, as they stand and look at one another, each of them feels as if they had long been holding their breath without knowing it, and now have finally exhaled.



In a private room in the Church of Delioch, the Company inventory and redistribute magic items after their recent haul. Dranko taps the magic spoon to a bowl (figuring it’s a typical gruel-producing *Murlynd*’s variety) and is startled to see the bowl fill up with maggots – live, wriggling, and highly nutritious. “No wonder Zeg was so scrawny,” says Ernie.

“It’s things like this that make me sorry Turlus is now Turlissa,” Dranko sighs. “If it were Turlus, he’d find this in his silverware drawer.”

“What should we do with this?” Flicker holds up the gold-plated dwarf skull with opals in its eyes. “It’s probably worth more than 8,000 gold pieces if we sell it as is. Or, we can chip off the gold and pry out the gems, and maybe get a thousand for it.”

“I’m okay with saving the gold and gems,” says Kibi, “but we should bury the skull.”

“I dunno,” says Dranko. “That’s a lot of wasted cash.”

“Dranko!” says Ernie, appalled.

“Seriously,” says Dranko. “Think of how much we could help the dwarves with 8,000 gold!”

Kibi looks pointedly at Dranko. “But you’re not going to give the money to the dwarves. Are you?”

Dranko opens his mouth, then closes it. “You’d be easier to argue with if you’d take off that *headband of intellect*,” he grumbles.



They also learn more about the diplomacy cloak. While it always gives the wearer a +5 bonus to Diplomacy checks, it occasionally grants a +20 bonus, at its own discretion. And though to Aravis's *identify* there's still no good reason why it should make someone want to wear it, he does think the cloak is very slightly sentient.

"Give it to Grey Wolf," Ernie suggests. "He's already got one voice in his head. What's one more?"

Bostock speaks into Grey Wolf's mind. *Remind them that I am no more a "voice in your head" than they are voices in each others' heads when using telepathic bond.*

Grey Wolf sighs wearily. "I know, I know..."

Everett: Been a long time since Bostock said anything. Or does he talk to Grey Wolf without it showing up in the Story Hour?

Sagiro: Bostock does talk to Grey Wolf from time to time, but typically in throw-away contexts that don't make for good Story Hour content. I have learned that the only way I'm ever going to get this thing written is to leave out a bunch of the extraneous, not-story-advancing dialogue. I admit to being a bit arbitrary about what I include, but I promise I'm not omitting anything important.



Morningstar leaves to visit her own temple in the city, and learns a bit more there. She is told that Myr Madar, the Kivian God of Judgment, has taken over for Drosh in the shepherding of souls. Little is known about Myr Madar in Charagan; while the core pantheon of Kivian gods is essentially an extended family, Myr Madar is not related to the others by either blood or creation. Regardless, all of the churches in Hae Charagan are abuzz with the news.

The Company *teleport* back to Tal Hae to take care of some local business and start up on more research. Aravis casts a pair of *vision* spells, with the following two questions: "*How do I contact the Feline Conclave?*" "*How do we defeat the Book of Lies?*"

His vision on the first question starts high in the air, looking down upon an enormous forest.

The view swoops down through the canopy and then into a small hidden clearing. Eight cats lounge there in an approximate semicircle, some stretching in the grass, others resting on stumps or logs.

They are having an argument. About him.

While Aravis cannot specifically hear the words spoken, the vision conveys to him the gist of their dispute: some of the cats think he is vital to their survival, while others think he will be the instrument of their destruction.

When he shares this with the others, Dranko guffaws. "Oh my gosh! Cats are fickle! Alert everybody!"

The second vision is shorter and more straightforward: Aravis sees the black face of Grey Wolf's *Mordenkainen's cube* – the one that casts *disjunction*. "In other words," Aravis concludes, "The book is unalterable, and we have to destroy it."

"That's so annoying!" Dranko complains. "I wanted to write our own stuff in it."

Aravis rubs his chin. "The worry is that the Book of Lies is powerful enough that I could lose my spell-casting ability if I destroy the thing. We know it's magical, and we know it doesn't *detect* as magic, so it could be a true artifact. On the other hand, it could simply have a minor enchantment upon it that hides its magic." He tries casting *greater dispel* upon the Book a couple of times, but the power of his spells is insufficient and so nothing changes.

Morningstar casts a *sending* to Arkin, member of the Great Pack:

This is Morningstar, companion of Aravis. Human spirits can move on now after death. Has this helped your plight? You may respond, twenty-five words.

The reply:

No, our spirits are not subject to your gods. We've been neither helped nor harmed.

Aravis then tries to *teleport* to the cats' clearing he saw in the vision, but this fails. A *scry* cast upon one of the cats also fails, and he concludes that the whole area must be shielded. "I guess I should be happy the *vision* worked, at least," he mutters.



Dranko takes a stroll through town to the secret tailor-shop entrance to the Manse of the Undermen. He finds that Lucas Blackwell is out on business, but while walking the corridors he finds the halfling Gideon Hollow at work in a laboratory. The little arcane trickster is part of his Small Council, but their interactions have been few since Dranko's return from the past.

"How are you?" Dranko asks amiably, poking his head through the doorway.

Gideon doesn't look up. "Fine."

"You look suspicious," Dranko comments.

The halfling sets down the wand he was working on, sits up straight, and turns to Dranko. "And you look unattractive," he says.

Dranko ignores the insult and keeps smiling. "How's everything?"

"It was going well until someone interrupted me while I was in the middle of crafting this wand."

Dranko clears his throat. "Uh, yeah. Anyhow, a new God of Death just took over for the old God of Death who fled, and all the souls who had been anchored to Abernia have now ascended to their ultimate reward in the heavens."

Gideon Hollow picks his wand back up, along with a small file. "Oh. Good for them."

"So... yeah," says Dranko.

"I hope they end up somewhere nice," adds Gideon. "And you're telling me this because...?"

"Because you asked," says Dranko. Then, quickly: "No, no, I guess you didn't ask, but I wanted to tell somebody."

"Well, that's very interesting," says Gideon, entirely without interest.

Dranko smirks. "Would you mind if I just sat here and looked over your shoulder for half an hour?"

Gideon doesn't look up again. "Yeah, that would be great, Dranko. I'd love that."

"Or perhaps I could go do other, more useful things."

"You're the Oracle," says Gideon, looking aggrieved. "Your word is law. Do whatever the heck you want. Speaking of which, how are you doing with your ragtag bunch of adventuring buddies?"

Dranko puffs up a bit. "My ragtag group of adventuring buddies has just made an unbelievably profitable gem-importing deal that I'll be telling the Small Council about soon."

"Excellent," says Gideon, and for the first time he seems to be sincere.



Dranko makes two more stops in the Manse. The first is in the treasury office, where four Undermen functionaries are passing a number of papers around a small round table. Their conversation stops when Dranko enters the room, and they all leap to their feet.

"Sir!" exclaims one of them, a tall thin fellow with red hair. "To what do we owe this honor?"

"What are you doing?" Dranko asks.

"We're crunching numbers," answers a second guild member. "Specifically, we're reviewing various terms of our trade deal with Tev. It's... um, it's kind of boring."

"That's not boring at all!" Dranko answers with a smile. "If you figure out a way in which they're trying to screw us, let me know."

A third guild member, a short woman wearing glasses, smiles back at the Oracle. "It's more the other way around, sir."

Dranko raises an eyebrow. "We're trying to screw them?"

"Subtly. It will increase the profit margins."

Dranko nods approval. "How badly are we screwing Forquelle?"

"If you refer to our agreement with Seresef, Forquelle is not involved. I suppose in that sense, we're screwing them mightily."

Dranko laughs. "Well, carry on. You're doing a great job."

"Thank you sir," says the red-haired man. "If you'd like to review the paperwork at any time, we are at your complete disposal."

Finally, Dranko stops in his own office. *My own office. This is great!* He evidently has a large desk, shelves, a carpet, paintings – the place is pretty posh. There's a large folded parchment on the center of the desk with his name written neatly upon it. He reads:

To Dranko Brightmirror, Oracle:

As you requested, I have shifted the main focus of the Undermen to taking advantage of the recently opened border between Charagan and Kivia. As those efforts have now been under way for several weeks, I am able to make a preliminary report.

We have secured trade agreements, or are in the process of doing so, in a number of areas, the main ones being the gem trade with Seresef, furniture imported from Tev, and glassware and spices from Dir-Tolia. Although the impact so far on our bottom line has been modest, this is due to initial outlays, purchases and investments necessary for future business. We expect that our available funds will triple within six months due to the increased revenues from new trade.

However, there are significant difficulties that may hinder our ability to extend our reach further. One is that Ocir controls much of the Kivian trade, due to the location and size of its main port city, Kai Kin. They are an extremely insular country, xenophobic in the extreme, and they have rebuffed all of our attempts at contact.

The more serious problem is our main competition – a merchant guild known as the White Sun Cartel, based in Djaw. They were as quick off the block as we were, and have already secured many contracts with merchants in Charagan. The Cartel wields enormous clout, and it's said that they are the mercantile arm of the Emperor made manifest. It is a fair statement to say that they have taken control of the trade markets between the two continents. They are willing to threaten and intimidate to further their ends; we have lost several contracts due to that pressure, most notably a lucrative agreement with a consortium of wine merchants from Fanaam, who backed out of a deal after being contacted by the Cartel.

I will continue to explore all avenues in this regard, and am pleased to note that despite the competition, the sum of revenues involved is so large that even a small player stands to gain significantly.

One unrelated note: Octavius and his people have expended some effort to locate King Farazil, as per your request of some weeks ago, but have made no progress. They have followed up several rumors of "possession by evil sprits" and such, but all have led to dead ends. His conclusion thus far is that Farazil has either gone deep into hiding, or has left Charagan altogether. However, he will continue to search until you explicitly countermand your previous instruction.

I continue to run the day-to-day affairs of the Undermen in your absence, knowing that your personal affairs can, and should, take precedence. As always, you may contact me via sending, visit to the Manse, or through Turfissa.

Ever your servant,

Lucas Blackwell, Hand



Morningstar visits her church in Tal Hae. She hopes to hear news about Octesian, but there is none. For better or for worse, the Dreamscape has been quiet under the constant watch of Ellish sisters. As she leaves to return to the Greenhouse she passes another sister coming in from outside, which is unusual because it's early afternoon under a bright sun. She can't help but notice that the sister wears an unusual necklace, the stone of which is a flat diamond formed of two triangles, one black and the other white. The sister recognizes Morningstar and her eyes grow wide. She falls to one knee. "Morningstar?"

"Yes. And you are...?"

"My name is **Glory**."

"You can stand up, Glory. You are a Daywalker, I see."

Glory smiles proudly. "I am." If Morningstar notices that she's blinking more than is normal, and sports some conspicuous sunburn, she makes no mention of it.

"I have been visiting other churches today," says Glory. "Making rounds, introducing myself. I assume you've heard about the souls of the dead; it's all anyone's talking about inside church walls."

"How long have you been day-walking?" Morningstar asks.

"Three weeks."

"Headaches?"

"They've gone away, mostly."

"And how long have you been a priestess?"

"Three years," says Glory. "But it was an honor to be called as a Daywalker."

Morningstar reaches out to touch Glory's necklace. "And where did these pendants come from?"

"They were Amber's idea."

"Of course they were," Morningstar mutters. Then: "How many Daywalkers are there here?"

"In Tal Hae? Six."

"How's it working out?"

"It's exhilarating," says Glory. "And we see so many more people this way."

"And what has been the reaction?"

"Mixed, but mostly good. Things have gone as smoothly as can be expected, given the tumultuous nature of our politics."



"Kibilhathur, I almost forgot. There was a delivery for you while you were away."

Eddings hands the dwarf a badly-folded piece of parchment. Kibi reads it out loud, though only Aravis and Grey Wolf are currently there with him.

To the Knights of the Spire Guard, Greenhouse at the Street of Bakers, Tal Hae,

Wile we was moving sum rubble out of from the dunjuns here at Longtooth Keep, we found this here stone box. We can't figger out how it gets open, and it's got "Kibilhathur" carved on the lid, so I'm having it sent to you at Tal Hae. I hope its nuthing bad.

Yor servant and offishul caretaker of Longtooth Keep,

Fergus

Eddings gestures to a small stone block, about the size of a cigar box, resting on a side table. There is a seam that indicates it's a container, and Kibi's name is indeed engraved neatly on the top. When Kibi picks it up he hears an audible CLICK from inside, and the dwarf feels Earth Magic thrum through his fingertips. He tilts the box open and two folded-up pieces of paper fall out. One has his own name written on the outside; the other, which looks to have a small object wrapped up inside, says DRANKO.

With Dranko still at the Manse, Aravis opens the half-orc's note and a small green stone falls out into his palm. It looks like a jade marble. Aravis puts the stone and paper back in the box without reading the note, while Kibi reads his aloud.

Dear Kibi,

It's been several months now since you and your friends left my home. Let me tell you something right off: that battle against Condor was the most amazing thing I've ever witnessed in my life! You had me on the edge of my seat, and the ending made it well worth watching. I cheered so loud I think I startled my unseen servants.

I don't have much to say, just that my life has become much more enjoyable since your visit. I no longer look upon my daughter's still face with sadness and trepidation, but instead with hope and happiness. And I'm not worried so much about Condor any more, either!

I think about you almost every day, too. Please tell Gela again how pleased I am to know that she not only lived through the accident, but went on to raise a fine young dwarf with good proper magic in his veins. You make me so proud.

Much love,

Grandpa Cranchus

P.S.: Don't tell Dranko, but I did add a little something extra to his trinket. After he eats it, make sure to watch him the next time he smokes one of those foul cigars of his.

Dranko comes back not too long after and is surprised to find he is also a beneficiary of Cranchus's gift box. His note reads:

Dear Dranko,

For me, it's only been a few months. For you, it's been a couple thousand years. I'll bet you didn't think I'd take you up on your request, especially after that crack about my daughter being a bookend. I was tempted, I'll tell you up front, to curse this thing, maybe make it turn your tusks green. But you probably have troubles enough right now, given your line of work. And since I have lots of time on my hands, I figured I could spend some of it making you something interesting. The real problem will be figuring out how to deliver it to you, since you won't be born for about two thousand years, assuming everything worked out with the time travel. I'll think of something – I've got centuries to work on the divinations and follow the probability lattices.

What you're looking at is a charm that should give you some insight into the weaknesses of elementals – I figured that was the least I could do after Rumbler knocked you guys around. Ordinarily I wouldn't make something like that, since it might fall into the wrong hands. That's why you have to swallow it.

Good luck with your adventures. I hope you found the future the same as you left it.

Sincerely,

Cranchus

He gulps the jade marble without hesitation, and feels an innate understanding of elemental physiology come into his head.

In game terms, he can now crit and sneak-attack elementals.

Dranko steps outside the Greenhouse. "Hey Cranchus! If you're paying attention: thank you!"

iamwardicus: Oh goodness... poor Dranko. Brilliant job as always, Sagiro!

Enkhidu: So, it's a family trait to heap shame on Dranko under the guise of helping? Excellent!

Piratecat: You know, I'm standing *right here*.

Pointy-headed character musing: Dranko has a weird role in the party. He fills the role of both damage sponge and striker, with more hit points than anyone else (a combination of good rolling and a 2nd-Edition-legacy high CON) and an impressive damage output against a single foe. On those occasions that I can manage a *hasted* sneak attack, Dranko will get five attacks doing something like 1d3+1d6 holy +10 + 6d6 sneak attack (reroll any 1s). That's about 14 pts of damage per attack with no sneak attack, or 40 points with sneak attack. The real weakness here is threefold; he can only attack one foe at a time, he often needs to move and attack (squandering a full attack), and it's surprisingly difficult to manage consistent sneak attacks. The result is that foes often start strong until Dranko and Flicker can maneuver into position.

With a 14 WIS, those cleric levels don't do a whole lot to his offense. They're great for defense, though, helping his saves and giving him a handful of utility and buff spells. Even better, they let him use a healing wand to act as party healer any time he isn't in optimal whipping position.

Enkhidu: In our last high-level game, we were somewhat melee-oriented, so we had enough role specialization in melee that we didn't run into that type of "single point of failure." But, on those occasions when our primary striker (our two-weapon using rogue/ranger/hunter could dish out damage similar to Dranko) was out for some reason, my character (a woodsy marshal type of character that was the primary damage and attack sponge) would feel the pinch.

Thornir Alekeg: Wow, you can tell they are taking a break due to the new parenthood in the group. Piratecat is apparently missing the game so much he has failed his save against "Let me tell you about my character." I can tell you from experience that the compulsion does fade with time, but hopefully you won't be away from your game that long.

Cervante: Delurking to say this is an excellent story of D&D and give it a bump. Also, Sagiro, would you be opposed to me steal... erm, borrowing some of your story for my own campaign I'm going to be running?

Sius: A random thought occurred to me, while remembering the stirges and the crystal tower thingy. Couldn't Dranko make himself immune to fire and then use *paroxysm of fire* on himself? I can't recall if it leaves you helpless, but if not... Few things would draw attention from a Big Bad like burping onto the enemy and *lighting him on fire*. Right up Dranko's alley.

Piratecat: True, although he's not entirely comfortable with the whole burning-hair-crackly-skin thing. I don't think *paroxysm of fire* has scaled well with level. That was an example of a magic item that wasn't used as much as Sagiro had hoped. Because it only had a few charges and we couldn't identify what it did, I almost never used it. That was probably a disappointing decision on my part.

And Cervante, I think Sagiro would be completely flattered if you used his insidious rat-bastard as an inspiration (or ripped it off wholesale). Just remember to give your half-orc player a lot of loot.

Sagiro: You – and anyone else – should feel free to steal anything you want from my story!

Cervante: PC, if I get a half-orc I'll make sure they get plenty of loot. Also, I have to say Dranko is my favorite character with Ernie being second.

Everett: Faves: (1) Morningstar; (2) Aravis; (3) Kay; (4) Dranko; (5) One Certain Step; (6) Grey Wolf.

Piratecat: You forgot Ernie and Flicker! And let me say, it wounds me to the quick that I've been bested by a PC who hasn't been in the game for about a decade...

The Axe: Dranko, baby! The rest are just window dressing! *ducks* *wink*

Piratecat: I like the cut of your jib, sir!

Everett: Sorry, but Kay's Yrimpas were the coolest thing ever. I'm partial to wind-based elemental characters because I played one for a long time. I'm tempted to put Grey Wolf before Dranko, too. Fine, my party faves all the way through the list would look like: (1) Morningstar; (2) Aravis; (3) Kay; (4) Dranko; (5) Grey Wolf; (6) One Certain Step; (7) Kibi; (8) Ernie; (9) Flicker; (10) Tor; (11) Snokas; (12) Maken; (13) Mrs. Horn.

So... did Grey Wolf's player take his name from the two protagonists of Joe Dever's role-playing books? I've always wondered.

kuragara: To answer your question, nope. Grey Wolf was originally my monk in MERP many many many moons ago.

Everett: Ah, thanks.



My Dinner with Califax

Kibilhathur wakes early the next morning, checks on the progress of his beer in the basement, and gets to work. His mission before lunch: to pore through their pilfered Black Circle library looking for information on the term "Morbid Link" – the bit of necromancy by which Mokad stole Praska's body. Kibi's certain that he's seen the term before – maybe when they were looking for ways to destroy the Null Shadow cauldron?

It takes him less than an hour to find what he's after. He calls the others down from breakfast and reads aloud the latest disturbing findings from their enormous Collection of Unsavory Writings:

The Morbid Link is an advanced Black Circle ritual in which the seeds of a devotee's consciousness are planted in the mind and soul of another person ("the subject") who need not venerate the Black Circle, nor even be a volunteer. The subject typically retains no knowledge of the link afterward, and the ritual leaves no residual auras subject to divinations arcane or divine.

When the adherent dies, his soul, intelligence, personality and memories are instantly transferred to the mind of the subject, who for all intents and purposes becomes the adherent. The subject's own consciousness is subsumed in sub-layers of the psyche, faintly aware of his surroundings but unable to exert any control over the body. After a Morbid Link is triggered, the death of the single body results in the annihilation of the subject's soul, so caution is advised.

Once the original devotee has died, and the two beings come to occupy a single body, there are two ways in which the souls involved can be affected. First, assuming that any objects are at hand that were once in possession of the subject, one can enact the Ritual of the Fourth Derivation. This will not have any noticeable effect on the Morbid Link itself, but afterward, if the body is killed, the soul of the original subject will continue on to the afterlife, rather than become null.

Second, if a Ritual of Seven Stars is performed directly upon the adherent, the subject's consciousness and mind will be fully restored, and it will be the soul of the transferred devotee that is annihilated. To configure this ritual properly, a Ritual Circle of 31 spans should be inlaid, adjunct to the Seven Star equations in standard configuration.

Kibi looks up from the book. "I hope the black circle we just tore up wasn't 31 spans," he sighs.

"We still have Mokad's ritual room in Kallor," says Aravis. "Mostly intact, I think."

All three wizards then hit the books to learn what they can of the “Ritual of Seven Stars.” It turns out that said ritual isn’t inherently Evil, but it’s still creepy and complex, with some odd material components including “moontears that have been immersed in Dustwine.” Like most highly involved Black Circle ceremonies, this one will involve a meticulously prepared chamber set with obsidian rings and obscure equations. Fortunately, the Black Circle provided thorough documentation. The ritual itself looks like it takes about six hours to complete.

“Look here,” says Aravis, inviting Grey Wolf and Kibi to look over his shoulder. “If we’re going to do the Seven Stars, Mokad will have to be alive and restrained through the whole thing.”

“It looks like the Ritual of the Fourth Derivation would only take fifteen minutes,” notes Grey Wolf, “and it’s much simpler.”

“The problem with that one,” says Kibi, “is that it leaves Mokad’s soul intact. He could be raised from the dead by his Black Circle buddies.”

The wizards share their findings with the others over lunch. “Have you noticed?” says Ernie, chewing on a hunk of cheese. “It’s always ‘adherents’ and ‘devotees’ with them. Never ‘believers’ or ‘worshipers.’ They sound less like a priesthood and more like a cult of evil mathematicians.”

“Could Mokad have more of these Morbid Links going?” asks Morningstar.

“Nope,” says Grey Wolf. “You can’t chain them, or be part of more than one at a time.”

“Another problem with that simpler one,” says Dranko. “It’s possible that if we do it, Mokad will sense it somehow. But I still think we have to do it, given that someone *else* could kill Mokad in the meantime. Which, if I’m understanding you smarty wizards correctly, would destroy Praska’s soul.”



The Company settle in for several weeks of research, spell-scribing and item creation – with occasional globe-hopping forays when necessary. For example, an hour spent with an acolyte of Kemma in Djaw gets them a primer on the Kivian pantheon, and Myr Madar (newly self-appointed master of Drosh’s old portfolio) in particular:

The Kivian High Gods, Yulan (God of Time and Reality) and Manisette (Goddess of Creation) arrived on Abernia millennia ago. With them came Myr Madar, whose relation to the High Gods is not known, and who takes no worshipers unto himself. The three found the land of Kivia, uninhabited and ruled by no other Gods, and they claimed it for themselves. Yulan and Manisette first created the five Greater Gods, who are: Kemma, Goddess of the Sun; Drosh, God of Death; Tiria, Goddess of War; Palamir, God of Magic; and Posada, God of the Sea. They also made the first humans who settled in Kivia, though these were soon joined by other creatures who came through the Ancient Archways. For it happened that there was another land on Abernia, and another God who ruled it. The land was called Char’gan, and the God was Pikon, but he stayed aloof from the Kivian Gods across the Sea.

Myr Madar has always stood outside the “family tree” of the other Gods. For the Greater Gods created the Lesser Gods, one to one – Heros from Kemma; Nifi from Tiria; Quarrol from Posada, and Dralla from Drosh. Palamir, God of Magic, was prideful and created four Lesser Gods instead of one, but his creations were flawed, and weaker than the others. They were Paro, Laramon, Svetla and Vinceris, mere demigods among the pantheon. Manisette was angered by Palamir’s pride, and though she was a Goddess of Creation, she showed that she could also destroy. She unmade Palamir and remade him as a God of Loyalty and Duty.

Myr Madar is the shadow that looms over all other Gods; and they fear him, even Yulan and Manisette. But he has always judged fairly, and no soul ascends to heaven without his scrutiny. Drosh holds the dead, and Drosh keeps those who deserve no good fate, and Drosh releases the righteous to heaven, and Drosh allows the undead to walk; but it is Myr Madar who judges, and Myr Madar who points the way. With Drosh’s recent unexplained absence, it seems to many religious scholars that Myr Madar was the logical choice to assume his duties.



They also look up the sage Four Keen Mind while in Djaw, he being the scholar who once sold them information about the land of Branoi far to the north. It only takes him a few hours to dig up a very old reference to ‘dustwine,’ and for some gold coins he shares it with the Company:

Far to the northwest of Djaw, in the rocky country of Bederen, is the town of West Greydust, and in that town it is said that they once drank from a holy pool a magic elixir known as "dustwine." There are no credible accounts of its effects, since the spartan inhabitants of Bederen have always been reclusive, but one who imbibed it was said to be cured of any number of afflictions both physical and spiritual.

This information is in a book of exotic potions written over 100 years ago, and there is no more recent information on the subject.



About two weeks later, late in an afternoon when most of the Company are busy in the basement laboratory, they hear a knock at the door upstairs. A moment later Eddings calls down. "Dranko, you have a visitor. It's Califax."

Dranko sets down his tools. "Show him in. We'll be right up."

It's strange to see his one-time nemesis standing and fidgeting in the Greenhouse living room. Dranko's not quite sure what to say. "How are you feeling?" he offers, after an awkward moment.

"Better," says Califax with a wan smile. "They've been feeding me well. May I sit?"

"Of course. Would you like something to drink?"

"I'd love something, thank you," answers Califax, sitting carefully down in a chair like he's afraid he might break it.

Kibi has come up as well by this time. "How about a beer?"

"Sure!"

Dranko sits in the chair opposite Califax. Now his scar-covered tormentor is relaxing in his house with a beer! "Well, I wouldn't have predicted this," he says.

"No," Califax agrees. "I guess not."

For one of the few times in his life, Dranko is finding it difficult to generate small talk. "So. Got your soul back."

Califax chuckles. "Yes, I'm well aware of that. Father Tomnic told me everything. I understand you put yourself in great physical danger on my account."

Dranko nods. "Giant monster, made out of huge crypts and earth and stuff. It was full of undead. It was great."

"Great?"

"For certain definitions of great, that involve excitement more than safety."

Califax, who has never been inside the Greenhouse, looks around with great curiosity. "This is... How did you come to be in this house?"

"Classified," says Dranko with a smile. "Let's just say it was a gift from one of the Archmagi, who saw a certain amount of potential in me and my friends."

He gestures to his friends, who by now have all filtered up to join the reunion. "Califax, this is my wife Morningstar, a shield-maiden of Ell, and a Daywalker."

"I've heard a lot about you," says Morningstar, keeping a neutral tone.

"Yes, I'm sure you have," says Califax, not meeting her gaze. "I wish I could say Dranko was entirely wrong, but I don't doubt he's been honest."

"This is Sir Ernest Roundhill," Dranko continues, pointing to Ernie.

"Sir??"

"Yeah, we're all knights," says Dranko. "Did I mention we even have a keep? We have a keep! Do you have a keep?"

"No," says Califax. "But I do have a church, which I'm fortunate to have been let back into."

"This is Grey Wolf. This is Aravis Telmir, a very powerful and impressive wizard. And over there is Kibilhathur Bimson, also one of those. And that's Flicker." (Edgar grumps to his master over an empathic link: *You're a powerful wizard too. Want for me to remind him?*)

Califax regards the Company with poorly concealed awe. "Father Tomnic has told me that you... all of you... have saved Charagan several times over."

"Once or twice," says Ernest modestly.

"Three times, actually," says Dranko. "Maybe four."

Califax says nothing for a minute, so Dranko speaks again. "Like I said, the Archmagi saw our potential. And it turned out that there was a better way for me than being cut and healed every time I did something wrong. You could say I've been re-channeled into more productive opportunities."

Califax steeples his fingers and speaks carefully. "Every part of your past is part of what has made you the man you are today."

"True," Dranko admits. "I would not be me, without you. And sadly, without Mokad." He turns to Ernie. "Can I spit in here?"

Ernie shakes his head. "No, but we'll take it as read."

"I'm... I'm very sorry about Praska," says Califax quietly.

"Yes, me too," says Dranko. "So, yeah, we fought Praska, and knew that she had turned, but didn't know that was Mokad inside of her. I'm glad you got that info to us, so we have the opportunity to actually save her."

Califax nods. The two regard each other in silence for another minute or two, taking occasional sips of beer.

"I'm thinking," says Califax suddenly, "about all the meetings of the elders of the Church, back when you were a child. The meetings about you, I mean, and what we should do about you."

"Did I ever apologize for the time I set the fane on fire?"

"You did... break a lot of things," Califax laughs. "And they weren't always easy to fix. You were... difficult. I'm just trying to reconcile certain things. I think I needed to see you here, in person."

Dranko extends his arms. "I'm just me."

"Yes. It's obvious you're still the same person I remember. But now, married and respectable..."

"Our very first mission involved some unfortunate moments with rats," says Morningstar. "Afterward, some in our very young Company were having trouble sleeping. My fumbling attempts at using dreams to help could only do so much, but someone else here found a more direct solution. He went out and found an old, bedraggled stray cat, that had no home, and brought it in so the house would be safe from rats. That is Dranko." She fixes Califax with a prideful look.

"So you are," says Califax. "And... I'm sorry, that you feel your childhood was less than fair."

Dranko leans forward. "All of my resentment and anger that was aimed at you was forgiven and dismissed a long time ago. I was set a task by Brechen, in exchange for bringing back one of our friends that was killed, to find a way to forgive you. And I'm glad I did. Because frankly, you were worthy of forgiveness."

"Thank you. I guess I served some greater purpose after all."

"Well, the fact is that you were able to find the strength in yourself to do what was right in the end, instead of what Mokad wanted you to do. I have tremendous respect for that, and I don't know that I've ever told you. Or expected to."

Califax looks studiously at his hands. "I spent so long not liking you, Dranko... This is going to be hard for me."

"It's okay for you not to like me."

"You're clearly a different person now, to a great extent. I shouldn't hold old grudges, especially in light of debts I owe to you now."

Dranko smiles. "Why don't we start over? Not in an annoying bards-singing-love-songs-by-candlelight kind of way, just a two adults sort of way."

Califax glances over at Morningstar. "Yes," she says. "He's worth it."

"Dranko Blackhope, hero of the realm," says Califax. "That's going to take some getting used to."

"It's 'Brightmirror' now. I changed my name after marrying Morningstar."

"That's the last thing I would have expected of you. Just remarkable. I'm pleased things have turned out the way they did. But... I'm really here to talk about Praska. I'm sorry to get sentimental."

"It's okay," says Dranko. "Why don't you stay for dinner?"



"She has a secret hideout under the capital," says Califax between bites of roast chicken. "It's possible that she's there right now."

Dranko shakes his head. "We've already raided it. She was there. Do you know that she sent null shadows after us?"

"Extra nasty ones," Kibi adds.

"Mokad did that, not Praska," Califax corrects them.

"Right," says Dranko, thinking sheepishly again of the mean things he said during the battle.

"He even used Praska to taunt me," says Morningstar. "Through a *thought capture*."

The Company give Califax a summary of their battle against Mokad/Praska beneath Hae Charagan, ending with their frustration when she teleported away, and their subsequent failure to track her down.

"Where would you guess she is now?" Dranko asks.

"If I had to guess, I'd say probably Kai Kin."

"Really!" exclaims Dranko. "Have you ever had their custard?"

"No," says Califax, not getting the reference. "I've never been to Kai Kin. There is a Black Circle temple there. Highly regarded by the locals, I understand. The Black Circle is one of the prominent religions in the country. I don't know what he was up to there; frankly, they weren't wholly sure of me, and eventually found me out, right before you rescued me. I was never deep in their counsels. I believe – though I have no proof – that they are working again to find a way to rescue Emperor Naradawk from Volpos."

"Attempt number four!" Ernie exclaims.

"I don't know how far along they are," says Califax, "or what their plan is."

"Mokad has powerful anti-divination magic going, unfortunately."

"Their entire temple is safeguarded," says Califax.

"How did they recruit you?" asks Morningstar abruptly. Califax freezes for a second before putting down his fork.

"And is anyone else in the temple still compromised?" asks Dranko.

"No," says Califax. He turns to Morningstar and answers. "I don't wish to discuss it. Let's just say they recruited me by... it was a personal matter. They preyed on my personal weakness."

"Oh, I know how it is," says Dranko. "They hated Dranko. You hated me. It was a perfect fit!"

"It's not funny, Dranko. Suffice to say, I found Mokad persuasive, and I fell."

"But you clambered back up," says Dranko, smiling. "And that's what counts."

Ever tactically-minded, Kibi asks, "In Kai Kin, where is the temple specifically?"

"I'm sure its location is no secret," says Califax. "The Black Circle is worshiped openly; you could probably ask anyone on the streets of Kai Kin. Though, Kai Kin – and all of Ocir – is xenophobic in the extreme. Insular. But here's what I think. You know the Black Circle in Kivia collects life energy, from people seeking knowledge. And that life energy is ultimately put to use for some grand purpose of theirs that was never made clear to me. I *think* that purpose is being brought about in Kai Kin."

"And something tells me their plan isn't to feed the hungry or heal the sick," says Ernie.

Califax chuckles. "The Black Circle – I'm embarrassed to say, I don't exactly know what it is. It is the embodiment of certain attitudes. But it is also tangible in its way. There is a malign will of some sort..."

"That's the goo," says Ernie.

"The what?"

"Long story," says Dranko. "Concentrated Evil."

"We're not prepared to talk about it," Aravis interjects, glaring at the others.

"So," says Dranko. "Califax, is there any way we can help *you* at this point?"

"You can sit and talk with me while you feed me dinner," laughs Califax. And so they do, making small talk for another hour. Eventually Dranko leans back in his chair and lifts his mug of beer. "You know, this is way, way nicer than I imagined it would be. Cigar?"

Califax declines, citing his soul-weak state. Flicker, ever insensitive to social niceties, asks what it was like to not have a soul for so long. Califax darkens and doesn't answer for a minute. Then he says simply, "It was hell."

Dranko breaks the tension by telling Califax the story of their encounter with Lord Tapheon in Het Branoi. When he has finished the part where the Demon Lord turned him into an inside-out fish, Califax shakes his head in disbelief. "All I ever did was give you scars. I don't feel like such the villain anymore."

"Heck," says Dranko with practiced nonchalance, "I've been eaten a few times."

They show Califax the trophy case. "And he's licked most of those things," Aravis chimes in.

Califax looks at Dranko. "You still have that revolting habit?"

Dranko looks affronted. "Aravis doesn't understand that people don't properly experience the world through all of their senses."

"Well, you certainly know what everything in the church tastes like," says Califax. "Including some holy relics, as I recall."

"They tingle," Dranko grins.

"He also knows what addictive, strength-draining powder tastes like," says Aravis.

"We don't have to air all of our dirty laundry, you know," says Dranko, aggrieved.

"I'm not airing all of it," Aravis answers. "Just the funny stuff."

Califax peers out a window at the dark Street of Bakers. "You can save some stories for my next visit. I should probably take my leave."

Dranko walks him to the door. "If you need anything, let us know."

"Well, you don't need anything from me," says Califax. "You're a savior of the world, after all. Good night everyone. Thanks so much for dinner."

And Califax departs. Dranko closes the door, turns to his assembled friends, and lets out a long breath. "That was the strangest visit we've had in a long time."

Innocent Bystander: When this happened, did the party have any alarm bells going off that Califax still wasn't entirely on the up and up, or by this time was he truly trustworthy?

Piratecat: We helped redeem him, let him rat out Mokad, and then gave him back his soul. At this point we're pretty confident that he's trustworthy. By the way, I'm just going to say: the process of trying to get Mokad out of Praska is probably my favorite adventure(s) that Sagiro has run in a decade. There's a lot leading up to it, but so good in so many ways.

Joshua Randall: You can take the Mokad out of the Praska, but you can't take... the... Wow, where was I going with that?



Dream of a Black Rat

Morningstar shakes her head. "Weird, weird, weird."

"He didn't seem like that bad a guy," says Aravis.

"He cut my husband!"

"Yeah," says Flicker. "But it sounds like he deserved it some of the time!" Morningstar turns and glares at Flicker but says nothing.

"Hey," says Ernie, eager to change the subject. "Grey Wolf and I were talking, and think that we should really find out what that black Goo is, given how central it is to what the Black Circle gets up to. What if the Goo is the boiled down life energy itself?"

“Note to self,” Dranko mutters. “Not going to lick it.”

“Maybe we can *legend lore* it,” Morningstar suggests.

“Or I could do some alchemical experiments on it,” says Aravis, getting that gleam in his eye that shows up when he ponders doing something perilous.

“Don’t let it touch you!” Dranko warns.

“I’ll cast the *legend lore*,” says Kibi. “But I’ll need a *protection from evil* first so I can get close enough to cast.”

So shielded, Kibi goes to the basement and retrieves from a closet the small sealed iron pot of Goo from Het Branoi. He casts his spell, and can feel it starting to work. Some kind of knowledge is coming into his head...

Thirty seconds later he regains consciousness, with a clear memory that he had learned some truth that was too horrific to contemplate. He has no recollection of the details. The pot of Goo, still sealed, has fallen to the ground, and his *protection from evil* is still active. He locks the pot back in the closet and goes upstairs to tell the others.



The next night they invite Ozilinsh over for dinner, and it’s a much less awkward social call than Califax’s visit of the previous night. The now powerless archmage seems happy, and they exchange pleasantries before the Company tell him about Mokad, Praska, and a possible new threat to the kingdom. Ozilinsh is absolutely fascinated by the notion of a Morbid Link, and ends up reading through the Company’s papers through dinner. His mild hyperactivity and lack of social graces have certainly survived the draining away of his magical powers.

“Hmmmm,” he says at various intervals, while the others eat and watch him. “Oooooh.” ... “Interesting!” ... “Dustwine?” ... “Say what you want about the Black Circle, but they’re brilliant mathematicians. Do you feel up to casting this Ritual of Seven Stars? Some of it is extremely advanced... but someone with whom you are eating dinner happens to be an expert mathematician himself, and would be delighted to help you.”

“Ozilinsh,” asks Kibi, “do you think casting the smaller ritual would alert Mokad that we were up to something?”

“No, I don’t think so. I don’t see any sub-aetheric vector that could account for transfer of knowledge. If you don’t mind, I’d like to borrow some of these books, so I can study the ritual and give you some advice. Don’t worry – I won’t actually try anything myself. Anyhow, thanks for dinner! It’s nice to get out of the house now and again.”



Another week goes by without notable incident. On the first day of July, Aravis wakes with a fresh message from the Crosser’s Maze.

This time your vision is direct – discovered by your own wandering fragment, rather than by your mysterious ally. The vision is of a dark place – an attic, you think, with light slipping through thin gaps in the roof. There are only two beings there – a short, stocky man in blood-red plate mail, and a large rat, its eyes glowing with malice. The two communicate telepathically, but your fragment hears their thoughts.

“Do you understand fully what I’m offering?” asks the man. “A being of your divine stature would become immensely powerful. You could lift your kind above all the others, become the hunters rather than the hunted. You could eliminate your rivals... permanently.”

“I understand full well,” hisses the rat. “And believe me, I enjoy the thought.”

“Excellent,” says the man. “Because that is also the price of my gift. Once you have been blessed, I want you to destroy the sparks of your three enemy factions. The ravens will also serve us in time, but for now they are of no consequence. It is the others who have both the means and the will to hinder me. Feast upon them. Their power will become yours. No beast on Abernia will be your equal.”

“As you wish,” says the rat, baring its teeth.

The man produces a small bowl and sets it down before the rat. “Drink,” he says. And the rat drinks.

That vaults the Rats into the #1 spot on the Company’s ‘to do’ list. Ernie rubs his chin. “What is it that the cats, dogs and horses can do that would annoy Tarsos like that?”

“Whatever it is,” says Aravis, “we have to stop the rats.”

Dranko frowns. "But Mokad..."

"I have to at least warn the cats about what's happening! Can anyone here cast a *sending* for me, to Arkin?"

Morningstar volunteers, and sends:

From Aravis: do you have the ability to get cats, dogs and horses to meet? We know who's killing you. Respond 25 words or less.

The answer comes back:

No, we are not wizards, and separated by hundreds of miles. It would take many weeks. Who is killing us?

Morningstar sends again:

We want Aravis to scry you, so we can teleport to you and meet face to face.

The answer:

We are in a protected place. I would have to endanger myself to allow this.

They send once more:

It's important enough to take the risk. We'll be scrying you in just under an hour.

Very well. I will step outside in an hour. But you could have just told me, to satisfy my curiosity.

Aravis starts casting *scry* immediately, and an hour later he successfully sees Arkin through the sensor. He *teleports*, taking the whole party with him.



The Company arrive at the foot of some steep, rocky hills that are covered with mist. Arkin observes them calmly. Only when he is satisfied of Aravis's identity does he gesture to a small meandering path that snakes its way up into the foggy hills.

Through his telepathy he thinks, *I don't believe most of you can follow us. But Aravis can. Come with me.*

Arkin turns and vanishes into the mist. Aravis follows. "Huh," says Grey Wolf.

Dranko sits on a rock and lights up a cigar. As he takes a leisurely puff and exhales, the puff of smoke forms itself into words in the air: **KIBI IS A GENIUS.**

Appalled, Dranko turns accusingly toward the dwarf. "I didn't have anything to do with it," Kibi protests.

"Really," says Dranko dryly. "Who did, then? You think my cigars are smart enough to just *know* you're brilliant?"

"Well," says Kibi smugly, "have you eaten any objects given to you by an Archmage recently?"

Dranko gulps. Yeah, in fact, he has.

Kibi continues, "At the end of my message from Cranchus, it said: 'P.S.: Watch Dranko every time he smokes a cigar.'"

Dranko blows more smoke. **ELEMENTALS OVER ALL.**

He blows again. **HI, DRANKO. ENJOYING THE CIGAR!**

Aravis smirks. *You shouldn't have coveted his elemental's eye!*

Dranko sighs, but at least he finds that if he blows smoke with a bit more vigor, the words smear into a normal-looking cloud.



Aravis follows Arkin of the Great Pack up the winding path. The mist soon grows so thick that the wizard is following Arkin only by sound. Ten minutes into the climb, he senses something odd about his surroundings; the space around him takes on a tingly, ethereal quality, as if it both is and isn't part of the physical world. (And back at the foot of the hill, Aravis drops out of the *telepathic bond*.) After a minute of that the feeling subsides (and he's back on the mental link), and then the mist grows thin for the last hundred feet before Aravis steps out into a tiny grass-covered valley.

There are dogs lounging here, eight in all if you include Arkin. There is some barking, and some sniffing, and the dogs arrange themselves into a rough circle in the center of the valley. Aravis sits before them and describes in detail the vision he had about the Black Rat. Immediately the dogs begin a riotous barking, pelting Aravis with mental questions and general exclamations of alarm. (Aravis shakes his head at the chaos. For all that these are Divine beings, they're still a bunch of dogs.) Aravis waits for the clamor to die down before explaining about the Emperor, his red-armored servants, and how the latter are working to rescue the former from exile.

The dogs are especially interested in Tarsos' opinion that the dogs "have the means and the will to hinder him."

What does he think we can do? asks Arkin.

"I don't know," Aravis admits.

We should do it, whatever it is! barks one of the other dogs, and that starts more frantic back-and-forth.

But we don't know what it is!

We should find out!

How?

I don't know!

"At the moment," says Aravis, holding up a hand, "the more immediate danger is that the rats can kill us permanently, and possibly even take our Divine Sparks onto themselves."

What?

WHAT?

How?

That's terrible!

No!

We must put a stop to it at once!

Arkin glares the other dogs into silence, then turns to Aravis.

I think, says Arkin, we know now, don't we then, why one of the Sparks was born into the body of a human, and a great human wizard at that. We are... I have told you that we are not wizards. We do not have any magic in the sense that you think of it. Our power lies in the guidance of our kinds. Their greater good, their way in the world, their relationships with Man. But we are not wizards, or warriors. We are dogs. That's why we hide. And we hope that this Rat cannot find us here.

One dog looks worriedly at Aravis. *Are you sure you weren't followed?*

"Yes," says Aravis. "But even if someone did, my friends would take care of them. Because we are wizards and warriors."

Then we beseech you... find this Rat and do away with it!

The dogs are clearly in some awe of Aravis. Over the mind-link, Kibi thinks: *Enjoy it now. The cats won't be in awe. They're cats.*

Aravis addresses the dogs. "Do you know how I could contact the Feline Conclave, or the Noble Herd?"

I know approximately where they are, Arkin answers, but we have no magical means of contacting them. The Noble Herd runs somewhere on the Plains of the White Sun. And the Conclave resides in the Endless Wood, as you should know.

"How did you find me?"

You are different from the others. You have a unique scent. I walked, and ran, for many days. Maybe the horses also sent one of their kind, but with Sparks being snuffed out, they are probably all in their place of sanctuary. Regardless, we appreciate the warning, and the knowledge. We'll appreciate it even more when you've eliminated this Black Rat.

"I'll be in touch," says Aravis. He bows to the dogs, and walks back down the misty path. He is fascinated by the stretch in the middle where he seems to exist both inside and outside the world.

"So much to learn, so little time," he mutters to himself. "And I have to waste that time killing rats and the Black Circle."



Once back with the others, Aravis shows off a new trick.

"I wish we were home," he says. And they are.

"Neat!" exclaims Flicker.

"Overkill," admits Aravis, "but I was out of greater teleports."

In the Greenhouse, they sit down in the living room and ruminate.

Aravis exhales. "They can't defend themselves against the Rat."

"Then I guess we know where this is going," says Morningstar.

"Once we deal with the Rat," continues Aravis, "we may be able to convince normal dogs, cats and horses to help us against the Black Circle. If the Sparks can guide regular animals, all of those animals could be our spies."

Ernie nods. "Maybe that's what Tarsos was afraid of."

Aravis wants to issue a *sending* to the Feline Conclave, but cannot cast the spell himself, and none of the others have enough familiarity with the cats to cast. This is solved by Morningstar casting *memory read* on Aravis and choosing the five minutes when he was actively casting the *vision* that showed him the Conclave. She chooses as her target the one who was arguing most on Aravis's behalf – a big, fluffy, smoke-colored Maine Coon.

I speak for Aravis of the Feline Conclave. We know who is destroying the Divine Sparks. We must meet. Respond 25 words or less.

The answer comes back:

Still too much distrust among the Conclave. I agree with you, but some think he is the killer. I'll keep working on them. Plumpypuss.

Morningstar can't choke back a chuckle. When she recovers, she recites the cat's response verbatim, and when she gets to the spoken signature, everyone except Aravis breaks out in gales of laughter.

"No wonder the other cats won't believe her!" says Kibi.

Aravis turns red. "For the record," he huffs, "before you make up some ridiculous Cat God name for me, I have never in my life insulted either Delioch or Ell."

"If you're going to be that way," says Ernie with a grin, "we'll call you 'Grumpypuss.'"

Dranko snorts. "Our return *sending* should be: 'Dear Plumpypuss. That's the cutest little Cat God name we've ever heard...'"

But Aravis has Morningstar cast again with a more sober message:

Stay hidden. The Rats are able to kill you and, we believe, they can destroy and absorb your Divine Sparks.

The reply from Plumpypuss:

Understood. Thanks for the warning. Figures it's rats, the vile creatures. They cannot penetrate our sanctuary. Hope to see you soon.

The party are not wholly convinced that the cats are safe from a Divine Rat who's already absorbed the Sparks of two other animal deities, but there's not much more they can do, so they go back to their work.



Two days later, Aravis gets yet another missive from the Maze:

You wake from a dream, and know it has come from the Maze, but are not sure who sent it – your fragment, or your ally.

You dreamed of the bottom of the sea. There was a school of fish there, floating easily above the uneven ocean floor, perhaps basking in the eerie illumination of some odd plants clinging to the rocks.

Then there was a sound, a strange thud, a noise that does not belong in the quiet recesses of the ocean. Another thud follows, louder, and the fish scatter. For a second there is nothing but the rocks and silt bathed in the blue light of the local flora. Then, with a swoosh and a yet louder thud, an enormous skeletal leg slams its bony toes into the ground. A second leg follows, and then a third; some skeletal monstrosity is striding along the bottom of the sea.

As Maze-o-grams go, this one goes into the "disturbing but not immediately actionable" category, though Dranko decides to go ahead and make some Truedeath weapon crystals after all.



Kibi tries another *legend lore* on the Black Goo, but this time maintaining a greater distance from the pot, and casting the version that takes longer to return information. Ten days after casting the knowledge comes, and once again he is knocked unconscious. But this time, though he wakes with no clear memory of what knowledge was imparted to him, he does retain a tiny recollected fragment: a faint idea of a tremendous physical impact.



The days roll by. The Greenhouse basement fills with the acrid smells of alchemical reagents and the sounds of progress. Morningstar spends hours in her room working on the first draft of her holy writing commissioned by High Priestess Rhiavonne. *The Book of Morningstar! What have I gotten myself into?*

Life is relatively peaceful for several weeks, and then gets hectic in an awful hurry. Just before dawn on a hot July day, Aravis is woken from a sound sleep by the feeling of a dagger in his heart. He instinctively clutches his chest and sits up screaming, but there is no knife, no assailant. Pewter is sitting at the foot of his bed, meowing piteously. As are, from the sound of it, all the cats in Tal Hae. One of the Feline Conclave has been murdered.

The others rush to Aravis's room, knowing full well what must have just occurred. "The cat must have died, just now!" Dranko exclaims. "Can we find out where he was?"

"We should have gone after the Rat before now," Aravis groans dismally.

You warned 'em, boss! says Pewter. *It's not your fault.*

Flicker puzzles, "Shouldn't they all have been safe in their sanctuary?"

"That's what bothers me," says Grey Wolf, looking at Aravis with concern.

"We should do a *sending* to Plumpypuss," says Ernie.

"Do it," says Aravis. "In the meantime, I'll do what I should have done weeks ago. I'm going to try scrying the Rat."

Morningstar cast her *sending*:

Plumpypuss, can we help? Who died? Where? Reply 25 words or less.

The answer comes with obvious pain in the cat's voice:

It was Sawgrass, the only one away when you warned us. He had been in Tev. I'll work on getting Aravis his meeting.

Ernie fumes. "And why didn't you listen to us, you stupid fuzzy hairballs!"

Aravis doesn't think his chances of successfully *scrying* the rat are high, but the Company prep for battle just in case. An hour later Aravis blinks, almost in confusion. "I got him. The Rat. I've got him."

Through the sensor he sees an enormous black Rat, easily the size of a large horse. It has its hairy snout in the bloody remains of a cat carcass. The ground around the Rat, to the full extent of Aravis's vision, is covered with smaller rats, swarming and squeaking. The air is filled with their furious cacophony. Aravis also notes a few rats here and there that are also abnormally large, though not so huge as the Rat – more like the size of sheep.

He quickly relays to the others what he sees. The Company finish buff and prep. They don't often make use of the *scry-and-teleport* tactic, but this seems like just the opportunity.

"Ready?" asks Aravis.

"Yeah," says Grey Wolf. "Let's ruin his day."

EroGaki: Plumpypuss!

coyote6: I'm sure it sounds much more impressive in the original language, Cat. Or maybe not.

Piratecat: Yeah, we were laughing pretty hard at the name. Not to her face, though – Plumpypuss will cut you. Anyways, it's bad form to mock a God. We learned that early on with Pikon.

You see, Sagiro knew that Pikon was a special God – the only one in Charagan when the Travellers arrived. But all that we knew was that he is the God of the farmer, and that the only time he got mentioned was on a holiday in his name when the farmers got the day off work. We thus concluded that Pikon and his worshippers were lazy gits who laid about all the time. This didn't end up going over well with any priests of Pikon we met.

Joshua Randall: It seems like the black goo is somewhat akin to the colour out of space (as in the H.P. Lovecraft story). I think that the tremendous impact that Kibi sensed was that of a meteor strike, again like the HPL story. This is very cool. Even if I'm wrong.

Piratecat: Half right. But it's so, so much worse than that. Gah.

Joshua Randall: Half right is better than I usually do. And I'm still bitter that I was wrong about Mrs. Horn being the secret evil mastermind behind everything...

Piratecat: That's okay. I'm still bitter that I was wrong about the archmage Cranchus and Parthol Runecarver (the mysterious 'P') being the same person, with Parthol having killed Cranchus and taken his place. It was an awesome theory that explained everything but couldn't have been farther from the truth. I feel your pain.



How to Ruin a Rat's Day

By now the Company pack a collective destructive force that rivals almost anything Abernia has to offer. When that force is unleashed on unsuspecting victims – look out. They appear hovering in the air, not wishing to stand upon the seething carpet of rats that stretches for at least fifty feet in every direction. Grey Wolf opens up with a *sonic lance*. Kibi casts an *earthquake* over the entire area. Aravis invokes *time stop*, and while the world stands still he *shapechanges* into an enormous yellow dragon. When time resumes he breathes a devastating cone of electricity.

Dranko sneak attacks the flat-footed Black Rat with his whip. Morningstar casts *fire storm*. Ernie casts *destruction*. With the rat still stumbling around on the quivering ground, Grey Wolf lets loose a *greater fireburst* channeled through Bostock. Kibi Quickens a *coldfire*, then reaches down and bestows upon the Black Rat an *Otto's irresistible dance*.

All of this happens in about ten seconds. When the smoke (quite literally) clears, all of the mid-sized rats are dead, the ground is thick with the corpses of small rats, and the Black Rat is covered with wounds, its fur patched with burns and its skin beneath splotched with bruises. And, best of all, it's dancing a serious jig. The bad news? Well, for one thing the Black Rat is still alive, having resisted or saved against much of the magical barrage. For another, the ground is *still* alive with living rats, squirming around and quickly covering the dead ones. It's as if there's a constant influx of the creatures from an Elemental Plane of Rats just off-stage. Ernie shudders.

The worst news is that Kibi has suffered some kind of backlash from making physical contact with the Black Rat. In addition to blistered skin and devastating internal injuries, his eyes have gone a flat black. The others see him preparing another spell and muttering to himself.

"Want to tell us where Tarsos is?" asks Dranko, looking down as the Black Rat spins and twirls. "We may let you live!"

"And those red-armored guys will turn on you," Ernie adds. "You can't trust them."

Of course not! snarls the Rat. *Do you think I care?*

"Where did you make the deal with him?" Aravis demands.

Some human town, says the Rat.

Aravis turns to Dranko. "Also, I will *never* let him live." He pegs the Black Rat with a *disintegrate*, which dissolves more of the creature's flesh. A chunk of its shoulder drops into the carpet of rats and is promptly devoured.

Morningstar Quickens a *searing darkness* that fizzles against her enemy's resistance, before casting *heal* on Kibi. The dwarf was preparing to cast *prismatic spray*, thinking that enemies had managed to surround him. As the haze fades from his vision and Morningstar's soothing energy fills him, he realizes that he was just about to cast the spell on all of his friends. "No more touching the rat!" he shouts, alarmed.

"Uh, guys?" says Dranko, pointing to the Rat. "I have some bad news." He noticed that when Kibi was healed, the Black Rat *also* gained health – a lot of it. They speculate over the mind-link that whatever happened to Kibi allowed their foe to share life force somehow. Whoops!

Back to the good news: while the Rat is dancing and they're hovering five feet off the ground, there's nothing dangerous to worry about, so the party continue to take their shots. Ernie flies directly over it and attacks with both *Coiled Viper* and his *spiritual weapon*. Grey Wolf burns it with *prismatic ray*. Flicker stabs it through one ear with a well-placed dagger strike. Kibi smacks it with a *Bigby's clenched fist*. But the Black Rat survives, mostly due to its strong innate resistance to hostile magic. It shrugs off another *disintegrate* from Aravis, a *flame strike* and Quickened *searing darkness* from Morningstar, and both an Empowered *cone of cold* and an *earthbolt* from Kibi. They have more luck with physical strikes: Ernie, Flicker and Dranko continue to slice, whip and stab.

Dranko looks down at the Rat, wondering why it's still alive. Bleeding profusely, and with bone showing through its ravaged hide in many places, it's still jumping, spinning and shuffling its feet. With every step it's crushing smaller rats beneath its enormous bulk. "If nothing else," Dranko observes, "its dignity is nearly dead."

The Black Rat stops dancing. Freed from Kibi's enchantment, it backs up and lowers its bloody snout into the swarm of rats. Then it opens its mouth wide and seems to *breathe in* hundreds of its smaller brethren. "Uh oh..." says Ernie.

The Black Rat lifts its head and blasts out a wide cone of rats from its mouth. The rodents spray over the party, thumping into them, tearing with claws and teeth, and clinging to their clothes and armor. Flicker and Dranko twist and evade the rats, and

Morningstar's *fire shield* burns them away, but everyone else is now covered with rats, biting and scratching and squeaking loudly. Ernie, who has harbored a phobia of rats ever since the party's very first adventure, lets out a shriek of terror.

Aravis casts *lightning ring*, surrounding his draconian body with electricity that burns away the rats clinging to his scales. Kibi punches the Black Rat again with *Bigby's fist*, and the creature wobbles noticeably. Dranko misses three times with his *spiritual weapon* but lands another crack with his whip.

With all of the party in bad physical shape after the Breath of Rats, Morningstar casts *mass heal* – which is good for the party, but also, it turns out, good for the Rat. Its consumption of Black Goo, along with the potent life-force absorbed from the three slain Sparks, has given it a powerful necromantic aura that leeches off any nearby healing energies. "Dammit!" Dranko exclaims. "We just healed the Rat, too!"

Morningstar throws up her hands in exasperation. "You'd rather I let you all get gnawed to death?"

Ernie is living his own worst nightmare, covered with rats biting and scrabbling at his armor. Some of them find exposed skin and open up numerous cuts. Somehow he concentrates enough to fire off a *searing light* at the Rat, before flying upward a bit. "Get them off me, get them off me!" he shrieks.

Grey Wolf likewise feels the stinging attacks of a dozen or more rats, but he nails the Black Rat with a pair of *lesser acid orbs*. Flicker swoops down, flanks the Rat with Dranko, and jams his dagger into its neck. "Won't you just die, you stupid thing!"

Kibi flies himself up to where Ernie and Grey Wolf are hovering and casts a Quickened *rainbow pattern* around all three of them. When he moves the glittering lights off to the side, the rats detach from their victims to follow and end up dropping back into the crawling carpet of their brethren. Ernie cheers. "Thank you, Kibi!"

"Yeah, well," says Dranko, "I hope there aren't any still squirming in your..."

"Shut up!" Ernie yells. "Shut up, shut up!"

Kibi then casts *hold monster*, but the Rat resists. "Dammit! That spell never works!"

The Black Rat sees that Dranko is hovering close above its head. With unexpected quickness it rears up high on its hind legs, grabs Dranko with its forepaws, and lunges with its enormous incisors. It bites Dranko's left arm clean off. Blood squirts sickeningly from the stump. Dranko has just enough wherewithal to cast *close wounds* to stop the bleeding, and yell down "I had magic items on that arm!" before he starts screaming from pain and shock. The arm itself falls into the morass of smaller rodents, where it is quickly devoured.

Aravis fires off two bolts from his *lightning ring*, but both are stopped by the Rat's resistance. Then he breathes more lightning, which crisps many small rats and scorches the Black Rat, but catches Flicker in its area.

The Rat laughs. *It's because you're a cat. Don't be surprised when things don't work out for you.* But its optimism is belied by a gurgling cough and a battered body. Its health-leech ability has kept it alive well past its expected expiration date, but it seems to be having trouble keeping its feet.

Morningstar fires a *darkbeam* that does only minor damage. Ernie's *doom* fails to get through the Rat's resistance, and another *searing light* likewise fails. Dranko, going on pure adrenaline and anger, gives the Rat a series of brutal lashes with his whip. Fittingly, the last snap of the whip yanks out one of the Black Rat's front teeth.

Bostock speaks into Grey Wolf's mind. *I suggest charging.*

I like my arms, thanks, Grey Wolf answers.

Your spells are largely ineffective against it. Weapons are not. I am not! But Grey Wolf proves him wrong, casting a Maximized *chain missile* that sends a handful of burning sparks into the body of the Rat. Dranko, looking down, sees his foe reaching up again to strike... and then a ball of blue lightning starts to burn in its eye socket. The Black Rat falls lifeless to the ground, where it is quickly skeletonized by the thousands of rats at its feet.

"Back off, everyone!" warns Aravis, and then he clears out the swarming rats with a pair of *fireballs*. What remains is a puddle of greasy black liquid radiating a palpable evil. Dranko can see his buckler and magic ring sinking out of sight in the center of the puddle.

"Hey, look. There goes my stuff." And with that, he floats weakly down and off to the side before collapsing in a heap.



"It's kind of a low-grade Evil." Ernie sniffs the air with distaste as he attends to Dranko's stump. The small pool of Goo left behind by the Black Rat isn't quite at the same level of Evil as the Black Book in their basement, or the pot of Essence they also have in storage. Still, none of them feel comfortable looking at or standing near to it.

The Company realize that they hear none of the sounds of woodland creatures one would expect at this time of day. Even the animals have the sense to avoid the remains of the Black Rat. "I can't believe it ate my arm," says Dranko bitterly.

"Well, no," says Ernie. "It didn't eat it. Technically it just ripped it off."

"It was the little rats who ate it," says Morningstar, nodding.

"Great," Dranko mutters. "Thanks."

They talk for a while about what they can do about the black puddle; it seems poor form to just leave it for unsuspecting passersby to stumble upon. Maybe positive energy will work? A *miracle* and/or *wish*? *Hallow*? *Consecrate*?

Flicker smirks. "Hey Dranko! Now you can answer the great question: 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?'"

"It sounds like a punch in the nose," says Dranko.

"What...? Oh. You... um... don't happen to mean your *own* nose, do you?"

"No," Dranko grumbles, "because if I punch *myself* in the nose, my finger might get stuck there!"

Dranko manages to light a cigar with one hand. The smoke forms into the words **KIBI IS GREAT**. But his next puff shows something less dwarf-aggrandizing: **NO PERMANENT HARM**. Huh?

Morningstar starts small, casting *consecrate* on the black pool. The foul liquid bubbles, and the area becomes holy for a few seconds. Then there is a gassing-off, a foul stench, the holiness is gone, and the emanating Evil returns. Morningstar harrumphs. "That was rude!"

Flicker looks over at Dranko, who is staring disconsolately at where his arm should be. "Say... you can craft *arms* and armor, right? Won't that help?"

Dranko ignores him. "You know," he says thoughtfully. "Maybe if we fish my arm out, it could end up being a holy relic someday. 'The Hand of the Healer,' they'll call it, except that it'll only do a half-assed job and only sort of make you feel better. But if you *hit* someone with it, it'll hurt a lot."

Morningstar next tries *hallow*, which will take a full day to cast. She prays to Ell while the sun crosses the sky above the tall trees. Her words grow louder and more powerful while the moon is out. The others rest; Dranko tosses and turns fitfully in his sleep.



The next afternoon, Morningstar completes her *hallow*. The black puddle hisses and bubbles again, but this time it shrinks as it does so, and within an hour it has entirely evaporated. It leaves behind a scoured-out depression in the forest floor almost a foot deep. At the bottom, in some bubbling mud, is Dranko's partially-dissolved left arm, still adorned with its magic items. Dranko nudges the arm with his foot, turns around, and throws up. When he has wiped the sour vomit from his mouth, he croaks, "Could someone be so kind as to remove my items from my arm, so I don't have to do it myself?" He turns to Aravis. "Forget about it being a holy relic. Can you *disintegrate* my arm after I have my new one?"

Flicker quirks an eyebrow. "Why?"

"I don't want our enemies getting a hold of it and using it against us."

"Yeah," says Flicker with a smirk. "They could raise an ARMy with it!"

Dranko can't help but chuckle. "My whip hand still works," he warns.

"You're a cleric, Dranko," says Flicker. "Above all, do no ARM!"

"Ell," says Morningstar. "I ask that you please produce a new arm for my husband Dranko. He's a good man who deserves your blessing, and also Flicker is going to drive us crazy until this whole thing is behind us."

She casts *regenerate*. At the spell's conclusion, a black silhouette of an arm appears on Dranko's stump, and in a minute it fades slowly to a normal, functioning limb. Unlike the rest of Dranko's body, it bears no scars. He leans over and gives his wife a kiss. "Thank you very much," he says simply.

Aravis clears his throat. “The next thing to do is to contact the Feline Conclave.”

Morningstar casts another *sending* to Plumpypuss, explaining the demise of the Black Rat. After a brief pause, the response comes back:

In six hours, scry me and teleport to my location. Um, Aravis can do that, right? Bring your allies if you'd like.

With six hours to kill, they get a bit more rest. Ernie flies up above the trees but sees no settlement within sight of their location. (They still have no good idea where they are – a drawback of the *scry/teleport* maneuver.)

Dranko ponders the battle. “I wonder what I did wrong in that fight. I mean, in past fights I didn’t have my arm bitten off.”

“I think I made the bigger mistake,” says Aravis. “I had *protection from evil* up. I could have picked up the Rat without risking it taking over my mind.”

“It also *hurt*,” Kibi reminds him. “A lot.”



Six hours later Aravis completes a *scry*, and sees the fluffy Maine Coon ‘Plumpypuss’ in a forest clearing. He *teleports* the party. And there they are. Aravis bows low. “Pleased to meet you, Plumpypuss.”

The honor is mine, meows the cat. Thank you again for disposing of the Rat. The Conclave would like to meet you right away. Can you vouch for all these other bipeds? Especially... – and here Plumpypuss looks pointedly at Ernie – ...him?

“Yes,” answers Aravis. “But why should I be worried about Ernest?”

Plumpypuss says nothing for a moment. *Well, as long as you’re sure...* The cat turns tail and walks into the misty woods. It’s an older, shaggier forest than the one they just left, with thick hanging vines and a rich smell. The Company follow, and they all experience a journey similar to the one Aravis took to his meeting with the Great Pack. The mist becomes too thick to see through, and everyone feels a tingle as if passing through some magical place. Were they *teleported*? Did they pass through a portal?

The feeling subsides, and the mist does as well, and then they are in a wide clearing. There are ancient ruins crumbled about – a low wall here, a smashed archway there. There are seven cats here including Plumpypuss, in a wide variety. There is a red tabby with white paws, a huge fluffy white cat, a mottled black-and-grey Manx, a little off-white Siamese, and a lean, grey alley-cat. A sleek black cat sits above them all on an old stone pedestal.

All of the cats regard Aravis and his friends with twitching tails. The black cat on the pedestal greets them. *Aravis, welcome to the Conclave.*

“It’s an honor to be here,” says Aravis.

I’m sure Plumpypuss has already asked you, but I’ll ask you again: are you sure your friends are safe, and that you can trust them?

“As certain as I can be,” says Aravis. “I trust them with my life, every day.”

The small white Siamese speaks. *I still don’t understand how we can trust them, Aravis included! He’s probably the same as that Black Rat! You smell it, don’t you?*

The grey alley-cat looks at Ernie and hisses. *And he has a confederate! We should be prepared. Make the other one leave. Or at least, make them put down their... what are they called, their spell components, the things humans use to effect their magics.* He looks at Aravis, then at Ernie. *Yes, put down your spell components.*

Are you all crazy? cries Plumpypuss. He just slew the thing that killed Sawgrass. And the horse, and the Dog!

How do you know? the Siamese retorts. We only have his own word for it!

The black cat on the pedestal interrupts. *He tells the truth. I can tell.* Then he turns to the Company. *Aravis, there is a taint on you, that we can sense. It is not just that you are a human. There is something fundamentally wrong with you – both you, and him.*

Aravis understands. He drops his component pouch to the ground and explains. “If you sense the same thing in both of us, then what you are sensing is that at one point in the past, we were touched by something very similar to what was driving the Black Rat.”

The grey alley-cat hisses. *I told you!*

Belladonna, hush! the black cat admonishes.

Aravis continues. "We used a *wish*, the most powerful spell known to human wizards, to remove its influence. And, there is a further wish I would like to attempt. I hope it will provide final proof that I can be trusted."

Explain, says the black.

"I don't know if my magic is powerful enough, but I would like to *wish* the destroyed essences of the slain animal Sparks back into existence."

There is much animated meowing at this suggestion. The red tabby with the white paws arches its back and hisses, *That's blasphemy! You may be a Spark, but you are still a human. That is Quarrol's business. You should not meddle.*

"But others have already meddled," says Aravis calmly, "and have destroyed the Sparks. I merely wish to restore the proper, natural order. Maybe that is why Quarrol allowed the Spark to be born into me."

The white Siamese nods its head. *That makes sense to me.*

How long would this take to do? asks the black cat.

"A few moments, is all."

I think he should do it, and do it right now! says Plumpypuss. *What's the harm in waiting?*

"I won't do it without your consent," says Aravis.

Then we'll vote, says the black. *I am Inkspot, and I will save my vote for the end.* He turns to the red tabby. *Four White Paws, how do you vote?*

I vote 'of course not.'

To the fluffy white: *Queen?*

I vote Yes, says Queen lazily. *I don't see the harm. If he has magics that powerful, what can we do to stop him no matter what he wants to do?*

To the gray alley-cat: *Belladonna?*

No. Absolutely not.

The Manx, named Claws, votes Yes, as does Plumpypuss. Finally Inkspot turns to the Siamese. *Frungycat, how do you vote?* (As Kibi, translating for the others via *tongues* over the mind-link, shares this last name, Flicker can't help but snicker.)

Joshua Randall: Someone is a fan of *Star Control 2*? Frungy, sport of kings! (Or it's a coincidence.)

blargney the second: That's why it sounded familiar!

Piratecat: Someone knows their *Star Control 2* references! No coincidence – that's Sagiro's favorite computer game. Frungy, sport of Emperors, is also the game Flicker snuck off to play when we first arrived in Djaw. And did you know Erol Otus did the art for the *Zot-Fot-Pik*? It all ties together.

Sagiro: The cat was named by a small child in Djaw who loved the sport of Farangi (sport of Emperors, played by his parents), but who hadn't yet learned to pronounce it properly. Thus, "Frungycat." And, yeah, I totally cribbed it from *Star Control 2*, the greatest video game ever made.

blargney the second: SC2 4ever!

I vote Yes, says Frungycat.

And I vote Yes as well, says Inkspot. *Which makes the vote five to two in favor. And to enlighten you, since it's clear your friends are listening: Quarrol sees fit that the Divine Sparks are born into cats who are in the care of humans. We all keep the names that our humans give us, for it is our prime purpose to make sure the balance between humans and cats stays in an acceptable place, for the good of our kind. Now, cast your wish.*

Aravis takes a deep breath. "I *wish* that the Divine Essences that were destroyed by the Rat be restored back to their kinds."

A wind picks up in the clearing, blowing through the trees and swirling the mist at its edges. The cats of the Conclave look around nervously, except for Inkspot who looks unusually attentive. "You'll have to tell me if it worked," says Aravis.

"Though I've been given one of your Divine Sparks, I do not have your senses for others of our kind."

All of the cats start to sniff the air. A minute later Inkspot stands up and flicks his tail. *It has worked*, he announces, *for our kind at least. We can sense it. A kitten has been born in Trev Lyndyn. Its humans have named it 'Snapdragon.'* In time it will grow mature, and join us here. Aravis, thank you.

Plumpypuss hops up into an old stump. *So now you'll all stop doubting him, right? Right?* Belladonna and Four White Paws shrink back a bit, humbled.

Pewter, who has been perched on Aravis's shoulder all of this time, has been taking in the scene with great awe. He whispers in his master's ear: *This is why I've been calling you 'Boss' all this time!*

And you're part of me, says Aravis, scratching Pewter behind the ear.

Hey, yeah. Heck, I'm probably the only cat familiar a member of the Feline Conclave has ever had!

Inkspot fixes Aravis with a stare. *We feel – most of us, at least, and perhaps the rest of us will come around to this point of view – that one of the Conclave was born into you because of the threat the Black Rat posed to us. Quarrol foresaw that the Rat would arise, and that you would need to strike him down.*

Then he narrows his eyes further and speaks directly into Aravis's mind. No other present hears what he says next. *I don't think that's the end of it. By the Ancient laws of Abernia, the Gods may not walk the earth. They have to stay in their heavens, and the rules for even the tiniest interventions are prohibitive. They are limited to divinations and prophecies, and they cannot take a direct hand. In fact, we, the Conclave, the Herd, the Pack, the... others... are the only divine beings on the surface, of any kind. Which means that you are the only directly divine human on Abernia. I don't think that came about simply to help the feline race. Perhaps there is a place you must go where only Gods are permitted, or a creature you must slay whom only a God can kill. I am the oldest of the Conclave. The others don't know how old. To all of them, I have always been here. Each of the animal Sparks has a leader such as me... except, now, for the Rats. Destiny is not finished with you, Aravis. But it has done well by us for today. Thank you.*

Then out loud, Inkspot says, *I leave you with one last word of warning. There is still something gravely wrong with you. You will have to do something about that, or it will be your undoing. You and your friend. And though I understand that it is not your fault, I do not think you should stay in this place any longer.*

You are more reasonable than we expected a human to be. We have found in our experience that humans are an extremely irrational and violent, and though occasionally soft and sentimental, ultimately capricious species. Even more so than we. Farewell.

Aravis answers, "I hope someday you come to understand that humans are more than that."

We'd all better hope so, says Inkspot. *It is our lot that we cats are, finally, at the mercy of humans. If harm comes to Abernia, it will be for the humans to prevent, or to cause, and not us.*

Sandain: That was a fantastic update.

wolff96: I love the Feline Conclave.

How (mechanically) did Dranko lose the arm? Expanded crit table, some kind of special attack? I'm curious how that was determined, if you don't mind explaining.

Loving the quick updates the last few weeks – the fight with the Rat God was awesome indeed, but the council afterword was just great. Can't wait to see how the whole thing with Praska turns out... I wish I lived close enough to sit in on one of these games.

Piratecat: I think its mouth was like the old 1E sword of sharpness; if it rolled a crit, off went a limb. I was really in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Although personally, I think Sagiro was getting even with me for the time I charmed his character into testing a sphere of annihilation the hard way!

Sagiro was really disappointed that we came in flying. The fight would have been much, much tougher if we were standing on the ground in the middle of that rat swarm. I also seem to recall that he was shocked we were able to scry it. Rolling a "1" on your Will save happens to the best of us, I guess.



A short but eventful update...

Maybe Not the Destiny He Would Have Chosen

After the Company have left the Feline Conclave behind, winding their way down the misty forest path until they emerge into trackless forest, Aravis shares Inkspot's private opinions with the others. "What disturbs me the most," says Morningstar, "is that you died, were brought back to life, and are *still* tainted from the Black Goo."

"And that a *wish* wasn't enough to fully get rid of it the first time," Kibi adds. Ernie squirms a bit.

"Hey, maybe a *miracle* would work," Dranko offers consolingly. "Divine magic could work where arcane stuff didn't."

Aravis sighs. "I was really hoping that Destiny was done with me. I guess not."

Dranko lights up a cigar. “You know, not all of us can be big deals. I’ve never had a Big Honking Destiny. And it’s kind of boring. So you be happy that you’re making a difference.”

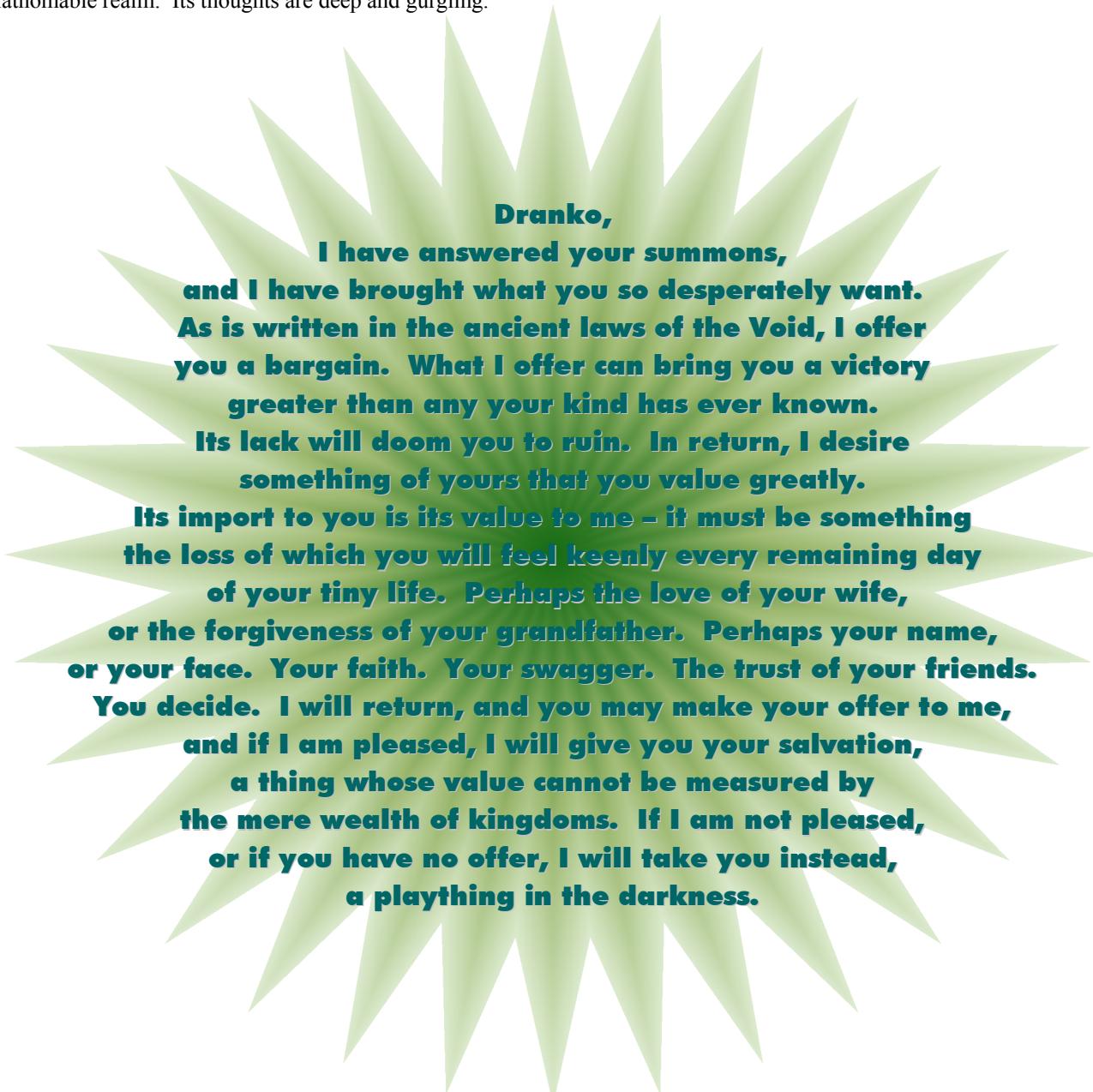
A tentacle erupts from Dranko’s chest.

Another bursts from his neck, then two more from his left leg, then another through his stomach. His friends are splattered with gore, rendered speechless with horror. The nausea of Cleaners is emanating from Dranko’s twitching form in waves.

More and more tentacles come wriggling from all over Dranko’s body until almost a dozen are protruding outward, waving grotesquely in the air. Finally one more pokes out of his left eye-socket, bursting his eyeball as it does so. This last tentacle holds a small glass vial in its suckered tip, and the others can see a small folded piece of paper inside the vial.

Dranko is no longer responding over the mind-link. Aravis reacts first, stepping forward and casting *temporal stasis* on his ravaged friend. Dranko goes rigid, and the tentacles, while still flailing around, are no longer tearing larger holes in the half-orc’s body. Morningstar casts *dismissal* on the tentacles themselves, but this has no effect. “Dranko!” she screams. “Talk to us! Dranko!”

Dranko doesn’t talk. But he *is* listening. Oh, to be sure, he feels pain. It’s excruciating, bringing to mind the feeling of being stretched apart by Lord Tapheon. But foremost in his thoughts is not the physical agony, or the distant cries of his friends. No, what Dranko is listening to is the Voice. It speaks directly in his mind, an ancient and unknowable intelligence from an unfathomable realm. Its thoughts are deep and gurgling.



Seconds after bursting out of Dranko, all of the tentacles retract and vanish. The glass vial is scraped off on Dranko's now empty eye-socket. Dranko himself falls to the ground, rigid and unconscious. He should by rights be dead; only Aravis's *temporal stasis* is keeping him in the land of the living. Simultaneously, Aravis *dispels* the stasis and Morningstar casts *heal*. Dranko's eyes snap open, and he screams. "Dranko," Morningstar implores. "Please, please talk to me."

"Oh," says Dranko, looking up at the face of his betrothed. "So that wasn't all just in my head."

"Among other places," says Flicker, trying to make light, although he, like everyone else, is trembling.

"This is officially the worst week of my life," Dranko croaks.

Grey Wolf has plucked the bloody vial from the ground and removed the piece of paper inside. "Dranko was here," he reads aloud.

Dranko pales. "Oh. Yeah. That."

Innocent Bystander: Awesome! So we finally get to hear about that in the Story Hour. I remember Piratecat making a mention of this a long time ago and was wondering when we'd get to read about it. Simply awesome!

Piratecat: Dranko threw the bottle into the void – in retrospect, probably not the best choice I've ever made – while we were trapped in Het Branoi. [See page 207 of Part II of the *Collected Story Hour*.]

"Took them a while to find you," says Grey Wolf.

Ernie does a complete examination of Dranko, and concludes that after Morningstar's *heal*, everything is fine. "Looks like there was no permanent harm," he says. Everyone looks at one another. *No permanent harm*.

"So the Cleaners can even control my cigar smoke," says Dranko with disgust. "Charming."

Morningstar casts *detect evil*, and Dranko checks out clean. Aravis sits down and shakes his head. "This is what happens when you play around in the Far Realms."

"I didn't!" Dranko protests. "I threw one little bottle." Everyone just looks at him. "So," Dranko says. "Our options are, I get something and give something up, or I get dragged away and we're doomed to lose. That's the suckiest bargain I've ever heard!"

"And you shouldn't have to make it," says Aravis. "We should destroy that Cleaner instead."

"No, we can't," says Dranko dismally. "Because if it's correct, and I don't make a trade with it, we lose."

"I don't think I believe that," says Aravis.

"Me neither," adds Morningstar. "We've chosen 'water.'"

"Look," says Dranko. "There are things that make me what I am, that I would miss terribly, but that I would give up for the rest of you, and what we do. We've all made sacrifices."

"You love your eye-patch," Flicker suggests. "You could give that up!"

Morningstar glowers. "I don't trust the Cleaner to keep any bargain."

"It doesn't matter if we trust it or not!" Dranko exclaims angrily. "The thing can rip through me out of nowhere and tear me to pieces!"

Aravis stays calm. "It just means we have to destroy it, or find a way to prevent it from harming you."

Morningstar nods. "And how do we know it's done, if you give it what it's asking for?"

"Exactly," Aravis agrees. "...and here's another thing I want, and I'll kill you if you don't make another bargain..."

"You could give *me* up," offers Flicker. "And then, when I was dead, Morningstar could bring me back to life."

"I think if you were the terms of the bargain, we could never bring you back," says Aravis.

"Oh." Flicker ponders a moment. "Then let's think of something else."

After a moment of quiet frustration, Dranko throws up his hands. "It seemed like such a good idea at the time! Who else has thrown a bottle into the Far Realms?"

"Maybe there's a reason," says Aravis. "When you go fishing in the Void, sometimes you latch onto the big one."

Dranko hangs his head. "Yeah. I just wish this one was the one that got away."

The party have plenty of questions now about several topics; time for a *commune!* Morningstar prays to Ell, and soon a holy presence is with her.

“Is miracle sufficient to remove the taint that’s on Ernie or Aravis, as detected by the cats?”

NO.

“Do we have the means at our disposal to remove the taint from Aravis and Ernie?”

YES.

“Is the information about those means currently in our basement?”

NO.

“Is everything the tentacle monster said to Dranko true?”

IT STRONGLY BELIEVES SO.

“Is there an upcoming battle we cannot win without its help?”

I DON’T KNOW. (“The future is written in water,” Aravis mutters.)

“If Dranko doesn’t pay the monster’s price, will it drag him into the Far Realms?”

UNDOUBTEDLY.

“Do we have the means to prevent that, other than Dranko paying his part?”

NO.

“Does the means at our disposal to cleanse Ernie and Aravis involve a Black Circle item or ritual?”

NO.

“Kibi suggests asking: Would a wish cast simultaneously with miracle cleanse Aravis and Ernie?”

YES.

“If Ernie or Aravis were to stand in an area while a series of hallows were cast, would that be sufficient?”

NO.

“Will the tentacle monster come back for Dranko within the next month?”

YES.

“Within a week?”

YES.

“Within three days?”

NO.

“Will hallow and miracle together be sufficient to remove the taint of the Black Goo?”

NO. IT MUST BE ARCANE AND DIVINE TOGETHER.

Which makes sense, given the nature of the Black Circle. “Arcane and divine together,” says Ernie. He looks pointedly at Aravis. “Who else do we know that fits that description? Hey, maybe Aravis is the only one who can fight the deity behind the Black Circle.”

“Huh,” says Dranko, as Aravis gulps. “You know, suddenly spending eternity in the Far Realms doesn’t seem so bad.”

“Will casting the Ritual of the Fourth Derivation cause the target to become aware that the Ritual has been performed?”

NO.

“Did the tentacles cause the ‘no permanent harm’ message?”

DRANKO’S CIGARS ARE OCCASIONALLY PROPHETIC.

Morningstar laughs, and says faintly, “You have prophetic cigars?”

Dranko laughs also, lights up, and blows some smoke. **KIBI IS INCREDIBLY INTELLIGENT.**

“Remember,” says Aravis, “Ell said ‘occasionally.’”

blargney the second: AWESOME.

coyote6: I’m not sure, but that may be the Best Update Ever.



Holy Jelly!

Eddings greets the Company upon their return to the Greenhouse. "Welcome back. I trust your journeys were exciting as always?"

Dranko rolls down his sleeve. "Look at this!"

"It's your arm," Eddings observes.

"But no scars!"

"Ah. Had that cleaned up a bit then, did you?"

"My arm was bitten off by a giant rat."

Eddings blinks. "I'm sorry to hear that, sir. But you appear to have gotten better."

"And worse," says Morningstar.

Dranko sighs. "Yeah, and worse. I also had a horrible tentacled being from the Far Realms burst out of me."

Eddings shakes his head. "Far Realms?"

"The bad place beyond time and space," Dranko explains.

"If you see Dranko with more tentacles coming out of him," Morningstar says, "let us know."

"I trust I'll have the presence of mind to scream in that event. Are you expecting a... recurrence?"

"Not in the next three days, no."

"Very good, sir."

Ernie comes in from the kitchen, munching on a muffin. "Whatever Ozilinsh is paying you, it's not enough."

Eddings bows his head. "That's kind of you to say, but I assure you I'm quite adequately taken care of."

"Did you ever think your life would reach the point where you regularly talk about tentacles?" asks Ernie.

"And where you magically appear in the middle of hostile armies?" adds Grey Wolf.

"And know what Black Lizard pie smells like?" adds Dranko.

Eddings smiles. "Often, when you're gone, I have time to reflect on just how boring my life would be had it gone the way I expected." He puts his hand in one of his illusionary eyes and rubs the socket. "Now, would you like anything?"

"A good dinner," says Kibi.

"And tonight," says Dranko, "I'd like to get very, very drunk."

Eddings produces a fine meal from the Icebox, supplemented with his own cooking and an excellent wine. The Company get to talking about past adventures, and how things had changed upon their return from the distant past. On the topic of Turlus/Turlissa, the evil baker-turned-beautiful spy, Eddings says, "I'm still not quite comfortable with that particular... transformation."

"I miss Turlus," says Aravis.

"I don't!" Dranko exclaims.

Flicker takes a sip of wine. "Yeah... remember that time he went out of his way to find out we hadn't been paying our taxes?"

Dranko smiles. "Remind me to write a thank-you note to the universe for erasing him."

Morningstar looks pointedly at her husband. "Just be careful where you drop it."

Before going to bed, Ernie sends a mushy *sending* to Yoba. Her reply:

If I have to look at one more map today, I'm going to scream. Miss you terribly. Love, Yoba.



July 25, 1832

Dranko wakes the next morning with a feeling of dread and a nasty hangover. He and some of the others had gone out drinking at Flicker's parents' place after dinner, though Dranko's recollection of how much he had imbibed is a bit hazy.

"Good morning!" calls Aravis cheerily at breakfast.

Dranko mutters incoherently at him, something about tentacles.

"Stop worrying," Aravis suggests. "Or at least, worry about something you can actually affect."

Dranko lights a cigar, hoping for guidance. **EARTH MAGIC IS THE BEST MAGIC.** "It sure is!" Kibi agrees.

Morningstar issues a *sending* to Snokas, just to check up on him:

How are you? Aravis? Sort of divine. Aravis and Ernie? Sort of evil-tainted. Dranko? Chased by tentacles. Really, we're about normal. Your turn. Morningstar.

The reply comes back:

You're making me miss the adventuring life. Still in Kallor library. Who knew there were so many books in the world? You're a topic of

Ernie laughs. "You'd think Snokas would remember the '25 words' rule."



After breakfast the Company head across town to the Ellish temple. The grounds are sleepy and quiet in the late afternoon; Morningstar shoos a few acolytes out of the main chapel and closes the doors.

Standing before the altar, she casts a *miracle* while Aravis simultaneously casts the following *wish*: "I wish that all remaining taint and side-effects resulting from contact with the evil black goo be forever removed from Aravis and Ernie." The others pray silently that this will work.

For a moment nothing seems to happen. Then, all at once, Ernie and Aravis both experience an extraordinary feeling. They feel as though they have just woken from an unremembered nightmare, to find themselves in a beautiful meadow beneath a shining sun. A spring fragrance fills their nostrils. They had no idea of the weight that had been squatting on their souls, so long present that it had become an unrecognized part of their beings. But now that weight is lifted. A cloud of dark smoke hangs in the air above them for a second, before a ripple of Ellish power disperses it.

Ernie shudders and takes a deep breath. "I didn't even know..." He is brought to mind of every ugly thought or bitter word spoken in the past year, and wonders at its source. "Thank you, Morningstar. Aravis."

"I'm glad it worked!" Morningstar exclaims.

"Me too," says Aravis. "Now, let's go destroy the Black Circle."



They *teleport* directly from the temple to the Ellish holy city of Kallor, though their specific destination is their captured underground Black Circle complex beneath the Cosnor Estate. At Kibi's previous instruction, the Ritual Chamber has been repaired and prepped for the Ritual of the Fourth Derivation. Casting the ritual will only take half an hour, and requires three people. Some of it involves the invoking of questionable powers, but it's a low-level undertaking that should have no lasting effects on the perpetrators.

Dranko casts *augury* just to be on the safe side, which returns: "Mostly Weal." Mostly?

The wizards check everything one last time, but it all seems in order. They chant, wave, read scrolls and burn various components in a small iron cauldron. Half an hour later it's done. They all feel a bit down in the soul, but it's nothing a *bless* can't take care of. "That's stage one down," says Aravis.

Next up is the much more involved Ritual of the Seven Stars, which among other things will require a more elaborate arrangement of the ritual room, as well as "moontears steeped in Dustwine" and, of course, Mokad himself. The next stop will be the town of West Greydust in the Kivian country of Bederen. Morningstar asks Dranko if he'd rather wait until the tentacles come back, so that they don't interrupt the party at some inopportune moment, but Dranko just wants to get going. A standard collect-the-thingamabob quest will be just the thing to take his mind off the Cleaner's impending return.



According to their map of Kivia, West Greydust is a small town near the border between Bederen and Delfir. The closest they've been to it is probably "Hookbat Pass" to the southeast of the Delfirian Arch, but they opt to *teleport* somewhere safer. The Company are soon standing outside the town of Lav-Set in Tev, about 250 miles from their destination. The time has jumped from mid-morning to early afternoon.

"Time for *wind walk*," says Grey Wolf.

Dranko perks up. "We should get the genie to cast it!"

"We always make him cranky," Ernie warns.

"No we don't," Aravis replies. "He comes out cranky!"

"Come on," Dranko urges. "It's been a long time since we've talked to the guy."

Aravis assents and rubs the ring. A blue smoke issues forth and there is the impressive azure-skinned Al Tarqoz. The genie lays down a hand of cards with a triumphant expression, but his face darkens as the cards flutter to the ground. Dranko can see that all of the cards are of the same suit.

Al Tarqoz assembles his composure, effects a smile, and bows before Aravis. "And how may I serve my most beneficent master today?"

"Say," Dranko interrupts, "how much money were you going to win on that hand?"

"Assuming that I won – which seemed highly likely – there were over four thousand dirham riding on that hand. Which I will not now be able to claim, because they will accuse me of cheating."

"We were worried that you were going to miss us," says Dranko.

"Please, never worry again on my account."

"Dranko, you are not making it better," Ernie hisses.

Aravis smiles at the genie. "A straight flush was going to win that hand, so I wouldn't worry about it."

"I'll find out on my return," says Al Tarqoz.

At Aravis's request, the genie casts *wind walk* upon the assemblage, then hovers in front of the wizard with just the tiniest trace of impatience marring his calm demeanor.

Aravis can't help but look a bit guilty. "It's been about two years since we've called you!"

"Yes, I know."

"Would you be happier if we just unmade the ring?"

Al Tarqoz doesn't seem to hear the question. "I am always pleased beyond words to be of whatever assistance I can, my master. Is there anything else you require?"

"No. You can go."

The genie scoops up his cards and vanishes back into the ring.



The Company hover a hundred feet above the town of West Greydust; to the west, the sun is starting to set behind the mountains. Dranko sees some of the locals here and there, mostly farmers in their fields. Nothing seems suspicious or dangerous, so they land outside of town and walk in via the eastern road. As a group of armed and well-dressed strangers, they elicit many curious stares. One farmer near the road puts down a large basket and walks over to them. "Greetings, travelers. Are you lost?"

Aravis bows. "We're not lost if this is West Greydust."

"It is," confirms the farmer.

"We've come from a long ways away," says Ernie, "looking for something that will save the life of a friend."

"And you think to find it here?"

Aravis nods. "We hope."

The farmer directs them to the house of Seppet, the town healer. Aravis is delighted to see the holy symbol of Quarrol, God of Nature, prominently displayed above the door. He knocks.

The voice of a middle-aged man comes from the house, speaking (like the farmer) in a thickly-accented Kivian Common. "Come in!" Leaving their weapons outside the door, they enter Seppet's small hut.

Seppet is a gaunt man with a bushy black beard and thinning hair. He regards them curiously. "May I help you with something?" Aravis nods. "The first thing I'd like to do is make an offering to Quarrol." So saying, he hands over a small bag with 200 miracs. "You are very generous!" Seppet exclaims.

Aravis bows his head. "I have recently had good reason to be very thankful to Quarrol."

"Then you are always welcome in my house."

Ernie gets right to the point. "We are looking for a substance, to help a friend who is in great danger."

"I have a number of salves and curatives," says Seppet. "I can also cast healing spells on my own. Is your friend with you?"

"We're set with divine magic," says Ernie. "We're looking for something we can find only in this town. Something called 'Dustwine.'"

"Ah, yes. I am familiar with the legend of Dustwine. It is said to be in a pool in the mountains, but no one has been up there for several hundred years."

Ernie sighs. "And no one who went up there before ever came back alive?"

"According to the legends, some did not come back, and others said there was a horrible creature who lived there. So people stopped going. And soon, no one knew for sure what was really there."

"There's always a horrible monster," says Grey Wolf, entirely unsurprised.

Ernie presses. "Can you tell us where the Dustwine was said to be?"

"Of course." He points out the window to where a tall mountain is silhouetted by the setting sun. "If you walk up the pass, I gather there is a cave some ways up. I have never been there myself, having no desire to be killed by a horrible monster."

"Neither do we," says Ernie.

Seppet excuses himself briefly and returns with an old book. He flips through its crackling pages for moment. "Here we go. Dustwine. Which would 'drive out the evil spirit.' Go up the trail of Mount Temun. You should see a cave. I don't know how high up. But the mountain is not a difficult climb this time of year. But, yes, a cave, and a... here it is... a pool dripping from a stalactite." He flips through another few pages before closing the book. "That is all I can tell you, I'm afraid."

He turns to regard Kibi. "I am not familiar with your kind. If you don't mind me asking... what manner of creature are you?"

"I'm a dwarf," answers Kibi. "A free dwarf. Kibilhathur Bimson, at your service."

"And where do you hail from, Mr. Bim-son?"

"From the Kalkas Peaks, and a town called Eggemoggin."

"I am not familiar with that place. Where in Kivia is that?"

"We are from across the Uncrossable Sea," says Ernie.

"Ooooh!" says Seppet. "Everyone had the same crazy dream. I have heard that your land is very dangerous... and magnificent. And that there are great riches and terrible monsters."

"It's very much like Kivia in that respect," says Aravis. "Places with riches, places with monsters, but mostly places with small towns like this one."

"I'm afraid to say I find that disappointing," says Seppet. "I was hoping for something more exotic. Not that I am ever likely to go there."

For another hour the Company regale the healer of West Greydust with tales from Charagan. After the sun has been fully set for an hour, Seppet offers to put them up in his barn.

"Is there anything more we can do?" Dranko asks.

"Your friend donated 200 miracs to Quarrol, and you have delighted me with tales of your homeland. Also, you are extremely curious to look at. No, there is nothing more."



The Company wake early the next morning and take a hike. It's a lovely summer day and the views from the switchback trail up Mount Temun grow ever more breathtaking. Three hours up the path forks, with the main trail continuing up the side of the mountain toward the peak. A smaller track leads into a wide crack in the mountainside, where old and crude stairs lead into the shadows. "We always take the dark, narrow path," observes Grey Wolf.

"Let's see who else may have," says Morningstar. She casts a *thought capture* at the first stair. She receives an old thought of someone who hoped that Dustwine would be as useful as the legends indicated. "That's promising," she says.

The narrow stair leads up and around, then descends again and opens into an extremely wide cave with a step-stone path leading down into it. With the sun now blocked, most of the party rely on a *mass darkvision* from Aravis to see.

"Wait!" says Ernie, as the others start to descend. "Can you sense that?"

"Sense what?" asks Dranko.

"Yondalla!" says Ernie excitedly. "Something down there is holy to Yondalla."

As they descend further, Ernie's sense of the divine grows stronger. The way steepens, then opens at once into a truly enormous cavern. It extends both back and upward farther than they can see with their darkvision. A reddish fungus on the walls gives a very faint, ruddy glow, but not enough to see.

They can see, in the center of the cavern, an enormous stalactite poking downward from the darkness, ending about twenty feet above the rocky ground. It's made of a reddish crystal, or possibly stained ice. Directly below the stalactite is a stone basin, about three feet in diameter and raised several feet off the ground. A slow plinking drip of liquid falls from the tip of the stalactite into the basin. A worn pathway of stone slabs takes a meandering path to the basin's foot.

Ernie's feeling of a divine presence has grown even stronger. There is no sign of a horrible monster, so he starts down the path toward the basin and (presumably) the Dustwine.

Shklup!

A cow-sized blob of greenish-brown jelly drops down from the darkness above and lands on him. A truly nauseating smell fills Ernie's nostrils, and if being borne to the ground by an oozy blob wasn't bad enough, the thing extends a glistening pseudopod and smacks him in the head.

A second blob falls onto Kibi, and Aravis barely leaps out of the way of a third.

Morningstar wrinkles her nose as the putrid smell fills more of the cave, but she has the presence of mind to bring down a *flame strike* upon two of the jellies. They are scorched and quivering but not entirely destroyed. Grey Wolf extends his hand and *disintegrates* the third one into dust.

Dranko manifests a *spiritual weapon* which takes a swipe at one of the blobs, and Flicker takes a stab with his dagger, but neither attack has much effect. Aravis has more success with a *chain lightning*, which causes one of the jelly blobs to explode all over Flicker. "Augh!" Flicker yells. "Gross! Was that entirely necessary?"

Kibi casts *Bigby's clenched fist*. A fist of force appears, but its punch only glances off the nearest blob. The dwarf moves and Quickens an *earthbolt* which causes a second of the things to burst. Ernie finishes off the third one with a *flame strike* of his own.

Dranko peers upward into the dark. "Why do I think these aren't the real threat?"

Grey Wolf agrees. "They're probably the *sweat* from the actual threat."

No sooner do these words escape his lips than he is proven correct. A gigantic blob the size of a barn falls from above and lands directly on Ernie, who is lost from sight. They can barely hear his muffled cries. The acrid, nauseating smell from the giant jelly is nearly overpowering and sets everyone to gagging.

Ernie is experiencing a bizarre dichotomy. On the one hand, he is partially crushed and being digested by a hideous blob of goo. On the other hand, the feeling of holiness to Yondalla has suddenly grown much, much stronger. Could this horrible thing somehow be blessed by the Goddess? He shares this with his friends over the mind-link.

Should I hold off attacking, then? thinks Morningstar.

Give me a second! Ernie answers. *And pray to Yondalla!*

Aravis casts a *reverse gravity* which sends the huge ooze bobbing upward ten feet from the ground. Ernie is not revealed beneath. Dranko stoops to peer at the underside of the monster and sees Ernie's foot sticking out from the blob. He sends his whip curling around the halfling's ankle and he pulls with all his might. As Ernie starts to slide out inch by inch, Dranko uses his *necklace of bellows* to knock the blob upward another few feet. Ernie pops out of the jelly, covered in a slimy film, then falls upward to rest against the bottom of the monster, Dranko's whip still around his leg.

Ernie casts *bless*, hoping to send a message to the blob that they're on the same team. He gets no feedback from the gesture. *Fine*, he thinks to the others. *Get it! I'll apologize to Yondalla later.*

In answer, the blob extends a huge pseudopod, grabs him, and stuffs him back into the center of its bulk. Dranko's arm is nearly yanked from its socket. Then it does likewise to both Dranko and Grey Wolf, who join Ernie in the mass of jelly. All three can feel digestive juices starting to dissolve their exposed skin.

Morningstar does as Ernie suggests. She blasts it with a *fire storm*, then follows up with a Quicken *flame strike*. **WHOOOMPH!** Those trapped inside feel chilled as Morningstar's cold flames engulf the monster. Kibi follows up with an Empowered *cone of cold*, and bits of the blob are now frozen and flaking away.

But how to rescue their friends trapped inside? For that, Aravis casts *maze*, and as he hoped, his allies are left behind. They drop to the ground, sticky and foul. Ernie senses that the holiness is gone. Aravis assures everyone that a mindless creature stuck in a *maze* will not find its way out on its own, and they have ten minutes before it returns. They spend the time healing and cleaning themselves off.

Ernie, thoroughly confused, casts *divination*. He asks, "*Is it contrary to Yondalla's will that we destroy this creature?*" The answer comes to him:

Slay the foul beast, and become blessed.

"Now that's the kind of answer I like!" he says with satisfaction.

Morningstar places a *prismatic sphere* directly below the jelly's point of reappearance. Ernie adds a *blade barrier* at the last minute, for good measure. The huge jelly emerges from the *maze* and falls into and through both spells.

Basically, it explodes – and it's a good thing that the low-frequency bands of color take their effect first, so that the blob dies before it can be sent to another plane. In its death burst, several objects come flying out of its mass – bone, metal, some clinking coins. One of these objects is the source of the holiness Ernie has been sensing this entire time; he can see it glowing a soft green amidst the goop.

He wades over to it, and arrives in time to see a short sword shedding the last of the putrid ooze. It lies there, pristine, its hilt and handle carved into a cornucopia, its shining blade afire with runes. Blessings of Yondalla radiate outward from it.

"You're free now," Ernie says to the sword. "You don't have to be inside that awful thing anymore."

He picks it up. Energy courses down his arm and suffuses him, making his whole body glow green. The sword speaks into his head, a voice soft but powerful:

The time draws near that you will be needed in Appleseed. Tell High Priestess Sunblade that the Crimson Maw is no legend, that her people will drown in a sea of goblin spears if it is left agape. Together, we can close the Maw and end its threat for all time. But beware; Maglubiyet has his champion, just as Yondalla has you.

The voice fades, and a full knowledge comes into his head of the sword and its powers. He holds the legendary blade *Tava's Righteous Fury*.

+5 shortsword, keen, goblinbane. 1/day it casts a 15d6 *flame strike* that only damages evil creatures.
1/week it can summon the Astral Deva "Tava's Echo."
1/week it can create a bubble of invisibility that foils both the sight and divinations of goblins.

SolitonMan: Thanks Sagiro, this Story Hour is great! But I have to warn you, if you continue making frequent updates I'm going to start expecting them!

Sagiro: I guess I'd better slow down, then... (In all likelihood they *will* slow down; I've had more free time than usual the past week or so, but the upcoming week or two will be on the busy side.)

Regarding Ernie's discovery of *Tava's Righteous Fury*, I call the reader's attention to the halfling's stay at the Inn Between, following his long-ago-now death in the golem city of Repose. From the Story Hour c.10 years ago [see page 144 of Part I]:

Before he returned to the living, Ernie was made to promise two things as payment for being brought back to life. One was that some time after the party's current quest, they'd have to come back and help the halflings of Appleseed, whose people will be in a great peril from which only the party can save them...

Everett: Are there an infinite number of Cleaners in the Void? Were the Cleaners that One Certain Step died to kill remarkable in any way, or were they just like all other Cleaners and only happened to be in a mortal dimension? Did his death and the battle beyond the Black Door affect them in any way? The idea of evil that is infinite and infinitely replenishing is a bit unsettling.

Joshua Randall: The Far Realm is outside time and space, so I'm not sure asking questions about quantity have any meaning in regards to it.

Hmm. That's rather Kantian, now that I think about it.

Everett: And yet, there must be space and distance, or the act of throwing a bottle would have no meaning either. What the Far Realms *are* can't just be philosophical detrius, or you couldn't tell a story about them.

Piratecat: This is a good example of something that the DM doesn't need to define. If H.P. Lovecraft wrote D&D, the Far Realms are where the Great Old Ones would dwell. They epitomize insanity and Wisdom draining; angles are non-Euclidean, hideous tentacular Monstrosities that Should Not Exist™ rule, normal emotions such as hope and pity don't exist, and the dimension is both bounded and eternal. I think of it as a plane full of contradictions.

There may be infinite "Cleaners," but they simply don't care about us. Even though they serve a tremendously important purpose in the campaign (details forthcoming), they're mostly a plot device that has certain rules for when we interact with it. Sagiro will never need to decide how big the Far Realms is (assuming that phrase actually has any meaning for such an odd plane) because we're never going to need to know. I hope.

That brings me to something kind of remarkable about this game. For all that we're almost epic level, we are terribly aware of our own fragility and inconsequence in the multiverse. Yeah, there aren't a lot of mortal combatants who can match us on Charagan or Kivia, but the Emperor's machinations are vast and subtle enough that we often feel we're playing catch-up. It's sort of humbling, and it's remarkable that this power scaling has never once felt strained.

Siusi: I find this awesome as well. Do you think it has to do with the slower hand-out of experience (or whatever else you folks use to slow down the leveling process)? I've noticed (and been told, actually) that the characters in this particular game go up in experience at about half the normal rate, which would give ample time to both explore the new level of power each of you has attained upon reaching a new level, and even more time to explore your place in the world(s). There has been a definite lack of the usual "these 15th level people have been around all along, and you're just now hearing about them because you've never asked before" that I've seen... almost everywhere. I can only hope to emulate this sort of thing in my own games.

Piratecat: I'm a huge fan of the slower advancement; I did the same thing in my last campaign, with everyone leveling once per 10-12 sessions. The story is so good we don't care about leveling much, and we know our capabilities and teamwork down pat. There has never been a case I can think of where a really powerful bad guy pops out of nowhere. Pretty much everyone we've fought is someone who we've heard of for a long time, or someone whose presence has caused ripples in the world already. Friggin' rat.



Dranko's Bargain

Everyone is mightily impressed by Ernie's new weapon, though perhaps a bit put out by the timing. It's one more thing on the pile, since even if the time to help Appleseed is merely 'drawing near,' they ought to give this High Priestess Sunblade a heads-up. Their new itinerary: leave West Greydust, stop off to visit Evenstar in the mountains, then hop to Appleseed to warn the halflings, and finally pop down to Kai Kin to scout out the Black Circle temple. Dranko doesn't say what all of them are thinking, though – somewhere in there the Cleaner could come back. It makes him sick just to think about it.

He takes his mind off it by helping Flicker dig in the dead ooze for loot. They find a few magical goodies, including a highly-polished shield that can cast *spell turning*. Ernie flies up to the ceiling of the Dustwine cave and finds it riddled with holes and crevices. The smell is bad but not overwhelming, and he hears no sound of other jellies.

Grey Wolf flicks a piece of slime from his shoulder. "So we can tell the town we got rid of *one* horrible creature, but not *necessarily* all of them."

Speaking of loot, Aravis decides to blow a *wish*, right then and there, to turn Zeg's *robe of the Archmagi* from evil to good. Then, in a magnanimous gesture, he gives it to Kibi. While the dwarf tries it on, Dranko picks up a magical sack that looks empty and reaches inside. He pulls out a fuzzy sphere like a plush brown tennis ball. "Great," he mutters, tossing it aside. With a comical popping sound, the ball transforms into a mountain lion which immediately lets loose with a ear-splitting roar.

Dranko takes a step back. "Er... nice kitty? Would you, um, like to go back in the bag?" He is equally surprised to see the lion obey his orders. It shrinks as it leaps, and vanishes into the sack.

"I have a bag full of mountain lions!" Dranko announces. He turns to Grey Wolf's monkey familiar, Edghar. "If you poop in my shoes one more time..."

While this is going on, Morningstar is steeping a dozen moontears in the basin full of dustwine. After they have soaked for an hour the Company hike back down Mount Temun and return to Seppet's hut. He listens wide-eyed to their tale.

Dranko loves this part of his job. Leaning back in a chair and exuding a casual flippancy, he sums up the encounter. “So, yeah, basically, there was a giant blob of intelligent slime about the size of your barn.”

“Oh my goodness!” Seppet exclaims. “So that was the terrible monster of legend.”

“It’s dead,” says Ernie, “but there may be more.”

“If anyone goes back,” Dranko suggests, “bring a goat and send it along first. If there are more blobs, they’ll drop down on the goat.”

“And are the stories about Dustwine true? Does it drive out evil spirits?”

“We don’t know,” Aravis admits.

As the Company prepare to leave, Seppet bows low. “You have certainly given a good impression of people from Charagan. Are so many of you great warriors who can defeat enormous slime monsters?”

Dranko acts casual. “Nah, we’re totally famous there. They have parades for us.” No one notices that his eyes take on a faraway look as he boasts.

“Just one parade,” Aravis corrects.

“What did you do to deserve a parade?”

Dranko pulls a huge tooth from his haversack. “We fought a huge dragon and saved the world.”



The Company *teleport* back to Tal Hae and spend the rest of the day on logistics. As the Seven Stars Ritual will require some complex stonework and general retrofitting of their Black Circle ritual room in Kallor, Kibi arranges to have dwarven artisans sent to do the work. (In fact, he uses the same team that’s been repairing Longtooth Keep for them.) And while they’re recruiting experts, they contact Ozilinsh and set him to some of the thornier mathematical equations that need to be worked out. He eagerly accepts the challenge.

Dranko slips away from his friends and heads to the Manse of the Undermen. He invites Lucas Blackwell into his office.

“Lucas, how do you think you would do at my job?”

Lucas peers closely at Dranko. “Given that I’ve *done* your job for many months at a time, I’d say I could perform passably well as the Oracle.”

“Fantastic,” says Dranko.

“Are you going on another extended leave?”

“No. However, I have a little problem. That problem is, a hideous tentacled monstrosity from another dimension is going to take from me that which is most important.”

Lucas blinks. “Your money?”

Dranko laughs. “You’d think so. I do have lots of money. But, no. In order to get what I need, I’m going to offer... something else. I think that when I make this bargain, everything is going to change. And I think that I won’t be the leader of the Undermen, and will never have been. What I think will happen, is that *you* will be the leader of the Undermen, and I will be your highly able adviser from the shadows.”

“This is similar to what happened to you the last time?”

“Different in specifics, but yeah, similar.”

Lucas sighs. “Might I advise you to stay out of the sorts of trouble you keep getting yourself into?”

Dranko throws up his hands. “It’s not my fault! I threw a bottle into the void when giant tentacles were ripping apart a pocket universe, and...”

“Stop,” Lucas interrupts. “Say that one more time slowly.”

“I threw a bottle into the void...”

“What is the void?”

Dranko makes a face. “The void is the space left over when sanity dies. It’s a giant black place of whirling and gibbering.”

Lucas winces. “You are not making yourself very clear, but I’ll take it as a given that this void is a bad place.”

“Yes,” says Dranko. “And now I’m going to have to give up something that I love.”

“And one day when I wake up, I will be the leader of the Undermen,” says Lucas. “Are you sure it will be me?”

“No,” Dranko admits, “but it seems very likely. And if you *do* get the job, I’ll make it as easy as possible for you.”

Lucas scratches his chin. “Can I leave myself a note about this?”

“You can try. I don’t really know what will happen. Either way, I want you to know that I’m honored to have you as a friend, and that I think you do good work.”

Lucas bows his head. “Thank you.”

Dranko laughs grimly. “Also, in case the monster doesn’t accept my bargain, and drags me screaming into the madness...”

“Then I suppose I’ll *still* become the leader of the Undermen,” Lucas finishes. “Though I promise I won’t enjoy it as much.”



Satisfied that things are moving forward, they *teleport* back to West Greydust the next morning and issue a *sending* to Evenstar, that they’re in the neighborhood and would like to stop by. The reply is enthusiastically positive, so they *wind walk* for a few hours eastward toward the mountains.

The one Ellish shrine in Kivia is extremely well hidden, and for good reason. For one thing, the Delfirians do occasionally send scouts into the high mountain passes, looking for signs of Bederen incursion. For another, on this side of the Uncrossable Sea, the night belongs to Dralla. Doubtless the Mother of Monsters would be displeased to find a pocket of Ellish worshipers.

On foot it would be difficult to discover, but Morningstar enters *Ava Dormo* and scouts the mountains from the air while the others hover. Knowing more or less where to look, it only takes her an hour to spot the temple nestled in a high canyon. The Company descend, solidify, and approach on foot up a narrow trail. It’s well masked, with false tracks leading to precipices and the real one hidden by brush and boulders. Only Morningstar’s dream reconnaissance keeps them on the true path. In the middle of a steep scramble they are challenged by an unseen guard high above them. “Stop! Who is passing?”

“Morningstar of Ell. Evenstar should be expecting me.”

There is a moment of expectant quiet, and then the voice calls down, “You may pass! Continue on your present path.”

The trail continues to meander upward for another half an hour, and they don’t meet up again with the sentinel. Finally, in the heat of a cloudless late afternoon, they emerge into a U-shaped canyon. The walls of this mountain enclosure are dotted with beautifully detailed facades, as all of the buildings are built into the canyon walls. The party spot numerous sniping holes and high balconies; this little shrine is extraordinarily defensible.

Evenstar strides out of a nearby building and approaches. Beside her walks a younger woman in full armor, extremely tall and muscular, a triangle shield on one arm and a huge mace in the opposite hand.

Morningstar bows low. “Sister, greetings! Thank you for receiving us.”

Evenstar laughs. “How could we not? We are extremely honored. Allow me to introduce **Scola**, my bodyguard.” The tall woman gives a perfunctory nod and eyes the Company with ill-hidden suspicion.

“How long will you be staying?” Evenstar asks.

Morningstar can’t help looking around as she answers. “Just for the evening. This place is wonderful!”

Evenstar smiles. “Sisters of Ell have been here for hundreds of years. We are truly blessed to have this sanctuary.”

“How many sisters are here?” asks Morningstar.

“Sixty-five, and every one of us a Daywalker.”

Refreshments are brought to the guests inside a dining hall built into the west wall of the canyon. “We have a large store of goods,” Evenstar explains, as the Company sup and ask questions. “We have a reasonable trade with Bederen now that we’ve made contact. They sometimes bring wounded soldiers here. We tend to their needs, and they leave us with supplies.”

She flashes a smile as she adds, "They are thumping the Delfirians, by all accounts."

After the Company have been fed, Evenstar takes them on a tour of the grounds, showing off the chapels, dormitories, scriptorium and library.

"So you were *all* called to be Daywalkers?" asks Morningstar, gazing at the large black triangle hanging over the altar of the largest chapel.

"Yes," Evenstar confirms. "And all on the same day – the first day that there was such an official designation. We assume that we are meant to prepare for an upcoming trial. Do you know what its nature will be?"

Morningstar looks somber as she answers. "We suspect that Octesian is out there, looking for us in *Ava Dormo*. He seems to have perhaps gone insane, and is calling for me personally."

"Would you like us to send out scouts?" asks Evenstar.

"Anything you can do, yes," says Morningstar, "but don't engage with him! Remember, he can kill your waking bodies."

"But you can do the same thing to him now," says Evenstar. "I hope I can be at your side when that day comes."

"I would feel a lot better if you were there," says Morningstar.

Before going to sleep, the wizards identify the magic items from their most recent haul. It includes a +4 shield that casts *spell turning* once per day, a tan *bag of tricks*, an *ear-cuff of perfect balance* (+20 to Balance checks), a lens (with 12 remaining charges) that doubles the damage from *magic missile*, and a coin that improves saving throws.

A *stalwart's coin*, that allows one's STR mod to be applied to Fort saves, one's CHA mod to be applied to Will saves, and one's INT mod to be applied to Reflex saves, instead of the normal ability score mods. And, yes, it has a four-sided star on one side.



After breakfast the next day, Ernie casts a *sending* to High Priestess Sunblade. Ernie sends ahead:

I'm Ernest Roundhill. The blade Tava's Righteous Fury told me to find you. The Crimson Maw must be closed. How can I find you?

The reply:

Ernest? I am Maple Sunblade. I am in the Cathedral at Victory. I look forward to meeting you, and seeing Tava's Righteous Fury for myself.

Aravis *teleports* the Company into the wastelands far to the east, to one of their campsites from their long journey to Het Branoi. From there it will only be a few hours *wind walking* to the halfling country of Appleseed, and their capital city of Victory.

But before they can leave, Dranko feels a wave of nausea wash over him, and his head begins to pound. "I think the Cleaner's coming back," he says, turning green. The others watch him nervously.

"If worse comes to worst," says Morningstar, "I will always love you."

Twelve tentacles rip through space around Dranko – not through him this time, thank goodness. Through the ragged holes in the fabric of Abernia, the others glimpse the sickening star-field of that place of other, the realm of madness.

Greenish brown and rife with slimy suckers, the tentacles wrap Dranko in a revolting embrace. One is across his nose and mouth, stifling his breath, though Dranko manages a wry thought that it beats a tentacle through the eye. The Voice – that timeless, gurgling voice – speaks into his mind.

I have returned. What will you surrender to me?

Dranko makes a great effort to compose himself before answering. *Look. All my life, the only thing I ever wanted was for people to know who I was. I'd be sitting there as a little kid, with some bully beating me up, but I knew that someday I'd be riding in a parade, and all the people who were being mean to me would have to suck it up, because I would be important. I want statues, and I want books written about me, and I want people to know who I am. The day we actually had a parade was the best day of my life.*

And that's what I'm going to give up. Not the wanting... but I'll give away any hope that I'll ever be famous.

The Voice grinds in his mind.

**So. You are giving up your fame.
Yes. Your desire for it is great.
It tastes strong.
It pleases me.
The tentacles will sing to you.
You have upheld your part of the bargain.
Now, prepare yourself.**

The universe ripples, adjusting to a new reality.

A tip of a tentacle slides sickeningly into the middle of Dranko's head. *Something* is placed in his mind. It's incomprehensible – is it a word? A picture? A concept? A set of instructions? He can't wrap his mind around it, though it's hideously awful, terrible, *powerful*... He blacks out.

His friends watch the tentacle retract from his head, leaving a bloody streak. The remaining tentacles unwind from Dranko's body and vanish back into their holes, leaving Dranko to fall face-first to the ground, insensate. Morningstar leaps forward to cast *heal*.

Dranko's eyes flutter open, and the first thing he sees is his wife, glowing. He squints. "I'm like Eddings," he says hoarsely. "I can see magic." And it's true – it seems that he can now *detect magic* at will.

"Your eyes look okay," says Morningstar, cradling her husband's head. "What about the rest of you? You... you still love me, right?"

Dranko smiles, though his head pounds. "I still love you. I couldn't have given that away. No, I... I gave up any possibility of me ever becoming famous." Dranko climbs to his feet, clutching his head. "I guess I won't get my statue now," he says sadly. "But at least I had my parade."

The others look at him, puzzled. "You weren't at the parade," says Flicker. "You said you had something else important to do. We all thought it was weird at the time..."

Dranko stares. Then, in a moment of panic, he digs through his pack for the letter declaring all of the Company as Knights of the Spire Guard. He scans the paper frantically. His name is not included.

"Dammit!" he yells. Then he writes in his name again, after the others. *Sir Dranko Brightmirror*.

He sits down suddenly, grasping his throbbing temples. There's that *something* lodged in his mind. He wants desperately to know what it is, but he also knows instinctively that if he were to concentrate upon it, it would drive him irrevocably insane. But there are other things in his head, smaller gifts left by the Cleaner. He realizes that he can open a tiny window onto his memory of the Far Realms, and use the alien insight to see things.

He tries it. His eyes bulge and his sanity loses its edge, but he *sees*. "I can see everything!" he says hysterically. "I can see it all!"

And he feels like there are other things he could do, by glimpsing that hideous memory. "I feel a little odd, things are clearer now, but I can feel something squirming in my brain, I can see so much, the air moving, and I can see the colors come from magic, and I can do more! I can show you what's in my brain and push you away, and expand my perceptions of things, and there's something more, but I think I'm not ready to think about that yet, and it gave me something else, in my brain, which would destroy anyone who looked at it, so don't do it, because it's there, in my brain."

Aravis frowns. "And it will give us some aid against our enemy?"

"Yes!" Dranko exclaims. "Maybe! Maybe yes!"

Grey Wolf casts *restoration* on Dranko, but to no effect.

Dranko looks at Grey Wolf, a crazed look in his eyes. "You know what I think I'll do? I'll try sleeping tonight, and then I'll forget, and then I'll be better, because they say that sleep is a healing thing, and I need a healing thing. My brain hurts. Maybe from all the seeing of things."

Morningstar is unwilling to wait that long. She bestows her *protective sleep* upon Dranko, and he sleeps, and for a time he forgets. And while he sleeps, she cries.

EroGaki: Wow, poor Dranko. No statues for him... Still, I am mighty curious as to what happened to him? Some weird template? A prestige class? Spell-like abilities? I must know!

Davek: Who is Dranko?

Piratecat: *sob*

RangerWickett: Don't worry, Kevin, your pseudo namesake's still got a 90-foot colossus of his imperial self in *War of the Burning Sky*.

LightPhoenix: It's a shame no one knows who it's a statue of...

Piratecat: You guys are killing me. It was so central to Dranko's nature that it *still* hurts. Which, I suppose, means that it was the right thing to sacrifice.

This was tricky. My first goal was to not pick something that would have to make all the other PCs change – so no giving up Morningstar's love for him, for instance. I also didn't want to give up something physical. I could have considered giving up his clerical levels if I wanted to respect the character, since cleric/rogue doesn't merge too well, but his uneasy relationship with his god is one of the things that makes Dranko who he is. And that's when I realized I wanted something that would constantly remind him of what he had given up, so I could milk good roleplaying out of it every time I poked at it like a missing tooth. Its absence had to be just as interesting as its presence. And what the hell, I didn't think "I wish I didn't have a demon lord who hated me" would go over too well.

I'm sure Sagiro will post the spell-like powers Dranko got from this exchange, which he triggers by burning Wisdom. Any substantive use of the abilities renders him unable to cast spells that day and drives him towards the brink of insanity – a reasonable trade. And I *still* don't know what ripe, rotten nugget of insanity is lodged in my head for the Adversary to find.

Sagiro: Dranko's new abilities are:

- *detect magic* at will.
- *repulsion and true seeing* 1/day, at the cost of 2 points of WIS.
- *time stop* 1/day, at the cost of 4 points of WIS (always gives him 3 rounds).
- ...and there's one more ability he gets that also costs him 4 points of WIS, but I'll keep the details a secret until he uses it.

(Note that the WIS damage is not recovered by *restoration* or *heal*. It takes a full night's sleep, or Morningstar's *protective sleep* power. A *miracle* or *wish* would probably also work.)

Everett: All that at the cost of fame? Looks like a good trade off to me...

Sagiro: And speaking of secrets: I expect that my many savvy readers will want to take guesses at what's in Dranko's head. I humbly implore you: **please don't!** It's entirely possible that one of you will guess right, and on the off-chance that Dranko/Piratecat doesn't figure it out himself, I don't want to ruin the surprise.

The Axe: Great googily-moogily! As the story lags the game by some time, I guess that means it hasn't yet come up in the game yet. That's some planning ahead...

Blackjack: Shakespeare's unpublished folio of *Henry IX*? A Klein bottle full of phlogiston? A chocolate-greased ham radio in a pineapple syringe?

Everett: What's phlogiston? Can you chug it?

Blackjack: Yes, and it goes great with a fine cigar.

Sagiro: If you want to e-mail me a guess, I'll tell you privately if you're right.

Sandain: I thought Dranko would give up his sense of taste.

coyote6: It's been 12 hours, and someone has to say it: what sense of taste?

Innocent Bystander: If Dranko gave up his sense of taste I think he'd be licking even more things he shouldn't be.

Morte: Same here. I also wondered if it might be his collection of souvenirs. The actual answer was much better.

MorningstarofEll: These posts don't convey just how creepy Dranko was when he dropped into "tentacle voice." In a campaign full of memorable moments this was one of the creepiest moments for me! I still shudder both in and out of character whenever he uses a tentacle power!

Kaodi: And here I thought Sagiro was the big voice actor type in the bunch... Anyway, there should be a plus side to not being famous: think of all the things you could get away with because you are not being noticed anymore...

Downside: when your mountain lion eats Edgar, it is Edgar whose name goes down in history, hehehe...

Piratecat: Did you know that I can give negative xp? Just so you know. Just saying. Ahem.

I'm really pleased that Sagiro perfectly captured my scansion [above]. Twenty years of *Call of Cthulhu* has given me a passable "insane" voice; it's cool that I was able to channel how freaked out I really was at that point. Heh. This is where I wish we were posting sound files.

Kaodi: Actually, now I feel like I am misremembering who did that one voiceover that was posted on these boards many years ago. I was probably thinking it was Sagiro because I was thinking of his notable clone and ape voices, but I think it was an undead, and that would be your campaign's department...

Piratecat: Yup, that was me. Sagiro is as good, or better, with voices. Hearing Octesian or Shreen the Fair sets my skin crawling.

Sagiro: I'd say Piratecat and I are about even in the "creepy voices" category. PCat does particularly well with undead; readers of his old Story Hour will be familiar with the Lich Hagiok and the ghoulish Soder, both of whom had highly... memorable... voices. Ew.



Good Thing You Asked

Dranko awakens, his head a hastily-drained swamp of unwanted memories. His eyes flutter open and the first thing he sees is Morningstar's worried face.

"I feel better," Dranko says quietly. And indeed he does; the damage to his wounded mind has been healed. His wife helps him to his feet, and she breathes a sigh of relief that his voice is no longer so disturbingly manic.

Dranko looks around at his apprehensive friends. "If I were going to guess, there's something horrible we'll have to fight at one point – maybe Lord Tapheon – who's going to pry through my brain. And now there's a trap laid for him. Or maybe the Black Circle will try to read my mind and get a nasty surprise. And all things considered, things could be worse. I can live without the fame. I couldn't live without all of you."

Morningstar smiles, reaches out to touch Dranko's brow, and manifests her greatest power. Some vile creature from the Far Realms has placed something in the mind of her husband; now it's her turn. She shows him by a true *miracle* of Ell how much she loves, respects and cherishes him. The cauldron of horror the Cleaner left clinging to his psyche is easily parted by Ellish grace, and the dark and writhing vines of insanity are culled by feelings of love and friendship.

Dranko blinks and stares at his wife, his eyes misting. He has no words, but envelops her in a fierce embrace.



The journey via *wind walk* to the halfling city of Victory takes about five hours. The ground below rushes swiftly by, a wasteland of brown and gray rock dotted with old ruins, giving way only in the final hour to farmlands and settled green. The river that separates Appleseed from the southern lands is dotted (on the halflings' side) by old guard towers, obviously long empty.

Their map is accurate in its placement of Victory at the tip of a lake, the southernmost of a series of finger-like lakes stretching east to west. Victory is the capital city of Appleseed, and as much a fortress as a metropolis. It is extremely well defended, with tall and wide stone walls patrolled dutifully by halfling soldiers. A channel from the lake goes into the city beneath a jutting barbican.

The Company land outside the outermost wall and de-mist. The halfling guards at the city's southern gate are polite and no-nonsense. Ernie speaks for the group, announcing their visit with the Yondallan High Priestess. The guards are thorough in their questioning, but in the end the Company are allowed entry and not divested of their armaments. There are no papers to carry or fees to pay.

Ernie thanks the gate-guard. "I've long wanted to see Appleseed. I spend too much time in the company of kneecaps."

The guard smiles. "Just don't cause any trouble," he says half-jokingly, while eyeing the Big Folk.

Dranko laughs. "We seldom *cause* trouble..."

The guard's smile tightens. "As strangers to Appleseed, allow me to give you this advice. No one will stop you on the streets or interfere with your business, until or unless you cause a disturbance. I strongly advise against that, unless you enjoy extended stays in stockades."

So saying, he directs the Company to the Cathedral of Yondalla, which he says should be easily visible atop a hill near the center of the town, once they've cleared the walls. There are three different portcullises to traverse, and the narrow entrance to the city leads to a large and bustling courtyard.

Victory is larger than any halfling settlement in Charagan, and is at least half the size of Tal Hae. Many dwellings are built into hillsides, but these are of sturdy stone and built for defense more than comfort. The streets wind between the hills, and each hill of any significant size has a guard tower upon it. As they head in the direction of the cathedral, they are funneled through a number of narrow gates.

The Company do draw numerous curious stares from the local populace, though everyone is polite and there are no disturbances. Close-packed dwellings give way to open parks and gardens as they make their final approach up Cathedral Hill. They gaze up at the edifice, and Kibi can't help but be impressed by the architecture and engineering. Ernie's eyes are wide; the cathedral is many times the size of the largest halfling structure he has ever seen. An enormous stained-glass window above the front doors shows the gold-and-green cornucopia and shield of Yondalla.

Dranko laughs. "I'll bet they have kick-ass dungeons under there, too!"

They are met at the doors by a serene acolyte in green robes. "You must be Ernest Roundhill and company. High Priestess Sunblade is expecting you."

Leaving their weapons inside the door, the Company are escorted to the personal chamber of the High Priestess. At first her office seems empty, though adorned with ceremonial weapons and shields on the three walls and a huge tapestry depicting a grand battle on the fourth. But they spy a small door in the back of the chamber, through which wafts the mingling smells of fresh-baked bread and a savory stew. "Just a moment!" comes a woman's voice.

The High Priestess **Maple Sunblade** emerges from the kitchen adjoining her office, bearing a tray laden with loaves and bowls. She wears an apron over rich Yondallan finery.

“Maple Sunblade, at your service,” she says formally, setting down the tray on a round table. Ernest makes introduction of his friends, stressing the honorific ‘Sir’ when presenting Dranko. Sitting around the table and eating, Ernie tells Maple Sunblade about his discovery of *Tava’s Righteous Fury*.

“I’m flattered that it knew my name,” says Sunblade. “I’d like to see the sword.” She sends a servant to fetch it. Ernie digs around in the *bag of holding* and produces a bottle of fine halfling ale from Dingman’s Ferry as a gift.

“We have had a few visiting halflings from Charagan already,” says the High Priestess. “They came by ship, from a city called Tal Hae.”

“Hey!” says Dranko. “That’s where I’m from. Flicker here, too!”

Ernie smiles. “Since my colleagues have learned to *teleport*, I’ve been lucky enough to avoid sailing ships. I find them extremely disagreeable.”

“You must be doing well for yourselves,” says Maple. “I’m sure there is great demand for your services.”

“Yes and no,” says Ernie. “We are mostly troubleshooters for our Kingdom. We’re sent to places where wrongs are being done, and we do our best to right them. We’re not traders, and profit isn’t really our motive.” He elbows Dranko before he can object.

“We’re always glad to meet such people,” says Maple, nodding in understanding. “Though we’ve been in peacetime for almost a decade now. The Anlakis have not mounted any real threats in years.”

Dranko gulps a spoonful of stew. “But now you’re about to be attacked by a horde of goblins.”

“I’ve heard no reports, and our scouts are quite thorough,” says Maple. “But your news...”

At that moment the servant arrives with *Tava’s Righteous Fury*, and High Priestess Sunblade handles it with reverence.

“What is the Crimson Maw?” Ernie asks, as Maple traces the runes on the sword with her fingers.

The High Priestess doesn’t take her eyes from the holy blade. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard of it. But we have an extensive library, so perhaps we can find out. As for *Tava’s Righteous Fury*... Tava was a legendary halfling champion who fought in the very first wars between goblinkind and the halfling peoples, on a world now long forgotten. It is said to only appear when halflings are in grave danger from goblins. I’m honored to have seen it, though I was hoping I wouldn’t in my lifetime.”

She sits back and stretches. “The country of Appleseed used to be contested territory with the goblins, centuries ago. Eventually we drove the goblins into the eastern wastelands, where they tried – unsuccessfully – to rebuild their empire. Eventually they vanished altogether, probably into the Underdark, which is doubtless more suitable to them. We make sure our cities are well protected from below, with both fortifications and powerful warding spells.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” says Ernie. “Because the sword told me the goblins have brought an equivalent champion.”

Sunblade puts down her spoon. “But brought him *where*? I think it’s time we visited the library, don’t you?”



Ernie is allowed to keep *Tava’s Righteous Fury* on his belt as Maple Sunblade leads the Company to the cathedral’s library. It’s nothing like as extensive as the Vault back in Hae Charagan, but the Library of Victory houses many hundreds of books and scrolls. There is an extensive section on goblin-kind, with treatises on their military tactics, biographies of past goblin leaders, details of their religion, and speculative writings about their race’s motivations.

Edghar proves the most valuable researcher, as he climbs upon the shelves and reads through dusty parchments. Within an hour he has found a scroll of goblin folklore which contains an entire paragraph on the Crimson Maw.

Dranko glares up at the monkey. “How’d he find it? He’s just a monkey. I mean, he can’t *read*, can he?”

Over the empathic link, Edghar chuckles to Grey Wolf. *Tell him if he wants some pointers on some of the idiosyncrasies of Kivian Common’s vowel usage, he should just cast comprehend languages on me, and he’ll learn something.*

Not now, Grey Wolf hushes. Taking the scroll from his familiar, Grey Wolf reads:

Of all the legends told of Maglubiyet's children, one of the most troublesome, if unlikely, is that of the Crimson Maw. Though evidence is scant, the Crimson Maw is a demi-plane, large enough to house a formidable army of goblins. Its corrupt nature is said to both strengthen and anger the goblins who gather inside, so that when unleashed, an army barracked and trained in the Maw will be particularly fearsome.

Worse, given time, priests of Maglubiyet can move the opening of the Maw to any location on Abernia, and so the already empowered army of goblins can emerge behind enemy lines, inside a city – anywhere. This is done through a goblin artifact called Maglubiyet's Fang, housed in an iron palace deep inside the Maw.

All of this is speculative, derived from goblinoid scrolls. There are no eyewitness reports of the Crimson Maw, and no proof that it exists at all.

Morningstar fires off a *find the path* right then and there, but it produces no directions to the Maw. But Ernie hears Tava's voice again in his mind, barely a whisper. *The Crimson Maw is always open. While they set to move it, look for goblin holy ground.*

After Ernie has shared this message, Sunblade rubs her chin. "The goblins built many temples in the wastelands," she muses. "Though they're all ruins now."

"So," says Dranko. "Looks like we have another decision to make. Goblins, or Praska?"

Ernie opts for some guidance to answer that question. Back in Sunblade's kitchen he casts *commune* while baking a traveling biscuit. The High Priestess takes notes.

*"Will the threat to the halflings of Appleseed from the Crimson Maw come within the next week?"
I DON'T KNOW.*

Uh oh. When something is impenetrable by divination, it usually indicates the Black Circle's involvement.

*"Is the goblin menace within the Crimson Maw being instigated, motivated or exacerbated by our enemies in red armor?"
ALMOST CERTAINLY NOT.*

*"Are they being motivated by any outside party, besides the goblins and Maglubiyet?"
ALMOST CERTAINLY NOT.*

*"Do we have the means or tools that would enable us to go directly to the Crimson Maw?"
YOU CAN REACH ITS OPENING.*

*"In your opinion – and your opinion is well-nigh an order to me – would it be wiser for us to continue our pursuit of Mokad, as opposed to dealing with the Crimson Maw?"
MOKAD'S PLOTS ARE RIPENING, BUT TAVA SHOULD NOT BE IGNORED.*

Ernie can't help but grumble. "That's hardly an answer..."

*"Is anything else needed beside our military might, and the power of Tava's Righteous Fury, to defeat the threat posed by the Crimson Maw?"
COURAGE, GUILE AND LUCK.*

*"Will we be more successful if we invade the Crimson Maw, instead of letting them invade us?"
PROBABLY.*

*"Will the plots of Mokad and the Black Circle in Kai Kin come to fruition within the next month?"
YES.*

Yikes!

“Will destroying Mokad slow them down?”

NO.

“Will the Black Circle plots, if successful, result in the return of Naradawk to Abernia?”

YES.

Crap!

“Are we capable of stopping the current set of plots of the Black Circle?”

YES, THROUGH YOUR ACTIONS.

“In order to stop them, would it be wise to strike at the Black Circle in Kai Kin?”

YES.

“If we use Mordenkainen’s disjunction to destroy the Book of Lies, would the person whose life was protected by it be aware of its destruction?”

YES.

“Can I defeat the champion of Maglubiyet?”

I CANNOT SEE INSIDE THE MAW.

“Is it the wisest thing for me to do, to stay here to protect Appleseed, given the other threats to the world?”

EITHER WAY, DO NOT STAY IN APPLESEED.

“Will razing the Kai Kin Black Circle temple be enough to stop their plot?”

NO.

“Is there a specific individual we need to destroy, in order to stop their plot?”

NO.

“Is there a specific ritual we need to disrupt, in order to stop their plot?”

YES.

Huh. So the Black Circle is working on a plot that will bring Emperor Naradawk from Volpos, within a month? Now that's some news worth knowing!



Familiar Risk

Ernie, of course, still wants to deal with the Crimson Maw right away.

Dranko shakes his head. “What if we get stuck in there, or time moves differently? Could we risk it? I mean, don’t different onions have different times?”

“It’s a demiplane,” says Aravis. “Unless it actively makes us forget things, I’m not too worried.”

Ernie furrows his brow. “A demiplane? Doesn’t that make it more of a scallion?”

“Forget the herbs!” cries Aravis. “Yes, there is a potential problem of time differential, but that aside, we can certainly get out if we can get in. There’s always *plane shift*.”

“The Maw is clearly the lesser of the two evils,” says Morningstar.

Aravis nods. “I agree. But before we deal with the Black Circle, we’ll need to scout it out. I have a plan that will take a couple of days – I want to send a scouting party of cats to learn about the temple there. I think they owe me a debt of gratitude.”

“There’s another thing,” says Kibi. “If we want to deal with Mokad before doing anything else to the Black Circle, it’s still going to be a couple of days before the ritual room in Kallor is ready to go.”

So, over Morningstar’s continuing objections, they decide to let Aravis implement his cats-as-spies plan and then deal with the Crimson Maw as quickly as they can.

“Dealing with the Maw shouldn’t take long,” says Aravis confidently. “We should hop in, grab Maglubiyet’s Fang, and get out. If they can’t move the opening, it’ll no longer be an immediate threat.”



Morningstar casts a *sending* to Plumpypuss at Aravis's request:

We need the name of a cat in Kai Kin, preferably a stray. Reply 25 words or less. Morningstar.

The reply:

There is a cat named Set-Set. I had some dealings with him years ago. If he's still alive, he's in the foreign quarter.

Armed with that minimal information, Aravis *scries* Set-Set that evening. Through the sensor, and using *darkvision*, he sees an old and scrawny black alley cat resting on a low stone wall. With Pewter on his shoulder, Dranko stowed away in the *flask of body pouring*, and with a *refuge* token in his pocket, he *teleports*.

Set-Set turns his head sharply at Aravis's arrival but otherwise stays put on the wall; he's too old to go jumping from the mere presence of humans. He meows. Pewter translates: *You're strangely like a cat.*

I am one of the Nine, says Aravis.

Set-Set rises slowly to his feet. *How did you sneak up on me so easily?*

I had magic, says Aravis. *I used it to see you from a distance and transport myself.*

Magic? I don't know that. How can I serve you?

Over the mind-link, Morningstar opines, *I'll bet Kai Kin has a prohibition against magic.*

Aravis starts in on an explanation of how he needs a feline scouting team to infiltrate the Black Circle temple in the city. Set-Set seems extremely confused, and Pewter turns to his master. *Boss, he's just a cat. He's not very smart. He might get distracted by a mouse, and forget all about your instructions.*

We'll have to take that risk, says Aravis.

Can't you do any Cat Lord mojo to make him smarter?

Aravis thinks for a second before pouring Dranko out of his flask. "Dranko, you carry our spare *headband of intellect*, right?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I need this cat to be smarter."

Dranko hands over the headband before scrambling up the adjacent wall to get a better look at the city of Kai Kin. From the rooftop he takes in a broad view of this section of the city – presumably the Foreign Quarter. That would explain the mishmash of clothing styles, architecture and skin tones, and the wide variety of accents in the general cacophony of Kivian Common. He spots folk from Tev, Dir-Tolia, Djaw, Delfir, and even a couple from Charagan. The buildings are close-set and lean over narrow, winding streets. Though it is night, the Foreign Quarter is bright with lamps and loud with haggling and laughter. To the south-east Dranko sees the harbor, and to the northwest looms a thirty-foot stone wall.

Aravis drapes the *headband of intellect* around Set-Set's neck like a collar, casts *tongues*, and tries his explanation again. When he describes the Black Circle temple, Set-Set shakes his head. "I've never seen anything like that."

"It's on the other side of the wall," Aravis explains.

"Oh. I've never been there." Aravis sighs. Even with the headband, a normal cat still can't follow complex instructions. And this particular cat lacks the physical prowess he needs.

Boss, Pewter implores, just send me. I'm a cat, I'm smart, I'm agile, and I already know exactly what I'm looking for.

Aravis gives his familiar a scratch. *I suppose you're right.* He bows to Set-Set, thanks him, and takes back the headband. Then he fishes out his *refuge* token and ties it around Pewter's neck. *See if you can organize some other cats to get inside the temple.*

Pewter is skeptical. *Organize some cats? Er... OK, I'll do my best. What are your specific instructions?*

See if you can find the best way into that temple other than the front door, and anything else interesting.

How long do I have?

Two days. We'll meet back here.

Pewter grins. *I get two days to myself? Fantastic! Just promise me you'll take care of yourself. You're not going into that goblin place without me, right?*

Aravis is a terrible liar. *Er. Um. No! Of course not!*

Boss!

I didn't want to tell you, Aravis admits. *I don't want you to worry.*

Of course I'll worry! cries Pewter. *First of all, you need me in there. Second, you'll be in a demiplane, so if something happens to me, who bails me out?*

The token I tied around your neck. You bite it, you end up at the Greenhouse. And if I need you, I'll gate you in.

Dranko has dropped down from the rooftops and taps the wizard on the shoulder. “Aravis? I know you like cats and all, but why the hell aren’t you turning me invisible and just flying me over the frickin’ wall? I’ll fly over the temple and get you all the intelligence you need.”

“I can’t cast *invisibility*.”

“But you can cast *fly*. And I can stay hidden pretty well.”

So Aravis does cast *fly* on Dranko. As he casts, someone pokes his head into the alley and watches curiously. His clothing identifies him as Dir-Tolian. Dranko thinks quickly. “Thank you so much, sir!” he exclaims. “You healed my wound.”

“You’re welcome,” says Aravis.

“Hello?” says the man. “Are you crazy? Did you just cast a spell on him?”

Morningstar thinks over the telepathic link: *Did I mention I think there's a prohibition on spellcasting in Kai Kin?*

“I healed him,” Aravis explains to the man.

“By magic?” asks the Dir-Tolian, aghast.

“Yeah.”

“Have you been here long?”

“No.”

“Did we make a horrible mistake?” asks Dranko.

The Dir-Tolian looks shocked. “How could you have avoided knowing about the local custom?”

“We came in around three in the morning,” Dranko explains.

“It shouldn’t matter! Regardless, I will tell you this for your own good. Do not let the city guard see you doing that! Or any magic of any kind!”

“So there’s a prohibition on magic?”

“Of course there is! How could you not know that?”

Aravis looks puzzled. “Where do people go for healing?”

“They go to a temple, where magic is allowed.”

“And what temples are here in the city?”

The Dir-Tolian looks at Aravis like he’s daft. “They have temples to Lotus and to the Black Circle, I know that much. But I have not spent any time outside the Foreign Quarter.”

“Is there a Black Circle temple *in* the Foreign Quarter?” asks Dranko.

“Of course not. Say, why were you in this alley in the first place?”

“I heard him groaning in here,” says Aravis. “He was injured.”

“And to what God are you a priest?” asks the Dir-Tolian.

“Quarrol,” says Aravis.

“Say,” says Dranko. “Can I buy you dinner, as a way of saying thank you for telling us about the no-magic thing?”

Morningstar, over the mind-link: *I told you about the no-magic thing!*

Dranko gives the man a handful of miracs. “This is very kind!” exclaims the man. “My name is **Fahlwyn**, by the way. What are yours?”

Dranko introduces himself as Three Slippery Slopes, while Aravis gives his name as Benson.

“I have been to Kai Kin eleven times now,” says Fahlwyn. “Every time, I am forced to endure, for half an hour, all of the rules and regulations of the city. One of the first things they tell you is: no magic! You should pay attention to those lectures. I realize you may not take them seriously, but the authorities in Kai Kin will kill you! They will execute you without a second thought, for any number of infractions that might seem minor to a foreigner.”

Fahlwyn nods his head and departs the alley. Dranko and Aravis look at one another for a long moment.

Morningstar’s aggrieved thoughts come over the mind-link. *Good job, guys.*



This time it’s Aravis’s turn to go in the *flask*, while Pewter rides in Dranko’s pack. The half-orc flies up into the night and starts his aerial recon of Kai Kin. He is struck first by the huge size of the city – not quite as big as Djaw, but bigger than anything Charagan has to offer. The wall that separates the Foreign Quarter from the city proper continues well out into the harbor, and only Ociran ships are docked on the “native” side.

In stark contrast to the Foreign Quarter, the rest of Kai Kin is extraordinarily homogenous, especially for a place so large. The architectural style is mostly a uniform yellowing stone, with rounded red-tile roofs. Even more unusual is the constancy of upkeep and cleanliness; there are no slums, and no area that is obviously a high-society neighborhood. (Even a block away from a huge palace – that Dranko assumes is the seat of Ociran governance – the buildings are of modest size and adornments.)

Dranko selectively chooses a half-dozen rooftops around the city that are high, flat, and not easily seen from either the ground or other rooftops. At each of these he pours Aravis out, so that the wizard can study the place for possibly emergency *teleports*.

“Let me warn you,” says Aravis. “Don’t start thinking of me as your own private genie.” Dranko just grins.

It takes a few hours of slow, sneaky flight before Dranko comes across what is obviously the main Black Circle property in the city. It’s comprised of fifteen buildings on a sprawling several-acre campus, with the majority of the acreage covered in parks and gardens. Walkways and benches are dotted here and there throughout. One building – the largest by a good amount – is most likely the main chapel.

A few armed men patrol the grounds, but they seem at ease. From time to time a person in black robes leaves one building and walks unhurriedly to another. There’s no sign at all of anything sinister in the offing.

Pewter, new plan, says Aravis. Scout out the place, and see if you can get other cats to help, but don’t bother finding your way back to the Foreign Quarter. We’ll contact you in two days. If you haven’t heard from us by then, use the token.

No worries, boss. I’ll get you your intel. Just don’t get yourself killed while you’re gone.

After dropping Pewter off a few blocks from the Black Circle temple, they *teleport* back to Victory. For all of his confidence in his familiar, Aravis feels bereft.

“Kai Kin sucks!” Dranko announces. “Magic isn’t allowed – Morningstar, you could have warned us about that – and everything is the same, and they keep all the foreigners in their own walled-off section.”

“Right,” says Aravis, eager to make some progress. “On to the Crimson Maw!”

Joshua Randall: Never. Split. The party.

Piratecat: We meant to make it a nice, fast errand. We got lucky it didn’t turn completely pear-shaped on us, but it sets the stage nicely for my favorite party-splitting of all time.

And anyways, the Crimson Maw is a bunch of goblins. We’re about 18th level at this point. How much challenge can stinkin’ goblins be?

The Warlock: I have heard those words before. Usually right before the PCs in my run take a header down the stairway of life. This is gonna be a fun read when it gets posted.

wedgeski: Never have I been so glad that email notifications for subscribed threads aren’t working. I come back after three months to find all these updates waiting for me... and *big* stuff too. Still as wonderful as ever.



Return of the Killer Magic Rats

Despite Aravis's agitation, it's been an extremely long and tiring day. The party spend the night at the cathedral in Victory, with plans to tackle the Crimson Maw first thing in the morning.

Over a *heroes' feast* breakfast on the front lawn of the cathedral, while most of the Company discuss how to find and assault the Maw, Flicker has become oddly obsessed with flipping a coin.

"Grey Wolf, check this out." He flips the coin. Heads. He flips it again. Heads. Three more times; all heads.

Grey Wolf takes a bite from a muffin. "Have you *identified* that thing yet?"

"It's not magical," says Flicker. "It's just some random mirac I still had from the last time we were in Kivia. You know how many heads in a row I've flipped? Fourteen!" He flips it one more time. "Fifteen!"

Grey Wolf quirks an eyebrow. "Is there a tails?"

"Yeah. See? Hey, Dranko. Can you confirm there's no magic on this coin?"

Dranko looks over and squints. "Nope. Not magic."

Flicker keeps going and gets another nine heads in a row.

"Let me see that," says Dranko. Flicker tosses the coin over to him, and the half-orc takes a flip. Tails. He tries a few more times. Heads. Tails. Tails. Heads. Tails. Heads. Tails. "Huh," he grunts, handing the coin back to Flicker.

Flicker gets nine more heads in a row before tossing it to Grey Wolf. "Here, you try it."

Grey Wolf flips the coin, but when he tries to catch it, it bounces off the side of his hand and hits him in the eye. "Ow!"

Dranko laughs. "Great. An intelligent coin that's adopted Flicker."

Grey Wolf tries again to flip the coin, but it slips out of his hand. When he reaches down to pick it up, a bird poops on his head.

"Huh," says Dranko again. "So Flicker's super lucky, and you're super... not. Flick, let's play dice for a second." They pull out dice, and Flicker wins fourteen rolls in a row.

Ernie, at the other end of the table and paying little attention to these shenanigans, pulls out *Tava's Righteous Fury* and, with no expectation of success, asks it where they should go to find the Crimson Maw. His arm is yanked around, the blade pointing steadily to the south-east. "Hey, guys, I have a direction!"

Morningstar frowns. "Isn't anyone else worried about Grey Wolf being so unlucky? Maybe we shouldn't go anywhere dangerous until he's... better?"

"I dunno," says Dranko. "There's no new magic on Grey Wolf. Maybe it's..."

He's interrupted by a shriek from a nearby house. The Company hurry to investigate, and find a halfling woman lying on the road, rubbing her back. She looks dazedly up at an open window. "I... fell out. I must have slipped. Funny, I *never* leave that window open; the bells from the cathedral are too noisy otherwise."

She returns to her house, and ten seconds later the Company hear another shriek, followed by the sound of several dishes smashing on a floor. And as they stand there, puzzled, they can hear similar shouts of alarm and crashing sounds from elsewhere in the city. "We should get out of here," Aravis sighs. "Either we brought this with us, or it could affect more of us before we go into the Maw."

As they pass a tavern on the way out of town, a shabbily-dressed halfling comes running out to the street. "Excuse me!" he gasps breathlessly. "May I interest you in a gambling proposition?"

"It's not just you," says Dranko. "It's happening to Flicker here as well. You're under a magical effect."

"I am? Brandobaras must want me to become rich! I've been blessed!" The halfling takes off running down the street.



Ernie uses his doubts about *Tava's Righteous Fury*'s efficacy in wind-form as an excuse to bust out the *Vyasa Vya*, a.k.a. *Burning Sky*. The flying carpet coughs out a gout of black smoke that, as luck would have it, blasts Grey Wolf in the face.

Grey Wolf takes this, as he has all the previous instances of ill-fortune, with resigned equanimity. "I've had worse."

They fly over the countryside, Ernie leading the way on the carpet as he follows the tug of *Tava's Righteous Fury*. Ten minutes out of town they see below them a three-cart pile-up at a lightly trafficked crossroads. The Company now speculate these wild fluctuations of luck are somehow part of an imminent goblin offensive.

Only after a full day of flight, with a shrouded sun poking a few last rays over the western horizon, do the Company reach a destination of note. Two hours earlier they had crossed the river at the western border of Appleseed, and the difference in terrain was stark. Green gave way to brown, and lush to rocky. And beyond the river, starting out sparse and becoming ever more frequent, have been the crumbled remains of the displaced goblin kingdom. There are no longer any signs of living goblins, but the Company spy numerous small ruined towns as they soar overhead.

Now they see a particularly large and (relatively) intact cluster of ruins in a blasted and lifeless valley. Near the center of the ruins is the outline of a keep, mostly gone now but with a single conspicuously intact building that's been spared erosion from wind and rain by a tall section of the original outer wall. *Tava's Righteous Fury* dips to point at that building.

Rather than risk discovery by sleeping right outside, the Company *wind walk* about ten miles away to make camp. Grey Wolf solidifies in a mud puddle.

Nothing seems different when they return the next morning; *Tava's Righteous Fury* still points to the same goblin building, and at a downward angle. With Flicker in front scanning for traps, they enter cautiously.

It's an abandoned temple, stripped clean of every furnishing, every object, every sign of habitation. Only a stone altar, wall carvings and the general architecture betray the one-time function of the edifice. Ernie squirms a bit at the violent acts depicted in the carvings, all perpetrated upon halflings by spear-wielding goblins. He looks down at his sword and sees it pointing downward and to the left. Flicker approaches a door on the left wall and examines the lock. "I think it's locked, but if I..."

The door pops open. "Oh. That was lucky."

Beyond the door is a smaller chamber, and in the back of that room is a stairwell spiraling down. Flicker volunteers to go first again. "Heck, I wouldn't set off any traps if I were blindfolded! I'm the luckiest guy in the world right now!"

"Yeah," says Dranko. "You won't set them off. Grey Wolf will. So keep your eyes open, will you?"

Grey Wolf manages not to trigger any traps, though he does stumble down a few stairs before Morningstar catches him. At the bottom there are three different branching hallways, but *Tava's Righteous Fury* leads the way to what was probably a torture chamber. There are no living remains or loose implements of torture, but several pairs of manacles are still chained to walls splotched with aged blood stains.

A wall at the back of the torture chamber has been partially knocked out (from this side), and rough uneven stairs lead down from the hole for about twenty feet before rounding a corner to the right. A faint red light shines from beyond the bend, and the Company hear a low, distant growl. Pay-dirt!

Middle Snu: Wow! Just finished reading the whole thing. This is just a plain awesome story, and I am immensely grateful that you have devoted so many hours to writing it up.

A couple of questions, if you don't mind:

(1) At one point, Kay committed a significant portion of the Yrimpa race to a single military operation – did it work, or was it a trap after all?

(2) Something that's bugged me for a while: in Het Branoi, when the Vree machine malfunctioned and attracted the terrible Cleaners, Piratecat wrote:

As far as we can tell, it was like taking an AA battery pocket flashlight and hooking it up to a 220-volt power line. The machine was calibrated for Kibi, not Kibi and two freakin' artifacts, and the surge in power through the Way drew the Cleaners like moths to a flame.

You should have seen Sagiro's face as he realized the consequences of what Kibi was doing. It's fair to say that this wasn't how he expected the run to go!

So had Kibi not taken the Eyes into the Machine, would the quest have been over? And if so, how to get the third Eye? It's hard to believe that the Vree machine *really* would have worked, given how much of the Ways were still unexplored at that point.

(3) Way back in the Crosser's Maze, the party was given a list of eight questions and had to pick one to answer. But many of these alluded to things that were only resolved years (real-time) later, like Aravis being 'like a cat.' Were you really prepared to answer all eight questions at the time – and if so, have any of the answers changed in the meantime?

Again, thanks so much! It's awesome and an inspiration.

Sagiro: I'm glad you've been enjoying the story! Those are some great questions; here are some answers:

(1) The Yrimpa operation went off very well; it wasn't a trap, and (if memory serves) only one or two Yrimpa were slain. Honestly, with Kay's player leaving the game, the Yrimpa have faded into the background of the story. You may hear about them once or twice more before the game is over, but they're no longer a part of any major plots I'm juggling.

(2) No, the quest would not have been over had Kibi gone alone into the Vree's Machine. The Machine would still not have worked to "fix" the Slices, as the Vree were claiming. The Chaos was more trying to reintegrate all of the slices of *itself*, and that would have worked. Also, Kibi would have gotten some flashes of insight (read: plot clues) about the nature of the Slices. That's all tentacles under the bridge at this point, of course.

(3) Yes, I was prepared to answer any of those questions at the time. The only answer which subsequently changed significantly was "Where is Sagiro's body?" – I don't think I had yet decided that he had gone into Het Branoi ahead of the Company. I forget exactly what I *had* decided happened to him, but it wasn't nearly as interesting as having him be the Lord of the Roses. (Also, I was pretty sure they weren't going to pick that question.)

Joshua Randall: Yrimpa is a really fun word to say.

The Axe: Heh – I don't think I could say it out loud...

Sagiro: It's pronounced yer-IM-puh, with a clipped first syllable. (The "er" sound is very short.)

The Axe: Heh – that's actually pretty close to how I had it in my head...

MetaVoid: I've read it as EE-rimm-puh, also with short E.

Dranko creeps silently around the corner, following a narrow tunnel as it angles down before emptying into a large cavern. Something enormous is squatting at the far end, though he's still well over a hundred feet from the thing and so cannot make out much detail. Maybe it's an enormous dog? Or a frog? A spider, maybe? Whatever it is, it's lit from beneath, as it sits upon the source of the ruddy light.

The half-orc sneaks back to his friends. "There's something back there. It's huge, and it's sitting on our portal. Guess we'll have to kill it."

Flicker turns to Kibi. "Can you charm it?"

"In theory. But it never works," Kibi grumbles. Instead the dwarf casts *veil*, clothing the party in the illusionary form of rats. (Or, as the giants from their quest for Cranchus would say, 'killer magic rats.') He, Dranko and Ernie make a cautious sortie into the cavern. It's strewn with boulders, and numerous stalagmites rise from the uneven stone floor. Kibi, while a rat in most senses, is still not the quietest of creatures. While Ernie's armor is magically silent and Dranko is naturally stealthy, Kibi can't prevent small rocks from crunching beneath his feet. The beast, which from a slightly closer vantage seems to resemble a cross between a dog and a toad, heaves itself up a bit on numerous thick limbs. It grunts, growls, sniffs, and peers across the cavern. Dranko thinks it has extremely knobbly skin. It sees rats.

Ernie notes that this creature is tethered in place; a thick metal chain is bolted into a chunk of iron sunk into the stone floor, and the other end is fixed to a metal collar around the beast's neck.

Kibi sighs, and casts *charm monster*. Of course, it doesn't work. The dwarf feels his spell slide off the beast's mind. And now the guardian creature has *heard* one of the rats casting a spell. It becomes more alert, and it peers closely at these trespassing rodents.

Ernie and Dranko scurry forward. Dranko goes further, taking up a defensive position behind a stalagmite only thirty feet away from the massive creature. He sees that it has eight appendages, six of which are thick arms with sharp-clawed and prehensile hands. It appears to be squatting on a huge glass plate, out of which a bright red light is shining. The glass is strongly magical – strong enough to wash out any other nearby magical auras.

The hulking dog-toad narrows its eyes as Ernie runs closer, and decides to take no chances. It reaches up to its own back with one of its several arms and breaks off a stony nodule from its skin. It hurls this soccer ball-sized chunk of flesh at Ernie, and when it strikes the ground next to the halfling it explodes in a conflagration of fire and bone.

The rest of the Company take that as the signal to charge in as well. Morningstar gets close enough to drop a *flame strike* on the beast, but it entirely shrugs off the pillar of cold flames. Grey Wolf pegs it with a *rainbow blast* which sears it with a variety of energy types. The creature lets out a loud ululation of pain.

Kibi *summons* an enormous earth elemental (which tries to start a grapple but gets swatted away), and follows up with a Quicken *earthbolt* that bounces off the beast's magic-resistant skin. Aravis's *disintegrate* is likewise rendered inert.

Ernie draws a wand from his belt and manages to make a small hole in the beast with a *searing light*. Dranko activates his *boots of haste* before charging in and flanking the enemy with the earth elemental. His whip cracks and manages to dislodge one of the many protruding nodules on the creature's skin. Thick black blood oozes out and smokes in the air.

The dog-toad-spider bellows in pain, and glares down at... a rat. Did that rat just take a chunk out of the monster's hide with its *tail*? Well, if there's one thing this particular guardian beast can do, it's slaughter little creatures that come too close. Balancing on its two massive legs, it rips into Dranko with all six clawed hands, dealing enough damage to send a hundred rats to their little rodent graves.

And yet, somehow, this one survives. The creature's bestial brain registers annoyed confusion. Dranko, meanwhile, registers extreme pain and injury. He may be alive, but several parts of him that are traditionally on the inside are now splattered on the nearby stones. While Flicker runs up on his little halfling legs and flings an ineffective dagger, Morningstar rushes to cast *heal* on her husband. Dranko's pain is washed away.

Grey Wolf begins to *summon* some lupine speed bumps while the earth elemental takes some ineffective swipes. Kibi casts *Bigby's clenched fist* and takes a vicarious swing, but somehow this cumbersome monster manages to dodge. The dwarf starts swearing at his ill luck. Why does nothing work?!

Aravis tries again to *disintegrate* the creature, and while the spell does manage to pierce the target's resistance, it shrugs off most of the damage. Ernie pegs it again with a *searing light*, and Dranko lands two more perfectly-aimed whip strikes.

The beast is mightily confused. It still sees nothing but rats, but it's undeniably getting its gnarled butt kicked. This one rat in particular is... well, the beast isn't really sure what it's doing. It tries again to tear it to pieces, but once again the rat survives. How is this possible?

While Flicker tumbles into place and plants a dagger in the creature's side, Dranko blinks more blood out of his eyes and tries not to glance down at his sprung ribs. Again the pain is quickly soothed by a *heal* from Morningstar, who lets loose a Quickened *flame strike* for good measure. Grey Wolf's wolves appear and advance, and Kibi directs his elemental to stop swinging and start pushing. Ernie slides in to attack with his swords, Aravis fires off a *lightning bolt*, and Dranko doesn't let up with his whip.

With the beast pushed to the right by the earth elemental, the Company can now see that it's standing upon a huge red glass mirror. But they don't have much time to ponder the portal's nature or function, as the monster reaches back and snaps two more rocky nodules from its back. By this time over half the party have moved up fairly close to the creature, and so it slams the two nodules into the ground at its feet. There is a huge explosion, a fiery grenade blast shot through with bony shrapnel. Morningstar, Flicker, Ernie and Grey Wolf are devastated, as is the earth elemental. All but one of the summoned wolves are obliterated. Dranko, at least, dodges the entirety of the blast by sheltering behind a boulder.

Morningstar flexes her divine might and casts *mass heal*, entirely undoing the guardian beast's hard work, before the rest of the party move in to finish it off. Grey Wolf fires an *acid orb*, Kibi lands a punch from *Bigby's fist*, and Aravis blasts the thing with a *cone of cold*. The beast is now close to death, its breath quickening, its rocky skin starting to ripple and bulge.

Fittingly, it is Ernie who drives home the killing blow. "You're standing between me and my sworn duty," the halfling intones. "Taste *Tava's Righteous Fury!*" He delivers the decisive cut... and the creature explodes.

theskyfullofdust: Giant toad-dog with exploding warts that explodes when slain... Nice.

Piratecat: I seem to remember that it was an advanced, reskinned behir with a really nasty area-effect weapon. Not that we knew this at the time, of course. All we knew was massive pain and big explosions.

While a rogue probably shouldn't have the tank role in the group, I'm always amazed by how much damage a high Reflex save and Evasion saves me.

wedgeski: I get the impression from these combats that Dranko spends a lot of time at low hit points waiting for Morningstar to heal him... Is this actually the case?

Piratecat: It doesn't feel that way to me but Morningstar certainly agrees with you. Around this time her player was getting frustrated that there were all these cool things she could do, but she spent every fight healing other people instead. Trying to mitigate that was a multi-step process that involves a few spoilers.

We're at the stage where monster to-hits have outpaced our AC and every monster can hit us every time with non-iterative attacks. For instance, Dranko's AC at 18th level was 34 (and I don't believe it's gone up any since then); a CR 16 greater stone golem is at +42 to hit. The highest AC in the group is a few points higher than this.

It was around this point that I made a case for giving all the high AC-boosting items to one person who could then try to draw attacks. That would probably help reduce healing and would make sense tactically, but it was seen (by the PCs, not the players) as "Dranko wants all the cool items again!" No one's character liked the idea of one person with all of the cool toys. Everyone has a medium AC instead. It makes my character optimization side twitch a little, but sometimes fairness and good group dynamics should trump tactics. I love that about this group.

EroGaki: Our group has the same problem when we hit high levels. Now, it is mandatory for all characters to have items/spells that grant concealment/miss chance. *Lesser cloaks of displacement*, armor with the *greater blurring* enchantment, and *mirror images* are all big things for us; we usually have someone in the party who can craft wondrous items and/or magic arms and armor to accomplish these things, and we use the rules in the *Magic Item Compendium* to place common enchantments on items. That way, those *lesser cloaks of displacement* can still gain resistance bonuses to AC and stat boosts. It's a lot of work and gold, but it does help prevent damage so that our resident healer can have fun too...

Innocent Bystander: I've never played in a game of that high a level, but having flipped through the MMs a few times and seeing monsters with these insane full attack numbers, sometimes I wonder if there's a certain point where armor is mostly irrelevant except to keep the mooks off you while you deal with the bigger threat.

Piratecat: Yup. Other than Power Attack and iterative attacks, moderate levels of armor aren't much better than having no armor at all.

Enkhidu: After about 13th level, our group came to the same conclusion. However, since our major foes always seemed to end up being other humanoids, negating those iterative and power attacks was gold.

One thing that seemed to really help was layered defense. *Stoneskin + displacement/blur + AC buffs* did it for us.

Piratecat: I've considered having Dranko do an entire adventure naked, but I expect the other characters would *strenuously* object...

coyote6: It would be funny – right up until some giant cranked Power Attack to max with its Huge greataxe, and crit-splashed Dranko all over the ceiling and walls...

You can get higher ACs, with a little work. I had to tone down the AC on an ex-PC turned NPC in my D&D game, as at 18-20th, he could've had an AC that was double-digit points higher than anybody else (mithral full plate + shield + dwarven defender + battlesmith), and had DR 5 or 6/-. He would've been too effective, at least as an NPC ally (anybody that could hit him semi-regularly would be "miss on a 1" versus everyone else, and thus would slaughter the rest of the party). It might've been different if it were a PC.

(The toned-down version had AC 46 or 47 at base, IIRC; he could have had 50, easily. That's before dwarven defender's defensive stance, buffing spells, and the like, never mind Combat Expertise. Or his DR, or 300+ hp.)



The Crimson Maw

The Company resemble a collection of bloody pincushions. Had it not been for Morningstar's *mass heal* seconds earlier, half the party would certainly be dead. As it stands, everyone has survived, not counting the hapless elemental standing point-blank, and most of Grey Wolf's dire wolves. One of these has miraculously dodged both of the guardian beast's final explosions; Grey Wolf scratches it behind the ears and feeds it some jerky from his pack before it vanishes.

Without benefit of a second *mass heal*, the party blow many charges of a wand of *cure serious wounds* to patch up their injuries. Feeling more himself, Dranko looks at the corpse of the beast and then at his fellows. "We are some bad-ass rats!"

Now the debate turns to the prospects of a Five-Minute Adventuring Day. It's still morning, but the party have blown a great deal of firepower, especially in the healing department. They'd very much like to go into the Crimson Maw at full fighting strength, but it's possible that their battle with the dog-toad has been noticed by the goblins, or that its death has triggered some internal alarm. And of course, every day lost means another tick of the doomsday clock, with the Black Circle's latest plot to rescue Naradawk Skewn looming at midnight.

After five more minutes of heated debate, they decide to risk delay and take a day to recuperate. This also gives them time to examine the monster's chain and jeweled collar, both magical, as well as to explore this cavern more thoroughly. Regarding the chain itself, it's enchanted to place a constant *dimensional anchor* on whatever it constrains. And on the collar, it turns out that one particular inset ruby radiates the same strong magic as the red glass mirror. Flicker estimates that the other gems on the collar, if carefully removed, are worth upward of thirty thousand gold pieces.

Morningstar looks thoughtfully at the splattery remains of the monster. "It's troubling that the goblins are powerful enough to capture and tame this thing."

Dranko fishes a blanket from his pack. "Maybe the goblins look through the other side of this, and now they'll see that there's nothing sitting on their portal." He arranges the blanket on the mirror, trying to make it look, at a casual glance, like a "faux monster butt."



On Aravis's behalf, Morningstar shoots off a *sending* to Pewter. Not wanting to blow *tongues* just for this, and thinking it would be good to work out some kind of feline code, they settle on this:

Hey Pewter. We are well. Are you? One meow for 'dire peril,' two if 'danger,' three if OK, four for 'have info, come soon.'

The reply is three meows, followed by a pause, followed by 22 conversational-sounding meows that Morningstar is, alas, not able to understand.

Their attention now turns to the mirror. Ernie's *true seeing* uncovers nothing illusory or concealed, but Kibi's *analyze portal* (spoofed via *limited wish*) is quite revealing. He learns that in order to open the portal, one must hold the magical ruby from the collar and speak out loud the words "Maglubiyet's Fortress." He also gets a brief glimpse of the other side, though this is somewhat less enlightening. His view is looking straight down, as if from the top of a tall building, at a rocky red landscape, hilly but otherwise featureless. What he finds strange is that his own point of view seemed to be *moving*.

The Company's only other interesting activity that day is the exploration of a naturally concealed fissure along the left wall of the cavern. They spend a few *wind-walked* hours exploring, as the narrow crack leads to a tall vertical shaft with an ancient ladder. At the bottom this tube empties into a large connected complex of natural caverns with narrow footpaths, and these lead to more areas long ago occupied by goblins. Like the ruins above, these ancient goblin caves have been abandoned for centuries.



Heroes' feasted and *wind walked*, the Company activate the portal early the next morning. Ernie is still solid and flying via his magic shield, so that he can hold the ruby. "Maglubiyet's Fortress!"

The mirror loses its reflective property and becomes an opaque shimmering red. They step onto it, and descend through. Unexpectedly, they don't *stop* descending. All seven of them find themselves in free-fall, solid as rocks and plummeting like them as well. Ernie's *fly* spell seems to be failing him.

SPLAT!

They land on a hard rocky slope, badly bruised. A few bones are broken. Lesser folk would have been dashed to pieces. High above them a horizontal red disk zips into the distance, soon vanishing into the hazy red air. Given Kibi's glimpse of the previous day, it's likely that the portal was moving even as they emerged. Their *telepathic bond* is still intact, meaning that the portal did not strip them of all enchantments.

Ernie groans, stands, and when the party have collected themselves, casts a mass curative. The terrain around them is as Kibi expected, little red rocky hills that make it hard to see very far in any direction. But almost immediately they hear guttural voices sounding from the other side of the nearest hill, not more than fifty feet distant. Kibi immediately casts a Silent *veil* to make them all look like – what else? – rats. They scatter like rodents, with Ernie and Dranko moving toward the voice. Kibi activates *tongues* and listens to the voices.

"Are you... sure? Over... there?"

"Yeah! I can't believe you... didn't... hear it!" The speech of the goblins is punctuated with gasping breaths.

Ernie crests the nearest hill and sees three goblin soldiers. They wear red and black uniforms with the symbol of Maglubiyet's Fist prominently displayed. They are lugging enormous packs on their backs, bulging at the seams and towering over their heads. Swords are belted to their sides. They look exhausted, and their sweaty clothes and dog-tired expressions speak of a truly crappy day. It's about to get much worse.

Ernie rushes forward, and if the goblins are surprised to see a rat here, they don't have time to react. The rat swipes with a forepaw and the head of one goblin is shorn neatly from its shoulders. Ernie cleaves into the next one, sending it reeling. Dranko's whip trips the wounded goblin and deftly snaps the neck of the third.

Lying on the ground still bound to his heavy pack, badly wounded, and staring at the severed head of his fellow, the surviving goblin croaks, "I surrender! I surrender!"

Morningstar approaches and casts *mind probe*, stealing answers to her questions straight from the poor goblin's mind without it even knowing:

- The goblin, **Garogg**, is a grunt, and has never heard of Maglubiyet's Fang.
- The Iron Tower is several miles away; Garogg indicates a direction. He doesn't know anything about its specific defenses, though several thousand goblins are camped in its immediate vicinity.
- Garogg doesn't know when the army is being deployed. He has orders to be prepared to move out on very short notice. If there's a signal to muster, he doesn't know that either. His commander will tell him.
- The Champion of Maglubiyet is, he assumes, the war-chieftain Glemiyal. Garogg has never seen Glemiyal's face, but his mind contains an image of a tall, heavily armored goblin with a glowing red sword. He guesses Glemiyal is quartered in the Iron Tower.
- As far as Garogg knows, there are no other living things in the Crimson Maw besides goblins. And, apparently, rats.
- The command structure is fairly standard for large armies. They operate in small platoons of twenty, with twenty such groups comprising companies of four hundred. The companies are grouped into four or five divisions, each of which has (he guesses) between ten and fifteen thousand goblins. His division is called Selkik – all of the divisions are named for great goblin heroes.
- The goblins camped in the Crimson Maw have no need to eat or sleep.
- Garogg was not born here; like all the goblins, he was born in the Underdark.
- The goblin army has many hundreds of highly trained sorcerers and clerics. He doesn't know if any of them are capable of raising the dead.
- He was walking around with the other two goblins, because the three of them had gotten into some unauthorized fisticuffs. Now they're being made to run circuits with full pack as punishment.
- It will be about an hour before his commander notices his failure to return.
- It is highly unusual for a soldier to go missing here in the Maw.
- He can't think of much that would explain a random goblin's death. Sometimes goblins do kill one another in arguments, but that's very rare. There are two levels of punishment here: for minor infractions, circuits with full pack. For major transgressions, heavy objects are tied to the offender, who is then thrown in the lake.
- Garogg doesn't recall what it's like to feel fear. Even now he's having trouble remembering why exactly he surrendered. He does think he felt fear before being quartered in the Maw, but the memory of that is dim.

Ernie consults briefly with Morningstar over the mind-link, then kicks the goblin savagely in the kneecap. Morningstar casts *modify memory* to give the goblin a different recollection of the past few minutes. Garogg now believes that the other two goblins killed each other in a heated argument, and he himself was injured trying to get between them to stop the fight. He has no memory at all of deadly rats.

The Company watch stoically as Garogg gets painfully to his feet, unable to put any real weight on the busted knee. He throws off his 75-lb. pack, takes a few steps, then looks back, conflicted. With a sigh – and presumably a good idea of what will happen if he returns unencumbered – he again shoulders the pack, winces in pain, and hobbles away over the rocks.



The sky is uniformly red, with no sun or other celestial bodies to explain the source of light. There are high mountains at the edges of their vision, and no signs of buildings. *Everything* here is red, dull, irritating, monotonous, and hot. Each member of the Company feels unusually tense and uncomfortable. Dranko grumbles that if the Crimson Maw prevents sleep, they won't be able to regain spells. Morningstar, a professional, disproves this theory by dropping immediately to sleep. That's one worry out of the way, at least. Ernie tries another *wind walk*, but the spell simply fails. The Crimson Maw itself seems to suppress the ability to fly. So, on foot, the cluster of rats scurry off in the direction of the Iron Tower.

After a slow hour of marching, the Company begin to hear the noise of a crowd. The sound steadily increases until the party crest a hillock and see before them the edges of an armed camp. They are not high enough for a true bird's-eye view, but the camp is filled with dozens of small, crude tents and hundreds of goblins. A large group of soldiers are performing calisthenics with startling discipline. Other goblins, all in identical uniforms, are talking or resting. What's most immediately odd about the camp is the absence of cook-fires or the smell of food.

Rather than sneak through the tents, the Company opt to go around, keeping a large enough distance that the nearest goblins won't hear stray rocks or see loose scree sliding down from the ridge. Soon the camp is well behind them, and the party make good time sticking to the ridge-line. Ten minutes later they again hear approaching goblins, this time a few dozen feet below them, heading toward the camp they had recently left. These are in fancier versions of the standard goblin uniform, and one of them has a handful of papers. Morningstar listens with *tongues*, and soon ascertains that these are mid-level officers on an inspection tour. They are talking idly of the combat-readiness of the divisions, and which companies will be deployed as scouts once the invasion begins.

Finally the Company labor up a particularly high peak on the ridge and get a decent look around. They see a sprawling encampment below, at least five thousand goblins moving amongst a small city of tents. There is still no sign of the Iron Tower. As the rats catch their collective breath, Dranko spies a small number of running goblins crest a hill on the far side of the camp. Two head to a command tent in the center of the goblin mass, while others continue onward, soon vanishing from sight. Several minutes later there's a flurry of activity, orders are issued, and about thirty goblins start climbing the hills ringing the camp. These take up sentry positions along the ridges, one of them not more than a hundred yards from where the party are watching. It lifts a spyglass and looks around on both sides of the ridge, and others of the hastily deployed sentries are doing the same. The rats take shelter behind a boulder.

"Maybe," Flicker whispers to Dranko, "the goblins have discovered that your blanket is not actually a huge monster butt."

theskyfullofdust: What are the levels of the party at this stage? And how far behind is this update now?

Really enjoying the story and looking forward to learning more about the Maw. Thanks for sharing.

Sagiro: The party had recently hit 18th level at this point – the fight against the Guardian of the Maw was their first combat at 18th.

The Story Hour is about 25 runs behind the actual game; in "real life" the party is one more session away from achieving 20th level. In terms of real time, the party entered the Crimson Maw on September 1, 2008. So, still plenty of catching up to do!

theskyfullofdust: Thanks! How's play been at nearly 20th level?

Sagiro: Challenging! At 18th-20th level, and with a 6-PC party that includes two high-level clerics and two high-level wizards (plus an effective spellsword, an optimized-for-sneak-attacks rogue/lasher, and a rogue NPC), there's very little the party cannot do if they want to. Also, with so much divination magic at their disposal (*commune*, *legend lore*, *vision*, etc.), there's very little they can't find out. On top of that, I'm a total softy when it comes to handing out loot, so the party is loaded down with powerful magic items. And finally, if I challenge them *too* much, they can whip out *miracles* and *wishes*.

The sorts of adventures I can challenge them with have become harder to invent, and I often solve that problem by giving them quests in Unique and Epic Locations™ that have unusual rules. The Crimson Maw, for instance, is a demi-plane that prohibits flight and teleportation. It's a fine line, though. On the one hand, limiting the party's toolset makes them approach problems in new and fresh ways, and often improves the game. On the other hand, they've *earned* that toolset, and it's pretty unsporting to keep nerfing their powerful cool abilities.

In one of the next couple of installments, you'll see how the party figured out how to completely do an end-run around an absolutely majestic set-piece I had envisioned. And you know what? It was my own damned fault! You could hear the sound of my head-smack from three blocks down when they realized they could [details redacted].

theskyfullofdust: I know what you mean. I've never played or ran games at that level before (usually end a campaign around early teens) but I am used to players completely bypassing set-pieces and encounters by coming up with ideas I hadn't anticipated, or something I had forgotten about; and I too have been generous with loot in past games (but not so much these days, I make them earn every item) and regretted it later. Having more political games helped, since they couldn't just slaughter everyone, and having consequences as a result of their actions can help make them think twice about their tactics (burn a village to kill a demon, the king's not going to look kindly towards you, that sort of thing).

Looking forward to seeing how they tackle the Maw, and the head-smacking...

Piratecat: Woot, 20th level! Screw you, Octesian!

kuragara: Break out the foul cigars... Yes it is time to rejoice as Octesian is no more and we are 20th level.

Still can't help thinking we're doomed...

Sius: Congratulations, folks! That's what, 2 levels every year you've been playing, aye? I wish I had a game whose story was worth that...

Hey PC, what are the odds of Dranko re-earning his fame as some sort of epic reward? For extra points, make him choose between the possibility of recognition, or a colossal elemental's eyeball...

Mathew Freeman: Huzzah, hurrah and hooray!

MorningstarofEll: *whew* We did it!!!!!!

I don't think I'd ever want to run a campaign at this level.. I'm not sure how Sagiro does it. From my side at least our combats frequently feel like mad scrambles through our character sheets to pull out *something* that will keep us alive a bit longer. We have some combinations that get used repeatedly but we have to come up with new things all the time in order to make it through. Everyone except the NPC rogue is a spellcaster and the number of variables we can pull out to try in combat is pretty overwhelming. I won't give away too many spoilers... but last night's combat had a team of Ellish priestesses helping out as well, so there were something like 17 spellcasters on our side of the fight.

The Octesian fight has been hanging over us for just about five months in real time. It lasted three sessions... and the sessions were very spread out due to a lot of people being busy with their real lives. One big reason for a lot of the delays was Grey Wolf and I having a baby... Our baby is 4.5 months old now and we've finally finished the fight!

kuragara: Yeah, he began his early arrival on the night I was working on the miniature for this battle. I blame the tentacles...

MorningstarofEll: I feel like we worked hard and did justice to the story and that feels great! (And after the last combat I think I am maybe even looking forward to sitting back and casting *heal, heal, mass heal, heal* for a bit!!)

blargney the second: That sounds awesome! I can't wait to read about it. Do you have more to do in the campaign, or was that the capstone?

kuragara: Nope, got to go after two more evil red-armored folk and likely pick a fight with an imprisoned god. In short, we're doomed... but what else is new?

Piratecat: Such a satisfying fight.

I don't know about anyone else, but one of my goals when I level up Dranko is to simplify his character sheet. I'm going to get rid of minor magical items that make things harder to track, I'm going to list out what bonuses he gets from where, and I'm going to try to streamline the sheet to eliminate some of the cruft. We'll see how it works.

RangerWickett: I hear 4E's good for simplifying... Congrats!

MorningstarofEll: Yeah, archiving some of the lower-level stuff is a good idea... This combat was particularly challenging because I had the usual three pages of character sheet/items, six pages of spells (long-ish because I have a one line mini-cheat for each one to remind me what the heck they do and what page of which book to find them in) PLUS three or four pages of *Ava Dormo* abilities, three pages describing the abilities of the priestesses involved, the godsend of a cheat sheet you made me, and the handy page KidCthulu made with all of the stuff she cast on me. I swear when I looked down, the page I needed was never there!

Mathew Freeman: Congratulations on the baby! Another gamer brought into the world.

Sius: Ach, you all are killing me! All these subtle hints (subtle for Dranko at least) about your cool superawesomebossfightextraordinaire extravaganza, and we don't get to see it! For a good while, at least...

Is anyone sure that these posts all come from the players? Maybe Sagiro is posting all these teasers under pseudonyms; an extra layer of illegitimate rodentry, maybe? Don't know the man enough to put it past him...

Everett: So, then... what epic classes are the Company thinking of taking?

Piratecat: I don't think anyone has even considered epic classes. At level 20, it'll be at least six months before we'll need to think about it. Speaking just for myself, Dranko would continue in Rogue or Lasher. I don't think we'll be using the *Epic Handbook* as written in any case.

I'll post my level 20 sheet for anyone curious. This doesn't have the personal history, personal rules or information about his church; it does have the souvenir list and all current combat stats (along with a few typos). [See the following three pages.]

Joshua Randall: That's actually not that bad a PC sheet in terms of complexity, for 20th level. At least you have your attack bonuses written out and don't have to calculate them every... single... time... (That's my #1 pet peeve when DMing.)

Piratecat: Thanks. I've worked hard to simplify it; with two archmagi, a swordmage and two near-epic-level clerics in the group, we get a lot of buff spells. Knowing what bonuses come from where really helps.

Joshua Randall: Oh yes. Bonus stacking (or not) is both a blessing and a curse. I've actually created spreadsheets to track this, using separate columns for each type of bonus and the MAX function to figure out the largest bonus of each type, then summing them up. But doing it by hand can also work if you're not lazy like I am.

Piratecat: Even so, it's amazing how long my attack round can take if I don't start early. Rolling 1d3+1d6+12+7d6 (reroll 1s) for five attacks takes a stupid amount of time; each round it's 5d20 and then 45 d6, of which 40 need to be treated specially. I've either started using Machdice on my iPhone to calculate them, or rolling damage during other peoples' turns and making a list. Then I roll my attacks during my own turn and just cross out the damage numbers as they come up. Saves time!

Joshua Randall: Have you thought about figuring out your average damage, and then simplifying the damage expressions? For example on 1d3+1d6+12+7d6 (reroll 1s) I think the average damage is something like $2+3.5+12+7*(4.5) = 49$ points of damage. So you could simplify the damage expression to something like 40+2d6. (I believe towards the tail end of 3.5, the designers recommended doing this with monster damage rolls.)

Of course the downside of this is that you can never get a truly spectacular roll, like a ton of 5s and 6s, that would add up to a lot more than 52.

(cleric 5, rogue 11, lasher 4)
Lvl 20 Neutral Good half-orc. Worships Delioch, the White Hand, God of Healing.

Action Points: 5 base + 10 level = 15 (3d6 per point) **Number spent?**

Armor: **37** (10 +9 armor +6 shield +6 dex +2 luck (marriage) +4 deflection +0 size +0 natural +0 dodge)
Hasted = AC 38 (+1 dodge) Flatfooted 37 Touch 22 [75% fortification from shield]

Hit Points: (202 +14 temp hp (*heroes' feast*) +40 (*bear's endurance*, when cast))
256 - Normal + *Bear's Endurance* + temp
216 - Normal + temp

Initiative: +11 (+7 dex, +4 feat)
Move: 30'

Str	20	+5	(+6 belt)
Dex	24	+7	(+6 gloves)
Con	20	+5	
Int	09	-1	
Wis	14	+2	
Cha	08	-1	

+19 Fortitude (4 cleric + 3 rogue +1 lasher + 5 con +2 luck +4 resistance)
+25 Reflex (1 cleric + 7 rogue +4 lasher + 7 dex +2 luck +4 resistance +0 dodge)
+17 Will (4 cleric + 3 rogue +1 lasher + 2 will +2 luck +1 morale (*heroes' feast*) +4 resistance)
Modifiers: +3 vs traps, *Haste* gives +1 dodge to Reflex saves.

BAB: +15 (3 cleric + 8 rogue +4 lasher; +14 whip is +1 feat +7 dex +5 enh. +1 morale (*heroes' feast*))

Grapple: +20, +30 to avoid being grappled

Sneak attack: +6d6, +7d6 with whip, reroll any 1s

+29 **Coaltongue as a +5 whip:** 1d3 dmg +1d6 holy +5 str, +5 enh, +2 class

Special: (trip +13, ignore alig. DR, +1d6 holy dmg, 5d6 *searing light* 1/day, shadowstrike, truedeath crystal)

+29 / +24 / +19 **Full attack:** 1d3 +1d6 holy +12 dmg (+7d6 sneak attk, no 1s?)

+27 / +27 / +22 / +17 **Crack of fate full attack:** 1d3 +1d6 holy +12 dmg (+6d7 sneak attk, no 1s?)

+28 / +28 / +23 / +18 **Hasted crack of fate attack:** 1d3 +1d6 holy +12 dmg (+6d7 sneak attk, no 1s?)

Other attk modifiers: +2 (invisible), +2 (flanking), [+1 (*haste*), -2 (crack of fate)]

202 + 14 temp hp

Skill Descriptions

	Ability	Ranks	Items	Misc	Misc 2
Appraise	+1	-1	0		+2 luck
Balance	+9	+7	0		+2 luck
Bluff	+20	-1	19		+2 luck
Climb	+20	+5	11	2	+2 luck
Concentration	+9	+5	2		+2 luck
Craft (leather)	+3	-1	2		+2 luck
Diplomacy	+3	-1	0	2	+2 luck
Disguise	+3	-1	0	(+10)	+2 luck
Escape Artist	+13	+7	4		+2 luck
Forgery	+3	-1	2		+2 luck
Gather Information	+8	-1	7		+2 luck
Heal	+5	+2	1		+2 luck
Hide	+30	+7	17	(+10)	4
Intimidate	+3	-1	0	2	+2 luck
Jump	+7	+5	0		+2 luck
Knowledge (history)	+2	-1	1		+2 luck
Knowledge (religion)	+3	-1	2		+2 luck
Listen	+15	+2	4	+5	2
Move Silently	+30	+7	6	+15	+2 luck
Open Lock	+10	+7	1		+2 luck
Ride	+9	+7	½		+2 luck
Search	+6	-1	5		+2 luck
Sense Motive	+7	+2	3		+2 luck
Sleight Of Hand	+26	+7	15	2	+2 luck
Speak Language*	-	-	1		
Spot	+28	+2	22	2	+2 luck
Survival	+4	+2	0		+2 luck
Swim	+7	+5	0		+2 luck
Tumble	+10	+7	1		+2 luck
Use Rope	+11	+7	2		+2 luck

* Speaks Kivian Common, Common, Orcish.

Hide and Disguise bonuses require the *robe of blending* to be worn.

FEATS:

- Lasher virtual feat:* Improved trip (with whip)
- Ioun stone virtual feat:* Alertness
- 1. Exotic weapon (whip)
- 2. Weapon focus (whip)
- 3. Weapon finesse
- 4. Improved initiative
- 5. Craft Magic arms and armor
- 6. Leadership (to be retrained at 20th lvl)
- 7. Deadly precision (reroll 1s on sneak attack damage)

CLASS ABILITIES:

- Rogue:*
 - Uncanny dodge
 - Improved uncanny dodge (can't be flanked)
 - Trapfinding
 - Trap sense +3
 - Evasion
 - Improved evasion
 - Sneak attack +6d6 (+7d6 with whip)

Cleric:

- Spontaneous Cure spells
- Turn undead 2/day
- Lay on hands (12 pts/day)
- Distance heal 1/day
- Healing spells cast at +1 lvl (6th lvl)
- Protective ward +5 to saves 1/day

Lasher:

- Whip sneak attack +1d6
- Close combat (no AoOs for using whip)
- Wound (whip does normal damage)
- Whip lash (take AoOs as per normal within 5')
- Improved trip (as feat, with whip only)
- Third Hand (whip can manipulate stuff)
- Crack of Fate (rapid shot with whip)
- Lashing whip (+2 dmg with whip)

TENTACLE ABILITIES:

- Detect magic at will
- Repulsion 1/day, lose 2 points of wisdom
- True Seeing 1/day, lose 4 points of wisdom
- Time stop 3 rounds 1/day, lose 4 points of wisdom
- Tentacular nature 1/week, lose 4 points of wisdom (standard action. 1 attk/round as free action; (+30 + Wis mod to hit. 2d8+10 dmg, DC 25 Will save or panicked for next turn. Lasts 1 rnd/lvl, AC 30, 50 hp, only damaged by slashing weapons.)

OTHER COOL STUFF:

Can critical elementals (*Cranchus' gift*)

Marriage ritual gives +2 luck bonus on AC, saves, skills, and ability checks.

FACE: Eye patch of See Invisibility
HEAD:
THROAT: Hand of Glory (casts *daylight* and *see invisible* 1/day; holds a Ring of Delioch)
SHOULDERS: Cloak of resistance +4
BODY: Armor (see below) (occasionally swapped for *robe of blending*)
TORSO: Sash of Transparency ("Miss Charagan"; 39 charges)
HANDS: Gloves of Dexterity +6 (nose-sticking; "Kibi's a genius")
ARMS:
WAIST: Belt of Strength +6
RING 1: Ring of Deflection +4
RING 2: Ring of Water Elemental Command
RING 3: Ring of Delioch (3/day, transfer all healing received to an ally in 120')
FEET: Boots of Haste

WEAPONS:

Coaltongue: whip +2 (boosted to +5), +1d6 holy, sure striking, tripping (+4 to trip), *searing light* 5d6 1/day, *shadowstrike* 1/day (+5' reach and foe loses Dex bonus for one attack); holds greater truedeath crystal (ghost touch, +1d6 dmg vs undead, can sneak attack and crit undead). *Typically increased to a magic weapon +5 each day by Ernie's 4th lvl greater magic weapon spell.*

Alazar's Tongue: whip +5, casts *dimensional anchor* or *dismissal* on a creature struck, each once per day. -4 penalty to foe's saves for encounter, once per day. On crit, foe moves at half speed on next turn.

Spellbreaker: heavy mace +3 (on a crit casts *greater dispel magic*), 1d8, x2 crit (20)

ARMOR: +3 *mithral chain shirt of true stealth*; +15 move silently (greater shadow), blueshine (armor immune to acid and rust), crystal of glancing blows (+10 bonus to initially avoid a grapple); max dex bonus +6. *Typically increased to armor +5 each day by Ernie's 3rd lvl magic vestment spell.*

SHIELD: +5 buckler of moderate fortification (75% chance to avoid critical hits and sneak attacks)

Slotless/Miscellaneous objects:

Wand of cure critical wounds (33 charges)
Wand of indomitability (3 charges)
Snooper's Earring (+5 to Listen)
Indigo loun stone of Alertness
Pouch of Accessibility (Heward's Handy Haversack)
Bag of Endless Rope (495')
Tar Bag of Tricks
Lucent Tower
Decanter of Endless Water
Prophetic Emerald of Critting elementals (swallowed)
Immovable rod
Infinite spellbook (dimensional anchor is currently up)
Flicker has another Greater Truedeath Crystal
Refuge token to the Greenhouse
Refuge token for Morningstar
1 potion of waterbreathing
5 potions of cure serious wounds

Scrolls

dimensional anchor
waterwalk, neutralize poison, inflict crit wounds
sanctuary, spiritual weapon
tongues, cure light wounds, cure moderate wounds
cure serious wounds, water breathing
tongues, cure critical wounds, lesser restoration

Objects waiting to be used:

Robe of Blending (disguise self spell and +10 competence bonus to hide)
Necklace of Bellows (10 charges; free action; Fort DC 25, knockback 5' / 15')
Ring of Feather Falling
Ring of Undetectable Magic
Unshakable boots (can't be knocked down, will never run in fear, +10 to opposed grapple checks)
Amulet of Health +2
Amulet of Wisdom +4
23 +1 sling bullets
Spoon of maggots
Crown of Combustion (5 charges)
Wild magic translator disk
Bullseye lantern with a continual flame in it
Mirror of Whispers
Kivian common translation earring
Cloak Pin vs Poison +4 (from Wurthans after turtle battle)

LOOTZOR

GP: 41,900 (not updated, check sheets)

Useful non-magical objects

Climber's Kit: +2 circumstance bonus to climb
Tinderbox, flint & steel
50' of silk rope, grappling hook
Fishing rod, hooks & sinkers; large fishing net
10 spikes & small hammer
10 sheets of parchment & good ink/quills
Small metal mirror
Signet/seal forgery kit
Key to Greenhouse
Blanket & bedroll
Scrolls of Delioch (Holy Tome)
Holy Symbol

2 cases of Blacktallow cigars
Clean white & gold robes/cassock
Finely made clothing: black & red or black & silver
2 wineskins/waterskins
Chalk, bag of flour
6 candles & 6 torches
Crowbar
Thief's tools
excellent adjustable manacles & leg irons
Bag of caltrops (12)
Pouch with 30 steel marbles
Spire pin

Gave away:

Forger's Kit (+10 to forgery)
Glasses of Inversion
Iglat
Thriss

Spells

Orisons (6 spells)	Level 1 (4+1 spells)	Level 2 (3+1 spells)	Level 3 (1+1 spells)
— Amanuensis (SB) — Clean (R&R) — Create water — Cure minor wounds — Detect magic — Detect poison — Guidance (+1 on roll) — Light — Mending — Purify food and drink — Quick Sober — Read magic	— Bless — Bless water — Cause fear — Command — Comprehend languages — Conviction (SB) — Cure light wounds — Detect chaos — Detect evil — Detect good — Detect law — Detect undead — Divine favor — Doom — Ebon Eyes (SB) — Endure elements — Entropic shield — Grave Strike (SB) — Hide from undead — Inhibit (SB) — Know Age — Magic weapon — Obscuring mist — Omen of Peril (SB) — Protection from chaos — Protection from evil — Protection from law — Remove fear — Resurgence (SB) — Sanctuary — Shield of faith — Summon monster 1	— Aid — Align weapon — Augury — Bear's Endurance — Bull's Strength — Calm emotions — Close wounds (SB) — Consecrate — Cure moderate wounds — Curse of ill fortune (SB) — Dark way (SB) — Darkness — Delay poison — Divine insight (SB) — Eagle's splendor — Enthrall — Gentle repose — Hold person — Iron silence (SB) — Make whole — Owl's Wisdom — Quick march (SB) — Remove paralysis — Resist energy — Restoration, lesser — Shatter — Shield other — Silence — Spiritual weapon — Status — Undetectable alignment — Zone of truth	— Bestow curse — Circle dance (SB) — Continual flame — Conviction, mass (SB) — Create food & water — Cure serious wounds — Daylight — Deeper darkness — Dispel magic — Downdraft (SB) — Glyph of warding — Grace (SB) — Holy storm (SB) — Invisibility purge — Knight's move (SB) — Locate object — Magic circle vs. evil — Magic vestment — Meld with stone — Nauseating breath (SB) — Obscure object — Prayer — Prod from energy — Remove blindness/deafness — Remove curse — Remove disease — Resurgence, Mass (SB) — Searing light — Speak with dead — Stone shape — Water breathing — Water walk — Weapon of Energy (SB) — Wind wall
— Open slots	— Open slots	— Open slots	— Open slots
— Sphere: Healing (heal as caster +1 lvl) (2/day, heal @ line of sight)	— Cure light wounds	— Cure mod. wounds	— Cure serious wounds
— Sphere: Protection (+1 lvl prot. ward 1/day, for 1 hr)	— Sanctuary	— Shield Other	— Prot. vs. elements
Lay On Hands (12 hp/day): _____			

A SELECTION OF TROPHIES

- Mrs. H's fishermen's sweater
- Ernie's wooly mittens, hat, & socks
- Sock stuck into icebox
- Storm knight souvenir from Venic giant (big/little knight)
- Uthalingite dart of virulent poison
- Square coins (Gohgan's basement; 2695 years old)
- copper ring (Gohgan's basement; 2695 years old)
- red scarf from Gohgan's
- silver sash from goblin shaman
- Kay's silver elvish ring from her Mom (gift!)
- silver food bowl for Smeggy (from auction)
- silver ring (ruin of Tharnias' shop)
- Grubby white & gold robes/cassock
- Selection of Manzanill's clothing
- Nifi uniform & Nifi officer's uniform
- Uniform for the King of Charagan
- Necklace: jeweled sword (friend of Werthis)
- 18 flatworm teeth (one in good shape)
- bottle of sand from the mouth of Nahalm
- souvenir block of Floom
- big gray-blue behir (alligator-snake) scale
- vial of water from fountain in Ghant
- bent iron bar (after being strong with strength bean)
- Gardener's trowel, Cineloth estate, Minok
- sand-walking kit, stolen from Sand's Edge
- Bottle of rolt stench
- Necklace: jeweled sword (friend of Wurthas)
- Manzanill's spiffy wardrobe
- Falva's pot for Eddings (souvenir)
- 2 Faceless crossbows, whipped from hands
- ½ wooden golem head, from Repose
- Clay golem carving tools from Repose
- Moving topiary souvenier from Djaw (?)
- Little Cloudhawk Ferengi banner
- glass jar w/ body of ER's bright red snake/basilisk tail tip
- Crude ogre silver (9) & copper (4) coins
- Djaw paperwork for one month / weapon badge
- Cool Djawan clothing – both nice and crappy
- Tufts of red hair from Kay's bloodfox, in Blackhipe Moor
- Teeth and claws from Black Circle starved desert dragon
- Little tiny green fungus (nightmare beast caves)
- Giant beast tusk (shrunk to 1/144th size)
- Hunk of petrified nightmare beast dung
- Orc pouch – little copper coins, beef jerky (Glaring Peak)
- Tiny bottle with Flicker's sapphire dust in it (trap the soul)
- Abernathy's silver ashtray (75 gp)
- Cape made of Seki fur
- Stuffed Seki head
- 6' long eyebat cable
- stolen snuff box
- bottle of Venic Giant muck; giant turtle souvenirs
- jar of Venic giant flesh
- red marble blood gargoyle face piece (to stuff in Mokad's mouth)
- 2 bottles wine from Medir, 1 from Kenderhold
- Burning God statue
- souvenir from Flushing Day at the mirrors of Semek
- black & silver studded leather armor (w/ accessories)
- mechanism, pottery & skull from Castle Blackhipe
- original footman's mace
- 3 unholy symbols, black circle w/ 5 diamonds worth 500 gp?
- blind cow skull from Blackhipe Dungeons

- wooden 18" javelin from Kay's neck (Verdshane)
- Used-up invisibility ring from infiltration
- wooden plague bat on string
- 4 dwarfish adamantine coins (@ 20 gp) from God's Thorn
- Miniature blue glass minaret from Zhamir
- empty drug pot
- golden holy symbol of Nifi on a silver chain (40 gp)
- Mining pincers (rakshasa underground tunnel)
- Bottle of Grond/babbler goop, with small eyeball
- 2 Dire rhino tusks from bone spider
- Bone fragments from the battle of Bone Pass
- 3 feathers from a giant dire raven
- Handful of miracs, min-miracs, and chits
- Really nice Yujan carvings
- Handful of pakeesh, Topia and Gin
- Three cases of turtle jerky
- 1 box Tevian cigars (too mild for our taste)
- 1 pouch Northlynch leaf pipe tobacco (from Barnabas)
- 1 excellent corn cob pipe (from Barnabas)
- 2 sets of stylish Tevian clothing (needs tailoring)
- Manzanill's spiffy wardrobe, new clothes (light & heavy)
- Evil green potion from Kallor Black Circle central
- Dragon blood, scales, and teeth from Battle of Verdshane

- Vial of mud from the Battle of Verdshane
- Pennant from Sealing Day parade
- Carved horse & knight, in red and gold, from Sealing Day
- Letter from King, giving us Longtooth Keep and rank
- 2 plate-sized silver pieces from Eignomic's house
- Ostentatious magic "black circle" fake key
- Eye stalk from small tundra eye
- Really nice black circle robe with black circles, ~300 yrs old
- Black Circle & Rose kinetic toy
- Bit of rakshasa fur
- Box of perfect bugbear teeth (from Zeg)
- Monster tooth from Crimson Maw
- Shards of Maglubiyet's Fang.
- Meledien's disembodied, skeletal arm
- Pouch of sand from the floor of Naslyn
- Praska's Book of Lies
- Sealing wax & Oracle seal/Woundtender seal
- Pouch of greenspark tobacco
- Carved pipe & good tobacco (from Mrs. Horn)
- Gray slave robe (faked) & bucket from Tal Hai (Pike Vale)
- Insect poison (str) – Srapa?
- Virulent poison (con) – Srapa?
- Coin collection from around the multiverse

(Sir) Dranko Brightshield (formerly Blackhipe)
"One Slippery Slope"

Former Guildmaster of the Undermen
Former Knight of the Spire Guard
Priest of Delioch

Age: 27 (June 18, 1808)
Height: 5' 11"
Weight: 190 lbs.
Eyes: black
Hair: black
Skin: tan
Right handed

Ring of Elemental Command

Elementals of the plane to which the ring is attuned can't attack the wearer, or even approach within 5 feet of him. If the wearer desires, he may forego this protection and instead attempt to charm the elemental (as *charm monster*, Will DC 17 negates). If the charm attempt fails, however, absolute protection is lost and no further attempt at charming can be made.

Creatures from the plane to which the ring is attuned who attack the wearer take a -1 penalty on their attack rolls. The ring wearer makes applicable saving throws from the extraplanar creature's attacks with a +2 resistance bonus. He gains a +4 morale bonus on all attack rolls against such creatures. Any weapon he uses bypasses the damage reduction of such creatures, regardless of any qualities the weapon may or may not have.

The wearer of the ring is able to converse with creatures from the plane to which his ring is attuned. These creatures recognize that he wears the ring. They show a healthy respect for the wearer if alignments are similar. If alignments are opposed, creatures fear the wearer if he is strong. If he is weak, they hate and desire to slay him.

The possessor of a ring of elemental command takes a saving throw penalty as follows:
Water: -2 against fire-based effects

- * Water walk (**unlimited use**)
- * Create water (**unlimited use**)
- * Water breathing (**unlimited use**)
- * Wall of ice (**once per day**)
- * Ice storm (**twice per week**)
- * Control water (**twice per week**)

Strong conjuration; CL 15th; Forge Ring, summon monster VI, all appropriate spells; Price 200,000 gp.

Piratecat: I love rolling dice too much to regularly simplify the damage expression. I'd probably do this if combat was dragging, though. Not a bad idea at all.

This sheet is simpler and cleaner than my previous version. For instance, I was at a loss as to where my +4 resistance bonus to saves was coming from until I found a scrap of paper two years old that mentioned Dranko was wearing a *cloak of resistance +4*. Who knew? I had included it in my stats at the time but never wrote it down anywhere else. Quite the mystery for a little while.

Considering my tentacle bargain, I am going to retrain Leadership this level. I'm considering Craft Wondrous Object (oh +5 *amulet of natural armor*, you're looking *gooooood*) or a feat that gives -4 to AC for +2 to hit. Considering how many times I barely miss during iterative attacks, and how much damage I do when I hit, it'd probably be worth it.

Joshua Randall: Yess... Maximizing attack bonus is the first step towards the Optimizer Side... Feeeel your rage flow through you, then strike down your enemies and your journey will be complete! (And, oh man, -4 AC / +2 attack is fantastic as a finisher, or if you are about to unleash a full-round attack of like five iteratives!)

Piratecat: First step? Sagiro will tell you I'm the biggest optimizer in the group! I don't go overboard or make choices that are out of character (Dranko's low Wisdom and INT help confirm this, since every time I lose a skill point I cry a little), but I like having a PC who does a few things very well. My hope is that fun roleplaying helps hide the tendency to optimize, or at least makes it tolerable.

One thing this sheet doesn't have is the grand list of unused items we're selling or donating to our followers; I'll be working to liquidate those in the coming game.

Sius: How does the group dynamic hold together? I know it's a weird question but... how do you guys develop organic relationships with each other? With exception of a single player, there is no way anyone in my group will treat me differently as a character than they would if it were us in person. I went so far as to yell at someone to "Quit referring to the downed guy as the 'dazed character' since he might be dead for all you know!" Entire battles consisting only of meta-dialogue get irritating, though... I admire your verisimilitude.

Piratecat: This erupted quite early on when we had a few complete sessions devoted to the discussion of whether or not we were going to have to kill the prisoner. Oh, we hated those. With a mixture of neutrals and goods, thrashing out these issues was usually painful – but once we did we never had to discuss them again. Morningstar's character is the remaining neutral (Dranko slowly switched up to NG) and we're sensitive to the fact that she's pragmatic and willing to make some sacrifices others aren't. When there's a tricky moral quandary we vote. Majority rules, minority acquiesces gracefully (with a few justified "I told you so's when everything goes poorly).

Interestingly, the group are such good roleplayers that it never even occurs to me to treat the other characters as their players. I know the things which make their heroes angry, and it isn't what upsets the players; we make a conscious effort in combat to make decisions based on what the PCs would know or feel. It isn't always combat-optimal, but it's always satisfying. We all really respect the other players, too, so it's easy to do whatever will make the game most fun for them, as well.

I really credit this to the fact that the campaign has been running for 16 years with remarkably low turnover. I forget if the "new guy" is Aravis or Grey Wolf, but they've been in the game for 14 years!

Meanwhile, in tonight's game we found out what happens when you feed wine to a lion, and we found out the hard way what can happen when you don't investigate a problem quickly enough. While we were saving tens or hundreds of thousands of people from Octesian, we lost an entire city to a particularly horrific aspect of a different enemy. Oof.

Joshua Randall: Dude, you found that out, like, nine years ago when you didn't promptly investigate the Oasis Mages' Guild...

The Warlock: Oooh, now that's a low blow... (Do you have the feat for that?)

steeldragons: So I've just "caught up" to the current present of "Part 3." (Haven't even thought about starting 1 or 2 yet. My mind is too blown.)

First of all, WOW. Wow to Sagiro the DM. The variety and intricacies of the plots... keeping things interesting and challenging for such a high powered group...

Wow to Sagiro the writer... keeping the read entertaining... making just about any NPC encountered feel like a fully fleshed out realized character... even if they just have one line... the treatment of magic (especially given the sheer amount possessed/usable by the group)... sometimes just stating: "so-and-so casts xyz" sometimes going into very nice visual descriptions of effects... and never having it seem cheesy or over- or under-done.

Wow to Piratecat, Aravis, and all of the other players in the group. Keeping their characters real and grounded – i.e. even though they can use a *wish* to get home simply because they're out of *greater teleports* for the day... they still have concerns about their various futures and their capacity to deal with who/what's next on the "to do list" and there's a very real sense that even as powerful as they are any of them could die. The characters have fear and uncertainty as well as quirks and confidence that is palpable and very life-like.

Wow that you've all been in this group for 16 years!?! Gods you guys are a lucky, and gifted, bunch.

Kudos to all and XPs all around. Can't wait for the continuing story.

Sagiro: Hey there! Thanks so much for your post; we really are a lucky bunch, to have had such low turnover over so many years. And for me, having wonderful players who stay invested in the game is a large part of what keeps me going.

Speaking of which... I apologize to all of you for the drop-off in updates. I'm just going through one of those crazy-busy periods, with other stuff sucking away all of my free time. Although I left my old job back in February, I've recently taken on a regular contracting gig, which uses up most of the time I'm not spending taking care of the kids. On top of that, my lovely wife has scheduled me a busy weekend social calendar for the summer. (Just got back from a camping trip, in fact, which included Aravis and his family.) The result: not much time to write Story Hour. But I'm sure the wheel will turn eventually, and I'll continue writing. You all still have my promise that this Story Hour will someday conclude!

Piratecat: Don't bet on it. Sagiro's a great big jerk, and after what he pulled at the game last night we may throttle him before he has a chance to finish the story. We were *forcibly* reminded that if we like someone, they must be eevil. It'd been just long enough that the rule had slipped our minds.

Rat. Bastard.

Tamlyn: Tease.



It's a short update, but after this long I wanted to post *something...*

Undermining

The immediate problem, then, is that they must get past the closest goblin sentry without doing anything the other sentries will notice. Worse, the ridge grows narrower at the spot where the sentinel stands, its rocky top little more than a three-foot-wide

fly-walk with a steep drop on both sides. The interposing goblin stands at the top of a thin switchback-trail which leads down into the goblin encampment.

After a quick discussion of options over the mind-link, Kibi casts *charm monster*. “This never works,” he grumbles as usual.

It works! The goblin blinks a couple of times and looks around in confusion. Kibi quickly puts on his semi-sentient *cloak of diplomacy*. “Excuse me!” he calls.

The goblin looks down and sees... rats? Talking rats? Is he going crazy? He had just been tasked with reporting anything unusual, and this certainly meets the criteria. But... but... that grey one in the front is his friend, he’s sure of it.

“We’re a special rat task force sanctioned by Maglubiyet himself,” Kibi explains. “We’re here to help the goblin armies, but our mission is very, very secret. Don’t look down, or make any sign that you’ve noticed us.”

The goblin, **Margad**, nods slightly. Kibi hears the cloak whisper in his mind: *What Margad most wants is to be important. He’s sick of being a grunt in the army. He wants to be an officer, and he’s only waiting for a big break.*

“If you help us,” says Kibi, “you will gain special favor with Maglubiyet.”

It’s all Margad can do to stop himself from dropping to his knees in thanks. “Are you a high priest?” he asks.

“My boss is a high priest,” Kibi answers. “He recommended you as someone we could trust. What are your current orders?”

“To keep my eyes open for anything out of the ordinary,” says Margad. “Which, I have to say, you *are...*”

“It’s extremely important that you *don’t* say anything about us,” says Kibi urgently. “You are the only one who can know. We chose you because we know we can rely on your discretion.”

Margad stands up straight. “I’m honored, sir. If I may ask, are you a rat, or a goblin *disguised* as a rat?”

“It’s a disguise,” Kibi confides.

The goblin scratches his head. “Who are you trying to hide from? Everyone here is part of Glemiyal’s great army!”

Kibi thinks for a moment. “We’re preparing for the invasion against the halflings,” he ventures. “We hear they have many rats there, so...”

“Ah! I get it,” says Margad. “Clever. It figures the halfling cities are infested with rats. I hear they live in filth, and are little more than rats themselves.”

Can I kill him now? Ernie thinks over the mind-link.

Margad continues. “Does the fact that you’re already disguised mean that the attack is imminent, or even underway?”

“Soon,” says Kibi. “You’ll receive your orders when it’s time.”

“What would you like me to do until then?”

“Continue as you were,” says Kibi, “and be sure to report anything unusual. Just don’t mention seeing us, since we’re secret agents. We wouldn’t want you to get in trouble.”

“Of course, sir. You can rely on me!”

“That’s why we chose to tell only you. Your loyalty is beyond question. Good luck, soldier.”

SolitonMan: I just finished re-reading this story hour – mostly from the 914-page PDF (thanks Steve!!) – and finally through the end of the thread. It doesn’t lose a thing on repetition, and if anything is even more entertaining!

Thanks to all of you for sharing your awesome game on this board! I’d love nothing better than to be part of such a long-running group, and to share in such epic adventures. But barring that, this thread and others like it are a personal source of great enjoyment. Good luck with your continuing triumphs (both in game and out)!

Looks Like I Picked a Bad Day to Start Casting Status

...

Something horrible happens.

...

The second awful thing is that Ernie has become entirely obscured by a cloud of greasy black smoke. For the first time Morningstar gets a ping from her *status* spell – Ernie’s condition has changed to UNDEAD.

I was curious about this on my recent re-read. What exactly did Zeg do to Ernie to turn him into an undead creature, and more importantly, how did he do it while (apparently) in a *time stop*? Did the cloud he created simply surround Ernie while Zeg was *time stopped*, and the effect occurred once normal time resumed? This seems like a really cool spell/effect, and I’d love to use it on some enemies. Any information would be great to hear. Thanks!

Piratecat: I know it’s a spell in the *Book of Vile Darkness*, but I forgot the name. KidCthulhu couldn’t make that session – I think she was sick – so it’s quite possible that Sagiro let it affect Ernie in a *time stop* even when that wasn’t normally possible. It was a very handy way to make sure no one had to play Ernie as an NPC that evening.

MorningstarofEll: You know, I didn’t notice the title of that run... but I sure didn’t continue casting *status* as a default spell for very long! Maybe I should go back to it... or maybe I just don’t want to know these things!

The rats scamper off. Margad sneaks a peek at them out of the corner of his eye, then consciously turns his back on them with a self-satisfied expression. He makes a show of looking in a different direction with his spyglass.



The high ridge continues its vertical undulations, but stays perilously narrow for another mile or two. Eventually the grade opposite the preponderance of goblins becomes gentle enough for the Company to travel a bit faster on the left down-slope, though the stealthy Dranko, who has little trouble skirting the sentries by himself, stays on the high ridge to better keep an eye on goblin activities. Minute by minute the pack of rats progresses unseen across the high hills of the Crimson Maw; the light never changes, and the murmur of thousands of goblins becomes an ambient noise as persistent as the ocean. After several hours the ridge tilts steeply upward; Dranko takes point while the rest scramble behind. There are a few false summits but Dranko finally gains the peak, and his breath is taken away. Below him, on a huge plain at least two miles across, camps the bulk of the goblin army, at least twenty thousand strong. Rising up from the center of the army is a craggy mountain, and atop that mountain Dranko can see what is surely the Iron Tower.

The Tower is a tall black-iron cylinder, seemingly jammed straight down into the sloping side of the mountain. From this distance its windows are thin vertical lines of glowing red. Its top is flat and unadorned. An enormous wide staircase rises from the flat rocky ground to the massive tower gates, a two hundred foot ascent at least. The goblin army sprawls right to the foot of that staircase. Dranko squints, but doesn't see any goblins marching up or down the stairs, or stationed on them. "That's quite a staircase," he opines.

In fact, at a normal walking pace, it would take a good five minutes to climb them. Not wanting to waste the effort, and put off by the thousands of goblins standing in the way, Aravis casts *teleport* to get them all to the tower's roof.

It fails. It would appear that in addition to preventing flight, the Crimson Maw also prohibits teleportation magic. Faced with this new tactical conundrum, the Company brainstorm. Once they get to the stairs, Morningstar could block pursuit with a *prismatic sphere*. *Walls of force* would be similarly useful. It's the getting there that's the problem. Illusionary party members could serve to draw off enemy forces, but not enough of them. Can they bring sufficient firepower to bear, to simply blast through the goblin hordes? Probably not. Aravis jokingly proposes that they gate in the dwarves from Gurund, and have them dig them a tunnel to the Iron Tower. Afterward they can stay in the Maw until they're angry enough to march out and destroy the Guild of Chains.

Edghar offers to scout for them. *I look like a rat and move like a monkey. Who's going to catch me? And I've got my horn of fog to cover my escape, if it comes to that.* Grey Wolf finds that unacceptably risky.

Perhaps they can cast *reduce* and *invisibility* on everyone except Dranko, who can use his *robe of blending* to look like a goblin. Then Dranko could just carry everyone to the tower. But even with someone riding in the *flask of body pouring*, that's too much weight for Dranko to bear.

Could they summon magical horses and pound through the army before it knows what's happening? Stylish, yes, but only Grey Wolf is an expert enough rider to be confident of staying in his saddle.

It's a thorny problem, and it takes them a good half an hour before Aravis hits upon the simple solution. They can't fly or teleport over the goblins, and it's too dangerous to go *through* the goblins – so they'll just have to go *under* the goblins instead. All kidding about hundreds of gated dwarves aside, he realizes that he himself is the key to the plan – he can *shapechange* into a Digger, the void-mouthed tunnel-making creature employed by the orcs of Nahalm! The Digger claws away rock like it's butter, scooping the fill into its huge black maw and seemingly annihilating it. It's the perfect tool for a job like this one. The party move down the far side of the ridge, gather behind a stand of boulders, and spend a few minutes working out the details before putting their plan into action.

First, while the others keep a careful eye out for sentries, Aravis uses a *rod of greater metamagic* (*Silent*) to quietly *shapechange* into a Digger. (Inside his face, the sucking black void-maw feels alien and a little bit scary.) Then he starts to dig downward at an angle, intending to start with a twenty-foot descent so that the long tunnel ahead won't alert any goblins on the surface. The Digger's technique back in the orcish territory naturally made an arched and relatively stable tunnel, but Aravis is no expert. Scree suspects that Aravis's tunnels will collapse quite readily, but Kibi – who is an expert – corrects Aravis's technique.

While Aravis continues to dig, Kibi casts an Extended *persistent image* to mask the hole with an illusion of seamless, unblemished stone. It's not long before Aravis is ready to start the long horizontal bypass beneath the goblin army.

Kibi can't stop grinning as he follows behind Aravis. "This is great! Why haven't we been traveling like this *all the time?*"

Aravis would be happy to explain why not, but his mouth is not made for speaking. Also, he's shoveling rock into it as fast as he can. It's tiring, but he soldiers on, the others trailing at a respectful distance. Every few minutes Scree makes a foray to the surface and pokes an eye out, sending course-corrections to Aravis via Kibi. *There's something you don't see every day: a thousand goblins doing jumping jacks.*

It's a slow hour of trudging in the dark, the scraping of the Digger's claws on the stone the only sound they hear. They pass the time wondering where the rock goes when Aravis eats it. Dranko hazards a guess. "Maybe the rock gets stored in an extra-dimensional stomach."

Morningstar blinks. "Did you really just say the words 'extra-dimensional stomach'? Have I mentioned that our lives are really, really weird?"

It's a bit daunting to think that thousands of goblin soldiers are gathered only twenty feet above their heads. But finally Scree guesses that they're directly beneath the Iron Tower, and Aravis starts to dig upward, leaving a succession of ramps for the party to use for the ascent. They have to gain about three hundred feet of elevation, since the bottom of the Tower is embedded high on the mountain. By the time Aravis runs into an inedible iron ceiling, he's bone-tired. He turns into a rust monster but finds that the underside of the Iron Tower is impervious. (On the other hand, all of the metal on his friends' gear smells like mouth-watering steak. The rest of the party sidle away nervously.)

"Can we use *discern location* on Maglubiyet's Fang?" Ernie asks.

Morningstar shakes her head. "Not enough information."

"Same problem with *locate object*," says Kibi. "We don't know what it looks like."

"Maybe *passwall* will do it," Aravis suggests.

We won't have to, says Scree, who's been scouting around beneath the tower's bottom. *I've found a chamber in the rock, directly beneath the tower. That room has an iron ceiling, with a trapdoor!*

Aravis tunnels to Scree's discovery; it's an ancient and long-disused dungeon. Rotting skeletons of long-dead victims are still chained to the wall, though most of the bones lie in dusty heaps below the shackles. A stone staircase rises up along one wall to a clear trapdoor in the iron ceiling. Ernie goes up to listen, and hears a faint chanting from somewhere higher in the tower. The trapdoor is barred from the other side, but it's nothing that a *knock* won't foil. Dranko slowly pushes open the trapdoor as quietly as he can and pokes his head up.

He's in an uninhabited storeroom with iron walls. The chanting is now clearer, still above them, but not too far away. There's another door at the far side of the room. He pokes his head back down and grins to the others. "We're in!"

SolitonMan: Awesome update! Brilliant work on the part of the party, tunneling through to their goal – the resourcefulness of the players never ceases to amaze!

Aravis: You should have seen the look on Sagiro's face when we came up with that one.

Piratecat: Great game last night. First time we've played in two months, and we passed a campaign milestone that marks the approach of the end. We've crossed Yulan's Barrier into Abernia's Underdark, and there's no going back. Ever. And the surprise that our enemies have left for us makes me hate Meledien even more, which I didn't think possible.

steeldragons: Glad you had a great game... welcome BACK! Haha. Two months is a long time to go. But I've no doubt your group took it totally in stride and grace. Sorry to hear about a beginning to an end... though, of course "all good things..." 'n' all that.

My mind is reeling now! Having (I think) a pretty good sense of Sagiro's creative skills (i.e. brilliant RBDM-ness!), I shudder to think what he's made/caused/has in store within Abernia's Underdark... shudder, I say!

Only advice I can possibly think of to give is: Kick. Meledien's. @\$\$!!!... 'n' tell her I said "hi" while doing so. LOL.

Siuis: Ach. You, PC, are a tease.

Piratecat: Nerdgasm: Dranko just hit 5 times in one round for 254 pts of damage. Yes, I know it's totally power-gamey, but it's never actually happened before. Don't judge me!



Glemiyal

A quick glance around this bottom-most storeroom reveals only common supplies: pots of paint, a large number of candles, some stonemasonry tools. From somewhere above them comes a rhythmic chanting, many voices unified in guttural song.

A single door leads from the room; Dranko listens and hears nothing but the chanting. Flicker checks for traps before easing open the door, and finds an upward-leading staircase immediately on the other side, ascending some fifteen feet before ending

at another door. The chanting is louder now, and Aravis opines over the mind-link that it's probably the sound of the goblins moving the opening of the Crimson Maw to Appleseed.

The plan is simple: open the door, lay waste, stop the ritual. It's a bit unnerving to think that just outside the tower are 20,000 more goblins, but they'll cut that bridge when they come to it. Buffing spells are hastily applied, and the Company charge up the stairs and burst into the chamber beyond.

Ernie, Dranko and Aravis are in the lead, and so are the first to see the large round room, fifty feet in diameter and with a thirty-foot-high ceiling. At the center of the floor is a nine-pointed star, painted red, with candles about it in patterns. A dozen goblins stand around the perimeter of this circle, facing inward. On the far side of these chanting goblins is an enormous statue of Maglubiyet, God of the Goblins. A thirteenth goblin stands with his back to the heroes, arms raised, body clad in armor. He's enormous for a goblin – almost six feet tall – and a glowing red sword hangs by his side.

But all of this is not really what commands attention in the room. Suspended above the nine-pointed circle, in a column of red light, is an enormous dragon's tooth. It turns slowly, this way and that, occasionally stopping for a second, then twitching to a new position, then resuming its slow rotation. This must be Maglubiyet's Fang!

The party cannot think of a single thing going on in this room that they ought to let continue. With misgivings only from Dranko about the loot they might destroy, Aravis drops a *Mordenkainen's disjunction* in the room, placed so that everything except themselves is caught in the effect.

It all vanishes – the Fang, the circle, the goblins, even the statue. Everything in the room was an illusion! Some new things are revealed: a door behind the statue, along with three surprised-looking goblins who had been maintaining the illusion. Besides them, the room is empty.

Anxious to move on to the main event while their spells are still active, and also desirous that none of these goblins escape to give warning, the party press the attack. Grey Wolf moves up the stairs and casts *chain missile* at the startled goblins, Dranko whips one in the face, and Kibi tosses a *coldfire* followed by Quickened *magic missiles* that buzz by Dranko's head.

Only one of the three goblins survives this barrage, and he bolts for the door. Dranko trips him with his whip as he runs by, but the goblin falls into the door, pushes it open, and yells, before Aravis can finish him off with another *magic missile*.

Onward and upward! Ernie takes the time to cast *true seeing* before the party open the door and dash up a second flight of stairs; they hear more chanting coming from above.

Ernie kicks open the door again, and sees a room identical to the illusionary one below, only this time what he's seeing is absolutely real. "Ding dong!" he shouts. "Yondalla calling!"



Glemyial, Champion of Maglubiyet and hero-figure to thousands of goblins, turns to the doorway where the interlopers are emerging. He stands tall and confident, his legendary sword *Red Harbinger*, Bane of Halflings, pulsing red in his mailed hand. Despite the fact that Ernie's own sword, *Tava's Righteous Fury*, should be making him invisible to goblins, Glemyial is staring directly at him. Flicker dashes up the stairs on Ernie's heels and stands beside his friend.

Glemyial's face quirks in a smile, looking back and forth for a second between Flicker and Ernie. He lets out a deep laugh. "You? You two? You're the halfling lovers I was supposed to fear? I must say... your kind is more... adventurous than I expected. Not that it matters."

And with a flash, Ernie realizes that he never told Yoba about the Crimson Maw. Yoba, who has spent her entire life combating goblins. Yoba would have loved to be here for this fight – and, it would seem, was prophesied to have been. "Just goes to show you something about prophecies," says Ernie with a grimace.

Before Glemyial can respond, Grey Wolf emerges at the top of the stairs and casts an *acid storm* into the room, blistering the flesh of almost every goblin present. He follows this with a Quickened *fireball* to the densest cluster of goblins, but all the enemies are still standing when the acid and flames recede.

The goblins chatter quickly among themselves, and Glemyial points impatiently at the doorway. Realizing he's the only one who can see the invisible heroes, he barks a command. "Area spells, centered on the door!"

Four *cones of cold* are loosed upon the only three in the party who have crested the stairs: Ernie, Flicker and Grey Wolf. Flicker leaps and twists, avoiding most of the damage, but Ernie and Grey Wolf are badly frosted. Then two more goblins drop

confusion spells upon them. Grey Wolf blinks his eyes and discovers that the goblins have changed places with his allies! No, wait... have they? He's not sure. His mind is fogged. Flicker shakes his head, suffering a similar loss of focus.

Ernie resists both of the spells, and so he watches with perfect clarity as Glemyial approaches him, bats away his short sword, and lands a series of telling blows with the *Red Harbinger*. The halfling-bane sword leaves a glowing red afterimage as it cuts the air, as well as a terrible heat that burns in Ernie's wounds. Ernie stumbles and falls, conscious only by the barest of threads, blood pouring from rents in his armor. But a voice sounds in his head, a voice of comfort and resolve. *Stand fast*. He knows Tava is with him, and he fights off the encroaching darkness.

The rest of the Company move up to join the attack. Aravis *shapechanges* into a huge yellow dragon, of the kind that he fought at the Battle of Verdshane. He breaths down a cone of crackling electricity that tears some of the goblins to pieces and further damages several more. Dranko uses a wand to administer *cure critical wounds* to Ernie before tumbling into position to stand next to his friend.

Glemyial chuckles. "What do you hope to achieve? There's nothing here you can do! No matter what happens here, do you intend to fight off my entire army when it arrives momentarily?"

"I won't have to," Ernie hisses.

"True," Glemyial admits. "You'll be well dead by then."

Ernie spits at Glemyial's feet. "You will not live to see Appleseed."

Most of the surviving goblins are staring up in horror at the dragon, though the bolstering nature of the Crimson Maw somewhat dulls Aravis's terrifying presence.

"Forget the dragon!" barks Glemyial. "Kill the rest – especially Ernest Roundhill! He's on the ground in the pool of blood."

Goblin warriors charge the Company. Dranko deftly trips one with his whip. The rest flail at the spot where they believe Ernie is lying, but their blades either miss or are foiled by the halfling's plate mail.

Kibi casts a potent spell, moves up into the room, and touches Glemyial on the leg. *Otto's irresistible dance* is discharged, but unfortunately, due to a *spell turning* on the goblin champion, the spell is discharged back upon Kibi. He starts to caper and stomp, and curses up a storm while executing a flawless Dwarven battle-march.

Morningstar squeezes to the top of the stairs and fires off *mass heal*, undoing all the damage done to Ernie and Grey Wolf by the goblin attacks, and wiping away the confusion from Grey Wolf's mind. Then she Quicks and Maximizes a *searing darkness* that hisses through Glemyial's armor.

Ernie, still on the ground, uses one of the unique powers of *Tava's Righteous Fury*, calling down a *flame strike* directly on himself. Brilliant grass-green flames pour down from above, roasting goblins in holy fire and burning Glemyial, while bringing only a soothing warmth to himself, Kibi and Dranko. Then Ernie gets to his feet, enduring a wicked slash from the *Red Harbinger* as he does so.

A second later the surviving three goblin sorcerers center *chain lightnings* on the now-visible Ernie. Crackling red bolts sizzle and hiss, and Ernie again feels his consciousness slipping away... and again Dranko keeps him up, this time with an instantly cast *close wounds*.

Flicker sees that Glemyial is, for some odd reason, dancing. He lines up his sword and takes a mighty hack. "Argh!" Kibi shouts in pain and frustration. "Flicker! This is bad enough already!"

"What?" Flicker shouts. "Kibi? Where are you? Is that you dancing? I don't... I don't..."

Grey Wolf reaches forward, grabs the barely-conscious Ernie, and bodily lifts him up and back down the stairs, where he slides behind Morningstar.

Glemyial sighs as his main target is moved to the back rank, and Grey Wolf moves forward to confront him. "Fine," says the Goblin Champion, shifting his focus to Grey Wolf. "I suppose you're next." The *Red Harbinger* flashes, trailing its ruddy light, and Grey Wolf is nearly killed by a vicious series of cuts. Then Glemyial gestures pointedly to the stairs; from outside they can all clearly hear the sounds of hundreds of feet charging up the long stairway to the tower.

Aravis, hovering above in dragon form, casts a *chain lightning* of his own down upon the remaining goblin casters. Two of the three are annihilated in a shower of gore. Aravis finishes off the third one with a personalized *cone of cold*.

Glemiyal sees that his support has been entirely eradicated, but merely shrugs his shoulders, conspicuously unconcerned as Dranko steps forward to face him.

"I'm displeased," says Dranko. "You hurt the man I most respect. So now I have something for you." Dranko reaches into that part of his brain that shouldn't be examined, and draws a great power from his unnatural connection to the Far Realms.

Time stops.

The light from the *Red Harbinger* hangs in the air like smeared flame. Bits of goblin flesh both frozen and charred hang still in the air. The gushing rivulets of blood pouring down Grey Wolf's armor cease their trails, becoming glistening jewels.

Madness laps at the corners of Dranko's mind as he considers. He reaches into his *bag of tricks* and pulls out a fuzzy ball, which he then places directly opposite Glemiyal. *Flanking buddy*. Then, against what should be his better judgment, he reaches into his own madness and invokes *tentacular nature*.

A horrid brown tentacle erupts from the side of his head, whipping around like an angry snake. His Wisdom is now so low that he couldn't cast clerical spells if he wanted to. *But I don't need to cast spells. I have a tentacle!*

Time resumes, and Dranko is ready. He unleashes a ferocious barrage of whip-strikes, flanking with a suddenly appearing brown bear, and finishes by lashing Glemiyal across the face with his tentacle.

Giggling insanely, he shares a conspiratorial moment with his adversary. "I have dabbled in powers that even *I* don't completely understand!"

Now the goblin champion looks concerned. He idly slashes at the dancing dwarf next to him, while wondering if perhaps Ernest Roundhill has made a bargain with powers more malign than he would ever have expected from a halfling.

Morningstar casts another *mass heal* upon Kibi and Grey Wolf. Ernie does the same for himself, using his *quickscroll tube* to heal himself.

"Ernest!" calls Dranko. He gestures to the badly-injured Glemiyal and in a voice bubbling with madness shouts, "He's prepared for you. Finish him!"

Ernie calls upon his sword and tries to conjure up the Astral Deva, Tava's Echo. Unfortunately for him, the very nature of the Crimson Maw precludes summoning spells.

More unfortunately for Glemiyal, it works anyway.

There is an awful tearing sound as one of the properties of the Crimson Maw is harshly violated, and Tava's Echo appears, floating off the ground, her heavenly visage glowing with a soft green light. She looks with disapproval at Glemiyal and brings her own blade down upon him. Now it is Glemiyal who is driven to his knees.

Flicker blinks furiously. His head is so clouded, so confused... but he manages to gain one perfect moment of clarity. He looks upon the beautiful face of Tava's Echo, and then to that of Ernie, his friend for so long.

Flicker grins wickedly at Glemiyal, and shouts, "I love you, Ernie!"

"I love you too, Flick."

And Flicker drives his sword through Glemiyal's gut.

wedgeski: Brilliant. Masterful touch having Glemiyal expect both Ernie and Yoba.

steeldragons: Awesome... as if I was expecting anything less. Wedgeski hit it on the head: "Masterful." Thanks, as always, for the adventure.

Artoomis: As usual, this is *chock full of awesomeness*!

Piratecat: I'd totally forgotten about *bag-o-tricks* as flanking buddy. Woo! This was a fun game, and we were so very pleased Ernie stayed alive to bring about Glemiyal's first death.

Wait, *first* death? That'd be a spoiler, and possibly not what you'd think.

Everett: Sigh. I haven't played in a *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign in two and a half years. I really don't ever want to play in one again. But when I read the adventures of Abernathy's Company, I *almost* want one. And that is the highest compliment I can bestow.

(And I'll repeat something I said some time ago, for emphasis: they *really* gotta do something about Flicker's Will save.)

Piratecat: Flicker's Will save is even worse than you think. It's the poster child for why by-the-book epic play raises up all Will saves by 1 point across the board. I think it's single digits... and, unsurprisingly with that low low Wisdom, Flicker is blissfully unconcerned.

Everett: Yeah, natch. He's just so pitiable when he gets mentally incapacitated.

Sagiro: Yeah, Flicker's Will save is pretty much beyond fixing at this point. He has a 7 Wisdom, and Will is a "weak" save for his class. Some quick save stats for the party, at 20th level (in the Story Hour, they're currently 18th, I think):

Best saves
Ernie's Will: +27
Dranko's Reflex: +25
Flicker's Reflex: +20
Ernie's Fortitude: +20
Morningstar's Will: +20

Worst saves
Flicker's Will: +5
Morningstar's Reflex: +10
Kibi's Reflex: +11
Ernie's Reflex: +13
Flicker's Fortitude: +13

While I'm here:

Best ability scores
Kibi's Intelligence: 29
Aravis's Intelligence: 27
Grey Wolf's Intelligence: 26
Morningstar's Wisdom: 26
Ernie's Wisdom: 26

Worst ability scores
Flicker's Wisdom: 7
Aravis's Strength: 8
Dranko's Charisma: 8
Kibi's Charisma: 8
Dranko's Intelligence: 9
Grey Wolf's Charisma: 9
Aravis's Charisma: 9

Cerebral Paladin: Man, your players are a bunch of power-gamers, with all those Charisma dump stats. Don't any of you care about role-playing and unique character concepts that don't fit traditional stat patterns?

Piratecat: It was 2E! I call a mulligan!



Sagiro: Sorry... no Story Hour post today. But I did want to mention that in tonight's game, some 27-odd runs ahead of the story posted here, I threw the first, largely unchanged monster from the *Epic Handbook* at the party. They wiped the floor with it.

Going in to the battle, I was wondering if maybe the monster was too much for them. Sure, it was "only" CR 21, but it had stuff like SR 33, DR 20/+6, terrific saving throws, and it rated to do about 110 points of damage on a full attack. With 400+ hp, I thought it had a chance of doing some harm.

In hindsight, I should have expected that a party of seven 20th-level PCs would crush a single CR 21 monster, but I really needed to see the battle unfold to understand how potent the party has become. A *fire storm* here, a Quicken *true strike* followed by a spellsword-channelled *Maximized orb of acid* there, and pretty soon you have some real damage adding up. And by "pretty soon" I mean less than three rounds.

And then, because they do stuff like this, the party *polymorphed* an elder air elemental into a tarantula and fed it to an enormous oracular toad. I love my players!

Piratecat: Sagiro, one thing about this fight – you highlighted a major weakness of Dranko's that I had never even considered. One good chunk of Charisma damage and he's a drooling, blank-eyed husk. Scary and exciting! And DR 20/+6 scares me; it means that if I'm not getting sneak attack damage I do no damage at all. Thank you for an incredibly fun game. Also? Best prophecy ever.

Talking generally for a second, Sagiro has done something that I consider pretty much remarkable. He's taken 20th level heroes in a 15-year-old campaign and let us travel somewhere that is completely new to us – new rules, new allies and enemies, new economy, new mysteries about how the world works. That sense of wonder, where we're taking complete joy in exploring even as we're plunging onwards to try and save the world, is everywhere. Enormous oracular toads have something to do with this. I can't wait for next game.



Bad Place, Good Place

Flicker draws his sword out of the crumpled body of Glemiyal, and immediately spots a heretofore hidden goblin darting at him from the side. He slashes it across the leg.

"Ow!" cries Ernie. "Flicker, snap out of it!" So saying, Ernie *dispels* the *confusion* on Flicker himself.

"Thanks, Ernie. Though I don't suppose I'm also imagining that sound of footsteps?"

No, he's not. Goblins continue to charge up the stairway outside the Iron Tower. It will only be a minute or two more before they're flooding up the stairs. "We're going to have company very soon," Grey Wolf mutters.

Ernie looks at Maglubiyet's Fang, still spinning slowly in its column of red light. "Tava," he asks, looking up at the Astral Deva, "how do we stop this?"

Tava's Echo stares at the huge dragon tooth. "With violence," she concludes. At Ernie's behest, she brings her own weapon down upon the Fang, but some sheath of force prevents contact. She swoops down and picks up Ernie, then hovers before the Fang so that the little halfling can strike with *Tava's Righteous Fury*. The fabled blade is uninhibited by the Fang's protections, and on impact the monstrous tooth tilts and wobbles, rotating off its axis. Small cracks have appeared. Heartened, Ernie continues to swing.

As Flicker gingerly divests Glemiyal of his magical possessions, a huge swell of noise comes from the stairwell. The goblins have arrived. Morningstar casts a *blade barrier* as a greeting, and while the goblins in front stop short at the sight of the whirling knives, the ones in back surge forward and push their hapless allies into the blender. Only after a few seconds of frantic shouting back down the staircase does the carnage cease.

Aravis and Flicker pick up the looted body of Glemiyal, and heave it contemptuously into the *blade barrier*. Gobbets of Goblin Champion are splattered all over the front ranks of goblin soldiers. Morningstar smiles and readies a surprise.

It doesn't take long. Half a minute later some goblin manages to dispel the *blade barrier*, but as soon as the word spreads to charge again, Morningstar drops a *prismatic sphere* in the opening to the room. Goblins are fried. Goblins sicken and die. Goblins are turned to statues, or become gibberingly insane. Most experience many of these at once. Eventually, the remaining goblins retreat back down the stairs to regroup and reconsider.

"Back up, everyone," calls Ernie. He takes a final mighty swing with *Tava's Righteous Fury*, and Maglubiyet's Fang shatters in a spray of fragments. The red column of light in which it was spinning fades away.

Tava's Echo lowers Ernie to the ground. Ernie bows, and the Astral Deva returns the gesture. "I am always honored to serve," the celestial being intones, and with that, it vanishes.

In the lull that follows, Dranko brushes some goblin gore from his shirt. "Now what? I say we stroll down the stairs and kill lots of things."

"Works for me," says Ernie.

"Hold on," says Aravis, shaking his head. "I want to cast a *sending* to Pewter, to find out if he's in a safe place for us to teleport to."

Morningstar casts the spell for Aravis, asking for one 'meow' for yes, and two for no. The return sending is two meows, followed by some long, drawn-out meows, and ending with an emphatic single MEOW! Morningstar relays this, not sure what it means.

"Ah," says Aravis. "He wasn't somewhere safe at first, so he padded out the word count of his reply until he *was*."

"Your cat is so much smarter than my husband," Morningstar says with a smirk.

Dranko harrumphs, and lights up a cigar. The exhalation forms into the words **NOT FINISHED**. "Hey everyone," he warns. "Cranchus is telling us something."

A remarkably lucky goblin comes stumbling out of the *prismatic sphere*, takes one look at the draconic Aravis, and flees in terror. It is immediately burnt to a crisp.

"Hey!" Flicker yells suddenly. "What happened to the sword? I had Glemiyal's sword right here, and now it's gone. Dranko?" The party scan the room, but even with *true seeing* it's clear that the *Red Harbinger* is gone.

Then they hear laughter, right there in the room with them. It takes a few seconds before they realize that the laughter is telepathic, and could be coming from anywhere. It continues for a few seconds.

Morningstar looks up, annoyed. "Do you have a message, or are you just amused?"

The voice of Glemiyal sounds in their heads. *Oh, I'm very amused. Did you forget where you were? This is the Crimson Maw, and I am Glemiyal, the Eternal Spirit! So... you killed a body. Very nice. Well done. Unfortunately for you, I have about thirty thousand more, so if you'll just wait there behind your little shiny bubble, I'll be along shortly. Something tells me that your spells and your strength will run out long before I do.*

His mental presence recedes. Flicker announces that it's not just the red sword that's missing; everything he looted from Glemiyal's body is gone. Ernie gnashes his teeth. "I really, really hate him."

Morningstar shakes her head. "I think we just get out of here. We've done what we came to do."

"But the smoke said 'not finished,'" says Aravis.

"We should kill him again," says Grey Wolf, "and next time destroy the sword before it goes to his next body."

"You have a *Mordenkainen's disjunction* left, in the Cube, don't you?" Dranko asks. "That would work, right?"

Ernie concentrates on *Tava's Righteous Fury*, hoping for guidance. In response, the sword tugs a bit at his arm – toward the doorway out. "Have we done it?" Ernie asks the sword.

Yes, you have, it answers.

"The cigar smoke says we haven't," says Ernie. "We're not finished yet."

Not finished leaving, says the sword.

Dranko rolls his eyes at Kibi. “Stupid prophetic cigars,” he grumbles.

“I’m not very happy with Cranchus right now,” Aravis agrees.

Aravis casts *gate*, hoping that will provide them an easy exit from the Crimson Maw, but it fails – or rather, it produces a useless opening like an empty picture frame. “We must need to get back to the shifting portal, and go through that,” says Dranko.

The tugging on Ernie’s arm gets more insistent. Aravis peers out one of the arrow slits. The mountain atop which sits the Iron Tower is now fully surrounded by goblins, though none are trying to scale the mountain itself. The huge stairway that leads from the plateau to the Tower is clogged with soldiers. “We’ve got to get out of here,” he says. “And I have an idea...”

Minutes later, they’re prepared. The plan is predicated on the fact that while magic flight is suppressed in the Maw, ordinary wing-flapping flight is still possible. Grey Wolf has acquired a spell called *flight of the dragon*, which causes the target to sprout huge leathery wings. He explains the spell to Kibi, who casts *wish* to spoof *mass flight of the dragon*.

It works on everyone but himself; his Earth Mage nature prevents it. He thought as much would happen; his backup plan is to ride on Aravis, already in the shape of a flying dragon. The party are already under Kibi’s *veil*, and look like small rats. Morningstar uses a *miracle* to spoof *mass invisibility* as well.

With everyone ready, Aravis blasts a hole in the roof of the Iron Tower with a *disintegrate* spell, and seven flying invisible rats launch themselves into the red-gray sky. Once aloft, Kibi uses his *staff of illusions* to spoof the visuals of an *obscuring mist*, appearing at the top of the staircase, along with the conspicuous sounds of spell-casting coming from inside. As hoped, this draws the goblins’ attention away from the sky above. Even better, two goblin sorcerers cast *cones of cold* into the mist, which only succeeds in flash-freezing a dozen hapless goblin soldiers.

Following the steady tug of *Tava’s Righteous Fury*, the Company fly away from the Iron Fortress and out over the rocky terrain of the Crimson Maw. They soar over an enormous lake, around which more thousands of goblins are encamped, and then onward for another two miles, before Ernie’s sword dips downward. Still a thousand feet ahead of them, a sea of goblins is thronged around six glints of red, spaced somewhat apart but in the same 50'-by-50' area. The heroes fly closer, and soon see that each glint is a horizontal red portal, identical to the one that brought them to the Maw. Next to each of the portals is a tall goblin wielding a pulsing red sword.

Dranko reaches into his tentacular madness to invoke *true seeing* before diving down for a closer look. It is indeed fortunate that no goblin is both able to see invisible things, and looking up. Once within 120 feet, Dranko can see that all six portals are illusions, as are all but one of the Glemyials. But there is an actual portal in the area, masked by an illusion to blend in with the rocky ground.

The Company make a hasty plan over the mind-link, cast some buff spells, and start their assault with Ernie descending downward nearly to ground level. He utters a *holy word*. “YONDALLA!”

Power ripples out from Ernie in waves, and the potent hatred of goblins contained in his sword amplifies the range of the effect. Hundreds of goblins are dropped stone dead on the spot, and many more are stricken paralyzed and senseless. Glemyial is made conspicuous by the fact that he alone is still standing.

Morningstar drops a *flame strike* on the goblin champion, but this is less efficacious. Not only does Glemyial entirely resist the damage, but he holds the *Red Harbinger* aloft, and the magics of Morningstar’s spell are wrapped around it. Glemyial twirls the black flames around his blade like he’s making cotton candy, and with a flick of his wrist blasts Morningstar with her own spell. *Ah*, thinks Glemyial into their minds. *Clever. Now come down and join me. I’m waiting.*

Kibi drops a *spike stones* in a ring around the actual portal, to discourage goblins who were outside the deadly radius of Ernie’s spell from joining the battle. Aravis casts *mass haste* on the group. Grey Wolf centers a *cone of cold* on Glemyial, but again Maglubiyet’s chosen resists the attack. Dranko swoops down and cracks his whip across Glemyial’s face, leaving a bloody streak.

Glemyial smiles. *If this body doesn’t kill you, maybe the next one will. Or the one after that. Either way, I’d best get started.* The *Red Harbinger* flashes, leaving trails of red light, and carves bloody chunks out of Dranko. But Dranko is plenty tough and just a little bit mad. He smiles back at Glemyial, while Flicker lands in a flanking position and hacks at the goblin’s legs.

Morningstar sighs and tosses a *darkbeam* at her foe, and is surprised to find that Glemyial doesn’t dodge in time. The goblin champion’s eyes are seared in their sockets, and Glemyial cries out in pain. Kibi then pegs him with a Maximized and

Empowered *ray of enfeeblement*. And for a grand finale, Grey Wolf Quickens a *true strike* before descending and channeling a Maximized *acid orb* through an exultant Bostock. The sword nearly cleaves the goblin in two, and then Glemiyal's latest body erupts in a veritable volcano of acid and guts. The remains of his body ooze out of his armor, pooling in a puddle of smoking sludge.

Dranko gloats above the remains. "Does it feel bad, getting spanked by a halfling and his friends, twice in one day?" Then, to the nearest goblins: "Who's next?"

Many of the goblins do in fact move closer, but are mutilated by *spike stones* for their efforts, and halt their advance. The rest of the Company land next to the actual portal, and Dranko touches the magic ruby to its glassy surface. No pass phrase is needed to exit; the portal becomes filled with red light.

Flicker starts heaving Glemiyal's magic items through it before the goblin's next body can claim them. The rest of the party follow, flying out of the Crimson Maw one by one, until only Ernie is left. A voice sounds in his head: *Goodbye for now, Ernest. I'm sure I'll see you again.*

I sure hope not, Ernie thinks back, and then he jumps through the portal.



The heroes find themselves about thirty feet in the air, under a sunny cobalt sky. Off in the distance, maybe two or three miles away, is the city of Victory on the shores of Green Lake. It would appear that the goblins had been uncomfortably close to fixing the egress from the Crimson Maw! Stretched out beneath them is lush farmland, though directly below is a well-ordered apple orchard, rows of trees still a month or two away from harvest.

The only oddity is a thicker cluster of the trees, breaking up the neat lines, about a hundred feet to the north. Ernie thinks he can see a building of some sort hidden inside the stand of apple trees.

Dranko touches the ruby to the portal, and it becomes an opaque sheet of glass. Ernie concentrates upon *Tava's Righteous Fury* with the intent of destroying the portal, but all he manages is to thicken and harden the sealed-up gateway. The wizards in the party guess that this thing is now a permanent fixture of Appleseed, hovering in the air, and while the goblins probably have no way to open it from their side, they may someday find the means.

"Can you imagine how angry they'll be," says Flicker, "if it takes them a hundred years to get out of that place?"

But that's a problem for another day, and most likely for Maple Sunblade and the halflings of Appleseed to solve. For now, the Company heal up, rejoice in the fresh air, and decide to check out the hut in the apple trees before reporting to High Priestess Sunblade.

It's physically difficult to squeeze through the dense stand of trunks, but the party are rewarded when they reach the hut and find that a small attached sign reads: "The Inn Between." They rush inside, Ernie and Flicker leading the way. "Dolly!" cries Ernie. "We're home!"

"Come in! Come in!" shouts Dolly from the kitchen. "I've got lunch almost ready for you."

"Oh, I do so love this place," says Ernie, breathing deeply of the aroma of fresh bread.

"Flicker! Dranko!" calls Barnabas from his customary table at the back. "Come over here. I've got a new card trick going, and need some suckers to test it on!"

The Inn Between is the very essence of comfort without pretentiousness – a cross between the Golden Goblet and Ernie's mom's living room.

"Ernie," calls Dolly. "I could use some help back here." In the kitchen, Dolly hands Ernie a spoon and points him to the spice rack. "I'm glad to see you're still taking such good care of your friends," she says.

Ernie grins sheepishly. "Well, they take good care of me. They've brought me back to life twice!"

"Yes, I know."

"Is it going to be okay?" asks Ernie quietly. "Are the goblins going to get out of there?"

"No. Not for a long time, at least. You've done well, and Appleseed is safe from the Anlakis because of you. Now, what kind of pies do you think are in the oven?"

Ernie doesn't smell any pies, but guesses his favorite. "Strawberry rhubarb?"

"Good choice," says Dolly with a smile.

"One thing I don't understand," says Ernie. "You told me that one day I'd have to protect the halflings from the Anlakis, but the Crimson Maw was full of goblins."

"Ah, I see your confusion," says Dolly. "There is something important to the goblins buried under Appleseed, from back in the days when goblins controlled these lands. The goblins don't know that, but there is an Anlaki who does, and he promised to reveal the information about it, if the goblins would do his dirty work and wipe out Appleseed. In all likelihood, the halflings could have defeated the goblins, but their forces would have been decimated, and the Anlaki hordes would have swooped in and laid waste to the country."

"Who is this person? And how can we find him?"

"I wouldn't worry about him for now," says Dolly, opening the oven and releasing a sudden scent of strawberry rhubarb.

"Without the goblin armies, the nomads of chaos pose no serious threat. But you should tell the High Priestess that the Black Spear of Maglubiyet is a hundred feet below the center of Victory. If they could arrange to dig it up and destroy it, that would probably be for the best."

"I'm honored to have been chosen," says Ernie, adding some sage to the potatoes. "I'm not sure I'm worthy..."

"Ernest," Dolly laughs, "it's hard to argue with results!" She lowers her voice before continuing, and her face becomes more grave. "But, you're not done yet. Not finished. There are more problems to solve, more evils to fight, and things are coming to a head. You can feel it, can't you?"

Ernie nods gravely. "What is this storm? Why did Drosh flee? Can we do anything?"

"I hope so. Oh, I hope so. I can't see, exactly, the nature of what's coming. I don't like the notion of gods fleeing. I'm not going anywhere, I promise you that. I'll stand and fight if I have to."

"So will I!" Ernie exclaims.

"Oh, yes, you will. And if you do your job well, I won't have to lift a finger." Dolly produces a muffin, smelling of cinnamon and rose petals. "Eat this. It will help you in your trials to come."

Ernie takes a bite. Strength and energy flood through him to every extremity, even to the tips of his hair.

His *Strength of Yondalla* power has been augmented; now, once per day, he can assign 12 points to distribute between his AC and his Strength, as sacred bonuses. The augments last 1 round per level.

The Company spend the afternoon relaxing in the Inn Between, eating and talking and playing games with Barnabas. When Dolly walks over to clear the table, Kibi can't help but ask, "Do you know what the thorn in the side of Abernia is?"

"No, not the specifics. It's very old, I think, but it's more your problem than mine. I'm not Yondalla, you know. I'm just an aspect of her suited to this place. No, there are problems you will have to solve on your own – you and your fellow mortals. Abernia needs your help, Kiblhathur, but you will have to learn how to provide it."

Ernie has a sudden thought, remembering Glemiyal's first reaction to him. "I hope Yoba is okay!"

Dolly makes a face, and Ernie goes pale. "No, no," says Dolly. "She's fine. It's just that..."

"I'll bet she's mad," Kibi interrupts, "that you didn't bring her to the Crimson Maw with you."

"No," says Dolly. "She's not mad, because Ernie never told her about it. Did you?"

"No, ma'am," says Ernie sheepishly.

"No matter," says Dolly. "That's another thing that's not really my business."

As she walks back to the kitchen, Ernie cradles his head in his hands. "Killing goblins is easy. Relationships are hard."

steeldragons: Apologies, Sagiro. I know how exhausting it must be to be showered in praise all of the time... But it just needs saying: the Inn Between as a recurring location and the subtlety of where it pops in is just pure genius. So spot-on perfect. Thanks, as always, for the adventure.



The Ritual of Seven Stars

Dranko Brightmirror, disguised as a Kai Kin commoner, sits in a wooden chair on the sidewalk outside a café, affecting boredom. It's difficult, because Kai Kin custard is so damned *good*. It's a mixture of warm oats and berries and sugar and cream that's unlike anything he's had back in Charagan. Dranko doesn't let his delight show as he takes another spoonful. *Kai Kin may be a city of xenophobes, but they make a mean dessert. No wonder that guy from the golem city said this was his favorite.*

As the afternoon wanes, he's reviewing in his mind the details learned from Pewter the day before. Over and over again he steps through the plan in his mind. For the twentieth time he pulls a folded envelope from his haversack, runs his fingers over it, and puts it back. Tonight's the night. Everything depends on him. *Praska* depends on him.



Two days earlier...

With the Crimson Maw behind them, the Company move to the next item on the agenda: Praska, and the Black Circle priest Mokad who inhabits her body. While the rest of the party *teleport* to Kallor, Aravis makes sure Pewter is somewhere discreet, and *teleports* to his familiar in Kai Kin. The reunion is a great comfort to both of them, and neither are eager to again spend time apart, but Pewter is too excited to be sentimental.

Boss! You're not going to believe this! OK, maybe you are, but still.

While the Company have been thwarting goblins in an unnatural demiplane, Pewter has been scouting out the Black Circle temple in Kai Kin. He's done an expert job, noting the layout, walls, personnel, shifts – everything. But during his stealthy feline reconnaissance, Pewter has seen one thing in particular that he knows will be of great interest to his master.

I was up in a tree last night, watching people walking back and forth across the main quad, trying to get a sense of any patterns. Guess who I saw, plain as plain in torchlight, wearing a Black Circle robe and walking calm-as-you-please from the mess hall to the dormitories? Rosetta! Boss, she's one of them! She's Black Circle!

Aravis lets out a long breath, but avoids sharing in his familiar's near hysteria. *Pewter, we don't know that.*

But Boss, I saw...

Maybe she's there undercover. Or maybe they've got someone under an illusion spell to look like Rosetta. We just don't know.

You can draw what conclusions you'd like, Pewter sniffs. Rosetta's always had it in for you guys, even though you saved her from centuries of torment, and now we know why.

I don't see that it matters, says Aravis. We can deal with Rosetta later, but right now we've got Mokad to worry about. Have you learned all you're going to learn about the layout of the place?

Yeah. I learned a lot. I hope Dranko's smart enough to use it.



Things are busy back at the Cosnor Estate in Kallor. A team of dwarves under Kibi's direction has nearly finished building a ritual space suitable for the Black Circle's Ritual of Seven Stars, which, if successful, will destroy Mokad's soul and free Praska from all malign influence. The enormous room Mokad had used for the world-merging ritual is much too large, but the dwarves have built a small "cubicle" in the middle of it, with ten-foot-high walls cordoning off a thirty-by-thirty-foot area.

One of these walls has been perforated with holes, and lying at hand are a dozen wooden poles meant to be slotted in a specific pattern. It's disturbingly similar to Zeg's underground laboratory in Nazg Hodeth. Morningstar shakes her head. Can this really be right? Setting up a Black Circle ritual, in the Holy City of Ell?

Grey Wolf and Edghar are overseeing the mixing of powders and tinctures used in the Ritual of Seven Stars, while Aravis pores over the details of how the Ritual is actually performed. Timing is critical at several junctures. A small team of Ellish acolytes will be on hand to assist – something to which Morningstar only agreed after numerous assurances of safety by the wizards.

"It should take about three hours, once started," Aravis tells the others. "The good news is, if something goes wrong, or it's interrupted, we can start again from scratch."



Yesterday morning...

Listen up, Pewter purrs.

Dranko smiles as Aravis translates. “I’m all ears.”

The temple grounds are bounded on all sides by a tall hedge – about twelve feet high. You could probably climb it, but I’d advise against it. There’s some kind of thorny vine inside the hedges that crawls and twists around of its own volition. I didn’t test it personally, but it’s certainly some kind of protection against intruders.

“Got it,” says Dranko. “Vines of death. What else?”

There’s only one gap in the hedge, and that’s the main gate. There’s a freestanding stone archway, with a metal-barred gate that’s closed and locked at night. During the day it’s usually open – guarded by a couple of warrior types, but they look bored and often nip away for a snack in the mess hall. It doesn’t seem like they’re at all worried about a break-in.

Dranko chuckles. “Could I climb the gate?”

Yeah, probably. Sure, says Pewter. But there are guards there, even at night. You could try distracting them. Like I said, they’re bored.

“How about inside the grounds?”

Almost everyone inside the hedge wears black robes – or black armor and capes, in the case of the armed guards who walk patrols. Not many visitors – about half a dozen per day – most of whom are there to use the Chair. You know, the one where you can swap life force for divinations. In the days I was there, I didn’t once notice a visitor wandering around freely – unless you count Rosetta, of course.

Dranko ignores that last part. Rosetta is a problem for another day, and can only serve as a distraction from his main objective. “I’ll have Flicker’s *ring of jumping*. Are there rooftops of other buildings anywhere near the grounds? What kind of opportunities do they offer?”

Yeah, there are some two-story homes across the road, so you’re in luck there. It should be easy to take a running leap and land in the yard, but even at night that’ll make some noise, and someone could see you.

“How about if I land on a roof? Is the mess hall near the edge of the campus?”

Near enough, I guess, if you’ve got Flicker’s ring. If you can land on the roof, there’s almost no chance someone will see you. And in the middle of the night the mess hall is usually empty. Though if someone happens to be there having a midnight snack, they’ll certainly hear you land.

Dranko is already imagining the scenario, forming plans in his mind about how it’s going to go. “Aravis, tell me again how this soul-gem thing works. Or should I just ask Flicker? After all, he’s got firsthand experience!”

“You’ll need two things,” says Aravis. “First, this.” He hands Dranko an enormous diamond, exquisitely cut. “It’s the most valuable gem we could come up with. Don’t lose it. Or spend it.”

Dranko just grins and drops the gem into his haversack.

“You’ll also need a trigger object. Something you can fool Praska into taking from you. When she does, she’ll be transported into the diamond.”

“Got it,” says Dranko. His wheels continue to turn.

“Don’t forget the third thing,” says Morningstar. “Here.” She hands her husband a small black triangle made of some light wood. “*Refuge token*. Once you’ve got Praska, break it, and you’ll get teleported back here. Or even if you don’t have Praska, but something goes wrong. Don’t take any chances.” Dranko smiles innocently at her, and she simply shakes her head.



The present...

Dranko finishes his custard, stands, stretches. The late afternoon sun has started to set while he’s eaten and pondered and run through possible scenarios in his mind. Nominally this is going to be a trial run, but in case things go well, he’s got the gem and the letter ready to go. One more time he goes through his mental checklist. *Robe of blending*. *Ring of jumping*. *Refuge token*. *Letter for Praska*. *Mind blank in place*. *Incredibly valuable diamond that could buy a lifetime supply of Kai Kin custard and an army of cooks to make it for me*.

Dranko ducks into an alleyway and scrambles effortlessly up to the roof of the café. It's only two blocks to his intended launching pad, and once in place he lies low, overlooking the grounds of the Black Circle temple. He's waiting for the sun to dip a few more inches, just enough that it won't silhouette him as he makes his leap. He knows what he wants: the period of dusk when people still think it's afternoon, and no one has yet noticed that it's hard to see.

He waits. Waits. The sun drops behind the clock tower as it starts to chime the seven o'clock hour. *This is it.*

Dranko stands, sprints, and with a final prayer to Delioch, takes a mighty leap across a narrow alley and over the hedge. With Flicker's ring it feels more like flying. He executes a perfect shoulder roll onto the roof of the mess hall, and the combined effect of his magic items and natural stealth makes it a near-silent landing. The little noise he makes is drowned by the noise of chatter from diners, and the last few tolls of the clock-tower bell. He crouches, flat, and blends into the shadow of a nearby tree.

Once he is sure that his arrival has gone unnoticed, he peeks his head up to scan the grounds, comparing what he sees with Pewter's reconnaissance report. There are four building clusters that form the main complex of the temple grounds, with the mess hall and adjoining kitchens at the southeast corner. North of him is the library and scriptorium, and to the west, rising higher than the buildings around it, is the tinted crystal dome of the central sanctuary. Diagonally across the wide lawn are the low-roofed dormitories.

For half an hour, Dranko watches and observes. There is no pattern or regimen regarding dinner; priests and guards wander in and out on their own schedules. The cooks and servants appear to be lowly novices, wearing Black Circle garb that's simpler and more drab than that of the more senior priests and priestesses. There is no sign of the Circle employing civilian help, in the kitchens or anywhere else.

There is plenty of green space, with trees and benches and stone walkways forming a latticework between the buildings. Devotees of the Circle talk animatedly with one another as they move about the grounds, and the chatter is disturbingly benign. A trio of priests walking into the mess hall talk excitedly about translating an old book of medicine that could be used to help stop the spread of some diseases, and another two, sitting on a bench beneath a tree, discuss some obscure philosophical notions on the nature of Truth before leaving for the library. Most of the conversation wouldn't be particularly out of place in a typical Deliochan church, though it's all of a more scholarly bent.

Dranko takes a deep breath, runs through the plan in his head one more time, and uses his *robe of blending* to assume the aspect of a servant who earlier retired to the dormitories. He drops down the ground behind the kitchen and saunters across the lawn, head down but not too far, as calmly as he can manage. When possible he walks in the lengthening shadows of trees and buildings.

He has a moment of quickened anxiety when, half way across, he notices Rosetta, sitting quietly on a bench and flipping through a sheaf of scrolls. She doesn't look up or show any sign of noticing him, and he bites his lip and ignores her. His heart has stopped racing by the time he reaches the back of the dormitories, and when he reaches the spot with the fewest sight-lines, Dranko scrambles up to the roof. He utters an extra prayer of thanks for the overcast night that hides the moon.

From his perch on the dormitory roof, Dranko observes many of the clergy return to their rooms after dinner. This goes on for some time, since some come directly, while others have instead gone to the Dome or the library after the evening meal. Night has fully fallen by the time Praska emerges from the mess hall; lamps are being lit around the quad by servants.

She approaches the west-side door to the dorms, seemingly alone, and Dranko drops down, practically invisible, to stand near the entrance. There are many other people about, but none within thirty feet of him. For the moment, the door is closed. One of his hands is clenched around an absurdly valuable diamond. The other holds a fancy envelope closed with a round wax seal. It's empty, but that's not the point.

Dranko steps out of the shadows as Praska approaches. His eyes light up, and the whole of his face breaks into a wide grin, near to bursting with good news he can't wait to bequeath. He holds the letter like it's a precious artifact, something he's profoundly proud of. He looks down at it in disbelief, as if afraid it will evaporate before he has a chance to deliver it. His body language is open and entirely sincere, and he holds out his envelope, projecting a joy that she is sure to share when she sees what it is.

Praska slows down as she approaches, a puzzled look on her face. "Sav Ket," she says, quirking an eyebrow. "I've never seen you this excited before. Is that for me?" As Praska instinctively reaches out to take the letter, Dranko can't help thinking how amazing it is that, for once, a risky stratagem seems to be going off without a hitch.

And that's when he hears the dormitory door open behind him. No one shouts, but if Praska touches the letter, she's going to vanish, and whoever just walked out the door will see it happen, clear as clear in the light of a nearby lamp. Of all the luck! Dranko winces, remembering the crazy swings of luck that were affecting Appleseed before they went into the Crimson Maw.

He has only a second to make a decision. He considers that in the worst case, that's Sav Ket behind him right now, and Praska is looking at twins. Slightly better, it's someone else who has just seen Ket inside. Either way, he has a contingency plan, and with the fate of his best friend, and also possibly Abernia itself at stake, he *cannot* let this chance slip away. He lets Praska take the letter. She vanishes, the gem in his left hand becoming warm. And then, reaching into his personal tentacular recesses, he stops time.

Behind him, a thin Black Circle priestess stands frozen in mid-stride, her eyes just starting to widen. Across the quad, Rosetta is halted with a page of her book half-turned. The background murmur of dozens of temple denizens is halted; the only sounds are his breathing, and his heart thumping in his chest.

Dranko sprints to the nearest perimeter hedge and climbs, ignoring the thorny vines which (fortunately) are as quiescent as everything else. The moment after he hits the ground, he digs in his pocket with his right hand and finds the fragile wood of his *refuge* token. *SNAP!* He is transported back across the ocean to Kallor even before time has resumed.

And the best part? he thinks wryly to himself. *When they try to find out what happened to her, they'll only see her sitting on a quiet bench in Djaw, reading a book. Their own Book of Lies is going to bite them in the ass.*



Back in Kallor, Dranko recaps his mission with a mad gleam in his eye. Calling upon his *time stop* power, bequeathed by a being from the Far Realms, has left him with a highly disturbing demeanor. After hearing his tale and accepting the gem with Mokad trapped inside, Morningstar blesses him with *protective sleep*.

While he sleeps, the others put the final touches on the ritual room and the defenses thereof. Kibi drops tactically-placed *spike stones* on the wide floor, outside of the 30'-x-30' enclosure. Aravis reviews the timing of the ritual with the Ellish priestesses who will be assisting him. Aravis, who will be the primary caster of the ritual, dons the *necklace of mind-spell inversion* as a precautionary measure. He warns the others that no one should approach within ten feet of Mokad while the ritual is in progress.

Certain large-area abjurations are impermissible. Spells like *forbiddance*, *private sanctum* and *dimensional lock* will interfere fatally with the Ritual of the Seven Stars. But as a final measure, Kibi pours out his own life energy into a simple *wish*: "I wish that no follower of the Black Circle will be able to find this location for the duration of the Ritual of the Seven Stars." The room ripples, and their skins tingle from the wash of power.



In a small and ancillary chamber – in fact, the one that once housed the Null Shadow cauldron – Dranko places the hugely valuable diamond gently on the ground. "This is going to hurt me more than it's going to hurt you."

He brings down a huge obsidian brick and smashes the gem to powder. Mokad, infesting the body of Praska, appears on the ground in a small puff of smoke. Before he can so much as blink, he's pegged with a *dimensional anchor* before Morningstar fills the room with an *antimagic field*.

"Praska!" Dranko shouts. "It's not too late to change! I know you've only taken this course because you secretly loved me and I married Morningstar. But there's still time for you to come back to the light!"

Mokad only has time to raise an eyebrow before Dranko steps back and chuckles. "Nah, I'm just shitting you. We know you're Mokad." And with that, he, Ernie and Grey Wolf pummel Mokad into unconsciousness. Just to rub it in, Dranko changes to the form of Sav Ket before knocking Mokad out. Once the Black Circle priest is down, they divest him of his items, components, holy symbol, and anything else that might allow him to resist or escape, before carrying him out to the ritual room. There they chain the body of Praska to an altar in the center of a black circle inscribed around with equations and geometric forms.

"Lord," Dranko whispers, "I know this is disturbing, but I am always your servant. I don't *think* this is going to damn my soul to Hell, but let me know if it will. Thanks."

Wasting no more time, Aravis nods to his Ellish assistants and begins the Ritual of Seven Stars. The words of power are harsh on his lips, filling him with unease as he speaks them. For well over an hour he keeps up a stream of chanting, a litany that includes many long strings of numbers and complex equations. The priestesses toss handfuls of alchemical powders over the body at specific times, synchronized with certain of Aravis's words and gestures. The poles in the wall glow in strange and ever-changing patterns.

At the hundred-minute mark, a green light fills the circle around the altar, just as it should. Mokad's eyes snap open and for a second he tugs futilely at his chains. "Home," he says casually. When nothing happens, he says it again. "Home."

Most of the Company are perched atop the ten-foot wall of the enclosure. Dranko chuckles at Mokad's discomfiture.

Mokad cranes his neck. "What do you think you're doing?"

Ernie looks down and smiles. "We're getting our friend back. Also, and I know this is immature, but: phbtbbtbbbtbt!"

"We're performing the Ritual of Seven Stars," Dranko smirks.

Mokad lolls his head to look at the poles, and laughs for a solid ten seconds. "You know," he says, regaining his composure, "you kids shouldn't play with the grown-ups' things. You believe you have this all figured out, do you?" His laugh is one of pure contempt.

"We think we might mess it up," Dranko admits.

"*You think* you might mess it up, huh? Well, it's not going to be *my* problem when it goes awry."

"Oh? What will happen?"

Mokad ignores the question. "Which one of you decided where to put the poles? First of all: of your seventeen poles, I'd say that by happy fortune, you have about four of them in the right place."

He turns his neck to look at Kibi. "It's Kibilhathur, right? Did dwarves build this? I hope you haven't paid them yet."

Dranko ignores Mokad in turn. "What were you doing at the temple in Kai Kin?"

Mokad looks at him, seemingly surprised by the question. "Mostly writing. Our primary function is to record and preserve information."

"And bring the Emperor to Charagan," Dranko adds.

"Yes, that too. But that's not my job. Most of what I personally do is write and illuminate manuscripts. There's only so many times one wants to bring down the established order of things. It's a lot of work, and I'm happy to leave it to others." He glances again at the poles and snorts. "If you have any vacation sites off plane, this would be a good time to make sure they're available."

"I know you won't tell me," says Dranko, "but I have to ask: why this fascination with bringing the Emperor back? He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would command that kind of respect. Condor certainly didn't think much of him."

Mokad peers at Dranko. "Condor's been dead a long time, you know. Look, can I give you a piece of advice? It will save all of your lives, *and* when the Black Circle comes back to reclaim this place, it won't be a total wreck. The pole in the eighth hole from the right? Move it down two holes. Because where it is now, well... one of you can cast *fire storm*, right? That will seem like a wet torch compared to what will happen if you leave that pole where it is. Moving that pole still won't make the ritual work, but it will prevent you from destroying this room and everyone in it."

Kibi frowns. It's true that there were some... ambiguities... in the Black Circle reference material. He and the other wizards were confident in their conclusions and calculations, but still...

"Not that it matters to me," says Mokad. "I figure I'm a lost cause. When the Seven Stars fails, you'll probably just cut my throat."

"You mean Praska's throat," Dranko growls.

"You don't understand, do you? Praska's gone. Do you remember the dinner we shared, so long ago? Praska's been gone since that night."

Dranko snorts. "We know that's not true, because both you and she were still around, up until when we killed you. You do remember us killing you?"

"I do remember that," says Mokad quietly. "But Praska wasn't in her body, even before I died."

Everett: Can StevenAC or anyone else tell me what run numbers we first see Praska in? She's one element of the Story Hour I read so long ago that I don't recall her.

Sagiro: Run #5 (page 25 of StevenAC's collected Story Hour PDF): Praska introduced. She was Dranko's only friend growing up in the Church of Delioch. She sent a letter to Dranko, warning of strange political machinations in the church, particularly regarding Mokad and Califax.

Runs #14 & 15 (pages 35 & 36): Praska is caught spying on Mokad and Califax, and rather than face punishment, flees the church. She sends another letter to Dranko, saying that she discovered church money was being channeled to a secret archaeological dig in Sand's Edge.

Runs #38 & 39 (pages 66 & 67): Praska sends word to Dranko that she fled to Hae Charagan, and has been accepted back into the church there. She's happy and excited. But when Dranko goes to visit her, he finds she's been kidnapped by Mokad and the Black Circle. The Company have a strange dinner with Mokad, during which time he seems to be trying to recruit them, and afterward he releases Praska to them. She seemed fine at the time, but in fact she had been "attached" to Mokad via a "Morbid Link," which meant that if Mokad was ever killed, he'd immediately take possession of Praska's body.

Run #63 (page 100): Califax sends word to Dranko not to trust Praska, but the church can find nothing wrong with her.

Run #108 (page 179): In the Crosser's Maze, a version of Praska neither entirely real nor entirely imagined, says: "I'm part of the Black Circle now, and we know things. I've already foiled several schemes that the church of Delioch was cooking up. I see everything, and no one can tell."

Run #131 (page 300): The party kill Mokad and prevent him from merging Volpos and Abernia. He immediately takes possession of Praska's body, though it will be a long time before the party figure this out.

Much later: the party learn that Praska has gone over to the Black Circle, but do not yet know about the Morbid Link. They think Mokad is really dead, and that Praska simply betrayed them.

Even later: the party find the Book of Lies, finally realize that Mokad isn't dead, and that Praska isn't in control of her body.

“Who was?”

“The Black Circle was. And the Black Circle can do a very convincing imitation of a little brat. Now, Aravis? This next point coming up is extremely detail-oriented. You wouldn’t want to mess up any of the thirty-six...”

“Can’t we gag him?” asks Ernie.

Turns out that with a rag and *mage hand*, you can. And a few minutes later the ritual moves into a new phase, and Mokad blacks out. A ghostly vision of Praska rises up momentarily from his body, looks around in terror, and then slams back down into Mokad. “What if he’s right?” asks Kibi. “What if that’s not really Praska?”

Dranko looks somber. “Sometimes you’ve just got to have faith.”

The room shudders. Aravis glances around nervously; that wasn’t part of the ritual! Everyone feels their skin crawl, an itching tingle not entirely dissimilar to what they felt after Kibi’s *wish*. Nothing else happens, but everyone is thinking the same thing over the mind-link. *Did someone in the Black Circle just cast a counter-wish?*

The minutes pass. Energy is now traveling in pulses up and down the obsidian lines and curves inlaid around the ritual space. The Ellish priestesses are sweating in earnest, as one of the more complicated sections of the ritual arrives. Everyone tenses, wondering how things will go. Dranko tries to calm himself. All that one person in Kai Kin would have seen is Mokad and another acolyte teleporting away. Mokad is protected from divinations by his own Book of Lies. Every one of the Company is *mind blanked*. Kibi has cast his *wish*. How could Black Circle worshipers possibly know to come here?

Minutes later, those in the Company who can see invisible people witness a number of men and women in Black Circle raiment arriving, hovering, in the center of the enormous chamber. *Crap!*

Artoomis: Crap, indeed! Wow, this is so good! More! More!

Joshua Randall: This is why I undertake all of my evil rituals using *project image*.

Piratecat: This is my favorite run ever. Mokad is such a liar, and such a *convincing* liar. He had us worried. I’m still shocked that the plan to kidnap Praska actually worked. I can’t remember being more nervous. The group was not a big fan of sending one person in to kidnap her, and neither was I, but it was one of the few tasks that matched Dranko’s skill set really well.

The aftermath, though? Ouch.

Solarious: I take it that this is the point in the game where in the aftermath, Sagiro tells the party exactly how badly the Black Circle had to scramble in order to locate Abernathy’s Company, in Story Hour style? Well, it looks like we have a treat to look forward to. The next writeup is going to be so much fun.

Tamlyn: I was also wondering if this was that incident.

RedTonic: I joined just to keep reading this – my unregistered access to Story Hour threads apparently was dismissed some time ago, so I registered, and now I’m briefly delurking. I’ve been enjoying the Company’s adventures for some time, as a friend from another BB recommended them to me, and through them, I’ve also discovered Sepulchrae’s writing – this forum is a veritable library for me. Thank you for sharing with us.

Sagiro: RedTonic – I’m flattered that you’d register just for the story; it’s a fine community, and welcome to it! Also, nothing goes to my head faster than being mentioned in the same sentence as Sepulchrae.

Solarious – exactly right! Here it is...



How the Other Half Lives

“Cor Kek! Cor Kek!”

The Grand Diviner of the Black Circle looks up from his desk and slides his reading glasses down his nose. “Calm down, Six Thoughts. Take a deep breath. Good. Now, what’s this all about?”

“It’s Mokad,” says the woman. “He’s gone.”

Cor Kek straightens up, and thinks for a moment. This could explain the ominous (if vague) signs from the Morning Portents these past few weeks. He had figured the warnings concerned the greater mission of the Temple, but now, in hindsight... “What do you mean, gone?”

“I mean, vanished. Like he teleported. And there was someone else – I didn’t see his face. I was coming out of the dorms for evening prayers in the Dome, and one of the acolytes was handing something to Mokad. He took it, and then the two of them blinked out.”

Cor Kek rubs his temples. Mokad had warned him this might happen when he had first shown up in Kai Kin. “I’m riding around in the body of a girl named Praska,” Mokad had said. “And Praska is the childhood friend of Dranko Blackhope, a member of

an extremely formidable adventuring party. Given their absurdly overblown sense of heroism, it's a good bet that they'll eventually try to reverse what I've done."

"Reverse it?" Cor Kek had scoffed. "Unlikely! They'd have to perform the Ritual of Seven Stars, and they'd need *you*. They wouldn't dare accost us here, and the Book of Lies still shields you."

"Do *not* underestimate them," Mokad had snapped. "Remember, they were able to plunder the Merging Room in Kallor, which included whole shelves of sacred texts. They have wizards among them smarter and more puissant than even Tai En. They could cast the Seven Stars if they put their minds to it. And do not forget this – this is the group of so-called heroes that not only thwarted the Merging, but somehow sealed the rift at Verdshane. Their Ellish witch is probably your equal in the spiritual sphere, and they have a spellsword from Condor's direct line. These are Alander's Chosen, and you know that because of that confounded dwarvish Earth Mage, our divinations concerning them are... not always reliable."

"Yes, fine," said Cor Kek. "These are dangerous people, I understand. What do you propose we do about it?"

"I propose that I stay here, remain in the *sanctums* whenever possible, stay *mind blanked* at all times, and hope they don't get the foolish notion of *disjoining* the Book of Lies. We only have to delay them a few more months, and then it won't matter. But I'll tell you right now – I won't leave the temple grounds without telling you. If I turn up missing someday, you can bet your last mirac it's Alander's Chosen."



That was several months ago, and all has seemed quiet, though there was a disturbing report that the Spire had found and destroyed Nazg Hodeth in Charagan. But now Mokad was gone, and under suspicious circumstances. Was it, in fact, Dranko Blackhope come to rescue his old friend? "Six Thoughts, summon Tai En and Tel Mek to the Dome. Have Ashen Cloud bring a pot of divinatory elixir from the stores, and a scroll of *discern location*. We'll get to the bottom of this."

A few minutes later, Cor Kek, Grand Diviner, is standing in the Seeing Ring beneath the temple's central dome, surrounded by his most powerful servants. "Can't we just *scry* for Mokad?" asks **Tai En**.

"No," says Cor Kek grimly. "The Book of Lies shields him."

"The Book may have been broken," says Tai En. "How else would they have known he was here?"

"True," admits Cor Kek. He reads the scroll, and names Mokad as his target. Nothing.

"I will *commune*, then," says Cor Kek. He spends some minutes chanting in the Seeing Ring, and is granted insight into the Black Circle that encompasses all knowledge.

"Have Dranko Blackhope or his allies recently infiltrated the temple grounds?"

I DO NOT KNOW.

"Crap. He's in a *sanctum*, or he's *mind blanked*. Which he'd have to be, if he was just here."

"Has any member of the Spire Guard conspired to kidnap Mokad?"

I DO NOT KNOW.

"Which means all of them are similarly protected."

"Is anyone attempting, or planning to attempt, the Ritual of Seven Stars?"

I DO NOT KNOW.

"You need to divine the edges," says Tai En. "Nothing that directly implies the people involved. They're all shielded."

"I know how this works," snaps Cor Kek. "I'm being thorough."

"Is there, somewhere in Kivia, a Ritual Chamber set up to perform the Ritual of Seven Stars?"

NO.

"What about in Charagan?"

I DO NOT KNOW.

"You don't know?!" says Cor Kek, glancing down at the Seeing Ring. "Though the lack of certainty is as good as a 'yes,' I suppose..."

"They could have *sanctums* up around the Ritual Room, if that's what they're up to," says Tai En.

"But that would disrupt the Seven Stars," points out Kek.

"They could be waiting until they start the ritual to drop the *sanctums*," says En. "And we can't just keep casting *commune* every hour. For all we know they don't plan on starting for a week!"

"Okay, okay. I need more time to consider. It's possible that they don't even know about the Seven Stars. And in the worst case, they started five minutes ago and we have three hours to plan." Cor Kek asks the remainder of his questions, gleaning answers to unrelated problems. Then he sits and meditates. The others wait patiently. Half an hour later, he opens his eyes. "The Circle is with me," he says. "First, I must prepare a second *commune*. Then, says the Circle, I must give of myself, and so I will."

Fifteen minutes later, with another *commune* prepared in an empty spell-slot, Cor Kek makes his appeal. "Black Circle, source of knowledge, my life is yours. I pray that the magics preventing me from finding what I seek be stripped away for the next hour, so that I may rescue my friend from death."

So saying, he casts *miracle*. Then he immediately casts a second *commune*.

"Is Mokad being subject to the Ritual of Seven Stars?"

I DO NOT KNOW.

Cor Kek furrows his brow, but is not too surprised that the Book of Lies is stronger than his *miracle*.

"Are Dranko Blackhope and his compatriots engaged in or planning a Black Circle ritual?"

I DO NOT KNOW.

Cor Kek curses. Could these people have magics powerful enough to thwart a *miracle* cast inside a Seeing Ring? Still, he presses on.

"Is there, somewhere in Charagan, a Ritual Chamber set up to perform the Ritual of Seven Stars?"

YES.

"Ah ha!"

"Is that place Nazg Hodeith?"

NO.

"Is that place Aza Temg?"

YES.

"Is the ritual in progress?"

I DO NOT KNOW.

"Crap. Too close to the people involved."

"Are there glowing wooden rods set into a wall in Aza Temg?"

YES.

"Have they been glowing for more than an hour?"

YES.

"More than two hours?"

NO.

"Has the area around them been trapped or safeguarded against intrusion?"

YES.

"Would we circumvent any of the traps by arriving in mid-air?"

YES.

"Is the Merging Room still intact, such that it would be safe to teleport directly inside?"

YES. THOUGH THERE ARE PILLARS.

"Are the traps mechanical in nature?"

NO.

"Are they magical?"

YES.

"Do we have sufficient power here at the temple to defeat our enemies and free Mokad, teleporting in as many as we can?"

I DO NOT KNOW.

"Right. Of course not."

"Is the Seven Star Ritual set up inside the original Merging Room of Aza Temg?"

YES.

Cor Kek smiles and rubs his hands together. *That's enough*, he decides. He asks some more questions at the end, then stands up.

"We have them," he says to his fellow priests and priestesses. "Mokad warned me this could happen. I should have taken him more seriously. Alander's Chosen are casting the Ritual of Seven Stars on Mokad, right now, in the Charagan stronghold of Aza Temg." He turns to **Tel Mek**, his bodyguard. "Fetch Perrin Greybeard – the priest who came here from Charagan the day after the Boundary went down. If memory serves, he worked on constructing Aza Temg beneath the Twilight City. We'll need him to describe where we're going so the wizards can *teleport* us in."

Then, to Tai En: "We should have at least an hour before they can finish their ritual. Find Sen Pi and make sure she has *greater teleport* today; if not, we should have a scroll in the library. Figure out how many we can take between the two of you. It'll be me, you, Tel Mek, Sen Pi, Clavyn, Three Winks, Mon Zat, and however many of Mek's elites we still have room for. Get them all back here as soon as you can, and we'll start preparing ourselves. I want *mass fly* and *mass invisibility*, plus whatever buffing spells we have prepared. Pull more scrolls from the library if you have to."

"If Mokad was right, we're about to have the fight of our lives."



blargney the second: This stuff is so unbelievably good.

steeldragons: So unbelievably good. Next update's gonna be fierce!

Kestrel: Just wanted to say I really love these kinds of posts. As a GM, I really can appreciate the bad guy POV and love seeing how the Black Circle got around the plans of the PCs. Now I have a question (if you don't mind sharing): how did you design the Black Circle's reaction to the PCs' intricate plans? Was this post hindsight reasoning for the Black Circle's interference or did you come up with the plan on the fly after hearing the PCs' plans? (I'm a bad GM, and tend to just have the bad guys show up for the climactic fight and come up with a reason why later. Usually because my players are pretty damn smart and stump me until I've had time to think.)

Piratecat: I can't speak for Sagiro, but I can guess. Our group has a long history of divining around the edges of things, like when we found Het Branoi despite the Divination Sinks. Sagiro has had to adjudicate each of these. I have no doubt that Sagiro thought long and hard about how the bad guys might be able to find us after Mokad disappeared.

This was possibly my favorite post-game hand-out we've gotten. I love that all of Mokad's specious justifications to us, the ones that were so well given they almost had us doubting ourselves, were bald-faced lies. I also love that there was a good reason for this ambush, and that he didn't circumvent our defenses willy-nilly.

Sagiro: I had an advantage: Piratecat and I ran through his kidnapping mission over e-mail, which meant I had plenty of time to think about what the Black Circle would do if Mokad was abducted. And Piratecat's right: the party has taught me plenty about creative ways to get around *mind blanks* and *private sanctums* and such.

Also, the Black Circle folk are expert diviners, so I didn't hold back – I figured that anything I could think of, they could think of. Finally, I had decided that if the party did anything so clever that I *couldn't* easily justify the Black Circle finding them, I'd have Cor Kek cast a *miracle* in response. (Kibi's *wish* was that thing, in this case.) That was kind of a shame; Cor Kek would have loved to have that *miracle* back in the ensuing fight!

SolitonMan: Hey Sagiro & gang, just wanted to say that I'm still really enjoying this Story Hour; your ongoing adventures are just awesomely fun to read! Can't wait to see how this battle turns out... If the past is any indicator, the Black Circle invaders will regret their efforts!

Joshua Randall: Tsk, tsk, Spire Guard: not trapping the entire volume of the room? Amateur mistake... Also, in hindsight (heh), a *teleport redirect* (to, say, the middle of the ocean) would've been a spectacularly nasty trap to lay for those Black Circle bastards.

Sagiro: They couldn't have done these things; that much ambient magic in the vicinity would have screwed up the Ritual of Seven Stars. They had talked about various defenses, like *dimensional lock* and *forbiddance*, but they would have disrupted the Ritual. I don't think the party has the spell *teleport redirect*, but it would have had the same problem.

Joshua Randall: Bah, everyone knows that too much ambient magic makes obscure evil rituals awesomer. It's in the DMG somewhere.

Cerebral Paladin: These updates have been awesome – I'm looking forward to how this plays out. But I'm also wondering – do we know who Alander is? It's not surprising that the Black Circle name for the Company isn't the same as the Company's name for itself, but I'm curious if we know what that name means. I couldn't remember anything about Alander, but...

Sagiro: Alander was one of the original Archmagi and one of the Spire's founding members. Abernathy was his apprentice, centuries ago. In the "Before They Were Famous" prologue, found on StevenAC's site, you'll see mention of how it was Alander who gave Abernathy a scroll that ultimately chose who would be in the Company.

Alander was killed when Naloric Skewn (the original Emperor) forced his way back from his prison prime of Volpos, a thousand years after he was banished. That was the battle at which Naloric was killed, along with Alander, another archmage named Typier, and (it was long thought) Parthol Runecarver.

Cerebral Paladin: Thanks for the explanation! And for the awesomeness in general.



Wystan: Just read all of this (Part 1-3) over a week or so. Amazing... I wish I could find a game as good as this... I have one that is close and another that is just starting... but WOW...

Sagiro: First: hi, Wystan! It's always nice to hear from new readers, especially when they feel motivated to read the whole huge thing. Welcome.

Second, though you won't be reading it for a long time yet, I did something particularly rat-bastardly to the party last game. I think it left some of my players feeling angry and let down, which is something I can understand. Without divulging spoilers, what I did made them feel like they had gone through a whole lot of previous effort for nothing. I tried to assure them that that's not the case, but I'm not sure how much effect my attempts at mollifying them had. I did what I did for a number of reasons, among which were to add drama and urgency to what they're doing, but also to give them an emotional connection to the game world they've effectively left behind. My players will just have to trust me on this one, that it'll be a net positive in the end...

All of this is oddly synchronous with what's going on in this Story Hour as currently in progress. To wit: as you may recall, I write my Story Hour by transcribing audio tapes of the sessions. The main benefit of this is accuracy (especially important for dialogue), but a side benefit is that I get to hear long-forgotten table talk from years earlier.

Let me tell you: after last run, when the Black Circle team arrived in the middle of the ritual despite all the precautions the party had taken, my players were quite upset – more upset than I may have ever seen them. Keep in mind that I had not yet sent them the piece about how the Black Circle had managed it; all they knew was that they had cast *mind blanks* on everyone, and that the Book of Lies would thwart any divinations about Mokad, and that Kibi had cast a *wish* (of the XP-using-up variety) specifically to prevent discovery, and the Black Circle had shown up anyway. In fact, different players were upset for different reasons:

- Kibi's player was upset because she felt like she had blown a *wish* for no reason – that I was so determined to have this battle take place, that I was willing to break rules to make it so.
- Piratecat was upset because he felt like I had broken rules regarding *mind blank*, and that there was just no way the Black Circle should have been able to get there so soon.
- Morningstar's player was upset because I was breaking an unwritten rule about extra-party resources. Specifically, she pointed out that she theoretically has the entire Church of Ell at her disposal to help with the party's adventures, but doesn't call on them because that would be game-breaking and annoying to adjudicate. She felt there was a tacit agreement, then, that enemy churches wouldn't do the same. As an example: couldn't Morningstar call upon every 11th level or higher cleric in the church to cast regular *communes* to answer all the mysteries about the campaign? And since she doesn't, in order not to derail things, the Black Circle shouldn't do it either. Again, she didn't know at the time that it was only a small party-sized group of Black Circle adherents that were opposing them; I think she assumed that the only way the Black Circle could have found them so quickly was by pooling resources of an unfair magnitude.
- Ernie's player felt I had done something unfair in a general way, but described it more as a feeling, rather than point to specific things that were unfair.

And you know what? All of those feelings were completely fair, given what the players knew. Only Aravis and Grey Wolf's players thought it was okay. Aravis's player specifically pointed out that they do the same kind of *mind blank*-skirting tricks on a semi-regular basis.

That very night, after the game, and knowing I had a bunch of disgruntled players, I wrote up and sent around that last piece of the story, mostly as damage control.

It's interesting to consider all of this after the fact, because it exposes the weird middle ground between what the DM knows and can do, and what his villains know and can do. Like I said, there was a feeling at the table of: "Sagiro was going to have his battle no matter what we did, and so we blew a ton of time and resources for nothing." And that's not an unfair attitude for them to have had; I can completely see where they were coming from. But that kind of thinking puts me in a bind sometimes. Maybe it comes down to this question: should a DM have villains that are as smart and resourceful as the party, and possibly *more powerful* than the party, to a degree such that, in some cases, there really is effectively nothing the party can do to prevent some of the villains' short-term goals?

That's not to say the DM should break rules by fiat. Custom magics are great, but should be used with great care, and in such ways that they don't set frustrating precedent. I did make sure that the villains had a legitimate way of finding the PCs out, and they did have to blow a *miracle* that they then didn't have in the subsequent fight. But I still can't shake the feeling that I could have handled the whole thing better/differently, because my players really were actually, and legitimately, annoyed with me. I'd be interested in hearing readers' thoughts on the subject.

wedgeski: Fascinating. Thanks for the frank insight into your game here, Sagiro. What surprises me here, and believe me I mean no disrespect to you or any of your players by saying this, is that after all this time your guys didn't give you the benefit of the doubt? Great campaigns are successful collaborations between player and DM, so "Sagiro was going to have his battle no matter what we did, and so we blew a ton of time and resources for nothing" seems an uncharacteristically prickly response from a bunch of people who have forged such an incredible game together. Still, I can totally understand how their disappointment at failing to protect themselves adequately spilled over into criticism of your handling of the situation, implied or otherwise. That's just what happens when you play D&D at this kind of level, and it would be extraordinary in the extreme if you all made your way through to the end of the campaign without once feeling hard done by.

On the player-DM level, players at some point have to realise that they're pitting their multiple brains against the DM's one. That's several players, all of whom know the game and their characters intimately, conniving (and I mean that in the best way possible!) to outfox anything the DM throws at them. Great DMs will be up to the challenge a lot of the time, and you've certainly shown yourself to be more than a match on most occasions, but sometimes, rarely, the DM should be able to say, in answer to how the PCs' sixteen-stage defensive preparation was breached, that it just was. Bad luck. Trust me when I tell you it wasn't easy, but they did it. Now roll initiative and let's fight! (I say that even knowing that wasn't the case here, although it might have seemed that way to them at the time.)

Perhaps, when dealing with villainy of such vast power and resources (comparable to their own, in fact), the time simply comes when the PCs have to accept the fact that they aren't gods, and that there is essentially no plan they can put into motion which agents of equal cunning can't outwit. The only recourse now is to confront the threat, head-on, winner take all.

The alternatives aren't very pleasing at all. The PCs become so powerful, and their players' command of the game so complete, that there is essentially nothing the DM can do. He's beaten. Either that, or the campaign devolves into a battle of one-upmanship with the winner the person who can find the most obscure spell loophole first. I don't really like the sound of that.

Sagiro: I hear what you're saying... but there has to be a limit to the enemy's power, or what's the point, right? I control all the dials. I could have the enemies "win" any time I want, for any reason. My job is to craft a campaign where the enemies *don't* have the wherewithal to arbitrarily thwart players' plans, or what's the point in playing?

wedgeski: All true. But in the epic-level world of "I see your *wish* and raise you a *miracle*," I'm not sure you can always succeed at that.

Sagiro: Perhaps the problem was this: there's an unspoken agreement hanging over almost every aspect of the campaign, that when I present a challenge, and the players are both clever and thorough about taking it on, there should be some way to allow them a victory. Otherwise, why did I give them the challenge in the first place?

The answer, perhaps, lies in how granular one wants to be about it. If one considers the challenge to be "save Praska by performing the ritual on Mokad," then I certainly did make victory possible. But the sub-challenge of "prevent the Black Circle from finding out what we're doing" turned out to be too difficult, *despite* clever and thorough solutions from the players. And the players don't really know (and have no way of knowing) what "zoom-level" they should be considering.

I certainly didn't feel at the time that my players were being petulant or unreasonable. I felt more like: "Oops. Yeah, I sure set the party up to fail at this sub-challenge, as a part of making the main challenge appropriately difficult. I'd be upset too."

As a side-note, I have no business throwing first stones here. I nitpick at Piratecat all the time (in a good-natured way, of course!) looking for angles, things he's missed, and "wondering out loud" how the bad guys managed to hose us so badly again.

Enkhidu: The key, I think, would have been the *mind blanks* – but to be fair the players had been the first to "up the ante" on that one. I think I'd have been miffed a bit up until reminded of that. But really, I don't think it would have registered much with me if the Black Circle was obviously under-powered in the spell department when they arrived and had a throw-away line or two bemoaning how difficult the heroes were to find.

Piratecat: First, please let me say that I think you're misinterpreting what happened last game. We're bummed both in and out of character, and I think a certain NPC did something in character but very stupid, but our (my?) good-natured grousing didn't mean we feel screwed. It meant "of course something like that happened, we should have expected it but hoped it wouldn't happen, and it kills us that we can't affect it." Very different from feeling cheated. The stakes have just been raised, and we're worried.

That's different from the battle over Mokad. I'd forgotten how much a difference your explanation made, because we really did feel screwed. Interestingly, a big reason for that was the prep time involved – we spent a lot of time on our defenses. If we'd heard "don't spend two hours planning, because it won't matter. Fight!" we'd be irked and surprised but we'd probably shrug. Wasting that time for (we thought) no reason made it worse. It's the same reason why I love it when a GM says "don't overthink your watch schedule" or "don't overthink your plan, because something disrupts it," and saves what would be thirty minutes of needless planning.

That's why I love the behind-the-scenes so much. Actually seeing how our enemies out-clevered us made a huge difference.

scrubkai: I think Piratecat hit the nail on the head for almost any game. The more time/resources the players spend on any plan, the more frustrated they get when the DM does something to totally stop them. Because 99% of the world is in the DM's control, when the players feel like that 1% you can do is taken away then they get angry. After all this is a *shared* story, and if the DM is going to cheat and take away that 1% control a player has, then they have to ask why am I playing. Any good player is there to help shape the story, not to have an oral recitation by the DM. Most players understand and even wink/nod when this happens sometimes on minor things, but the unspoken contract most (non-railroad) games have is that when a player really chooses to do something, and is willing to pay the costs involved, the DM lets them do it.

Now, that said, if a DM can show how within the rules they have stopped pretty much anything my character has ever done, my reaction typically goes from hurt to grudging respect about how I was out-thought. It's all a matter of perspective, and I have to say on initial reading, my first reaction was that the Company got cheated on that exchange. The follow-up post did explain it away and actually impressed me quite a bit, but I have to say my initial reaction was to be shocked that Sagiro had been so, well, "railroady" on the players for probably the first time in the whole story...

LightPhoenix: I fall into Aravis's camp as far as this goes. My personal philosophy is generally that the players set the bar for what is acceptable and what is not acceptable by their actions. There was a Story Hour (I forget which one) I read before that specifically called out *disjunction* as a tactic that both players and enemies avoided. However, if the players chose to use it, they could expect the enemies to start as well. So, as Aravis has implied, if the players are using *commune* and *wish/miracle*, they should be expecting their opponents to be doing the same. It would be a crappy DM move to use it all the time, but using it once to ensure a climactic battle seems more than fair to me.

blargney the second: Goosey/gandery goodness.

MetaVoid: Same with avoiding *mind blank*! Agreed.

Sagiro: That brings to mind a related thought I've been having. *Disjunction* is a pretty crappy spell to cast on your players at high level. In 3.5E, the power level of a 20th-level party could be game-bustingly altered if a bad guy were to drop a *disjunction* on them, since magic items make up such a large percentage of the PCs' collective firepower. Understandably, then, I've been hesitant to do this.

On the flip side, Aravis drops *disjunctions* on my bad guys fairly regularly. It's not quite as bad when he does it, since most monsters aren't as heavily reliant on items, but it's still something I worry about. My inclination is to let it go – that is, continue to be reluctant to use it on the PCs, but not penalize Aravis for casting it. I'll just have to continue to take it into account when designing encounters. I can always give enemies different spells/abilities that are similar in immediate power but not so long-term hosing.

coyote6: You could always adapt the Pathfinder version – the area effect version only suppresses magic items for 1 minute/level, unless they roll a 1 on the saving throw (then that item is destroyed). You can also target one item, which has to save at -5 or be destroyed. That version has the same effect on artifacts, too.

Piratecat: The real problem with *disjunction* cast on a high-level party, even the Pathfinder version, is that it stops the game cold for three hours while everyone refigures all of their stats without magic items. I'm a big fan of the spell variant where it acts like an automatic dispel for any ongoing spells, and ignores magic items unless it's cast on one specific one.

coyote6: There is certainly that. And rolling saves for every magic item might take slightly less than forever, to boot. On the other hand, in my high-level D&D experience, the buff-dispel buff tango happens anyways, and trips everyone up, and drags everything out – that just seems to be how high-level D&D rolls.

Disjunction only ever appeared in my game as essentially a plot device – a bad guy showed up with a scroll or two, used one (with my intention being to scare the crap out of the PCs; any magic items that got zapped would've been replaced by newer, better gear), and left the other one as an option to use on the artifact MacGuffin.

The Warlock: In my long campaign, the PCs never wanted to use *disjunction*, avoiding it like the plague as they perceived the give and take between high-level movers and shakers to be something of a detente. Nobody really wanted to use it, under the assumption that if they did, a Disjunction War might ensue. Then, during the final conflict of the campaign, the villains out to consume the world dropped it right on the PCs. And the party clerics fought over who was going to cast the *miracle* to get all their spells and items reconstituted by next round. Which is how they avoided numbers re-crunching. It's definitely a show stopper if the party has expended their high-end resources, and I was happy to avoid it until climactically appropriate and entertaining while the PCs avoided its use as well. It's certainly a tough call from the DM's perspective, because it can completely ineffectualize a party that isn't prepared or has ineffective escape plans.

Quartz: [Piratecat: *The real problem with disjunction ... is that it stops the game cold for three hours while everyone refigures all of their stats without magic items.*] I can't speak for the Pathfinder version, but otherwise I beg to differ. The key to using *disjunction* is preparation. You, the GM, should have a complete list of all magic items and spells active on the players and NPCs. You also have a pre-rolled sheet of d20 numbers: simply pass or fail each item and spell in turn. And when *disjunction* is used, you do not tell the players that it is a *disjunction*. Tell them only things like "Your sword stops glowing" and "You fall to the floor." And don't bother recalculating anything beyond the basics until it's actually required.

The other thing to do with *disjunction* is to use it regularly as a means of churn, getting rid of items and opening the way for new ones. Heroes in fiction usually only have a choice few items; D&D heroes often end up like Christmas trees unless you take active measures, and *disjunction* is one such measure. PCs should be facing *disjunction* from about 10th level onwards. Give the BBEG a triggered item with *disjunction* in it as his ace in the hole, or have the conjured demon cast *disjunction* over everyone – including the BBEG. You just need to be careful that the PCs can still win. And, of course, there are multiple ways of getting the BBEG to waste the *disjunction*.

Of course, at Epic levels, everyone has *disjunction ward* or similar as permanent effects.

Piratecat: With respect, Quartz, you're describing a very different campaign than ours. I'd spend a lot of time snarling in such a game.

Quartz: Very true, and it's a shift that can't really be introduced now, at such a late stage.

Piratecat: Regarding the goose/gander discussion above, I'll go out on a limb and say that as players we all agree with this. The difference in this case is that we spent a lot of time setting up a situation that we legitimately thought would be impossible to divine around in the given time. Seeing how we were wrong evaporated our frustration. Now, I know as well as you do that Sagiro wrote the explanation after the fact, so he hadn't necessarily thought through the step-by-step details ahead of time. That doesn't bother me at all. What had seemed like an unusual metagamey "this fight will occur!" had yanked me out of my world immersion, something that almost never happens, and the explanation settled me back in so well that I'd completely forgotten the concern until now.

Joshua Randall: [scrubkai: ...my initial reaction was to be shocked that Sagiro had been so, well, "railroaded" on the players for probably the first time in the whole story...] I concur. It felt railroaded to me when I read about it, and the "behind the scenes with the Black Circle" felt like an attempt to justify laying the tracks. Sadly, I think this particular bit of railroading (if that's what you want to call it) may have deprived the game of going somewhere quite interesting. Suppose the Black Circle had *not* found out about the Mokad/Praska ritual and therefore didn't show up to try to stop it. Then the PCs would have deprived the Black Circle of one of their top lieutenants (Mokad), possibly prompting the Black Circle to panic and become desperate. And a panicked, desperate enemy can actually be extremely dangerous for the PCs!

So yeah, I was disappointed in this part of the story... at least based on what we've read so far.

Piratecat: Joshua, I strongly urge you to wait for future updates before deciding whether the Black Circle attack was truly railroaded, or whether it made the game go more or less interestingly! Mind you, I'm biased because this is one of my favorite fights of the entire run.

Joshua Randall: No way, man. This was the last straw. After, like, nine years of reading this story, I'm turning my back on it because of one DM decision that I don't completely agree with. (Uh, yeah. Joking.)

Re *disjunction*, for a less scorched earth approach, but unfortunately one that is equally annoying to track the results of, I am fond of using *area dispel magic* to strip people's buffs. Or even better, a strategically placed *Otiluke's dispelling screen* (I think that's the name – in the 3E *Spell Compendium* – basically a *wall of dispel magic*) over the entrance the PCs are most likely to use. And you'd think my players/PCs would have learned not to charge in blindly after the third time it happened, but no... *shakes head sadly*

Cerebral Paladin: It's hard to put yourself in the mindset of a situation that you've only read about through a different presentation, but I think I would have been in the same boat as Kibi's player. After all, XP is a permanent, highly personal resource – spending XP to cast a *wish* and then having that *wish* nerfed would feel really sucky, and it does contribute to that "why do we even try to come up with good solutions to the parts that aren't fights – we'll still have to fight them in the end" feel.

That said, I think the behind-the-scenes response is a hugely awesome bit of damage control. It explains why, and it shows resources being spent. Knowing that the NPCs would have dropped a *miracle* during the fight if it hadn't been spent on undoing the *wish* would make me feel a lot better. It's still rough... but it stops feeling like waving the GM Fiat wand.

As to the question of how to get the balance right... to me, the key is sometimes allowing the sorta anti-climactic victories. "Hmm... they might try to, but then... but if they... no, that won't work.... Okay, the ritual goes off without a hitch. Congrats." The players need to know that the effort that they're spending on being clever sometimes works, even though it doesn't always. In this case, it's hard to see how the bad guys could get around it... which comes back to why the damage control is so great. It does two things: one, it establishes a plausible, reasonable way that the Black Circle could find them anyway; and two, it explicitly tells them that their effort wasn't worthless – stripping out a *miracle* from the enemy caster ain't nothing, especially assuming that's the only *miracle* he had prepared. The combination of the two goes a long way to restoring the trust. (I also think that it's key that sometimes the Company's plans really do work solidly – that makes this not just another clever plan hand-waved away, but an exceptional example of taking on well equipped and brilliant enemies. Also, the fact that the Black Circle has a strong divination focus makes the behind-the-scenes easier to swallow. Sure, the PCs used enormously powerful magic to conceal what they were doing – but they were also taking on the Black Circle in one of its core competencies.)

Sagiro: You mean, like when I have a glorious charge-or-sneak-through-thousands-of-goblins scenario envisioned, and the players instead figure out that Aravis can *shapechange* into a \$#! Digger and simply tunnel underneath the whole friggin' army? For that matter, consider that, originally, I thought it was *highly* unlikely that the party would be able to kidnap Mokad from within the Black Circle temple. I figured they'd have to have a big battle royal inside the temple grounds, which would have been much tougher for them. But then they described the plan to sneak Dranko into the temple, *mind blanked*, and have him hand Mokad a soul-trapping item. I thought about it, and what could go wrong, and whether Mokad was likely to have *true seeing* up, etc., and in the end, with Dranko making his die rolls, it seemed like the plan should work. So it did.

Then I thought through what the Black Circle would do in response, and how they might overcome various obstacles, and what their resources were, etc. And when I did that, it seemed like *their* plan should work. So it did.

coyote6: Yeah, once PCs are casting *wishes* and *miracles* any time they fight enemy spellcasters who are of the equal-or-better category, the players have to expect the bad guys to bust out the reality-altering magic. The NPCs are almost always going to be fighting for their lives, after all; they have no reason to hold back.

In my game, during the climactic battle against the quadruple-digit-hp dragon, the PCs had been pounding on him for a bit, and were starting to get the upper hand, and I think anticipating finishing him. Then he rumbled out a "I wish I was in full health" – I think every player said "oh ^*%\$" or some variation. They would have loved an opportunity to force him to make a different wish.

Cerebral Paladin: [You mean, like when I have a glorious charge-or-sneak-through-thousands-of-goblins scenario envisioned, and the players instead figure out that Aravis can shapechange into a \$#! Digger and simply tunnel underneath the whole friggin' army?]

Exactly. In case it wasn't clear, I wasn't criticizing your GMing at all – I think this sequence is in many ways you doing everything right. But it still hurts a lot to have a *wish* appear to just fail, which is why I think it's likely that if I had been a player, I would have felt cheated. And that in turn is why the "behind-the-scenes" look is so great. It's not just "trust me, this cost them real resources and they can do this," but rather it's "here's why they were able to do this."

One of the related questions is whether it's possible to avoid those moments of frustration on the players' parts while still maintaining a tense and satisfying game. My guess is no. You have to be able to hit them with what they're up against, or else the game becomes just a continuously easy romp, which would not sustain my interest (at least not for long). But that then means that sometimes the players feel frustrated when their legitimately good, but not unbeatable, plans get beaten.

Siusi: I went through something similar just tonight. The end result was something like "You're making stuff up to cover for screwing up!" I feel somewhat screwed, and couldn't put my finger on why – was I just being a poor player?

PC said it best: the DM's actions just stripped away any immersion. I went from playing a game to trying not to argue incredulously, and it left a bitter taste in everyone's mouth. Thanks, PC, for giving me the words on that. It'll help smooth over any hard feelings.

As for the actual battle with the Ritual, and with Mokad... it was close, and I would have preferred to read something about the Black Circle teleporting in – about twenty minutes too late! But it didn't read like railroading, maybe because of the divination specialty. After all the stuff this party has done I would have thought he'd have the benefit of the doubt. Though I guess I myself would probably have been butt-hurt. I'm not on your level of play just yet, though; I've room to grow.

Shieldhaven: My experience with struggling to be a good player and not a jerk (this is not easy for me) is that no matter how much I trust and respect the GM, it is hard to keep perspective when the character and party I care about is getting nailed to the wall by a plan gone awry. A few days after the fact, I sometimes have a bit more perspective, but sometimes in the shorter term there's snarling.

To be honest, the vast majority of players I know are the same way I am, and I've been on the receiving end many times as well. It's tough, and I think Sagiro handled his campaign's situation optimally. A big part of that came from really solid exposition, beforehand and after, on what the PCs could expect from the Black Circle.

Cerebral Paladin: This is almost exactly what I was trying to say.

Artoomis: On *disjunction*: when my party had that available, we very rarely used it. Only in extremis. Why? Because it not only helped win the battle, but, as a disturbing side effect, destroyed the treasure and put the caster at risk of losing all casting abilities forever (you never know when there might be an artifact in the area).

On "suspension of disbelief" (a.k.a. "suspension of belief," a.k.a. "immersion"): I agree it is most annoying to lose this – the world should hang together and one should not get the sense that the DM acts randomly. Our current DM helps this by occasionally doing a "behind-the scenes" look at what is happening that the PCs would not see or know.

On this story: More! More! I am on the edge of my seat waiting for how this plays out.



Gone in 18 Seconds

Before I describe this fight, I thought I should mention a metagame note that will shed light on some of the details. We no longer use XP in the campaign. Instead, I level the party at a pace that seems right to me, and when they level, each character gets a stash of Action Points equal to $(\text{level}/2) + 5$. One Action Point can be spent in lieu of 1000 XP for use in endeavors that require them, such as powering a *wish* or *miracle*, or crafting magic items. Action Points can also be spent to increase a single die roll, to gain temporary access to feats, or, at the time of this combat, to gain an extra standard action during your round.

I have since disallowed that last usage, since it resulted in the same "three spells every round" pacing that made me dislike the old 3.0 *haste* so much. But in this fight, that's the explanation for how the PCs are able to accomplish so much. They collectively used a whopping 14 Action Points in the combat, and the casters were doing "spell, Quicken spell, action point spell" almost every round.

Eighteen seconds. In a diplomatic encounter, it often takes longer than that to introduce one or two of the participants, preparatory to hours of verbal sparring. On the field of battle, two armed and armored soldiers might take that long just circling one another, probing for an opening, clanking sword against shield, stumbling in the mud.

When some of the most powerful spell-slingers and warriors in the world meet to do battle, eighteen seconds is enough time for expenditures of energies not seen in entire lifetimes of common folk; for the mighty to live, die, and live again; for the fortunes of the world to be decided, its course spun anew.

Consider the hourglass turned at the moment of the enemies' arrival.

"Curse you!"

Aravis reacts before anyone else. He casts *time stop*. The Ellish priestesses are halted mid-chant. One has just tossed a handful of reagents toward Praska's supine form; each crystal, mote and flake are suspended, their outlines bright in Aravis's perception. Thirteen members of the Black Circle hang motionless in mid-air, clustered in two *teleport* groups. Almost on instinct Aravis *shapechanges* into his preferred yellow dragon form, then casts *shield* on himself. But luck is not with him, and time kicks in sooner than he hoped. With another muttered curse he lands atop the low stone wall and sends a Quicken *fireball* into the middle of one of the enemy clusters.

The wizardess **Sen Pi** blinks. One of her enemies has cast a spell and vanished, and instantly a summoned dragon has appeared. But she has her orders, and sticks with the plan. As the dragon is landing, she flies up and over, and waves a hand at the wall riddled with holes. Over half of the glowing rods are forcibly ejected from their slots, clattering to the ground, some first bouncing off a green translucent bubble of force that surrounds Praska and her altar.

"Hey!" Dranko shouts. "We spent all day setting that up!"

The other of Cor Kek's wizards, Tai En, has his attention grabbed by the dragon, and while Dranko complains, he attempts to *polymorph* it into something more harmless. Aravis can feel his form start to shift, but his draconic form resists the effect.

At the same time, Tel Mek, the Captain of the Black Circle Guard and a supremely accomplished fighting man, flies down to hover next to Flicker. He buries a black mace in the halfling's side, and beyond that, some kind of palpable and painful aura is radiating out from his armor. Flicker's preternatural reflexes keep him from falling off the wall, but barely. Tel Mek, his white hair and goatee peeking out in places from his helmet, snarls down at his opponent. Flicker responds almost instantly, activating the *hand of glory* that lets him see invisible things. He gulps at the sight of Tel Mek towering over him, but slashes several times with his shortsword. He doesn't even make a scratch.

Dranko sees Flicker in trouble, and puts up a *wall of ice* that effectively extends the wall upward thirty feet. Tel Mek frowns as his quarry is denied him for the moment. Dranko adds a spur that shields the isolated Kibi from the knots of enemies above him, before running along the wall and vaulting onto Aravis's back.

Grey Wolf is already casting as this happens, following a Quickened *iron storm* around one group of enemies with a *chain lightning*. Electricity tears at the Black Circle devotees, burning their clothes and skin. None of them die, though almost all are left smoking and in pain.

Three of Tel Mek's elite fighting unit had been moving toward the dragon almost from the moment it appeared. They shrug off its terrifying aura and slash at Aravis's scales with their swords, becoming visible in the process. Two land telling blows, and blood gushes from the dragon.

Three seconds have now elapsed.

Cor Kek, Grand Diviner of the Black Circle, recognizes Dranko from Mokad's many tales. Black lesions crawl on the cleric's face, and Dranko can feel sympathetic pustules erupt all over his skin. But Dranko is tough enough to essentially shrug these off. "Is that all?" he taunts.

Cor Kek snorts, turns his bald head to Aravis, and casts *energy drain* upon the dragon. Life and magics are sapped from the wizard, and Aravis feels his most potent spells torn from his head: *greater arcane sight*; *lightning ring*; *maze*; his backup *maze*; *polymorph any object*; and most distressingly, his emergency *Mordenkainen's disjunction*.

"What was that?" Cor Kek scoffs, as he flies upward and out of the *iron storm*. "Your ride appears to be flagging." The Company note that despite being in the *chain lightning/iron storm* apocalypse, Cor Kek appears almost entirely unhurt.

Boss! Pewter says urgently. *That's him! That's Cor Kek, their high priest!*

Even as Cor Kek is exchanging words with Dranko, Ernie, who cannot see the many enemies still invisible, is almost screaming over the mind-link. *Dranko, where are they?!*

To the left of Aravis, and twenty feet forward of him, Dranko thinks. *You'll get a bunch of them.*

Ernie immediately drops a *flame strike* on a cluster of the enemy as he hops down from the wall, and then casts *righteous wrath of the faithful*, bolstering his allies. For the first time since its construction, the Merging Room of Aza Temg is filled with the scent of fresh bread.

Dranko's *wall of ice* has caused some tactical difficulties for several of Tel Mek's elites; as they fly over and around it, Kibi also moves, and when he has line of sight drops a Maximized *coldfire* on the knot of enemies near Aravis. One of the elites drops from the air, along with an under-priest named Clavyn who never even had time to get his bearings, let alone act in the combat. Kibi follows with a second (Quickened and Empowered) *coldfire*, this one catching Cor Kek, Tai En, and two of the elite fighters. None drop. A small gem falls from Tai En's headband, and all of the wizard's wounds heal. Crap!

In the midst of the tumultuous blasts and flashing blades, Dranko continues his repartee with Cor Kek. "You really are the world's biggest prick. What's this whole 'ending the world' thing going to do for you, anyways?"

"Ending the world? Nonsense! I'm just going to make it more palatable."

Morningstar, while everyone else has been instinctively firing off spells and attacks, has been considering what best to do to protect her three Ellish priestesses who had been assisting in the ritual. It's a miracle, she thinks, that they haven't yet been caught in some area-effect spell and annihilated. They could flee, except that as a (failed) defensive measure, she had placed a *prismatic sphere* in the only doorway out of the Merging Room. With a sigh she dismisses the *sphere*, Quicksens a *true seeing*, and drops a *flame strike* exactly where Ernie had cast his. Tai En and one of the enemy fighters are burned; a second fighter is killed outright; and Cor Kek is entirely unaffected.

Clavyn may have been killed, but the other two under-priests, **Three Quick Winks** and **Mon Zat**, overcome their indecision borne from the baffling chaos of their first full-scale battle against equals. In tandem, even as Dranko and Cor Kek are jawing at one another, and Morningstar is motioning for her priestesses to make their escape, the two Black Circle priests each drop a *flame strike* on Grey Wolf, Dranko and Aravis. Dranko evades both, using Aravis's larger body to shield himself. Aravis and Grey Wolf are both badly burned. Morningstar sighs with relief as her sisters make a hasty retreat from the fray, then turns her full attention to the battle.

Six seconds.

Drained and near death, Aravis changes back to his human form in order to use his *tongue stud of potion quickening* to gulp down a healing draught. (Dranko deftly dismounts to stand again on the wall.) Aravis would like to target a *greater dispel* on Cor Kek, but realizes that this will be quite ineffective due to the *energy drain*. Instead he Quickens a *disintegrate* and fires it at Cor Kek, but the Grand Diviner has come to the battle with *spell resistance* cast, and the beam dissipates harmlessly.

Sen Pi flies into position and blasts Aravis, Dranko, Grey Wolf and Ernie with a *cone of cold*. Again Dranko evades – and so does Aravis, using a charge from his *ring of evasion*. Grey Wolf is very nearly dead, his skin blue and covered with a frozen rime. At the same moment, Tai En targets Grey Wolf with *insanity*. Somehow, despite the beating that his body has taken, he finds the mental resolve to resist the assault on his mind.

Tel Mek has flown over to Kibi, and while the Black Circle wizards are assaulting Grey Wolf, he's slashing at Kibi with his black mace. He lands a perfect strike to the dwarf's chest; the mace pulses with negative energy and saps strength from Kibi's muscles even as it bruises his bones.

While Flicker takes a bounding leap to Grey Wolf and force feeds him a curing potion, Dranko activates his *sash of greater invisibility* and unleashes a torrent of whip-strokes at the three elite fighters hovering around him. The first strike curls in beneath the visor of the enemy's helm, pulping his face. The second and third strikes finish off a second, snapping his neck. Dranko grins at the third. "This is your opportunity to run. I suggest you take it."

"No!" shouts the fighter. "I will die in defense of the Circle, if I must."

"You sure will!" Dranko agrees.

Cor Kek does a double-take as he looks at Dranko's sash. "Miss Charagan?" he says, raising an incredulous eyebrow.

"Look, I won fair and square!" Dranko retorts. "Though if you'd rather direct an attack or two to the dwarf over there, I'd be something in your debt."

Grey Wolf, somewhat healed by Flicker's potion, pegs Cor Kek with another *disintegrate*. It gets through the target's spell resistance, but the Grand Diviner takes only minor damage. Bostock chides his wielder. *Perhaps if you would make use of me, instead of resorting to spells, your situation would improve. I would say that...*

"I'd like to kill you, Miss Charagan," says Cor Kek, flying further upward. "But you know the old saying. 'Kill the wizards first.'" Cor Kek Quickens a *heartclutch*, and Aravis can feel his heart start to leap, literally, from his chest. The pain is staggering, but Aravis presses down, grits his teeth, and resists the deadly effect.

"Fine," says Cor Kek. "I'll do this the old-fashioned way." He casts *fire storm*. The Merging Room is shot through with roaring flames and filled with the screams of the Company. When the flames recede, both Grey Wolf and Aravis have been burnt to charred corpses. "Wizards first," Cor Kek says smugly. "But Dranko, you can be next."

But Morningstar is already thinking furiously over the mind-link, and at her urging, Ernie picks up Aravis's much-lightened corpse and heaves it so that it lands next to Grey Wolf's. Then he Quickens a *searing light* that strikes harmlessly against Cor Kek's armor. Cor Kek smiles. "I can see this will be quite satisfying."

Ernie's face contorts in anger. "May everything you eat, for the rest of your life, turn to ashes in your mouth."

Dranko can't help himself. "It'll taste like our wizards!"

"Dranko!" Ernie screams. He's not in a joking mood.

The surviving member of Tel Mek's elites cannot see the invisible Dranko, but slashes through the air where his voice is coming from. Most of his swings go awry, but one lucky shot strikes the half-orc in the neck. "Aha!"

Ten seconds gone now.

Kibi realizes that standing toe to toe with the Black Circle's most fearsome warrior is not a good long-term strategy. He can feel malign and damaging energies pouring off Tel Mek's armor, but takes the chance, grits his teeth, and casts *Otto's irresistible dance*. "Excuse me, sir," Kibi says with a grimace, "but would you mind dancing for me, please?" He touches his enemy's armored foot.

Tel Mek obliges. Still hovering, he starts to caper and prance, even managing some startling mid-air twirls and spins. His face turns red and he splutters with rage. "I'm going to kill you for this!" he roars, but of course he can't at the moment, because he's executing a perfect jig.

Kibi follows up with *prismatic spray*. Tel Mek resists being turned to stone. Three Quick Winks turns a sickly shade of green and drops dead on the spot from the poison in his veins. Kibi feels a backlash of pain as electricity, normally a prohibited element for Earth Mages, is forced out of his fingers; Mon Zat is still alive despite the horrible burns on the side of his head. Sen Pi is unable to resist the petrification ray, turns to rock, plummets, and breaks in half against the *spike stones* below.

"Looks like you missed a wizard," says Ernie. Kibi wastes no time, Quickening a *cone of cold* that blasts the dancing Tel Mek and kills Mon Zat.

While Kibi unleashes his arcane fury, Morningstar finishes turning the battle around. She flies to where Grey Wolf and Aravis's corpses lie smoldering, Quickens a *revivify* on Aravis, casts another on Grey Wolf, and finishes up with a *mass heal*. The wizards blink, returned from death and finding themselves at full health. Grey Wolf hears Bostock still yammering away in his head.
...swing me next time, assuming there is a next time!

"Welcome back," says Morningstar. Then, to Cor Kek, she says: "Maybe it should be clerics first."

"Mages!" yells Dranko. "See what you can do about keeping Cor Kek from escaping!"

But the Black Circle's top wizard is also still part of this fight. Tai En blasts a Maximized *cone of cold*, unconcerned that Cor Kek is in its area. He follows up with a Quickened *ice storm*. Again half the party are badly wounded, and Ernie drops unconscious as large chunks of ice slam into his head and shoulders. Dranko instinctively casts *close wounds* on the halfling, immediately bringing him back to consciousness.

Aravis feels good. *Really* good. He realizes with a start that during his brief time spent dead, spells on his person that require a living target have ended, and that includes the *energy drain*! He pops off a *see invisibility* and then targets a *greater dispel magic* on Cor Kek. The Grand Diviner is suddenly stripped of *fly*, *invisibility* and *spell resistance*, along with some other minor enchantments. He falls, but lands atop the narrow wall and manages to keep his balance. Aravis then Quickens a *cone of cold*, striking Cor Kek, Tai En and Tel Mek. None of them drop, and Cor Kek doesn't seem injured by it at all. In fact, for all the sound and fury of the combat, Cor Kek is barely hurt. His *energy immunities* have prevented almost all the damage tossed his way. He still has some tricks up his sleeve, and is confident that he can still wrench the battle back to his side.

Dranko moves quickly up to him, stepping easily on the narrow wall, readying his whip. Cor Kek is distracted enough that he doesn't notice Flicker creeping up behind him. Over the mind-link, Dranko says a single word to his halfling ally. *Now*.

As Dranko lets loose a deadly barrage of whip strikes, Flicker leaps onto Cor Kek's back and starts stabbing. As he stabs, he shifts his weight so that Cor Kek doesn't fall off the wall before Dranko finishes his salvo. Cor Kek knows pain the likes of which he has never before endured, but he doesn't know it for long. It only takes seconds for the pair of rogues to reduce Cor Kek's head to a gushing ruin. His body falls lifeless off the wall.

SolitonMan: Ah yes, just one of the *many* reasons I love this Story Hour!

Only three enemies now remain: the wizard Tai En, the dancing warrior Tel Mek, and the last of Mek's elite fighters, a young man named **Kerwyn** who has been hanging back from the fighting. Kerwyn cannot believe what has just happened: Cor Kek, torn apart by a half-orc with a whip and a little halfling? Sen Pi, killed? Clavyn, Mon Zat, Winks, all dead? His entire squad destroyed? Tel Mek, the greatest warrior he has ever heard of, reduced to a ridiculous and helpless mid-air dance? At least Tai En is still alive...

SPLOOOSH!

Grey Wolf targets Tai En with an *acid orb* that dissolves the poor wizard's body right out of his robes. Kerwyn's eyes grow even wider. He fumbles in his pocket before the rest of these deadly enemies' attentions are turned upon him, and snaps a *refuge token*. He blinks out.

That leaves only Tel Mek, still twirling. As Dranko and Flicker move into position, Aravis gets a *sending* in his head:

Rosetta has returned from her mission with vital news. The Spire will convene at the Greenhouse in one hour. Please attend with your company. Cornelie.

Aravis responds:

We're in the middle of killing Black Circle villains. Can we make that four hours?

As Dranko and Flicker move into position around Tel Mek, another *sending* comes in:

Four hours, or at your earliest convenience. Good luck!

Tel Mek dies dancing; Flicker and Dranko rip him to pieces.

Elapsed time: eighteen seconds.

blargney the second: Huzzah!

Tamlyn: Simply awesome!

steeldragons: Um... wow. Just... yeah... wow.

Everett: The descriptive feel of Sagiro's battle scenes: great, as always.

One reason I stopped playing D&D two years ago was that I'd get very bored with the silliness of playing a series of actions that occur, after all, in six seconds, in half an hour or forty-five minutes of real time. In a campaign this deep and engaging I wouldn't mind, but do you have any clever solutions to that problem? Or do you just not consider it a problem?

Piratecat: I don't have a big disconnect between game time and combat time. I certainly like this better than 1E's one-minute combat rounds. (In *Mutants & Masterminds*, I'll note, we measure combat rounds not in seconds or minutes but in how many panels on the comic page they take up.) I agree with Sagiro, though, that being able to use action points for an extra standard action was too powerful; our enemies couldn't do it. We don't miss it much now that it's gone.

Joshua Randall: Cool fight. But I'm kind of surprised that we're not seeing more 'save-or-die's getting tossed around. You know, *wail of the banshee*, *chained flesh to stone*, that kind of thing. Particularly nasty against low-Fort mages.

steeldragons: I saw several, notably the *heartclutch* on Aravis. Also, at the moment, I'd say the *fire storm* would qualify as well. But, thankfully, the party (and for a continued 18 seconds of awesomeness, the enemy) saved.

Joshua Randall: Although if there is some kind of "the PCs won't use too many 'save-or-die's if the DM also doesn't" detente going on, then I applaud your collective restraint!

steeldragons: That seems to be the case of this most awesome of all adventuring parties (and one of the, if not *the*, longest running campaigns I've ever heard of). And thank the gods. Opinions of "save or die" notwithstanding, this was... just... wow.

Seriously Sagiro, forget what I said about a graphic novel, this story requires an animated feature!

Sagiro: In general I take a dim view of "save or die" spells like *wail of the banshee* or *finger of death*. Though I've never outright banned them or anything, my players and I do in fact have a kind of unspoken detente. Of course, with the arrival of spells like *revivify* in the *Spell Compendium*, I may rethink that policy before the end...

Aravis's player has pointed out on many occasions that high-damage spells are often "save or die," if the target's hit points are low enough. I personally don't think of them the same way, though, unless the damage is high enough to kill a full-hp PC in a single round. Also, Aravis has no qualms about tossing around 40d6 *disintegrate* spells, which are save-or-die if your hit points are at or below around 140.

Heartclutch is not technically save or die. On a failed save, the target will die in three rounds unless someone uses *heal*, *mass heal*, *miracle* or *wish*.

Finally, I don't mind using *flesh to stone*, since the party member can be revived if the party win the fight, or during combat if someone has prepared *stone to flesh*, or uses a *miracle* or *wish*.

coyote6: Yes, I loooove *revivify*. I house ruled it to work if cast within level/2 rounds, too. I much prefer just-died resuscitation magic to "oh, you've been dead for days/weeks/years/decades, let's bring you back" resurrection magic.

steeldragons: 'Save or die's or no 'save or die's... did I mention the... ya know... WOW! How do I love this Story Hour... let me count the ways... OK, or not... it's a looot of ways though, lemme tell ya.

Good show (again! As if there was ever a doubt). Thanks, as always, for the adventure.

Joshua Randall: I don't object to *disintegrate* so much because (1) you have to hit with it and (2) the target has to fail a Fort save and (3) you still have to roll those damage dice. I guess what I was referring to is the contrast between this fight, which was cool (and did involve a few 'save-or-die's) and something like the following fight, in which mass 'save-or-die's wiped the floor. (And apologies for quoting from another Story Hour, but this really is the perfect example.)

(from *Sepulchre's story*, emphasis added)

"I..." the Bard began, but never finished.

Because Mostin, whether in a fit of paranoia, or anticipating an inevitable coming to blows, acted unilaterally, and made a decision which would change the way that the travellers related with the inhabitants of Afqithan. To the others, it also demonstrated the power that an arcanist of Mostin's stature could wield in Faerie or any of its orbiting demiplanes. He spat a number of syllables out, prompting bows to be drawn or shot, and eliciting a desperate but ineffectual gesture in response from Koilimilou.

* * *

Ortwin experienced a strange sensation which lasted less than a fraction of a second – the merest flash in his mind. Shomei immediately recognized it for what it was – a temporal discontinuity in their vicinity. After it had passed, there was a colossal discharge of magical energy, and the tapestry of reality threatened to rupture completely before it rewove itself. Echoes of Sonics hung in the air.

The three Jariliths, Shupthul, the Succubus and twenty-six of the thirty Hell-hounds had vanished: the Captain's empty armour and arms collapsed to the ground in a noisy rattle. Eleven of the Loquai had been petrified, along with six of their griffin mounts – some frozen with grotesque expressions of terror upon their faces. One other sidhe was dead from fear, and all but one of the remaining steeds had likewise been slain by a phantasmal killer. Each of the umbral quicklings had been reduced to a pulp by sonic attacks. The female sidhe sat upon a stone griffon with a vacant expression on her face.*

The last griffon attempted to flee with its petrified rider, along with the four hell-hounds. Mostin turned them into flounders, which flapped impotently in the air before suffocating.

* * *

* Mostin's attack consisted of a *time stop*, Empowered and Maximized by the magical trait of the plane to six rounds of virtual time, during which he cast *haste*, a *chained flesh to stone*, a *chained phantasmal killer*, two *banishments* directed at the demons and hell-hounds, *disintegrations* targeting Shupthul and the Succubus Lemazai, an *insanity* on Koilimilou, and various sonics. There were multiple redundancies in the spells – some of the Loquai were struck by both the *flesh to stone* and *phantasmal killer*. Shupthul avoided petrification but was disintegrated. Koilimilou succumbed to insanity. The save DCs were 25 + spell level because of Mostin's augmented Intelligence, and even with the chained spells, most of the targets needed to roll 20s. Koilimilou initially attempted to counterspell the *time stop* with a *greater dispelling* she had readied, but failed.

wedgeski: Nice post, Joshua. While Mostin's actions are certainly epic in every sense of the word, and while this question would, on the face of it, seem like madness in reference to Sepulchraive's campaign, I have to ask myself: would I enjoy playing in a campaign like that?

For me it goes right back to the recent discussion on very high-level play. With that much power at your disposal, and an unwavering willingness to use it against your foes, doesn't the campaign just degenerate into tit-for-tat exchanges of obscenely powerful magic, one after another until the inevitable day when you choose the wrong spell or, simply, fail the wrong save? That's a knife-edge I wouldn't want to walk every single session. It's illuminating to hear about the unspoken agreements in Sagiro's game which reflect upon it.

shilsen: It's interesting for me to read someone else saying that, since I decided a long time ago that Sepulchraive's campaign is a perfect example of the difference between great writing (which I think it is) and a great game (which, for me, it would absolutely not be). It's not surprising at all to me that Sep has mentioned on multiple occasions, IIRC, that he doesn't run a tabletop game for the group the way Sagiro is (and most of us are doing), but rather runs one-on-one sessions with the individual players. As a DM who has sometimes had players having the same responses that Sagiro mentioned above, this discussion has been really interesting for me.

coyote6: FWIW, that trick wouldn't actually work, at least not in 3.5E – spells you cast with a duration of Instantaneous can't hurt anyone else. You can summon, you can dump a bunch of delayed spells – but there was no mention of Delay Spell.

The scene in Sep's game might've been 3.0 rules, though. Of course, the PCs are way beyond normal power levels – Mostin apparently has INT 40 at that point. (Me, I'd have switched to *Mutants & Masterminds* or FATE or something a zillion levels ago...)

Sius: Oh, man. You guys are, as ever, an inspiration.

No epic advancement, huh? Wait, no, you still distribute levels. Never mind... Can't wait to see how you guys look – is it gonna be like in the ELH, where all the iconics show up in flashy but mostly useless stuff, like a helmet of *ioun stones*, twelve flaming axes, and a +8 bikini? Well, Dranko probably will, but I suspect the rest of you all have more taste. (Seriously though, a shadowdancer with a flaming blade? Counterintuitive, that.)

Also, did anyone see that young padawan who 'ported out with the *refuge* token? I'm surprised Grey Wolf's next words weren't "I *wish* he were back here." That sort of slip is the thing that gets you guys in the butt a lot. But summoning a now-noncombatant and killing him isn't your style either... Hmm. Guess I've got more to learn from you guys than I thought.

Sagiro, is there any hope of Dranko ever getting famous again? Ever? Or even infamous. It's heart-wrenching to know something so important to the guy is forever beyond his reach. Maybe let him blow several feats on epic reputation?

Piratecat: Sacrifices have to have costs. Otherwise they mean nothing. As for the guy who escaped, we're okay with that. We *did* regret not getting to listen in as he reported back. Man, the look on his face when he realized there was no one to report to...

Quartz: You mean your arch-villains don't have clones, contingent *resurrections*, pending lichdom, or other ways of returning from the dead?

MetaVoid: Doubtful! But without Mokad, would they see them again?

Piratecat: Yeah, that hadn't actually occurred to me until I read this. Thanks a lot. I *knew* we should have gone back to Kai Kin and dropped three or four *earthquakes* on the temple complex. We didn't, though, because aside from neutral-and-pragmatic Morningstar we want to be the heroes. Becoming city-leveling bullies isn't really our thing.

Joshua Randall: City-Leveling Bullies sounds a lot meaner than Spire Guard, that's for sure...

Piratecat: Sius, none of us are shadowdancers, and none of us have a flaming blade (although Dranko's whip is flaming nowadays; he turns it off when sneaking around). Are you thinking of someone else?

Sius: PC, I was actually commenting on all of the pictures in the *Epic Level Handbook*. It shows all of the iconic characters (even the PrC ones) but with "epic" gear. I know they had to show the difference since they were using a visual medium, but some of the images were jarring and absurd – most notably, the flaming weapon used by the penultimate sneak. I was thinking of a contrast, where most of your party continues with their comfy peasant clothes, neat, maybe plain but functional equipment with a few personal touches; feathered shield, holy symbols, realistic personal flair. I then remembered Dranko having a helmet of glory(?) in all its obnoxious, jewel-encrusted splendour. I giggled for a minute and wondered what Abernathy's company would look like, decked out all "epic." I was, admittedly, not bothering to be rational at the time...

For Dranko's eternal loss of recognition: I've found that D&D is about overcoming hindrances. That Dranko just *can't* fix it, rather than needs a lot of effort, is jarring. I'm looking at it in the wrong light, I know. It's bittersweet, and is supposed to evoke this kind of empathy, or the sacrifice was meaningless. I was just putting some thought into the how of going about it, because for me knowing that even going through all these otherwise-legitimate steps to fix something won't work has more impact than just "there is no way." I asked fully expecting you guys to have thought through and refuted the idea already.

Maybe that's my issue? I think in mechanics. It's an extra layer of distance between me and the game world. As long as that's there, I won't be able to have a game like this...

Everett: If that's your issue, then I agree: this campaign "works" because everyone involved has their hearts in it. That's why we read it. (Personally, it's the only thing I read on here – Sepulchraive's Story Hour, while impressive-looking, doesn't get me interested.)

I don't see that Dranko's sacrifice is meant to evoke empathy from us. Fame, and the wanting it or needing it, isn't exactly a heroic goal, and Dranko, after all, is some mixture of anti-hero and jerk, i.e. Jayne in *Firefly/Serenity*. (I mean that Dranko is much more like Jayne than Mal. "We're gonna explode? I don't wanna explode.") Throwing the bottle into the void was a pretty dumb thing to do in the first place (and totally in character), and the way it came back to bite him also makes sense insofar as a character arc would naturally play out. I wouldn't expect that he would ever be able to recover his quest for fame – since after all, he hasn't lost that wish or desire, it's just that if he were to pursue it he'd be dragged off by tentacle-monsters that exist in a dim, OTHERspace totally apart from good or evil. Really, it's for Piratecat to resolve how he sees fit, or to live with.

And if you think about it, the closest thing the party has ever had to a straight hero was One Certain Step, the NPC. I'd also say Grey Wolf has a kind of heroic cast – quiet and good with both a sword and a spell. And Tor Bladebearer and Kay fit the hero mold, but they're ancient history. That's it. Morningstar's just a professional, Aravis is an intellectual, Ernie and Kibi are likeable in a hobbit-sense but not how you usually think of world-savers. Flicker is Flicker.

LightPhoenix: [shilsen: ...I decided a long time ago that Sepulchraive's campaign is a perfect example of the difference between great writing (which I think it is) and a great game (which, for me, it would absolutely not be).] I've thought the same thing at times as well. I can totally imagine Sep's game as an e-mail game, or a PbP game. Playing in it always seems a little unwieldy to me. Of course, that suggests the question of where it stops being a game, and where it starts being a shared story. If the actual game part of "role-playing game" is minimal and incidental, does that really make it a game anymore? Would (to continue using Sep's example) Mostin's attack really be playing the game, or would be it considered simply part of the story? Normally we speak of RPGs as blurring the line between game and story, but just like that line can sharpen with regards to the game side (i.e. tabletop strategy games), it can sharpen with regards to story as well (i.e. a shared narrative).

For me, and me alone, my feeling is that you need to be playing a game to consider it a game. That is, Mostin's "I win" attack is not actually playing a game. I'd say that while Sagiro does a good job challenging his players, their group is starting to approach that line as well, and this battle is evidence of that. It seems to me that this is the biggest problem with "Epic" level games, and not the whole mechanical side of things. It also seems to me that is why the beginning levels are the most fun for people; it's where the lines between game and story are interwoven, where they are blurrier.

Piratecat: For what it's worth, in the round where both Aravis and Grey Wolf died I thought we might have a TPK on our hands. Plenty challenged!

Sius: Games like Sepulchre's are interesting as a diversion, but unless everyone is on the ball, or some folks get plot armor, it quickly becomes a no-fun endeavor. I'm going to attack an advanced Vecna (I have 48 hit dice, and redundant caster levels) and while there's an in-game reason for it, I'm kinda hoping my character will die. It's surreal.

I am, as ever, interested in seeing how the Story Hour here pans out. Abernathy's Company are quite a fine crew, and engaging – this is the only Story Hour I've read where I care about the story several times more than the metagame. I don't care what Dranko's exact hit point total is; I care that he's still alive. That's rare to find online.

Vargo: Didn't you hear? Dranko is dead! [<http://thief.wikia.com/wiki/Dranko>]

Piratecat: Son of a monkey! Sagiro was a designer on *Thief*, so I think that's "my" Dranko! I had no idea.

Sagiro: Heh. I had forgotten all about that!

RangerWickett: And E.N. Publishing killed Emperor Drakus Coal tongue in the prologue of *War of the Burning Sky*. Man can't catch a break.

Sius: Ach. Poor Dranko, famous for dying. The guy just can't catch a break. Heh.

Destil: Wait, what? Poor who? I don't remember anyone like that in the Company, and they're all famous...

Piratecat: You know I can ban you, right? Right? *sob*



What Rosetta Was Doing

It takes just over an hour – and a very busy hour at that – to reconstruct the ritual chamber. Most of this is spent procuring the backup sets of reagents and repositioning the poles, while Kibi uses *stone shape* to spot-fix numerous instances of cracked masonry and splintered rock. In the middle of this clean-up, Praska lifts her head and blinks confusedly.

"Dranko?" she says in a small voice.

The half-orc, using the *decanter of endless water* to spray away some of the gore, looks up. "Yeah."

"What happened?"

Dranko sighs. "You're still Mokad. You're not fooling anyone."

Praska chuckles. "Yeah, I'm still Mokad. You got me."

"And who's this?" says Dranko, hoisting up Cor Kek's headless body.

Mokad's eyes go wide. "You killed Cor Kek! He must have been trying to rescue me."

"Why would he have bothered?" asks Dranko. "I mean, you're kind of a jerk."

"Perhaps he was my friend," says Mokad, his voice flat. "You probably understand that."

Aravis scoffs. "You would have used him the same way you use anyone else. Like Praska."

"You know nothing," Mokad sneers. "You assume that because someone doesn't share your world view, they cannot maintain friendships? I guess it's true what they say, about how narrow-minded you goody-two-shoes types are."

Aravis chuckles. "You mean to say, you would not have sacrificed Cor Kek, to bring back the Emperor?"

"Of course I would. And he would do the same for me, in a heartbeat, and rightfully so. Because we are willing to make the sacrifices that are necessary in order to make the world right for us."

"Why do you want to bring the Emperor back so badly?" Ernie asks. "Is he going to bring you all puppies or something?"

"The Emperor is the rightful ruler of Abernia," says Mokad.

Dranko drops Cor Kek to the ground. "Yeah?"

"Yes. And King Crunard is a usurper."

Dranko walks over to stand above Mokad, still chained down and *anchored*. "I would tell you that you could discuss this with Cor Kek in whatever afterlife you believe in, but we're about to annihilate your soul."

Mokad laughs. "Ah, yes, the Ritual of Seven Stars. You think it's going to annihilate my soul?"

"That's what it says on the box," says Ernie.

"Maybe when you're done, your wizards should take another look at the fine print."

Kibi motions to the corpses of Mokad's would-be rescuers. "Your friends wanted to stop it badly enough."

"Oh, it will kill me just fine," says Mokad. "But you may find that my soul will not so much be annihilated, as bent on revenge from the afterlife."

"That'll work, too," says Dranko. "Frankly, I don't see how it would be much different than now."

Mokad is silent for a few seconds, then speaks again. "What do you suppose is going to happen to Praska when you finish this ritual?"

"You won't be inside of her," says Dranko. "That's pretty important."

"Do you want her to have any remnants at all of her old personality?"

Dranko narrows his eyes. "Why do you ask?"

Mokad chuckles again, a sound the Company have grown to detest. "Because I can see to it that she doesn't."

"Fine," says Dranko, turning his back to Mokad. "You do what you need to do."

Mokad shifts, stares at the ceiling, and becomes quiet. His eyes are glassy.

"One last thing," says Dranko. "Everything you did to me when I was younger, I forgive you for." Then to Aravis: "I trust you, and believe in you. Let's do this thing."

For the second time Aravis begins casting the Ritual of Seven Stars, assisted by Kibi, Grey Wolf and two Ellish sisters willing to take the risk. A few minutes in, Mokad lifts his head one final time. "Almost done," he says. "This is your last chance, Dranko. Praska as you know her hangs by a thread. If you wish to ever see your friend again, you will let me go."

Dranko shakes his head at Aravis. "God speed, Mokad. God speed. Delioch will protect her, no matter what you do."

"Then I'll see you on the other side," says Mokad, and these are the last words he utters. The ritual progresses and he becomes comatose for the remainder.

Three hours later, as all five of the ritualists toss handfuls of alchemical powders onto Praska's body, a tremendous white light shines up from the altar like a pillar of divine wrath, a *flame strike* in reverse, and for ten long seconds the girl's small body issues a piercing double-scream, man's voice and woman's voice mixed in suffering. Her back arches, and it seems that her silhouette will snap from the strain she exerts on the chains that hold her in place. The light fades, and Praska's body settles on her stone slab, and the energy bubble surrounding her fades away. Ernie and Dranko rush to her side. Ernie casts *heal*.

"Praska, are you there? It's me. Dranko."

Praska's eyes flutter open. She bends her neck to see the two faces at her side, their expressions studies in anxiety. "Ernest? Dranko?" Her voice wavers, but carries the overtones of curiosity and mischief that Mokad could never emulate.

Dranko's face breaks into a grin. "Took us long enough to figure it out."

Morningstar, suspicious to the last, casts *detect thoughts*, and everything seems normal.

As Kibi moves to unwind the chains that bind Praska to the altar, Aravis steps forward. "Praska, what's the last thing you remember?"

"I was in Hae Charagan. Just now. I was eating some stew. It wasn't very good."

"What year is it?" asks Dranko.

Praska realizes that no one else is laughing at the question. "1831," she says. "It's July."

Dranko sighs. That was thirteen months ago. "Remember that day Mokad took you captive, and poisoned all of us?"

"Oh gods, yes," says Praska. "That."

"While Mokad had you kidnapped, he prepared your body as his little place to run to when he died."

Praska says nothing for a second. Then: "What does that mean?"

"Well, we killed him, months and months ago now..."

Piratecat: We played tonight. Sagiro is a giant rat bastard, roles are reversed, Dranko's normal combat style has definitely been torn out of a rut, it is in fact possible to hate Meledien even more than I previously did, the term "meat-shield" can sometimes become quite terrifyingly literal, never throw out your old magic items, and – possibly for the first time in years – Dranko is looking at death. Justifiably so.

Rat. Bastard.

blargney the second: Has he grown into a dire rat bastard?

Innocent Bystander: Wouldn't it technically be 'advanced' into a dire rat bastard? Though I don't recall seeing a DM advancement table in the DMG...

“Really?” Praska interrupts. “You killed Mokad? Good for you!”

“Not really,” says Dranko. “We killed his body. But his soul then took over your body.”

Praska seems to take note of her surroundings for the first time. She sees all the trappings of the Black Circle, and the bloodstains on the stone. Kibi lifts the last of the chains from her legs. She seems suddenly pale, tiny, afraid. “No...”

“He has been riding around in you ever since,” says Dranko grimly.

“I don’t see how,” Praska protests. “I was eating in the temple, about five minutes ago...”

“It’s August,” says Ernie. “And it’s 1832.”

Praska gasps. “My Gods!”

Dranko motions to the bodies piled in the corner. “They came to stop us from freeing you. They failed.”

Praska sits up and rubs feeling back into her legs. “So, what has he... have I... been up to all this time?”

“Trying to destroy the world,” says Dranko.

“Really? I didn’t succeed, did I?”

Ernie is just suspicious enough to pop another *dimensional anchor* onto Praska. “It’s just to keep you safe, in case they try to grab you again,” he explains. “And no, you didn’t succeed.”

“Wow,” says Praska. “I’ve been trying to destroy the world as a Black Circle priest. Once you know I didn’t actually *do* it, it’s kind of neat, when you think about it.”

Grey Wolf clears his throat. “Except for the part where you killed me, and Aravis twice, technically.”

“Oh,” says Praska, at a loss. “Sorry about that.”



The Ellish sisters offer to take care of Praska, since they really ought to be heading to that Spire meeting about now.

“Well,” says Praska with a smile. “I can see that you wouldn’t want to invite me, if I’ve been trying to kill everyone all this time. Mokad! What a bastard!”

Dranko nods agreement. “He really was kind of a prick. But now we’ve dispersed his soul, and I trust Delioch will have pity on him.”

“I hope Delioch gives him a wedgie, honestly.”

“We’ll be back, maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow,” says Dranko. “Stay out of trouble.”

Flicker has just about finished scooping all the magical plunder from the battle into his *bag of holding*. Morningstar insists that her share of the treasure be accounted for in minor magical items – weapons and armor, mostly – that will then be used to equip her Daywalkers.

Kibi uses *stone shape* to temporarily entomb the bodies of their foes, until they can return with more time to consider proper disposal of them. They only leave out Cor Kek, whose body is stripped of all but clothing, enchanted with *gentle repose*, and stuffed into the *bag of holding* along with the loot.

“Time to go,” says Aravis. “Let’s hear what Rosetta has to tell us.”



The Greenhouse is packed.

“Sorry we’re late,” says Dranko, as the Company enter via the front door. “We were unavoidably detained.”

The members of the Spire already present turn and stare at the gore-splattered party. Lady Cornelia, High Priestess of Pikon, can’t contain a gasp. “What happened to you?”

“We’ll talk about it after the meeting,” says Aravis. “First we want to hear what Rosetta has to say.”

Kibi ignores the many guests and flags down Eddings. “Ale, please. The good stuff from the basement.”

“Make it two,” says Ernie.

Ozilinsh hops over to them, buzzing with his usual energy. “Nice to see you all, though I daresay you’ve looked better. Everyone alive?”

“Two-thirds of our mages died,” Grey Wolf deadpans.

“But they got better,” Ernie adds quickly.

The archmagi Fylnius and Alykeen are there, nibbling on cakes and chatting with Rosetta herself. Dranko can’t help himself. “Well, Rosetta! You’re someone we haven’t seen in a long time!”

She looks over from her conversation and nods politely, though Morningstar thinks her look conveys ill-concealed suspicion. She is gesturing with her left hand as she speaks; her right hand is stuffed into a pocket of her shirt.

Salk, foremost of the archmagi since the death of Grawly, comes guiltily out of the kitchen licking his fingers and being roundly *tsk-tsk-ed* by Eddings. He joins Duke Nigel, who is talking with a woman the Company do not recognize. The Stormknight Dalesandro and King Crunard’s advisor Yale come down the stairs; most of the guests have come that way, via the secret room connected to Ozilinsh’s tower. Yale bows before the Company.

“Nice to see you all again!” She notes the spattered blood and adds, “Looks like you’ve been plying the trade.”

Dranko can’t help but notice that King Crunard himself is conspicuously absent, and asks after the health of His Royal Majesty.

“Troubled,” is Yale’s reply. “He does it to himself, of course, as he has been doing for his entire reign. As you may recall, the King is not naturally immune to the Masking, and so conducting certain aspects of his business has always taken a toll. As such, he has enforced downtime, so his brain can recover, after hearing too many reports of too many things he is not equipped to handle. I’m both happy and displeased to say the Masking is deteriorating rapidly, though I think it’s probably a net benefit. Anyway, his life is not in jeopardy, and he should recover within a few weeks. I am authorized to speak on his behalf until then.”

“It’s an honor to have you here,” says Dranko.

“Really, the honor is ours,” says Yale, “given the great deeds done by your friends.” As an afterthought she adds, “And you too, I suppose.” Dranko forces his smile as he seethes.

“Where’s Wellington?” asks the archmage Alykeen. “I was hoping to talk to that boy.”

“Sorry,” says Yale. “He’s been assigned. He’s with the… Salk, what do they call themselves?”

“The Happy Harriers,” says Salk with a laugh.

“Ah, yes,” Yale continues. “Wellington, Glade and Royce have joined with Junaya and Jerzembeck’s team, and they are all currently in the Gahantropalas Forest, repelling an invasion of ‘forest demons’ that’s threatening the entire population of the island. Apparently there are thousands of them now, so we have our other elite strike team dealing with the problem. I mean, since you’ve been off doing things no doubt equally important to our collective safety.” Rosetta snorts, but everyone else in the room nods, as if it’s beyond question that the Company spend all of their time engaged in vital pursuits.

“We should start,” she says, “but I suppose we can wait a few more minutes for the last couple of attendees. Koenig and his apprentice are coming, correct?”

“So we have time to change?” Morningstar asks, forcing a laugh. She does want to get out of her gore-soaked robes.

Rosetta raises an eyebrow, only now realizing just how sickening is the Company’s physical state. “You *will* be telling us what you’ve been up to, I trust?”

Dranko gives her a pointed look. “You’re the one who summoned us to this meeting, so you should probably go first.”

“Yes, I did, so why don’t you hurry along and clean yourselves up.” She waves vaguely with her left hand.

“You know what?” Dranko takes a step toward Rosetta. “I’m pretty sure we can have this conversation without you being so condescending.”

Rosetta smiles. “I’m not being condescending. Perhaps you shouldn’t project.”

Over the mind-link, Dranko fumes. *I hate her so much.*

Aravis chides: *No bloodshed in the Greenhouse!*

Ernie joins in the hate. *We took her out of God’s Thorn; we can put her back!*

Morningstar sighs. *I just want to hear that she did some good for our side.*



While they wait for the last stragglers, making small talk, there's a crash from the center of the room. Fylnius had just put his feet up on a low table, and it snapped in half, dumping plates and mugs onto the floor. "I'm so sorry!" the old elf exclaims.

But many of the others remind him that the waves of extreme luck, both good and bad, are still rippling through the world, and he can hardly be blamed.

Aravis grumbles, "I was hoping the Greenhouse was immune to that." He repairs the table with a *mending* cantrip.

"Especially given what we have in our basement," Morningstar adds.

"What exactly do you have?" asks Salk.

"A giant Black Book of Evil," says Dranko. "Also some black goo that turns people irrevocably evil."

"Not true," Ernie protests. "I got better!"

"Yeah," says Dranko, "with both a *wish* and a *miracle*. And anyway, you should be proud that I know such a long word!"

Yale looks thoughtfully at the table. "That is why Portia and Attrius aren't here, you know. They've been assigned to guard the High Priestess of Corilayna, who many people are blaming for the rash of bad luck."

Dranko nods. "But it's not her fault, is it?"

"We don't know," says Yale. "She maintains personal innocence, but she is clearly hiding something."

Several of the Company leap immediately to the same appalling guess. "Corilayna fled," says Ernie, eyes going wide. "In advance of the coming storm, just as Drosch did. Think about it. When Drosch fled, souls weren't going to the afterlife until another deity stepped in to take His place. And now Corilayna has left, and everyone's luck is going bonkers because no one's regulating it."

"As soon as another God takes over the aspect of luck, things should go back to normal," Dranko says. "But the Adversary is coming, called by the Black Circle."

"We think he was trapped somewhere beyond the Abyss," adds Aravis. "The rituals in Het Branoi were designed to break down the barriers that held him. But we stopped that. He's still trapped. But the Black Circle almost certainly still has something planned. Something new."

"Yes," says Rosetta. "The Black Circle does indeed have something else planned." Conversation quiets down at this, and as the archmage Koenig has recently arrived, Rosetta declares it's time for her to share her important news. With her right hand still in her pocket, she tells her tale.

"I have been on a secret mission, shall we say, since you all saw me last. I apologize that I didn't tell you where I was going, but the knowledge of where I was, in anyone's head, could have compromised things at any time. It's the Black Circle I was dealing with, and as you..." – and here she looks pointedly at the Company – "...are particularly aware, their divinatory prowess is unmatched."

Aravis mutters over the mindlink. *That does make a convenient excuse for her, doesn't it?*

"The Silver Shell has certain counter-divinations, ways of finding out what the Black Circle is up to, and I am now in a position to tell you about something I have recently learned. A fortunate stroke of luck has occurred in the last day, allowing me to infiltrate the heart of the Black Circle in Kivia."

There are many murmurs at this, and Grey Wolf manages to keep a straight face as he says, "Really!"

"Yes," says Rosetta. "And it was no mean feat, I assure you. Few people on Abernia could have done it."

"How could they possibly have accepted you?" asks Dranko innocently.

Rosetta outwardly ignores the intimation. "I was well disguised. I have certain spells at my disposal known only to the Shell, and I was able to divide my mind, leaving one half exposed to the Black Circle. For all intents and purposes, I was a member of the Circle. That half had a carefully constructed history, and a personality different than my own. I told them I was from a branch of the Black Circle near Bederen, and gave them some intelligence that they could have found out anyway – events on

Kivia, and nothing to do with Charagan, I assure you. I needed to provide them with bona fides, and an excuse for being there. It got me in the door. The other half of my brain was able to slowly make investigations into what the Black Circle was up to.”

Rosetta waits for the whispers of the assemblage to die down again, before pointing to the unfamiliar woman who had been chatting with Duke Nigel. “I would like to acknowledge my partner **Etria**, who was vital in keeping me alive, uncompromised and sane. You are probably not familiar with Kai Kin – a city on the southern coast of Kivia...”

Ernie pipes up. “I hear they have delicious custard!”

Rosetta stops her narrative and peers at the halfling. “You know about Kai Kin?”

“I’ve uh, heard the name, in conjunction with the dessert.”

“It’s in a country called Ocir in south-central Kivia,” Rosetta explains. “They are extremely insular, xenophobic, but still one of the more powerful countries on the continent. They have a large army, and the Black Circle is very strong there; though they are not intimately tied to the government, they wield a great deal of influence. Remember, in Kivia, the Black Circle is seen as benign, which we all know is a lie. But certainly well-meaning citizens of Kivia – and you also know this from your previous visit – are inclined to give them life energy in return for answers to questions.

“I think the use of all that collected life energy is currently an integral component of the Black Circle’s main ongoing plot, a plot I believe to be dangerously close to its conclusion. That is why I called this emergency meeting, the moment I learned what it was.

“I confess, though I had been in the Black Circle temple for months, I had been somewhat stymied. I knew that there was a scheme brewing, and I knew who had information about it, but they are extremely capable when it comes to keeping secrets. Even from me. I knew that their high priest, an extremely formidable man named Cor Kek, kept extensive notes on this project, but in a place I could not access.”

Ernie can hardly contain himself, knowing that Cor Kek’s remains are currently in Flicker’s *bag of holding*.

“But you were able to access it just recently,” Grey Wolf prompts.

“Yes. Because after many months of scratching around the edges – and I can’t explain this, and I worry that this is part of a trap that is still in the process of closing – all of the Black Circle leadership in the temple at Kai Kin teleported away, *en masse*, all at once. I realized that that was my chance. I burned several scrolls, some of them the only ones of their kind in the possession of the Silver Shell, and I managed to force entry into the inner sanctum of Cor Kek beneath the temple. I found his notes, took them, and immediately teleported out, to a designated sanctum in the temple of Pikon in Hae Charagan. I then spent the next hour reading Cor Kek’s journal. I thought time was probably of the essence, and having read Cor Kek’s plots, I am now certain of it. I don’t know where he is, but I assume that any moment he will discover the theft.”

She scratches her nose awkwardly with her left hand. The old woman Etria speaks up suddenly. “You can tell them what it cost you, you know.”

Rosetta rolls her eyes, but Etria just stares at her, so she pulls her right hand from her pocket. It’s black, withered, shriveled to half its original size. All of the fingers are useless twigs. “The cost of holding Cor Kek’s journal turned out to be my right hand,” she says simply. “It cannot be regenerated. I did divine ahead of time that it wouldn’t be fatal, and thought I might not have the time to remove the traps. So I went ahead and opened it, and this is the price I paid.” No one speaks for a few seconds after that. Rosetta only seems annoyed that she was asked to bring it up.

Morningstar breaks the silence. “I hate to be rude, but given all we know about the Black Circle, how do we know your mind has not been compromised?”

Rosetta puts her ruined hand back in her pocket and nods to Morningstar. “Etria?”

Etria stands up. “As you most of you know, I am Duke Nigel’s court wizardess, and have been for many years. On Rosetta’s recent mission, I was her failsafe. In Kai Kin there is a section of the city in which they house the foreigners. I spent three months cooped up in a small boarding room, only coming out for meals, and to keep up my front as a merchant. In that room I used a number of magical spells and devices, designed to monitor Rosetta’s mental state at all times. We had a means to teleport her away if anything went wrong. Fortunately nothing did. Inasmuch as you can trust my judgment – and I am a wizard of no small means – I can say that Rosetta’s mind has not been tampered with during the operation.”

“I would feel better if we could question you under truth magic,” says Morningstar.

“I would be happy to let you,” says Etria. “I understand your desire for certainty.”

"Etria," Rosetta snaps, "you don't have to do that. We all know that you're fine."

"No, I think Morningstar is correct," says Etria. "You know how strong the Black Circle is. Put yourself in their shoes for a moment."

High Priestess Cornelia casts several truth spells, including *zone of truth* and *detect lies*, and Etria appears to believe everything she says concerning the mission. When that appears to be enough for the assembled dignitaries, some of the Company grumble. "We were questioned under truth magic," says Morningstar pointedly, "but that didn't stop you from suspecting us anyway."

Rosetta sighs and looks directly at Morningstar. "I don't believe – I never believed – that you are consciously working for the Black Circle, or betraying us in any way. But you had prolonged contact with them without knowing the extent of their power, and I still think that that level of scrutiny was, and continues to be, entirely warranted." She thanks Etria, who sits back down.

"Let me get to the heart of the report," says Rosetta. "Why we are all here. And I know you say this house is inviolable, but when Cor Kek returns and discovers his journal is missing, he will try to divine our whereabouts, and they may have a means to penetrate it."

"It turns out that the Gate at Verdshane, which Ozilinsh's company so commendably sealed up – you especially, Aravis – is only one of *two* weak points between Volpos and Abernia. The second one, heretofore unknown, is the one the Black Circle is currently attempting to breach. It is, according to the journal of Cor Kek, an enormous ring of gartine, in Il-Drosh, in Kivia. Even the Black Circle's knowledge of this is imperfect."

"There is a series of ravines in Il-Drosh, covered by a magical fog, they think, and warded from all divinations from without. Even inside, the Black Circle believes divinations will not function. It is a heavily enchanted area. No one has a visual record of having been there. And the gate – this skysteel ring – is supposedly guarded. Droshian necromancers set an army of undead to guard it many centuries ago. It is not entirely dissimilar to the gartine arches we have seen elsewhere, in that it needs to be activated in some way."

And at the mention of this tremendous gartine ring, the Company's thoughts are harkened back to a poem, a set of five verses found by One Certain Step in his church library almost two full years ago. Four of these five verses have long since been deciphered, their predictions and warnings come to pass. But the fourth never made much sense until this very moment.

**tell them the door is close at hand
the foe can come forward in any land
his armies will roll through a skysteel hole
and turn their home to a bed of coal**

Neurotic: Whoohoo! And the bad guys bite it (again).

wolff96: The amount of planning and foreshadowing you put in still amazes me after all this time.

coyote6: I love that the Black Circle attack allowed valuable intel to be discovered. All those times Rosetta spoke so respectfully about Cor Kek and his might, I can't believe that Dranko didn't drop Cor Kek's head in front of her.

Piratecat: The essence of comedy is timing.

Cerebral Paladin: I love that Mokad keeps inspiring doubt. I don't know about your players, but I kept worrying that Praska was going to come back without her memories, or personality or something. Also, I love the fact that the Black Circle attack had collateral benefits – keeping the other side's high-level people occupied can pay off in unexpected ways...

Everett: So was Mokad bluffing?

Sagiro: Oh, hell yes he was bluffing. Mokad knew exactly how screwed he was, and was saying anything and everything he could think of to stop the ritual. Pretty much everything he said concerning the ritual, from the moment he was kidnapped, was a lie.

KidCthulhu: It doesn't hurt that Sagiro himself is one of nature's greatest liars. The man is scary good at prevaricating.

Everett: I see. So... is he dead and gone and *annihilated* this time, or is his soul still out there somewhere, moaning and plotting? Or is that just a bit of an open question?

Also: how long has the campaign gone on in game-time? I've always assumed, somehow, that the passage of time was roughly equivalent to the real-time 15 years you've been playing, but if they killed Mokad "months ago" and Step received his prophecy "two years ago," then, not so much. Five years of game time? They were summoned to the tower in 1828?

Joshua Randall: April 1, 1828, to be exact. Making this story the best April Fool's Day joke ever!

Sagiro: If the party's understanding of the Ritual of Seven Stars is correct, Mokad's soul has been annihilated.

As far as in-game time goes: four years and four months have elapsed between the party's summons to Abernathy's tower (April 1, 1828), and the Spire meeting described in my last post (August 3, 1832). The relative time experienced by the party is somewhat greater, since the time they spent in Het Branoi is not otherwise accounted for.

Destil: What about the time spent in the past? Did they return after the same amount of time had passed? Sounds like 13 months in Charagan has passed since the attempt to merge the two planes using Grey Wolf, if that's how long Mokad's been in Praska's body.

Sagiro: They arrived back from their excursion into the past, to find that about seven weeks had passed in the “real time” world. During that seven-week span, the Spire’s divinations indicated that the Company did not exist. But it’s a *little* more complicated than that, since their trip to the past was during the time-had-been-altered time-line. The quick summary:

- October 4, 1831: The Sharshun rewrite history while the Company are safe in the Greenhouse.
- [The party spend a little over a year of relative time finding Het Branoi, exploring Het Branoi, and cavorting around in the past]
- November 23, 1831: The Company arrive in the present again, having fixed history.

So, while the world has only seen seven weeks go by, the Company have experienced (if memory serves) around 13 months of adventures, which included the time spent in Het Branoi during which *no* objective time was passing in alternate-history Abernia.

coyote6: So they’ve taken 5 years and 5 months to get to where they are now. That’s not too bad.

(In my Rise of the Runelords PF game, the PCs started the week at 4th level; a day and a half later, they’ll be 6th.)

steeldragons: Not to be rude to the interested parties... BUT... Mokad=GONE!!! YAAAAAY!!! Abernathy's Company! Huzzah!

Now... that Meledien chick...?

Everett: We won’t see that Meledien chick for a long time to come in the Story Hour.

jmucchiello: So they restarted the ritual where every little detail needs to be just right with a few dead bodies “piled in the corner”? WHAT? Shouldn’t they have been moved to another room at a minimum?

And they waited three hours before applying the *gentle repose* to Cor Kek? Something just seems wrong about all of that.

Everett: I guess the ritual doesn’t much care. Cor Kek’s soul wasn’t about to get up and interfere.

Piratecat: What’s he going to do, develop salmonella? We just needed him to be non-dribbly long enough to get him to the meeting. After that, we didn’t much care.

Still, we’ve learned from that time we killed Srapa, the lizard that kidnapped Flicker in Het Branoi. We didn’t remember that we’d stuck his corpse in a *bag of holding* for a good eight months. Yecch.

Joshua Randall: Srapa is my favorite bad guy from this Story Hour. I realize he gets overshadowed by people like Mokad, Octesian, et al. but still – Srapa is my favorite. It’s not often that one lizard can cause that much trouble for a party of high level PCs! I like to think that he has a clone waiting somewhere...

jmucchiello: Runny bits of gore and blood could run into diagrams painted on the floor in a most disagreeable manner.

Everett: Yeah, but they just weren’t going to, you know. The Black Circle had their try, they failed, they’re done (for now). There wasn’t any storytelling or gaming challenge in such a thing happening for Sagiro to present to the company.

Sagiro: Regarding this:

- “Ground Zero” of the ritual – the altar with Praska’s body, along with the inscriptions adjacent to it, were protected by a force bubble throughout the entire combat.
- Most of the complex parts of the ritual were the spoken words and the thrown alchemical powders. The battle didn’t have much effect on these, since they had backup supplies of the reagents.
- Seven high-level adventurers and three priestesses of Ell worked on the cleanup for over an hour. *Stone shape* and *unseen servant* can work wonders! Fixing up the wall with the holes and then re-inserting the poles was the trickiest bit, but three wizards with 24+ INT can accomplish great things in a short time.

(Also, what Everett said.)



Everett: Originally posted by Sagiro, August 16, 2009:

For the record, the Story Hour has now fallen about 30 runs and 2.5 years behind the actual game, which is still going but kind of entering the home stretch. By which I mean we may only have 2-3 years left before it all ends.

Uh huh.

Sagiro: No, really. It’s entirely within the realm of the possible that we’ll be finished the campaign by August 16, 2012. It all depends on how frequently we play. My rough guess is that we have about 25 sessions remaining, and we play about 3 times every 2 months. That works out to about 16 months left, which would be May of 2012. We’ll see!

Piratecat: Clearly, my friend, you’re on the Mayan calendar. That perturbs me.

Everett: Well, just as a f’r instance, spending the morning zoned out re-reading older game runs while presumably at work, I noticed that dozens and dozens of runs ago, while they were investigating slavery in Djaw, the party found out that Tor Bladebearer had been mentally coerced into serving a rival army. Aren’t there a LOT of loose ends like that to tie up before the game comes to an end?

(And what will the endgame look like, anyway? Epic combat with the Emperor himself, perhaps? Aren’t we supposed to see him in the flesh, soon?)

Piratecat: Everett, we dropped a lot of plot threads recently when something more important came up. I suspect that certain things will remain unresolved. It happens, it’s a big world. I’m not sure if I want to clean up minor plot threads when all is said and done (assuming we live). We’re going to have enough trouble with the major ones!

Wilhem: Wow... WOW! just read through the whole thing from start to finish. I’m not sure my girlfriend will thank you for the couple of months spent catching up, but I certainly feel they have been enriched. What a lucky group you are, fantastic players and a suitably, amazingly devious DM! I’m very jealous, makes me even more determined to find a group and start roleplaying again. Can’t shake the image of Pewter as a cockney cat, though!

Joshua Randall: You have to leave some loose ends for the campaign’s sequel. Duh.

Sius: Personally, I’m assuming the Adversary, who scared all the traveling gods to this world in the first place, is on his way. It makes a small amount of sense, seeing as how some of the travelers (or the other gods, I can’t keep em straight...) are traveling again.

But who knows? There have been plenty of twists and turns and, worse, following through without twists and turns. I’m looking forward to about four years of reading material to come...



Dead in the Water

The Archmage Salk leans forward on the couch. “Does the Black Circle know *how* to activate this gartine arch?”

“The details were not included in Cor Kek’s journal,” says Rosetta, “but that doesn’t mean they don’t know how. I think we have to assume that they do know, given the other details I read. Please, allow me to continue. There’s more.

“As I said, there’s an army of undead guarding the portal. It’s called the Sworn Legion, and is nigh undefeatable by mortals. The Legion is warded against positive energy, and they cannot be turned while in a place so holy – or unholy, if you will – to Drosh, God of Death. But as you know – and I understand that Ozilinsh’s Company is at least partially responsible for this – apparently Drosh is no longer exerting any influence on Abernia. Therefore, a weakness Drosh never thought he’d have to worry about when setting his defenses, is now being exploited.”

Dranko groans. “Uh oh...”

Rosetta smiles grimly. “The Black Circle has sent their strongest necromancer, and its own army of undead to defeat the Sworn Legion and activate the skysteel ring. For while the Sworn Legion could thwart any assault by living men, it is entirely ill-suited to fight other undead. And while I don’t know where this army of undead *came* from, or how they propose to get it over there, it’s certain that they have one.”

“We know where it came from,” says Aravis. “The huge army of undead that vanished, last seen walking into the river near Kai Kin...”

Ernie nods. “And undead don’t breathe, and don’t care how long they walk.” More clues fall into place. The Company recall that the necromancer Zeg had notes on keeping undead preserved while underwater for long stretches, and on the topic of improving their ability to fight other undead. And one of Aravis’s visions from the Maze was of some large skeletal creature striding underwater.

Rosetta frowns when she hears all this, but does have one piece of good news. “They wanted to have their two most potent necromancers involved in the attack – Zeg and Ten Old Bones – but Zeg could not be contacted, so they proceeded without him. Their timetable was important to them. And that’s the most troubling thing about all of this. As far as I can tell, the army may already *be* there, in the ravines. At least, because of the restriction on divinations, the Black Circle has no better plan than to get their undead army into the ravines, and march them around until they find the place.”

Ernie smiles. “That must be particularly frustrating for them!”

“Oh, I hope so,” Rosetta agrees. “Unfortunately, I’m hard pressed to think about how you could do better. And they have a head start, and can split up into multiple scouting parties, and here you are, listening to me talk. They could be finding it and opening that gate right now. Given that they have *some* means of communicating with Naradawk on Volpos, he’s probably waiting on the other side of the Skysteel ring, ready the moment it opens.” She turns to the Company. “I am told that you are the likeliest members of the Spire Guard to take this job.”

Over the mind-link, the party decide that they’ve heard enough, and it’s time to share their good news with the assemblage.

“We’re going to make your afternoon,” says Ernie.

“I hope so,” says Rosetta, raising an eyebrow in curiosity.

Ernie holds up the *bag of holding*. “Inside this bag is the body of Cor Kek.”

“And all of their other leaders are dead as well,” says Aravis.

“The reason you saw them leave,” says Kibi, “is that they left to find us. Which they did, though that didn’t go very well for them.”

“I saw you this morning,” says Dranko to an increasingly wide-eyed Rosetta. “I walked right past you while you were sitting on a bench, reading a book.”

“And you ignored me?”

“It seemed like the thing to do.”

Rosetta nods her head. “It *was* the thing to do. That was exceptionally good judgment on your part.”

“Thanks.” Dranko then explains briefly about Mokad and Praska, how he infiltrated the temple at Kai Kin, used a gem of soul trapping, and then how they performed their ritual back in Kallor.

"Wait," Rosetta interrupts. "You performed the Ritual of Seven Stars? On your own? Are you aware of the danger to your souls – to your inherent *goodness* – from performing Black Circle rituals?"

Dranko shrugs. "I was aware that my friend's body was possessed by a big jerk. Anyway, they showed up about half way through, and we killed them all."

"Was Tel Mek with them?" asks Rosetta, leaning forward eagerly. "Tai En?" She describes the members of the Black Circle leadership.

"We think so," says Aravis. "We killed twelve altogether. Only a single guard fled. After killing them all, we performed the ritual. Mokad's soul is gone forever."

"Hmm," says Rosetta. "There might be someone left who could resurrect Cor Kek. There's not much you can do about that, though it would take them a great deal of time. My goodness. Cor Kek, Mokad, Tai En and Tel Mek, all in one day. Most impressive!"

"Someone should check out Praska quite thoroughly," Aravis suggests. "Just to be sure. It turns out Califax was right all along."

Rosetta turns to Duke Nigel. "I think that these members of the Spire Guard should be taken off the suspect list. Because, while I would believe in large amounts of subterfuge and deception on the part of the Black Circle, a plan that involves slaying their High Priest, and their strongest warrior, and their most accomplished wizard, *and* Mokad... well, that stretches even my imagination beyond credulity."

Ernie blinks. "We were on a suspect list?"

"Of course you were! Based on your constant interactions with the Black Circle, it was only prudent. But either way, I don't have the time to investigate you further; you're needed to save the world a fourth, or maybe fifth time. I've lost track."

Aravis smiles at her. "Well, it's nice to be off your suspect list. And so you know, you're off ours too."

"You have a suspect list? What did you suspect me of?"

Dranko grins. "When Pewter saw you in the Black Circle temple, we thought, 'Either she's a horrible turncoat, or she's really clever.'"

"I'm glad it's the latter. Understand that my mistrust of you has never been borne of personal dislike."

Over the mind-link, the Company all agree that this statement does not apply in the other direction.



The Company spread out their map of Kivia on the table of the Greenhouse living room. Where once it represented thousands of square miles of mystery and adventure, now it's mostly familiar.

To the far northwest, the bellicose kingdom of Delfir is separated from its neighbors by the Gorkandi mountain range, though there is an egress into Tev (not far from the Delfirian Arch) via "Hookbat Pass." Due east of Delfir lies Bederen, a sparse and Spartan country that is also home to Evenstar and her cadre of Ellish devotees. To the south are the sprawling farmlands and green hills of Tev.

Moving southeastward, the simple country of Dir-Tolia borders Tev; the two are strong trading partners, and the bustling free city of Trev-Lyndyn stands watch by the Tev-Bilin river that forms the border between the two countries.

The center of Kivia is dominated by the Endless Wood, a vast and dense forest nearly five hundred miles on a side. To the north of the forest is Anlakis, a warlike country of loosely allied nomadic tribes, all of whom revere Tiria, Goddess of Chaos. Bederen has built a stout stone wall along its border with Anlakis, stretching in a 250-mile diagonal across barren rocks and hills.

Moving clockwise from Anlakis, one finds the halfling kingdom of Appleseed abutting the Endless Wood on its eastern border. South of the forest are the hot grassy Plains of the White Sun, where sit the five Jewels of the Plains: Mirj, Djerreth, Djaw, Fanaam and (technically) Levenmud. This last city rests on the shore of the Sea of Snakes, and is considered by travelers no more a "jewel" than Mirj is considered hospitable. The majestic metropolis of Djaw occupies both the geographical and cultural centers of Kivia, boasting not only the largest population of any city in the known world, but also an abundance of art, science, magic, fine cuisine, cutting-edge architecture and sport. The White Sun Cartel is the most powerful economic force on Kivia, the Guild of Chains operates a thriving slave trade, and the Jewels are said to be capable of fielding an army better than any on the continent.

To the south of the White Plains are the secluded and xenophobic kingdoms of Seresef and Ocir, the former being famous for its exquisite gemstones, the latter for its position as the Black Circle's base of operations. The city of Kai Kin, second only to Djaw in size and influence, lies along Kivia's southern coast, where the 1500-mile Eternal River empties into the Sea of Strife.

The lands to the southeast of the Eternal River, while comprising approximately 35% of Kivia's landmass, are largely desolate and unpopulated. (The only country marked on the map east of the river is Gurund, the dwarvish state largely in thrall to the Guild of Chains. The Stoneguard Mountains run parallel to the Eternal River, and Gurund is sandwiched between the two.) To the far southeast of Kivia is the Jungle of Dreams, wherein still sits, in all likelihood, the bottle containing the magical City of Zhamir. To the far northeast are the blasted rocky plains of Surgoil, home to giants, beholders and blood foxes, and the beholder tower hiding Het Branoi's modest exterior.

And across all of those lands, from Delfir to the jungle, from Appleseed to Kai Kin, the Company has ventured in these last few years. Only one area of the map remains unexplored: the farthest east, labeled "Il-Drosh" by a single runic letter. It lies to the north of the tremendous Black Bay that separates it from the Jungle of Dreams. The cartographer who drew this map – someone named One Far Wanderer – has warned that this region's depiction is "...largely based on rumor and myth – let the traveler beware." In particular there are two features on this part of the map that invite curiosity and dread: a series of long gashes haphazardly drawn, and a spot of blackness in the center of rough concentric rings.

The gashes are probably the ravines mentioned in Cor Kek's journal. (*The black spot is something else entirely; the Company will learn its nature in time, and won't like it one bit.*) Ernie traces an idle finger over the jagged marks. "The moment we found out that no one had ever been there to map it, we knew we'd have to go there some day."

Dranko scratches his stubble. "How will we know which necromantic army is which?"

Aravis thinks about the skeletal army they encountered in the wastes west of Djaw. "The one that has the huge, multi-legged skeletal things on its side is the bad one. But I'm far more worried about how we're going to seal the portal permanently."

"It's just gartine," says Grey Wolf. "Can't we *disintegrate* it?"

No one knows.



With the meeting of the Spire adjourned, the Company spend some time *identifying* and divvying up the loot from their battle with Cor Kek. Eddings, exhausted, looks exasperatedly at the crumbs on the couch where Salk had been sitting, as well as the general disorder all around the Greenhouse. Ernie orders him to sleep, and the party clean up the mess with cantrips and *unseen servants*.

A few of the items are slated for unquestioned destruction: an unholy mace, a wand of *mantle of evil*, and a bird skull that can cast a *commune* once per week, with a human sacrifice taking the place of the usual cost of life-force. There's also a token of *unholy aura* that ought to be destroyed. The majority of the loot is standard-issue stuff: amulets of health, rings of protection, cloaks of resistance, periaps of wisdom, various armor and weaponry with low-level enchantments, and a pile of healing potions. These will be distributed to the Ellish Daywalkers, with a few set aside for the Undermen's adventuring party.

A few items are more interesting: a heavy mace that drains strength from those it damages; a *ring of darkvision*; some wands and scrolls imbued with mid-level spells. Finally the wizards get to the top-tier stuff:

- A stone (with 8 charges remaining) that automatically heals you 5d6 if you start your turn at half health or lower.
- A suit of +5 *plate mail* that drains life from anyone standing next to the wearer.
- A holy ring of Delioch that allows the wearer to transfer healing done to himself, to another wounded person within 120 feet.
- A small green weapon gem that can change the damage type done by any weapon, to any type the wielder desires.
- A large silver coin that allows a re-roll of any d20, once per day.

And finally there is a smooth gray stone sphere, about the size of an orange, that is identified only as "CAYYAT." The wizards have no idea what it does, though it radiates strong transmutation magic and is activated by someone holding it and concentrating upon it. Also, fortunately, it's not inherently evil. Flicker thinks he removed it from the body of Cor Kek.

Aravis wants to test it out right then and there, though Grey Wolf convinces him to at least take it outside the Greenhouse first. Aravis sighs, but grudgingly admits that activating a powerful and mysterious item, one last in the possession of a Black Circle priest, should be done in a less risky venue. He takes it to the Greenhouse roof.

The gray stone is slickly smooth in his hand, polished to a nearly reflective sheen. Gripping it in one hand, he activates it by mere concentration, and feels it compress slightly in his grip. Before him a rift opens in space, a rectangular doorway filled

with opaque gray light, pulsing slowly. The ball floats up and out of his hand, stopping to hover before the doorway at the height of his eyebrows. It slowly spins in place.

Aravis reaches out and touches the surface of the rift and finds it solid but slightly yielding, like a flexible *wall of force*. Kibi, whose curiosity has brought him to the roof on Aravis's heels, casts *greater arcane sight* and is nigh certain it's a portal. Aravis walks to the "back" of the gray doorway and finds it as impermeable as the front.

After five minutes, both wizards note that the portal's pulsing is quickening, as is the jerky and random rotation of the hovering sphere. Dranko, also present, casts *omen of peril* to see if something bad will happen within the hour. He gets no result.

Aravis reaches up to grip the sphere, but it's as fixed as an *immovable rod*, and its rotations nearly break his wrist before he is obliged to let go. Willing the portal to close causes no discernable change.

"Great," says Grey Wolf. "We've opened a portal, and we can't stop it, and it's on our roof."

Kibi casts *limited wish*. "I wish I knew what this was going to do!" he exclaims. The answer comes to him immediately: IN FORTY-EIGHT MORE MINUTES, THE PORTAL TO CAYYAT WILL OPEN. "That was pretty limited," grumbles the dwarf.

Dranko calls Ozilinsh on the crystal ball, but the ex-archmage has never heard of Cayyat either. "The planes aren't really my area of expertise," he says apologetically.

"Who's the expert among you?" asks Aravis.

"Semek," says Ozilinsh. "Trouble is, he's dead."

For the next 45 minutes or so, the portal pulses ever faster, and the sphere's rotation reaches such speeds that it would burn the skin from the fingers of anyone willing to grip it barehanded. Then, without fanfare, the ball stops spinning and the portal brightens noticeably. Aravis reaches out and plucks the gray stone sphere from the air. With a shrug he puts it in his pocket, then rubs his chin for a second, staring at the portal. Unable to contain his curiosity, he steps through.

He is standing on the wooden deck of a large cabin, high on a hill, overlooking a lake and surrounded by high snow-capped mountains some miles off. In the middle of the deck, behind him now, is a freestanding gray rectangle. For a ten-count he gazes upon this bucolic sight, mutters "Oh, to hell with Castle Blackhope," and steps back through. As he hoped, he emerges onto the roof of the Greenhouse.

"So, what?" says Dranko. "It doesn't actually go anywhere, then?"

When Aravis raises a quizzical eyebrow, Dranko adds: "You stepped in and came right out the other side."

"Time would appear to move differently in there," says Aravis. "I was there for at least ten seconds."

Kibi joins Aravis on his next attempt. The sky in Cayyat is blue and clear, though not quite the same shade of blue as what they're used to, and the clouds are a soft orange, perhaps reflecting the light from the half-sized orange sun. Turning around, they see that the deck is attached to a large log cabin, and through large glass windows they can see that the inside is beautifully appointed, with paintings and fine furniture and thick carpets. A large black circle is set into the north(?) -facing wall.

After giving a count of sixty this time, Aravis and Kibi step back onto the Greenhouse roof, and again the others report that they appeared to have spent no time inside.

For their third foray, the entire Company go in except for Morningstar and Grey Wolf. This time, standing on the deck and squinting into the sunshine, they hear footsteps approaching from inside the cabin. A door opens, and standing before them is a small goblinoid creature, just under four feet high, with gnarly green skin. He wears servant garb.

"Hello," says Aravis, as the goblin steps slowly out onto the deck.

"You're not Cor Kek," the goblin observes. "Who are you?"

"He's dead," says Dranko.

"Dead? Did you kill him?"

"He attacked us," says Kibi quickly.

"Well, kind of," adds Dranko.

"Oh," says the goblin, a smile spreading across his face. "Pleased to make your acquaintance! My name's **Gibbil**. Welcome to Cayyat!"

"What was your arrangement with Cor Kek?" asks Aravis.

"I didn't have an arrangement with him as such, sir. I just maintain the place."

"It's beautiful," says Kibi.

"Thank you, thank you."

"Are you happy here?" asks Ernie.

"The work's not so bad," says Gibbil. "Cor Kek was kind of a jerk, though."

"He sure was!" Ernie agrees.

The rest of the Company introduce themselves, after which Gibbil asks if he can get them refreshments. "And there's a staircase off to your left," he adds, "if you want to head down to the lake for a swim."

"You'll find the new management here is less jerky," says Aravis with a smile.

"Would you like a salary?" adds Ernie.

Gibbil looks at Ernie curiously. "Now what would I do with money? I've got everything I need right here!"

"Is there anything you'd like?" Ernie asks.

Gibbil thinks for a second. "Yes. I'd like to be treated with respect! And not be bossed around so much."

"Done," says Ernie, and they both smile broadly.

"Time works differently here than it does back home," says Dranko, looking expectantly at Gibbil.

"That's what Cor Kek told me," answers the goblin servant. "Far as I understood, there's no time passing wherever you come from. Don't pretend to understand these things. They're well beyond me. I'm just a humble goblin."

"How long have you been here?" asks Kibi.

"I've been here forever. I come with Cayyat!" Gibbil shows them around the interior of the cabin. "Over there's the library. We've got some laboratories too, and an observatory, though Cork Kek said it was worthless to him. Bedrooms are down that hall; eight of 'em, not large, but large enough for folks your size. And of course, you have a ritual room, through that door there, for all of your mumbo-jumbo thaumaturgy." The Company assure him they won't be using it, recent history notwithstanding.

A thought pops into Dranko's head. "Who owned the place before Cor Kek?"

"That was a long time ago," says Gibbil. "It was a devil."

"Did he treat you with respect?"

"Oh, no, he was worse than Cor Kek. I mean 'devil' quite literally. My understanding is, Cayyat got created by some wizard a long long time ago, and I was created too, at that very moment. I'd say Cayyat's about four miles on a side, with the lodge here at the easternmost edge."

"Now *this* is a major *rope trick*," says Aravis.

"When was the last time Cor Kek was here?" asks Dranko.

"When there's no one here for five minutes, from my point of view, the place shuts down. I don't even exist. I think Cor Kek said he could only use it every month or so. And you can only stay for two months at a time – our time, I mean. Mostly Cor Kek came here to read, and make stuff in the laboratory."

"That's what we'll do, too," says Aravis. "That, and take nice vacations."

"There are some hiking trails through the foothills, and around the lake," says Gibbil. "They're very nice."

Dranko nods at Ernie. "Ernie here's an excellent cook, if you'd like us to make you anything."

"I'm an excellent cook, thank you very much," says Gibbil, standing up a bit straighter. "Don't need any help, if you please."

Dranko fishes a torch out of his pack and hands it to Gibbil. "Could you just hold this for a second?"

"Hm," says the goblin, turning it in his hands. "Pine. Pitch. Looks about three years old. You should get a new one."

Ernie throws up his hands. “Dranko, Gibbil is *not* going to be our torchbearer!”

“Oh, I couldn’t leave here,” says Gibbil, handing the torch back to Dranko. “I’m part of this place. It just wouldn’t be right. Plus, I’d probably just disappear if I tried. Cor Kek told me never to try it. So did the devil, for that matter.”

“Ever meet the wizard who made this place?” asks Dranko.

“Nope. The devil killed him before he had a chance to use it.”

“It’s almost like new,” Dranko exclaims. “We’re just the third owners!”

“Cor Kek redecorated the lodge,” says Gibbil. “My understanding is that the Black Circle is some kind of church of knowledge. All about learning stuff.”

“And evil,” says Dranko.

“Mostly evil,” adds Ernie.

“Really?” says Gibbil. “Cor Kek was standoffish and rude, but mostly he just read, and made his trinkets.”

After a lull in the conversation, Gibbil rises on his toes. “Well, stay as long as you want, as long it’s no longer than two months. And I should mention, your grace period’s almost up. For a little while after you open Cayyat, you can come and go as you please, but soon no one will be able to come in until the whole thing resets. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going back to my nap. If you need anything, just wake me up, last bedroom on the right.”

The Company had briefly debated whether or not to set out that very day for Il-Drosh, despite their somewhat depleted spell reserves. Now the question is moot; not only will they have time to rest, but they’ll be able to spend sixty-odd days crafting magic items ahead of their mission to stop Naradawk’s arrival.



Overland Flight

“Will you be staying long, then? Maximum allowable time?” The goblinoid creature Gibbil, caretaker of Cayyat, bounces on his toes, hands folded behind his back.

“Probably,” says Grey Wolf.

“I suppose you’ll be wanting the rooms made up? One for each of you? Any special instructions?”

Flicker asks if they have a smoking room. Morningstar requests a bedroom without lamps, candles or other lights. Gibbil scuttles off.

Cayyat’s laboratory, presumably designed and stocked by Cor Kek, is magnificent, putting to shame the Company’s basement operation in the Greenhouse. The glassware is enchanted to be nigh-indestructible, the reagents are perfectly preserved and in abundant supply, and everything is meticulously labeled. The party get down to business, scribing scrolls, brewing potions, crafting wands, improving armor, and copying spells.

There are no spellbooks in the library, though most of the tomes touch on the theory and history of necromancy. The party leave them alone, though all are intrigued by a heavy metal door at the back behind the westernmost stack. It’s locked, but that proves little impediment to Flicker, who springs the door open in less than a minute. He pulls it open, and the entire Company feel like they’ve been punched in the gut by a *Bigby’s fist*. Flicker blacks out and drops to the floor like an empty puppet.

Ernie quickly casts *magic circle vs. evil* and hurries forward until Flicker is in its area. Flicker groans and gets to his knees, squinting through the doorway. Even inside the protective circle, he feels a malign heat pouring out of the small room beyond the door. “Huh,” he says, rubbing his head. “I was so sure it wasn’t trapped.”

“It wasn’t,” says Aravis, gesturing. The inside of the room is small, more like a large closet, but the back wall is lined with shelves, holding almost fifty books, all with black leather spines. The titles are in a strange language. It’s not clear if the palpable evil is coming from one book or all of them.

“You know,” says Morningstar, “we could take all of our evil stuff from the Greenhouse and toss it in there.”

A few of them crowd into the closet, protected by Ernie’s spell. Kibi casts *comprehend languages* and realizes that the books are not technical – philosophy, history, politics – but at least one of them is radiating the overwhelming evil of the Black Goo.

Ernie picks up one of the books and carries it gingerly out of the closet, but it burns his hands and he's obliged to drop it. They replace it using fireplace tongs. "I think the ink in all of those books is Black Goo," says Aravis.

Flicker closes the door, locks it again, and then jimmies with the lock to make it even *more* secure. Morningstar casts *detect evil*, and finds a residual taint that lingers (but is fading rapidly) on Ernie and the fireplace implements. "We've made evil tongs," says Grey Wolf. "Lovely."



Weeks pass, relatively speaking. Stuff gets made. The Company enjoy swimming in the warm lake at the bottom of the hill, and going for walks through the surrounding woods. Flicker busies himself by removing the many black circles that have been mounted, drawn, and etched into the walls around the lodge.

When the two months are nearly up, the party gather in the large main room, drinking tea (served by the ever-attentive Gibbil) and contemplating their next move. They have rolled out their map of Kivia again onto a long table, the corners weighted down with plates. "Here's my theory," says Dranko, puffing on a Blacktallow cigar. "I think I know where the portal to their world is, inside those trenches. It was put there by Drosh, right? And Drosh isn't stupid. So it's not close to the edge, because someone might stumble upon it. He wanted to give his undead guardians a chance to protect it."

"So," says Aravis, "you're saying that it's in the middle? That's hardly..."

"No!" Dranko interrupts. "He wouldn't put it in the exact center, because he'd know that's what *everyone* would think. That spot's probably trapped. It must be *near* the center, but not exactly. So we go there, near the center, and listen for the sounds of fighting."

Flicker scratches his head. "How do we know where the center is?"

"I don't have to think of everything, you know."

Grey Wolf smiles. "I like the part about listening for the sound of fighting."

"Anyhow," Dranko continues, "I've made everything I'm going to make, and you can only pee in the lake so many times before you get bored." The others stare at him. "Which is zero times," Dranko hastily amends.

Gibbil bids the party a fond farewell, and seems extraordinarily pleased that his guests also wish him well. "Good luck with your quest! I hope to see you again before long."

They step out of Cayyat and onto the Greenhouse roof. Dranko has two months of beard (not having shaved while on hiatus) and uses his *robe of blending* to make himself look shabby and tattered before re-entering the Greenhouse. Eddings looks at him, blinks once, and comments dryly, "Ah. I see you're going in disguise."

Ernie laughs. "Dranko, were you expecting to disconcert Eddings? I don't think that's possible at this point."

Eddings chuckles and nods. "What is the next item on your agenda, if I might ask?"

Dranko reverts to his normal look. "We're going to fly to the far corner of Kivia, where our enemies have an army of undead that's going to pry open the world and let the Emperor through. We're going to find them and stop them."

Eddings blinks again. "Is that likely? And soon?"

"Yes, and yes," says Grey Wolf.

Eddings nods. "So, you'll be saving the world as usual. Very good."

The party briefly discuss teleportation destinations. There are three possible options, all of which are about equidistant from where the ravines are marked on their map. They could appear in the Jungle of Dreams, or the halfling town of Victory in Appleseed, but they decide upon the desolate plains of Branoi in north-eastern Kivia, since that's marginally closer. After a last farewell to Eddings, Aravis casts *greater teleport* and in an instant they're standing in a bleak and barren land. It's cold, and dark, and they realize that this is still the very same day as their battle with Cor Kek! It was already late afternoon when they entered Cayyat, and the *teleport* has moved them several hours forward. Still, they're well rested, and can navigate by starlight. Wind whistles over the rocks and scrub. There are no blood foxes in sight.

Grey Wolf notices that Flicker isn't wearing his armor. "Oh, right," says Flicker. "I wanted to see if this would work across the ocean." He thinks for a second, and instantly his armor is there, on his body, fully buckled and strapped. Dranko had added the *called* enchantment to several of their armors while in Cayyat.

“What if it failed?” asks Grey Wolf.

“I’m sure Aravis would have teleported me back for it.”

After some brief argument, they decide to summon the genie Al Tarqoz to cast *wind walk*. “It’s not right,” says Ernie. “He’s like a slave.”

Flicker disagrees. “It’s nothing like that! We let him go back where he comes from, every time!”

Aravis uses the ring, and the blue-skinned genie appears before them. Just as he did the last time they called upon his services, he lays down a hand of cards. “Ha! This time there won’t be any... uh...”

“Good hand,” says Aravis, as the cards flutter to the snow-dusted earth. “Probably was a winner.”

Al Tarqoz composes himself. “Ah, my most munificent master! I’m certain that you have a fine explanation for ONCE AGAIN summoning me away from a game I was about to win, this time on a hand that was going to earn back many of my possessions and a good deal of my dignity?”

“That wasn’t the same game, was it?” asks Kibi. “When we summon you, is time passing for you?”

“No, it was not the same game. And yes, in my homeland, time is passing right now, I assure you. I’m certain that my friends and business associates are assuming that NOTHING untoward could be going on regarding this hand of cards.”

“They do know you’re a genie, don’t they?” asks Aravis.

“Oh yes. I’m sure they will accept all of this without question. Now, how can I serve you?”

“We’d like you to cast *wind walk*,” says Aravis.

“And we’re sorry!” Ernie adds.

Al Tarqoz smiles. “I exist merely but to do your bidding, my most benevolent master.” He casts his spell, and when Aravis assures him they need nothing more, the genie scoops up the cards, sighs, and vanishes.

“He’s really pissy,” says Dranko.

Morningstar sighs. “ You would be too, if someone kept summoning you.”



For many hours, the bleak landscape of north-eastern Kivia rolls by beneath them. The sun rises, struggling to spread its thin, cloud-filtered light over the cold stone ground. Kibi endures the long airborne journey with stoicism, though he envies Scree, safely tucked away in his *familiar pocket*.

The northern edge of the Stoneguards approaches, jagged snow-capped peaks jutting into the bitter air. The mountain range is wide as well, stretching twenty miles west to east. They are about half way across, flying high above the mountaintops, when they start to feel discomfort.

Three minutes and three miles later, it has grown worse, and also quite recognizable. It’s the distress they felt in the locked closet of Cayyat, and in the presence of the black book in Kallor, and the Black Goo from Het Branoi.

By the time the Company have reached the edge of the mountains, they are having trouble progressing. The evil emanating from... *somewhere out there*... is like a psychic headwind. Figuring that the source of this is at ground level, they angle upwards, and so are able to make more lateral progress without the radiating evil become overwhelming.

Eventually they see, far down below, what’s almost certainly the source: a black spot, like a huge shadow on the ground. It might be an enormous crater, or a flat-black lake. There are no clouds in this part of the sky, which gives them a decent view, and given their current altitude the black blotch must be dozens of miles across.

Even thousands of feet above the ground, the Company, quite literally, cannot bring themselves to fly directly over the black crater. Evil is blasting upward from it like heat from a volcano. Aravis briefly wonders if he’s seeing Naslund, the Gods’ necropolis from one of his Maze visions. He rightly discards the notion. Kibi thinks this might be the thorn in the side of Abernia, of which he once dreamed.

They decide to backtrack and go around the distant evil spot, mightily disturbed that they can feel it so powerfully, miles in the air. “Why in the world aren’t there any *good* places in the world like that?” Dranko grumbles.

The party descend to a lower altitude once they have given the evil crater a wide enough berth. The terrain is, if anything, becoming more bleak and lifeless. There are no streams, no vegetation, so signs of natural wilderness.

After this description, Ernie's player (kidcthulhu) uttered: "One does not simply *wind walk* into Mordor!"

Three hours after leaving the Black Crater of Evil behind them, they spy a large patch of mist down below, at ground level. It's probably about a thousand yards on a side, vaguely square-ish in shape, and rises fifty feet from the ground. Dranko looks for signs that it's roiling, and sees none.

"It's so dry here," says Ernie. "How can there be mist? It's not natural!"

They swoop down and fly into the mist, and it's not damp inside, though it is chilly. It's a thick fog, obscuring their vision beyond five feet or so, and making the Company nearly invisible in their gaseous form. They'd been warned that the ravines beneath the mist would be shielded from divinations, though their *telepathic bond* stays active as they probe the white vapors. When they are convinced that there's nothing interesting inside this patch of mist (and have found the ground to be unblemished by trenches, ravines, or anything like them), they fly back up out of the haze and continue onward at high altitude.

A few minutes later they see more patches of fog, varying greatly in size. The smallest are no more than thirty feet in diameter, while the largest they see is at least twenty miles on a side. None of them show any signs of movement within; there is no breeze, and the areas of mist lay like unmoving shrouds on a dead landscape. It is clear that they are unnatural; while they don't have sharp edges, they are all of a uniform height, and give the impression of being spell-effects like *obscuring mist*. They form an archipelago of cloud islands in a sea of blasted rock.

Then, ahead of them, they see the largest patch of mist by far. It extends past the edges of their vision in all outward directions. Another hour of scouting shows that this block of fog is almost a hundred miles on a side, in a rough square. Like all the others, it rises to a height of fifty feet from ground level. Beyond it are more smaller patches, but this is clearly the largest. Flying low over the top of it, the party see no sign of movement within, nor hear any sounds.

Aravis decides that they should examine the ground along the southern edge of the mist – the side that faces Black Bay. They drop down to near ground level, though Dranko decides to test the fog again and flies into its interior. His connection with the others over the mind-link is cut off when he descends about fifteen feet into the fog. Interesting!

They land on the ground. There are no footprints, but they do find what they were looking for – bits of bone flakes and fragments scattered among the stones. After some more scouting, they find that there's a swath of ground, several hundred feet wide, littered with tiny bone chips. It seems as though a large skeletal army did in fact pass this way, coming from the bay and vanishing into the enormous cloud of mist.

Aravis picks up the largest fragment he can find, and casts *vision*. He guesses that he'll be unable to divine the undead currently, and so poses the question: "How long ago did the undead pass this spot?" The universe answers him: Six and a half days.

"That's quite a head start," says Grey Wolf.

Aravis does some quick math in his head. If the bone army is moving four miles an hour, and the mist simply covers a big open space, the army could have easily covered the whole thing in a week. But if the hidden ravines are labyrinthine enough, it could take months to explore them all.

They've now been traveling and scouting for almost thirteen hours. Before sleeping, they split up, and spend another three hours skirting the entire perimeter of the fog bank in two groups. They meet on the far side, and confirm that neither group has seen any more bone chips. Cor Kek's army has gone in, but it hasn't come out again unless it left in the exact place it went in. Finally, Aravis *teleports* them back to where they started. Grey Wolf uses his *Mordenkainen's cube* to make them a *magnificent mansion*, and they pile in to go to sleep. They're bone tired.

coyote6: "Bone tired" – I see what you did there...

Joshua Randall: Love Cayyat! Although I'm jealous, because when I made a timeless demiplane for my PCs to use, they were too paranoid to use it. Such a waste.

jmuccihello: I hope Eddings has a proper British butler accent – John Gielgud from the movie *Arthur*.

Thoras: Same comments as everyone else, but amazing as usual. I've read the entire thing now and it's definitely inspired me to try DMing, despite the fact that I'm new to even playing the game.

I'm not sure why, since the description doesn't really make it out that way, but for the giant crater of evil they skirted around, I have this picture in my head reminiscent of one of those scenes in games/anime etc. The ones where you see this huge fount of earth energy erupting up into space, but instead of green, it's this writhing rope of greasy black energy, heh.

Duncan Haldane: [Piratecat: Even so, it's amazing how long my attack round can take if I don't start early. Rolling 1d3+1d6+12+7d6 (reroll 1s) for five attacks takes a stupid amount of time...] A friend of mine was playing a rogue in mid-teens, and he set up a fishing-tackle box (single layer) for his attacks. D20s in one row, then the other rows contained each of the appropriate dice for the attacks in progress (e.g. different weapons), then sneak attack dice. One column for each attack, and columns had the same colour. So he would just announce who he was attacking, as well as secondary targets if the first went down, and he'd shake the tackle box and expose the results. As long as you can add up quickly it works well.

Oh, and as an aside, I didn't know till just now that Morningstar and Grey Wolf's players were a couple.

Piratecat: They weren't originally; although they were friends back in college, during the course of the campaign the players fell in love, got married and had a child. Which is pretty damn awesome.

Cerebral Paladin: Re damage calculation: with 7d6 (reroll 1s), it might be worth doing some substitutions of equivalencies. 7d6 (reroll 1s) is equivalent to 7d5+7 (assuming that you reroll 1s on the rerolls as well), which makes the overall expression 1d3+7d5+1d6+19, which is I think substantially more straightforward. d5s aren't particularly common, but you can get prism-style dice which work just fine, or wacky irregular sided dice which can be made to work if they're shaped very carefully.

In general, I don't like "reroll 1s" as a common mechanic, because it makes for time delays while being strictly equivalent to simpler dice code changes. There can be some fun involved, because "I never roll ones" is kinda cooler than "I get to add x to my total and roll smaller dice." But it's usually not a gain on net, IMO.



A Tale of Two Dragons

I suspect we're caught in some kind of trap. Morningstar conveys this to the others via the mind-link, and the rest are inclined to agree. After all, based on Scree's scouting report, they should have emerged from the mist in well under a minute, but it's been over twenty minutes now, and there's no end to it. Still, they decide to press on.



That morning, after a *heroes' feast* breakfast and discussion of plans, the Company had decided to send Scree on a reconnaissance mission, before the whole group plunged blindly into the unnatural fog. Scree was amenable as always, sank into the ground at the edge of the cliff, and relayed his observations through Kibi.

I'm heading straight down ... Okay, I'd say I've gone about thirty feet. I'm sticking my eye out of the cliff face; oh, still misty. I can hardly see at all. I'll go down some more ... Good rock. Quartzy. Strange, but solid. I'm poking my eye out every so often ... Hey, I've come to the bottom, and it's still foggy ... No, wait, there's another cliff. It's terraced, you see. If you scaled down the cliff by a rope or something, you'd find yourself on a ten-foot ledge at the top of another cliff! Oh, and I've found the bottom of the mist! Here, just a minute ... Ah, I see. Now I'm at the bottom of a ravine. I can see the bottom of the fog layer, a couple hundred feet above me, I think, right where the ledge is. The ravine is about fifty feet wide down here ... Hey, there are more bone chips too! Maybe it's the Black Circle army? Or maybe the undead that already live here? Who knows?

Can you feel any tremors nearby? Kibi had asked. He wanted to know if Scree could sense the proximity of the skeletal army.

Yeah. I feel a bunch of little tremors. Like there are things moving around within a few miles of me, in multiple places.

"Their army is fanning out," Kibi had told the others.

Ooooh, look at that! Scree had then exclaimed. *A giant! No, wait. It's just a statue of a giant's legs. The top part is in pieces, on the ground. The face looks worn. The whole thing does ... Hey, now I hear something. Sounds like wind blowing somewhere past where this ravine bends out of sight. Getting louder. Oh, whatever it is just turned the corner. Judging from the bone fragments flying around, a huge blast of wind is coming down the ravine this way. I'll just sink back into the stone and stick an eye out ... Huh. Nothing happened, though my eye felt tingly when the wind blew past. Now it's gone, and it's quiet again.*

Kibi had then recalled his familiar, after which they made their final plan. Morningstar cast *control weather*, hoping that a good gale-force wind would sweep the mist away. But while it did have *some* good effect – she increased visibility inside the fog from 5 feet to almost 30 feet – it mostly just churned the mist in place. Some magical force kept it from dispersing. Still, it didn't sound like they had far to go. 150 feet of mist, then 200 feet more to the bottom of the ravine. Once they had cast their buffs, including *hide from undead*, Aravis *shapechanged* into his accustomed dragon form, and Morningstar rode on his back while the rest flew on the flying carpet *Burning Sky*. Down they rushed, expecting to reach the bottom in less than ten seconds.



That was almost half an hour ago now. They are clearly moving – individual curls of mist are whipping past their faces, and Morningstar's pale hair streams out behind her like the tail of a kite – but they've seen no sign of the bottom of the mist layer, let alone the floor of the ravine that Scree had described. Kibi, who hates flying with a passion, is gripping the sides of the carpet with whitened knuckles. "This doesn't seem to match Scree's report," he says morosely, though by now that's abundantly obvious to everyone.

Five more minutes pass, with no change. Morningstar reiterates her opinion that this is at best some kind of defense mechanism that hedges intruders, and Flicker thinks that perhaps it's a trap from which they cannot escape, but a minute after that the mist ahead actually starts to clear, and in rapid succession goes from thick, to wispy, to not there at all.

They have arrived in the ravine exactly as Scree described. It's about fifty feet wide, and stretches away in both directions at least a hundred feet before bending away out of sight. The walls are two hundred feet high, sheer, and made of a smooth gray quartz-like stone streaked with black striated veins. The ground is made of the same.

The broken Giantish statue is also there, smashed and wind-scoured. Dranko wonders out loud, "How does anything get weathered down here?"

Morningstar realizes with a start that her *control weather* spell is no longer active, though by rights it should have lasted for hours. There is no breeze at all here in the ravine; high above them the thick white fog hangs still like a cotton blanket. There are no animals, no sounds, nothing that betrays any hint of why this place is here.

Aravis rubs his chin. "My suspicion is that Drosh had a blind spot for things moving through the ground." Which seems true; whatever magics that were active in the mist were evidently bypassed entirely by Scree. Down here below the mist, Dranko finds that his inherent ability to *detect magic* works just fine, suggesting that the prohibition against divinations only applies *across* the mist and not beneath it.

There's nothing to recommend one way over the other, so the Company pick a direction at random and head down the ravine; after all, this place isn't going to just scout itself. At five hundred feet the ravine bends away to the left, continues on for three hundred feet, and splits. There are bone fragments down both of the new branches, so once again they choose randomly, flying along about half way up the ravine's height, Morningstar still on Aravis's dragon-back and the rest on the flying carpet. While the ravines vary somewhat in width, they are all of an unnaturally uniform height, and the quality of the stone never changes. Dotted here and there are more statues of giants, all in varying poses and states of decay. Most are broken in places, and weathered smooth to the point where few facial features remain.

Nearly an hour has passed, when the party round a corner and see something approaching, several hundred feet ahead of them. It seems that a force of undead has also just turned a corner, and now the two groups are facing each other. The Company are still enchanted to be invisible to non-intelligent undead, so they proceed, though cautiously.

The undead contingent consists only of skeletons, many dozens of them, mostly of human size, but a dozen or so of a giantish variety standing some twenty feet high. All of their bones are inscribed with glowing blue runes, on arms, on legs, even on the tops of their skulls. None of them are reacting in any way to the party; it seems their spell is holding, so they rise up a bit higher and move to fly over the enemy. (Though they are not entirely sure that this *is* the enemy; the odd runes lend credence to the theory that these are the indigenous undead population.)

A few seconds later, a second group of skeletal creatures rounds the corner: four little flying skulls the size of large crows, and a huge skeletal dragon. The skulls have gems in their eye-sockets: a red gem in the left eye and a black one in the right. All of them, and the dragon as well, have blue runes etched upon them. The dragon pulls up when it sees the party. Oops! It screeches loudly at the army below.

The Company hastily start casting buffing spells, as the rune-covered dragon and its accompanying flight of skulls draws nearer. It is precisely at the moment Aravis realizes he's seen those runes before – they belong to an obscure language he ran across while perusing some of their pilfered Black Circle books – that the skulls let loose their attacks on him. Twenty *magic missiles* streak from their black right eyes – five per skull – and all of them slam into Aravis's draconic body. He has scarce time to recover before they each launch *fireballs* at him, engulfing him (and Morningstar) in a small inferno. He survives the attack, the fireballs triggering his *energy buffer*, though he is severely scorched and burned.

Aravis responds by Quicken a *shield* spell and breathing out a massive cone of electricity. The dragon doesn't even try to avoid the blast, and comes away scorched and smoking. The skulls zip around in the air, partially dodging the blast. None of the flying enemies have dropped. The many humanoid skeletons below are now looking up to observe the aerial battle, though none can do anything about it.

Kibi watches the skeletal dragon approach, and wonders what kind of breath weapon it might have. Negative energy? Or maybe positive energy, since it's presumably designed to fight other undead? Whatever the case, he doesn't want to find out the hard way. He casts *control undead* upon it. The dragon jerks to a halt as if caught in a net. Kibi smiles.

"Curse you!" spits the dragon.

“Don’t attack me, or any of my friends,” the dwarf commands.

“Yes, fine.”

“Where is your master?” asks Kibi.

“I don’t know.” The dragon’s harsh screechy voice drips with frustration and contempt.

“Then how will you find him?”

“I will fly back to where I saw him last. He has ways of locating us, or calling us to him.”

“Has he found what he’s looking for?” asks Kibi.

“Maybe.”

“Are you all still marching?”

The dragon sneers. “I fly, I don’t march.”

Kibi sighs. “Is the army still on the move, then?”

“The army is still searching, if that’s what you’re asking.”

That tells Kibi something important, at least. The dragon doesn’t think Ten Old Bones has found the Skysteel Hole. “Attack those stupid flying skulls,” he commands. The dragon groans, but turns to do as it is bidden.

Morningstar, herself singed by the barrage of *fireballs*, casts a healing spell on herself and Aravis. Grey Wolf uses a wand of *fly* on Dranko, before Quickening an *iron storm* down among the ambulatory skeletons. As even more skeletons come into view around the distant corner of the ravine (including four more flying skulls), Ernie pops one of the nearby skulls with a *positive energy ray*. All that remain are its two gems, which plummet to the ground. Dranko (now flying) and Flicker (already flying) become a flank-and-destroy team, their weapons magically augmented to allow sneak-attacks on the undead. Together they finish off a second of the nearer set of skulls. The dragon, firmly under Kibi’s command, destroys a third skull in a flurry of teeth and claws. “The dwarf!” it cries in frustration. “The dwarf is making me do it!”

The fourth and final skull in the group targets Kibi with all of its attacks. Five *magic missiles* strike him, and the *fireball* triggers his *energy buffer*. Aravis takes some fiery splash damage, and glares. In retaliation he sends a *chain lightning* into Grey Wolf’s *iron storm* down below. Skeletons explode – nearly every one of them in a 40-foot radius, in fact. The ranks behind them start to fill in the gap; some instinctively avoid the plinking iron filings, but others wade mindlessly into the killing zone. More skulls move up as well.

Kibi continues to query the dragon. “How far back in the ravines did you last see your master?”

“Miles away,” barks the dragon. “Days ago.”

Unfailingly polite, Kibi requests that the dragon descend and take on the humanoid skeletons. Given how many of them there still are, Kibi instructs: “Use your full breath attack capabilities on the army below you!”

“Whatever you say,” answers the dragon, a bit too eagerly. It flies down and hovers over the mass of undead. Kibi frowns, and figures it can’t hurt to fill the canyon with *spike stones*, just in case.

A *darkbeam* from Morningstar and an *ice storm* from Grey Wolf take out another flying skull. Grey Wolf then casts *fly* on himself and absents himself from the party’s clustered formation.

Down below, the smaller skeletons grind themselves down upon the *spike stones*, unaware that they’re killing themselves. The giant-sized ones seem to be a bit smarter; they stop moving through the spikes, and instead pick up their shattered brethren to use as missile weapons. Dranko dodges two armored skeletons, but a third smacks him right in the chest. He sees that their blue runes continue to glow even after de-animation.

Ernie drops a *flame strike* on two of these larger specimens. Flicker and Dranko flank and annihilate another skull like a two-headed blender. Then the dragon, facing dozens of its fellow skeletons, opens its jaws and breathes.

Nothing comes out, save a tiny gasp of stale air, an impotent cough. “That was my best,” it chortles. “Anything else?”

More of the skulls target Kibi, but he weathers the storm of *magic missiles* and *fireballs*, and that’s the last serious attack these undead are able to make. Aravis shows how dragon breath is supposed to work, blasting most of the remaining skeletons on

the ground into charred fragments. Grey Wolf terminates another skull via a Maximized *greater fireburst* channeled through Bostock. Morningstar and Kibi's controlled dragon finish off all the rest of the enemy except for a single giant, which finally topples due to the incessant chipping from the *iron storm*.

Kibi orders the skeletal dragon to lead the Company to where it last saw Ten Old Bones. It's large enough that he rides upon its back along with Dranko and Flicker. Ernie, Grey Wolf and Morningstar ride upon Aravis's back, and the pair of dragons make excellent time. They fly through the canyon maze at great speed for the next fifteen minutes. They only pull up short when Grey Wolf, under the effects of *enhanced senses*, hears something ahead. They all stop, and they all hear it. It sounds like wind.

"Do you know what's causing that sound?" Kibi asks the dragon.

"Wind. It's blown on us before."

"What happened to you when it blew on you?"

"Nothing," says the dragon. "It tingles."

"Does it affect anything that's not undead?"

The dragon laughs. "How would I know?"

From around a distant bend in the ravine, the wind comes, just as it did when Scree was first scouting. They can see the cloud of bone debris kicked up along its leading edge. High up, the bottom of the mist layer is stirred by the gusting air. They have about fifteen seconds until the wind reaches them.

For a couple of seconds they think they might try riding it out, but then they see that as the wind passes by some of the giantish statues ahead, one of their stone arms is snapped off. Dranko feels his blood run cold. "We've got to find cover! Aravis, can you make us a shelter?"

He can. Even as the party fly down to ground level, Aravis casts a *secure shelter*, and they swoop in through the door as quickly as possible. Aravis himself has to hastily shrink down to human size in order to fit.

"Wait out here until I come back," says Kibi to his dragon, before closing the door to the shelter. And just in time, too! The door has been closed only three seconds when the wind reaches it, and their little house shudders and vibrates as the gale rushes past. Dranko fishes a long strip of jerky from his pack, opens the door a tiny crack, and pokes the jerky into the wind. It instantly becomes much heavier, and when Dranko pulls it back, he finds that the exposed section has turned to stone.

"Well," said Kibi. "Hiding in here was certainly the right thing to do!"

After a minute or two, the wind dies down almost instantly. Scree gives the rest the all-clear, and they leave the shelter. The dragon is still there, waiting for them. "What are the capabilities of Ten Old Bones and his army?" Kibi asks it.

The dragon looks as though it would puff up proudly, if it had any flesh to puff. "His army is vast. Tens of thousands. It will roll over you."

"Is it broken into more groups like the one you were part of?"

"For now," croaks the dragon, "but we'll all be together before too long. Ten Old Bones can contact us when we're close enough, and guide us to him."

"What does he look like?" asks Kibi.

"Like a skeleton."

"Is he a lich?"

"Why? Does that scare you?" The dragon chuckles again, a grinding, rattling sound.

"Answer the question," demands Kibi.

"I don't know what he is, and that's the truth. He's very old, and very powerful. More powerful than any of you, I can tell you. But he's like you. Human-ish."

"Does he wear anything in particular?" asks Dranko.

"Clothes," says the dragon.

Dranko shakes his head. "Describe the clothes. Are they unusual? Honestly, it's like talking to a child."

"I don't need to answer you," spits the dragon.

"Yes you do," says Kibi. "I command you."

"Fine. He wears black. A cloak. Those things on your legs... pants. And he is adorned with various magic trinkets."

"What kind of spells can he cast?" Kibi presses.

"I don't know."

"Did he create you?" asks Dranko. When the dragon shakes its head, Dranko adds, "Then why are you working for him?"

"Because the person who *did* create me works for him. His name is Six Bone Shards."

"Is he also with the army?"

"No."

"Are there any living creatures in your army?" asks Kibi.

"I don't think so."

"Spellcasters? Other than those skull things?"

"I don't know," says the dragon, exasperated. "I'm not privy to the abilities of every creature in the army."

"How about this, then," says Morningstar. "Are there more creatures as powerful as you, or more powerful?"

The dragon doesn't answer at first, until Kibi glares at it. "I don't know. Fifty maybe. That's only a guess."

"And what are you all looking for?" asks Kibi.

"A tower," says the dragon. "And a great ring of metal."

At this point Kibi thinks he only has about a minute left before his *control undead* expires, and he has no desire to endure the revenge the creature will doubtless try to exact. With only the tiniest of moral pangs, he orders the dragon not to defend itself, and Flicker, Dranko and Grey Wolf smash it to pieces.

Everett: Did it have any last words?

Sagiro: Nothing particularly memorable. It knew this was coming.

RedTonic: Poor undead dragon.

Piratecat: This was the best saving throw for a monster to fail ever. Even as we speak, someone is hopefully painting a Boris Vallejo-style black light velvet poster of Dranko and some gorgeous bikinied warrior riding the bone dragon into battle. (Gorgeous bikinied *female* warrior. Nice try!)

Also, note to self: find Six Bone Shards and kick his butt.



Undead Collision

The Company confer. How to best find the Skysteel Hole in a maze of canyons a hundred miles on a side? Morningstar tries a quick excursion into *Ava Dormo*, but finds the region warded, filled with impenetrable blackness. After reviewing several other options, most of which would be far too time-consuming, they decide that Kibi will use *limited wish* to spoof *commune with nature*. But the spell will only have a radius of 20 miles, and as the wizards think the edge of the mist is closer than that, they decide to keep moving center-ward for a bit. (Otherwise, some of their 40-mile diameter circle will be wasted.)

Hide from undead is recast, and onward they fly. There are no dead-ends in this exaggerated labyrinth, but many loops that bring them back to places previously explored. Progress is slow, but Kibi is certain that, on the whole, they are headed in the right direction. More of the canyons are dotted with the broken giantish statues, their presence now making a gruesome sense in light of the petrifying wind. Morningstar clings to Aravis's draconic back while the others ride on Ernie's flying carpet, and all of them at a high altitude so as to be less vulnerable to threats on the ground.

"Why do we always fly so high?" groans Kibi, and he wonders if closing his eyes would make things better or worse. It helps that they have to land periodically, so that he can use his dwarfish senses to figure out how far they've come. Once he's convinced that they've moved more than twenty miles from the edge of the ravines, he sits upon the rocky floor and casts his spell.

Kibi has never before effected *commune with nature*, and is nearly overwhelmed by the sensory overload. His eyes roll upward into his head and only his natural affinity for stone (along with his mighty intellect) keeps him conscious and focused on what he senses. He has chosen to divine the layout of the ravines, the locations of powerful magical creatures, and the presence of any living people.

The ravines stretch out from him in all directions, interconnected in a weaving labyrinthine map. There are many hundreds of “powerful magical creatures” appearing on his mental diagram as glowing gray spots, and these vary greatly in potency. Kibi guesses that the run-of-the-mill skeletons aren’t showing up at all, but that creatures like the blasting skulls and bone dragon are pinging the radar.

The density of the glowing dots increases toward the center of the maze, and culminates at a location so bright that there must be over a thousand powerful undead creatures clustered there. This locus of activity – most likely the spot where armies of undead are clashing – is in a final long ravine, one which terminates at the only pure dead-end revealed by the *commune with nature*. That ravine is almost half a mile long, and the concentration of undead is about a thousand yards from the dead-end.

Kibi can detect two distinct types of undead there. One matches that of many small “scouting parties” similar to the ones the party has already encountered. The other is unfamiliar, and presumably those are the Droshian undead, set here to guard the Skysteel Hole. The dwarf frowns; he can’t be sure which side is winning.

Only a hundred feet short of the terminus there is a gap in Kibi’s perception of the ravines – mostly likely a building of some kind. The gartine arch, perhaps? But there are four undead beings in that gap, of significant power, that are of the Droshian type.

There is one final creature, more powerful than any other, and this one is high up, near to the ceiling of mist that caps the ravines. This being, which Kibi assumes must be the necromancer Ten Old Bones, is, if anything, slightly more powerful than himself.

As for living creatures, there are none, save for those in the Company.

Kibi’s perspective returns to his own person, and he sums up his discoveries. “They’re already fighting at the Arch!” As the Company immediately set out again, the dwarf shares the remaining details. He estimates that the hot spot is twelve miles distant in a straight line, but closer to twenty given the winding route they must take. Only one path through the maze will lead them true; all other paths and branches lead to reverses and loops.

Half an hour later, as they round a bend in one of the canyons, they see a cluster of some thirty black-clad figures below them. These aren’t the blue-runed skeletons of the Black Circle, but the Droshian defenders set here to repel intruders. Despite the active *hide from undead* spell, these creatures fire a volley of arrows at Aravis’s draconic body. The party are flying high and fast enough that most of the arrows miss their mark, and they opt to continue on at full speed rather than try to explain to these creatures that they’re on the same side.

“You know what?” says Dranko as they speed away. “If these guys are shooting arrows at skeletons, it’s probably not working out very well.” Ordinarily, the party know, any skeletons in this place would be controlled by Drosh, Kivian God of the Dead. But the old rules have lost their application in light of Drosh’s abdication.

Soon enough the party encounter a second group of Droshian undead, but these are headed in the same direction as themselves, and don’t manage to hit with a single arrow before the Company is out of range. They fly onward through the ravines, whose only feature is the scattered petrified remains of giants. Kibi leads them, the one true course still etched into his mind.

Finally, up ahead, they see the back end of the battlefield. Black-clad humanoids wielding oversized falchions are battling by the hundreds with skeletons covered with glowing blue runes. Farther ahead the battling undead forces grow denser and the fighting more intense, before the ravine makes one final ninety-degree bend. They are high enough that neither side has taken notice of them, or at least with enough alarm to alter their battle plans. They take the opportunity to cast some buffing spells (including *indomitability* on Morningstar) before turning the final corner and facing the last long ravine.

They take the turn, and see that the final thousand yards is a clogged mass of raging war. Forces in numbers impossible to estimate are engaged in countless melees, surging forward and backward like ocean tides. The ground is stone, but most of that is covered with splintered bones or the fallen cloaked remains of the Droshian defenders. Inasmuch as a single front can be identified, the Black Circle army is pushing it inward toward the dead end, while the Droshians are trying to force it back.

In the center of the ravine, a hundred yards from the dead-end, a tall but narrow tower of quartz and adamant soars upward a hundred feet. It seems to grow organically from the stone floor, and at its apex is a wide stone platform. At the edge of this

platform, nearest to the end of the canyon, is a black stone obelisk set about with white glowing runes. Four oversized Droshian guards stand atop the tower, hacking apart an endless progression of skeletons coming up through a trapdoor in the roof.

The Company make for the tower at top speed. As they draw near to the heart of the fighting, they can see strange creatures below them mixed in with the rank-and-file skeletons. There is what looks like an enormous bone buckyball, twenty feet in diameter at least, with sharpened giantish elbows protruding from its surface. It looks like an gigantic skeletal flail head rolling to and fro across the canyon, crushing Droshian defenders (along with many of its allies) and impaling them on its spikes.

There is something like an enormous bone spider, reminiscent of a construct the party fought years ago, consisting of two huge concentric bone rings resting on eight long jointed bone legs. The rings rotate independently, and it fires bolts of hot red energy from an agglomerated “head.” There are two particularly large and well-equipped giantish skeletons, towering almost as high as the spiky ball, wearing custom steel mail and laying waste with enormous thick-chained flails.

And finally there is a dragon. This one is larger than the specimen recently controlled by Kibi, and a good deal larger than Aravis in his draconic shape. Unlike every other Black Circle combatant here, the dragon has gray, rotting flesh clinging to its bones. It circles lazily around the top of the tower, deigning now and again to breath a black mist upon all the undead upon it.

All of this is set against the backdrop of the Skysteel Hole. In the stone wall that marks the dead-end of the ravine, a gigantic ring of metal is pressed into the rock. It sinks below ground level at its base, so that it more resembles an inverted horseshoe. It doesn’t seem to lead anywhere; its entire empty center is simply the rock wall. None of the undead seem concerned with it; the tower is clearly the focus of everyone’s attention.

That the Company should have arrived at this moment, given the many days the Black Circle forces have been searching, is a staggering coincidence, an unnatural stroke of luck. It seems that the wild fluctuations in probability brought about by Corilayna’s absence have thrown a potentially world-saving gift to the Company. Now they just have to claim it.



The Company wonder where in this mess Ten Old Bones is hiding; according to Kibi’s vision the most powerful being here was high up near the mist layer, but there’s no immediate sign of him. More urgently, they see that the stream of skeletons pouring out through the tower roof is threatening to overbear one of the four Droshian guards and push it over the railing. They move to assist, swooping in to the tower top and wondering how powerful the dragon is. Dranko’s whip and a *rainbow blast* from Grey Wolf clear about nine of the skeletons, which provides enough of a respite that the Droshian guard pushes away from the edge and regains solid footing.

Ernie casts *blade barrier* across the entire ravine at ground level, cutting off the encroaching skeletons from the tower. Aravis casts *Bigby’s clenched fist* and sends it to aid the tower-top guardians. It bull-rushes a particularly large skeleton right off the roof, which falls pleasingly into the *blade barrier* below.

Ah, but the dragon. It flies over and hovers, observing these unwelcome newcomers to the fray. To its surprise, they seem to be alive. It breathes upon them, a massive cone of *horrid wilting* that draws the vital fluids from their bodies. Grey Wolf, Ernie and Flicker are struck more fully, and are left so weakened that another such blast would surely finish them off. Having done that much, the dragon flies up and away, stopping again some forty feet above them, and fires off *magic missiles* at Dranko.

The half-orc is indignant. “You hit me with *magic missiles*! You son of a bitch!”

The dragon thinks directly into Dranko’s head. *That’s what you’re worried about? You should not have come here, mortal. You will die.*

Yeah, well, thinks Dranko in reply, *we kind of killed everyone else in the Black Circle. Ten Old Bones was the only person left.* The Dragon chuckles.

Although they are still either on dragonback or the carpet, the individual members of the party can also fly on their own. Morningstar casts *mass heal*, entirely undoing the effects of the dragon breath, before disembarking from Aravis and flying out of cluster formation. Kibi Quickens a *wall of force* in mid-air, directly above the *blade barrier*, hoping that it will impede the dragon’s flight. Then he casts his own *Bigby’s fist* to join Aravis’s.

One of the massive flail-wielding skeletons stops laying waste for a moment, and with a gesture *dispels* the *blade barrier*. The other one does likewise, *dispelling* one of the *fists*. The huge bone spider spins its top ring about so that the head is facing a preponderance of the party. It fires off a ball of green energy that, by sheer luck, is halted by the *wall of force*. Green light plays all along the wall, illuminating it for all the combatants to see.

Dranko and Flicker go after the dragon, launching themselves from the carpet to assume flanking positions. Though the dragon nips Dranko with its jagged teeth on his way by, the two heroes carve large chunks of flesh out of the dragon's putrid corpus. It snarls with surprise.

Bother. What a nuisance you all are. The voice sounds telepathically in the heads of all the Company. **Ten Old Bones!** *I'll give you five seconds to leave. After that, the chances of your deaths will go from 'highly likely' to 'assured.'*

Morningstar doesn't buy it. "Zeg sends his regards," she says grimly.

Unlikely. Zeg is dead. You're going to make me do this myself, aren't you. So tiresome.

"Nah," Dranko responds. "You should just let your monsters take care of it."

I was hoping they would be sufficient; I do hate exerting myself.

Aravis guffaws. "So, not only are you a coward, but you're lazy, too!"

Grey Wolf ignores this exchange and fires a *disintegrate* at the dragon, but its body is preternaturally tough, and it resists most of the damage. Ernie has a better idea: he maneuvers the flying carpet until it rises above the *wall of force* and casts *bolt of glory*. A beam of radiance lances from Ernie's fingertips, looking for all the world like *Tava's Righteous Fury* in flight, and it blows a foot-diameter hole right through the bulk of the dragon. Bits of rotten organs and rancid flesh spray out the far side. The dragon dips a bit in mid-flight, but retains its equilibrium and growls in pain.

Aravis reverts to his human form and casts *lightning ring*, surrounding himself with a small electrical storm.

The dragon responds to the brutal assault upon itself with some kind of Quickened healing, though it's not much compared with the damage it's taken, and then twists around in mid-air like a cobra. Dranko finds himself looking into its dry, dead eyes, and before he can make any kind of witticism, the dragon savages him with claws and teeth. His own blood splashes everywhere. The dragon then flies downward slightly, putting the *wall of force* between itself and the majority of the party's casters.

Morningstar sighs, and absorbs a passing swat of the dragon's tail as she moves to *heal* her husband. He plants a quick kiss as she arrives.

Kibi has been intently surveying the scene. All of these antics with the dragon are well and good, but the real issue here seems to be that an endless crowd of skeletons is entering the tower at ground level, and emerging at the rooftop to harry the Droshians defending the obelisk. It's only a matter of time before their press will become overwhelming. More of the Black Circle army is surging into the ravine all the time, and it's clear that they are slowly but surely grinding down the Droshians' defense. He glances at the rock face with the Skysteel Ring pressed into it, but decides that's too risky. Instead he targets one of the ravine walls – with an *earthquake*. He's not certain what effect this will have; the stone here is strange, at once both natural and constructed, and with properties of ancient enchantment that he cannot guess at. Will it resist his spell?

No. No, it won't. With a sound like an avalanche, a colossal volume of rock breaks free of the wall and collapses to the ground like a tidal wave. The sheer quantity of dislodged stone buries everything in its path as it sweeps from left to right. A huge cloud of dust rises up like a mushroom cloud, but in the canyon itself, everything in the vicinity of the tower is buried in ten feet of gray-green rock. Skeletal limbs and heads poke out here and there, but in a matter of seconds the entire melee has ceased. The huge spiky bone-ball stops rolling, rocking futilely in place. The bone artillery-spider cannot free its legs, though the rotating rings still function. The two flail-wielding giants are buried up to their chests, effectively paralyzed.

Most importantly to Kibi, the ground-level doorway to the tower has been entirely blocked off. There may still be a hundred or more skeletons inside of it, but he has effectively turned off the tap. The spider does manage to swing its head around, and it blasts Dranko and Morningstar with a burst of green energy.

But Dranko and Flicker maintain their focus. Flicker waits until the dragon becomes distracted by Dranko, and nearly severs its tail with a series of knife-slashes. When it becomes distracted by *that*, Dranko starts shearing off chunks of its head with his whip. At the second whip-snap, the dragon starts to chuckle again. Its body almost seems to be vibrating. Dranko doesn't hesitate; he strikes twice more, and the second time he caves its head in entirely.

Goodbye, thinks the dragon into Dranko's head. And with a last bitter laugh, it explodes.

Dranko sees it coming with a split-second of lead time, and somehow finds the one safe vector within the blast radius. Morningstar and Flicker are not so lucky. Morningstar suffers pain that she *knows* should be indicative of death, and indeed if not for the *indomitability*, she'd have been eviscerated. As it is, sharp thorns of bone have gouged the entire right side of her body.

Flicker, unprotected by magic and unable to dodge the eruption, is blown into a hundred pieces, his guts splattered obscenely into the *wall of force*, where they slide down to splash upon the rocks.

wedgeski: Y'know, I've killed an inordinate amount of PCs with death throes of one kind or another over the years. They really can be extremely dangerous. Great update!

theskyfullofdust: FLICKER!! Nooooooooooooooooooooooo! Poor little guy, blown to bits by an exploding dragon. May he rest in pieces... Great update. You really know how to work an epic battle. Considering this is 3.5, how hard/time consuming is it to design these encounters?

steeldragons: *stares agape at halfling entrails smearing their way down a wall of force*

blinks. Rubs eyes. Looks again *stares agape as tears form in his eyes*

Piratecat: And were it not for the *indomitability*, which left her at 1 hp, I believe Morningstar would have been at -45. Something absurd like that. Just brutal.

Innocent Bystander: That was awesome! Great thinking on Kibi's player's part to bring the walls down.

Is this the first time Flicker has died? Anyone remember who's all died, at what points, and if anyone has bit it more than once?

Tamlyn: I think Flicker has died at least once before and when he came back was told to focus on rogue levels. Of course, I may be wrong.

Sagiro: Wrong, but close! When Mrs. Horn died (the first death in the Company), Flicker decided himself to focus on rogue levels. Other deaths:

- Ernie, killed by anvil-handed golems.
- Aravis, killed by null shadows.
- Grey Wolf, Kay, Makel and One Certain Step, all "killed" in the Crosser's Maze, but they were alive again when the rest escaped. Those so slain suffered irrevocable Wisdom loss.
- One Certain Step, Makel and Snokas were also all killed in more conventional ways. It's a tough world for NPCs!

Interestingly, the killed characters have been brought back to life in every single case, though Makel and One Certain Step went on to die again in more heroic fashions.

Everett: At this point, One Certain Step is still the last character they lost who stayed dead, and his death was a long-coming plot point. Makel's was a plot point as well. I assume they'll resurrect Flicker, but in the middle of Mordor...?

Anyone want to take odds on a PC death while in the dead lands?

Innocent Bystander: I guess, only counting current party members, that's 4 down and 3 to go. Anyone want to start a pool?

Piratecat: I think (but am not sure) that Sagiro is forgetting someone, but I may be misremembering or have my timing screwed up. It's also possible it hasn't happened yet, and I should avoid spoilers. It's also worth mentioning that we lost several people in that last climactic fight against the Black Circle, but we got to them in time with *revivify*.

At this point in the game the closest Dranko has come to death was in Het Branoi when he was being squeezed to death in the paw of a giant demon. Grappling is *not* his friend. That said, improved evasion and a high Reflex save has literally saved him from thousands of hit points worth of damage.

Duncan Haldane: But arrogance has cost him a few points of damage too! Remember failing to save against the iron/lightning combo (forget the exact name of the spells) from friendly fire?

blargney the second: Dice have a way of kicking you in the nads for being confident in your character's abilities.

Davek: Played a game of Boothill once where my character was hell on wheels. Got into the last fight and took down 4 of 5 bandits without a scratch, the entire gunfight was within close range too. The remaining bandit got on his horse and took off. At about 100 yards he fired blindly back at me with his pistol. Rolled 100 to hit, then rolled 100 for hit location. I'm down with a terminal hole in the head...



The Door Close at Hand

The voice of Ten Old Bones sounds in their heads, a dry chuckle mixed with a sigh. *I did warn you. And I liked that dragon. I suppose I'll have to make another one when all this is finished.*

"There will be nothing left of you," Aravis retorts coldly, before *shapechanging* into a fly to make himself less visible. While Ernie heals Morningstar, Kibi casts *xorn movement* and sinks beneath the rocky ground. It tingles slightly with Earth Magic, and even with his highly attuned senses he cannot determine whether the rock is natural or worked.

Dranko uses another charge of his *wand of indomitability* on his wife, then flies upward toward the misty ceiling of the ravine. He remembers what Kibi learned from his *commune with nature*, and guesses that Ten Old Bones must be lurking in the fog. He sees nothing, but hears the necromancer's voice in his head. *You can't see me, and you won't be able to. I have become one with the Sheltering Mist, and the mist is impenetrable.*

Dranko focuses his *detect magic* upward, and sees that the edge of the mist is like a smeared glass pane to his magical senses. *Out of curiosity*, he thinks, *how do you intend to pry open the gate and let your stupid Emperor through? What with, you know, being misty?*

While Morningstar casts *true seeing* and flies around to the other side of the tower, Ten Old Bones responds. *Ah. Here we go. Like this.* The Skysteel Ring starts to glow.

"Um," says Dranko, sweating. "That's a reasonable answer. And how are you doing that... up there... made of mist? And why

are you doing this? If the Emperor shows up, you're not going to get to play with your fun undead anymore. He's not going to respect you or treat you well, you know."

Your ignorance is astounding.



Around the distant corner of the ravine, a new mass of Black Circle skeletons is surging forward, and while they will certainly be greatly slowed by the rubble from Kibi's *earthquake*, Morningstar spies another flight of about a half-dozen flying skulls heading their way.

Dranko and Kibi fly down to the top of the tower, to examine the rune-covered obelisk. Dranko, inevitably, licks it. Kibi casts *comprehend languages* and finds that the runes have no clear direct translations. They are symbolic of different magical types – his best guess is that they stand for divination, enchantment, etc. Some of the runes aren't part of any language, symbolic or otherwise, but the shapes themselves lend the obelisk power.

All at once, the dozen or so skeletons atop the tower, fighting against the four larger Drosavian defenders, explode in a shower of bone fragments. The defenders are blown to bits, and the *Bigby's fists* are annihilated. Dranko manages to put the obelisk directly between himself and most of the shrapnel, but Kibi is bloodied by a spray of bone chips. Simultaneous with the explosion, ten wraiths come flying upward out of the tower. They look like semi-substantial black curtains, with glowing eyes and shadowy auras. They scatter once out in the open. Finally, one more being emerges from the tower. He's a humanoid, emaciated, and wears fraying black robes. His body is surrounded by about twenty silver globes that shift and slide in slow orbits around him. He floats down to stand alone next to the obelisk.

"You're such a big liar," says Dranko. "Up in the mist, huh?"

Yes, fine. I lied. Now be quiet, and leave me alone for a moment.

Ernie flies to a spot ten feet above the head of Ten Old Bones, and in close proximity to some of the wraiths. He casts *holy word*. "NAUGHTY!" A flash of green and gold light bursts from his hands, a holy emanation smelling of fresh bread. Several of the wraiths buckle, though they aren't paralyzed as Ernie was hoping. Bones doesn't even flinch. Ernie Quicks a *know opponent* upon the necromancer, but is hardly surprised when it has no effect.

Aravis shifts into human form, and fires off two ineffective lightning bolts from his *lightning ring* before casting *reverse gravity* at the top of the tower. Ten Old Bones starts to rise for a second before regaining control of himself, and standing again upon the tower roof. He appears to be able to fly.

Grey Wolf toys with the idea of casting *Mordenkainen's disjunction* on Ten Old Bones, but worries about striking the obelisk as well, and possibly triggering some unwanted reaction. He *might* be able to place it so as to get the necromancer without also encompassing the obelisk, but it will be a very tricky bit of casting. He warns the others about what he's thinking, so Morningstar flies up and away from the tower top. In case Grey Wolf decides against his *disjunction*, she casts *greater dispel magic* directly on Ten Old Bones. Three of his seven active enchantments are stripped away, though not, as she was hoping, his *fly* spell.

Grey Wolf goes for it. He drops his *disjunction*, and succeeds in avoiding the obelisk while still getting Old Bones. The *reverse gravity* is removed, and the only obvious effect on the necromancer is that all of the silver globes around his body wink out. The Company also experience a moment of mental silence; for just a second, Ten Old Bones is not in their heads. But then he reestablishes his telepathy, and lets out a tremendously aggrieved sigh. *You are so annoying!* he laments. *Do you have any idea how long I've been working on this? And now I'm going to have to... oh, this is bothersome!*

Ernie musters little sympathy. "Do you have any idea how long we've been working on this?"

You just got here! Old Bones retorts.

Kibi summons a huge earth elemental next to Ten Old Bones on the tower roof. His *protection from good* has been disjoined, and so the huge stone creature has no difficulty grabbing the old necromancer in an earthen fist. Ten Old Bones struggles for a second but realizes he has no chance of wriggling free. "It's my birthday," says Dranko. He shifts into position and cracks his whip several times at Ten Old Bones' exposed head and legs. Chips of skull and leg bone are sent flying, and the damage is substantial, though the necromancer looks more annoyed than seriously injured.

The wraiths go after Kibi, Aravis and Grey Wolf. Kibi is the only one to have life force drained from him; Grey Wolf resists their attempts to suck his vitality, and Aravis is protected by the *wall of force* that Kibi cast earlier. Dranko glares at Ten Old Bones, stuck in the elemental's grasp. "We love this world," he says, "and we get annoyed when people try to destroy it."

Not nearly as annoyed as I am, I promise you! This is galling. This is intolerable! And he really does sound exasperated.

“Shut up and get more grappled,” says Ernie.

Ten Old Bones utters a strange and potent syllable, and one of the runes on the obelisk glows brightly. Then he vanishes from the grip of the elemental and reappears higher up. He tries to take control of Dranko’s mind, but the half-orc proves indomitable. And then the little silvery globes reappear all around his body. *I should have been finished by now*, he grumbles.

The syllable that he uttered hangs in the air, filling the canyon with unnatural echoes. The glowing gartine ring, the Skysteel Hole, glows very brightly. Light starts to flicker inside its circumference, as if someone is starting up a movie projector aimed at the wall within its circle. The Company can see hazy mountainous terrain beyond, as if the gartine ring is becoming a gateway to another world.

If you’re not here in a few minutes, you’ll be much happier in the long run. Now, please, I’m still very busy. Yes, you’re all very powerful, and I’m very impressed, but it’s not going to make any difference.

Ernie uses his sword *Tava’s Righteous Fury* to begin summoning the Astral Deva Tava’s Echo. Then he Quickens a *silence*, centered next to the obelisk, in case Ten Old Bones is manipulating it verbally. Aravis fires off two more bolts from his *lightning ring*, this time at the wraiths. Then he flies up and over the *wall of force* and casts *maze* on Ten Old Bones. One of the little silver globes around the necromancer vanishes, but Old Bones himself does not. “I officially hate him,” says Ernie.

The flight of skulls, each with one red and one black gem in its eye sockets, has nearly arrived. Morningstar casts *darkburst*, which clears out skeletons in a huge radius, cold flames flashing them to powder. She also gets the five skulls in its effect, but none are destroyed.

Kibi Quickens *mirror image* on himself, and eight more dwarven wizards appear. Then he moves away from the wraiths around him, and their parting swipes only serve to pop two of the images. He follows up with a *greater dispelling*, again on Ten Old Bones, but there is no observable effect.

Grey Wolf hacks futilely at the nearest wraith with Bostock. The sword is just as frustrated as he is as the wraith’s insubstantiality foils every attack. *Ah ha! No, wait. Yes! No! Dammit!*

Dranko launches another flurry of whip strikes at Ten Old Bones. The silver globes may block targeted magic, but they have no effect on a whip. More pieces of the necromancer – whom Dranko and the others are increasingly (and correctly) suspecting is a lich – are liberated. The final whip snap knocks off a finger, which goes spiraling down to the ground. “You know what that is now?” Dranko taunts. “A spell component.”

This is so annoying! Ten Old Bones sounds nearly overcome by the sheer rudeness of the Company’s attacks.

On the wall where sits the Skysteel Hole, the flickering projector image becomes fixed and clear, like a huge picture window looking out upon an alien landscape. It is now easy to see that a vast army is camped just on the other side of it. And up to this window strides an enormous figure, twenty-five feet tall and clad in blood-red plate mail. An enormous black sword is slung onto his back. This being takes off his helmet, revealing a twisted and pitted face the color of a deep bruise, a dirty purple, with eyes like glowing orange coals.

Emperor Naradawk.

The Emperor unslings his sword and moves it slowly forward until it taps against the space within the Skysteel ring. He looks up at the Company swarming around Ten Old Bones atop the tower. Then he jams the sword into the ground next to him, crosses his arms, and waits.

Ten Old Bones looks down and sees Naradawk waiting to take a final step into Abernia. He barks another weird syllable, but when nothing happens, he frowns. Then he vanishes, reappears some fifty feet higher up and casts *exhaustion* upon Aravis, Ernie and Dranko. They are sapped of strength and mobility; Aravis’s limbs go dead. *We don’t want to keep the Emperor waiting. He’s just going to be annoyed. With me!*

“Not at the top of my list of concerns,” says Aravis.

Ten Old Bones repeats the syllable, again with no effect. He considers for one more second, then throws up his hands. *You silenced the obelisk! AAAARRRRGGH!*

“You’re welcome,” says Aravis. Ernie smirks.

Weeks of preparation, and you put a stupid silence spell on the obelisk! When this is done, I’m going to kill you!

Tava's Echo appears, and immediately heals Ernie. "Now that I have healed you, Ernest, what is on our agenda?"

"Preventing the Emperor from coming through."

"Oh dear. You seem to have landed yourself in a pickle."

Aravis is only able to move because he's flying, though he is only barely able to move his arms. Somehow he manages to fire off an *antimagic ray* at Ten Old Bones, but it has no effect. Then he Quickens *stunning breath*, changes into dragon form, and breathes a cone of electricity. Again, the lich is entirely unharmed. Ernie flies up to the lich and lands a solid blow upon it, but Bones' bones feel like iron, and the blade makes only the slightest scratch.

Five buzzing skulls arrive, and blast Morningstar with their full magical armament. (It would have been six, but a flying Droshian defender catches up with the trailing skull and knocks it off course with a falchion before pursuing it downward.) Still, five is plenty. Morningstar is engulfed in five concurrent *fireballs*, which are followed by 25 *magic missiles* that zip into the dissipating smoke. She is terribly burned and scored, but retains consciousness.

Kibi flies upward and catches all five skulls in a *prismatic spray*. Three are blasted to pieces by elemental energies, and a fourth is turned to stone, after which it plummets to the ground. Grey Wolf exchanges more blows with a wraith.

Dranko then experiences a moment of great and sudden clarity. His whip is capable of dealing sneak attack damage to undead, but he needs a flanking buddy, and Flicker is no longer available. But that can be solved... He reaches deep into his mad soul, drawing upon the powers of the Far Realms. He casts *time stop*. Everything around him freezes. He thinks about his plan, and giggles out some sanity. He moves up to Ten Old Bones, reaches into his *bag of tricks*, and gingerly removes a fuzzy ball. He has no idea what it will become, but with another little giggle, he balances it carefully on Ten Old Bones' time-frozen head. He prepares his whip.

Time restarts. A warhorse appears directly on the skull of Ten Old Bones. "Surprise!" Dranko yells.

Ten Old Bones doesn't understand what's happening, but while he manages to sidestep a bit as the horse slides off and down to the waiting rocks far below, the hapless equine provides exactly the distraction Dranko needs. His whip cracks, perfectly placed, several times. The lich's shoulder bone is sheared away. Its teeth are forcibly extracted. Its lower jaw is crushed.

A horse? For the love of...

"Everybody loves horses," says Dranko, before a final snap of his whip removes the skull from Ten Old Bones.

The Emperor has been watching all of this with great intensity. He is now staring directly at Aravis, and his eyes are wide with anger. Aravis smiles at him. Dranko flips him off.

And even as the Company see Naradawk silently mouthing the word "No!" over and over, and pounding the planar boundary with his sword, and gesticulating violently, the image vanishes, and the wall within the Skysteel ring becomes just a wall, as solid as stone cold truth.

RangerWickett: Huh. I really thought they were going to lose there.

coyote6: *Bag of tricks*, for the win! I may have to point this post out to all of my players. They're always selling the little things.

Siusi: And with this, Dranko cements his place as the most popular man that can never be famous ever.

Seriously, that is the coolest rogue trick ever. I will make a note of having horses appear on people's heads from now on.

theskyfullofdust: Nice update. And good use of a *bag of tricks*. And, phew. For a minute there I thought the Emperor was going to get through.

Piratecat: So did we.

carborundum: Genius! Just imagining him placing a furry friend on the head of an incredibly powerful lich had me giggling like I was touched by the Far Realms myself... Thanks for another awesome update!

Orichalcum: Wow, it's really awesome how Aravis and that horse totally saved the world!

Piratecat: You're killing me, here.

Destil: Hey, now. You're forgetting someone very important: Grey Wolf's *silence* spell was critical.

Orichalcum: It's true. My apologies. Though I think that was actually Ernie's *silence* spell? Now there's a great hero.

Piratecat: *sob* But desperate times, desperate measures. It was the last thing I could think of. I was as astonished (and pleased) as anyone else that it actually worked. I think the first real tide-turner in this fight was Kibi's *earthquake*. That's what let us concentrate on the real threats.

Joshua Randall: *Effulgent epuration* is a pretty good spell, but alas not enough for Ten Old Bones.

Innocent Bystander: So is that the end of the major Black Circle players? The party has sure killed enough of them.

Enkhidu: There's a phylactery around somewhere that says no, I think.

Innocent Bystander: Oh right, he was a lich. Yet another item on the party's to-do list.

Piratecat: Avoiding spoilers – at this point we're pretty sure it is, and we're feeling pretty damn pleased with ourselves. Emperor thwarted! There are still red-armored jerks around – Meledien, Tarsos, and Octesian (last seen banished into Dream) – but we've tromped on the Black Circle leadership and all the major players we know about. Clearly we have nothing else to worry about on that front. *twitch*

Mathew Freeman: Best Villain Ever PLUS Best Villain Death Ever!

Wonderful stuff, and a great reminder to keep your character sheet up to date. You never know what's going to come in useful.



Unexpected Guest

The mopping-up stage is extensive. Following some quick healing and *restorations*, and while Dranko hastens to find Flicker's remains (as well as loot the now-quiescent corpse of Ten Old Bones), the others investigate the interior of the tower. They discover that nearly the entire measure of the building is a single wide, winding staircase that goes from ground to rooftop. The only other feature is a chamber about half way up – containing a second obelisk, identical to the one on the roof. That would explain why Old Bones was inside the tower when the Company arrived.

As for the lich himself, Dranko finds that his bones are already brittle and decaying. After retrieving Flicker's head (the only obviously recognizable piece of his remains), Dranko relieves Ten Old Bones of his magical possessions. "Flicker would have loved this part," he says.

"I miss Flicker already," says Ernie.

Aravis smirks. "I feel like he's all around us."

"In fact," says Dranko, "a little piece of him is with me right now!" It's easier to joke about it, knowing that Ernie plans to raise Flicker from the dead.

Dranko ducks as a splinter of bone whistles past his head. Oh, right. There's still a battle going on, though it's lost most of its urgency. The large Black Circle arachnid artillery platform has stopped firing; its barrel is pointing downward, and it can't rotate its ring because too many of its structural bones have snapped. Kibi's rockslides continue to slow the general melee to a near-standstill.

As Dranko loots the lich, Aravis looks on thoughtfully. "He'll have a phylactery somewhere," he says. "We'll need to find it and destroy it, or Ten Old Bones will be able to come back to life. Well, undeath, anyway."

The lich's magical stuff consists of:

- An arcane scroll containing *horrid wilting* and *greater dispel magic*.
- A second scroll containing only the 9th-level spell *effulgent epuration*, a powerful abjuration that Bones had been using in the battle. (It was what created those silver globes that absorbed incoming spells.)
- Standard battle gear: *cloak of resistance +4*, *amulet of charisma +6*, *ring of protection +5*.
- A *ring of wraiths*, which can summon eight Dread Wraiths every 24 hours.
- A set of *bracers of armor +8*, *greater fortification*.

And finally, in a deep interior pocket of his black robe, they find a large ellipsoid of clear crystal, the size of a grapefruit. Etched into its smooth surface are blue runes, identical to the ones found on every skeleton in the Black Circle army. It identifies as a *runic lens*, and it bolsters the power of linked undead, particularly when fighting other undead. And they've seen this object before; sketches of it were among the papers in Zeg's office, in the warren that housed the Necromantic Forge.

"Why aren't we smashing that thing right now?" asks Grey Wolf.

"Wait," says Dranko. "We could march home with our own undead army at our back!"

"If we're going to do that," says Aravis, "I'd rather march it to Kai Kin and knock the whole place down. Poetic justice."

Dranko shrugs. He also gives the *runic lens* a quick lick. Glassy, but a bit gritty where the runes are etched in.

Rather than co-opt the army, they take the *lens*, and place it and the *ring of wraiths* atop the looted body of Ten Old Bones. With everyone standing back, Aravis casts *Mordenkainen's disjunction*. The items cease being magical. The large bone artillery spider immediately collapses under its own weight, its no longer fortified bones unable to provide sufficient support. Grey Wolf, flying high, sees that the front between the two competing armies has immediately shifted, with the Droshian guardians pushing back the invaders.

Morningstar laments that, ironically, they haven't attempted to *turn undead* even a single time. They correct that problem, and generally unload all of their remaining firepower into the Black Circle army. Their assistance turns the battle into a rout, and while the Droshian undead keep an eye on these strange living interlopers, they make no hostile moves against the Company.

Before they leave, Dranko catches a glimpse of something glinting in the bone wreckage below. He realizes that they haven't looted the little flying skulls, each of which has its eye sockets filled with one ruby and one jet, respectively. The party spend some time popping out gemstones, and in the end Dranko is holding a pile of extremely valuable jewels. He's not as good an appraiser as Flicker, but he guesses he's got between 100K and 200K worth of gold piece value. "I could make a loincloth out of these!" he exclaims.

The others wince, wishing they could unthink the inevitable imagery. Morningstar groans. "That's what *modify memory* is for."



With nothing left to do here in the mist-capped ravines of Il-Drosh, the Company fly straight upward. As with their descent, the escape takes longer than it should given the distance traveled. Some forty-five minutes later the mist thins, and then abruptly they are above it, flying in open air. It's nighttime, but the moon is nearly full, low in the sky. Once free of the thick foggy ceiling, Morningstar fires off a *sending* to Rosetta.

Bad news: we saw the Emperor. Good news: thwarted him. Army leader Ten Old Bones, lich but killed. Drosh undead now clearly winning. Flicker dead.

There is no response, and Morningstar thinks that, for whatever reason, the spell didn't make it to its intended target. She casts again, this time uttering her message to Yale. The reponse:

Excellent news, though we're sorry to hear about Flicker. We were starting to wonder what happened to you.

"Strange," says Morningstar. "We've only been gone a couple of days."

"Maybe not," says Aravis. "Maybe while we were in the mist, time was passing more quickly out here."

Either way, the Company want nothing more than to *teleport* back to the Greenhouse for some rest. They do so. Eddings greets them at the door. "Nice to see you back!" he exclaims.

"When did you last see us?" asks Ernie.

Eddings is quite used to this kind of odd question. "Just under two weeks," he says.

"Could have been worse," says Grey Wolf.

They talk for a bit about the timing. Corilayna, Goddess of Luck, is still AWOL, and the laws of chance are still in occasional flux. It's possible that a particularly fortuitous surge of fortune caused them to arrive in the nick of time to stop Ten Old Bones. Or maybe the mist really does extend time? They're not eager to go back and experiment.

After a quick freshening up, Ernie has a message delivered to the Chuch of Yondalla, asking that they prepare for Flicker's resurrection the following day. Then they contact Ozilinsh on the crystal ball, and soon they are sitting with him in the living room giving him a full info dump. Ozilinsh is raptly attentive. When he asks for more detail about what Emperor Naradawk looked like, Dranko uses his *robe of blending* to assume his features, albeit on a smaller scale.

"Some of us might have made rude gestures at him," says Ernie, glancing at Dranko.

Dranko clarifies: "I totally flipped him off."

"Was that wise?" asks Ozilinsh.

Ernie laughs. "Dranko's hoping to get Tapheon and Naradawk to start fighting each other over Dranko's soul."

"Right," says Ozilinsh. "Because the demon wasn't powerful enough to be the most powerful creature who specifically wants you dead." Ozilinsh comments that he doesn't recognize what kind of creature the Emperor is, but that's not surprising. His grandfather was a human, who became corrupted by Black Goo. Who knows what effect that would have on his progeny?

On the subject of phylacteries and how to find them, Ozilinsh answers: "With great difficulty. Liches aren't typically careless. If I were him, knowing what I do about the Black Circle, I'd expect Ten Old Bones' phylactery is inside a *divination sink*. In which case you'll have to use good old-fashioned detective work to find it."

"How long before he reassumes his old form?" Aravis asks.

"A couple of weeks," Ozilinsh guesses. "Maybe a month, if you're lucky?" Abernathy's apprentice laughs and shakes his head. "Once again – and you may be growing tired of hearing this – the kingdom is in your debt."

Kibi smiles broadly. "No, we don't grow tired of hearing that. Say it all you want."

Ozilinsh smiles back. "Abernathy knew something when he picked you, that's for sure."

"Say," says Dranko. "Where's Rosetta? She didn't answer our *sending*."

"Oh, right!" says Ozilinsh. "Rosetta is gone again. And we're specifically not to know where, just like last time. She left about three days after you did, on some 'vital mission against Black Circle interests.' She took Etria with her. Given that her mission against Cor Kek was such a success, we're inclined to trust that she knows what she's doing. No, we're more concerned with Cencerra's whereabouts than Rosetta's."

As the Company know, Cencerra and her adventuring company have been missing for over a year, ever since they headed through a gartine arch on the Dwarven island of Karth. Others have been sent to follow up, but none have even been able to *find* the arch. Grey Wolf mentions that perhaps they should look for her themselves, and this leads to a review of the many loose ends to which the Company might still attend. At the top of the list is raising Flicker and finding the phylactery of Ten Old Bones, but below that are such tasks as:

- Vanquishing Thewana/Davarian and the Delfirians, while rescuing Tor in the process.
- Putting a stop to the predations of the Guild of Chains.
- Morningstar "slaying again when the time comes for the Throggun's ascension." The blood mark still itches on the back of her hand.
- Defeating Parthol Runecarver in Kynder Hold.
- Kibi removing a splinter from Abernia, as per the planet's specific dream-delivered instructions.
- Destroying the other two Cauldrons (brothers to the Cauldron of Null Shadows) mentioned in the Black Circle library.
- Wiping out Darkeye and the Sharshun in their fortress hidden in the Greatwood.

Dranko idly lights a Blacktallow cigar while they chat, and blows out a stream of greasy smoke. It forms into the words **NOT LYING**. Well, not every prophetic exhalation is going to be immediately obvious.

By the time Ozilinsh has departed, it's early evening. The party head out reluctantly to perform the necessary task of informing Flicker's parents that their son is dead. Ernie invites Crick and Mora for a private chat in a back room, where he gently explains how Flicker died bravely, and in the act of saving the world. "But I plan to bring him back to life tomorrow, if you don't object."

Crick and Mora most vociferously do not object. But Morningstar explains that it's possible that Flicker is happy and content in the afterlife, and may not *want* to come back. "Well, he did die a hero," says Crick. "To think I have a son who died fighting a dragon!"

Ernie smiles. "And if things go well tomorrow, you still will!"

Crick laughs. "Oh, he'll be insufferable about that, won't he!"

Ernie buys a round for the house, and Crick drinks with the Company as they regale the Smoke House with tales of Flicker's adventures. Dranko delights in retelling about the time Flicker was trapped in a sapphire while his friends pursued him through Slices of the Abyss. Ernie recounts the time that Flicker surprised them by starring for a Farangi team in Djaw. Mora is absent for most of this, but eventually the laughter of the room draws her out, and she sits quietly, listening to stories about her son. They spend several hours there, drinking and recounting and laughing, all the while wondering if Flicker will choose to come back from the dead, or if his part of the story is truly over.



It's late in the evening when the Company head home for bed. Eddings greets them at the door. He looks nervous. "You have a visitor," he says stiffly. "He awaits your pleasure in the living room."

They seldom see the unflappable butler looking so distraught, so they enter cautiously, and there is indeed someone sitting on the sofa, his head bowed so they cannot see his face. But when all are assembled, he raises his head so that they can get a good look at him. **Parthol Runecarver** smiles thinly. "I let myself in," he says.



Tales of the Gods

jmuccihello: There doesn't seem to be any reference to Mr. Runecarver since 2008 (real time) – aside from one in 2010 where he is referenced as part of mistaken identity. So I ask, why do they need to 'defeat' him?

Joshua Randall: Because he's a bad moth- *Shut yo mouth!* I'm just talkin' 'bout Shaft Parthol Runecarver. Ehem. Sorry. He's major bad news. I'll let Sagiro or one of the players fill in the details. Other thoughts:

[“Right,” says Ozilinsh. “Because the demon wasn’t powerful enough to be the most powerful creature who specifically wants you dead.”] Heh, I don’t remember Ozilinsh being that sarcastic. I blame Dranko.

[Morningstar “slaying again when the time comes for the Throggun’s ascension.”] ZOMG, I’ve been waiting for this for like nine years.

Innocent Bystander: I might have to go through the PDFs again; Morningstar “slaying again when the time comes for the Throggun’s ascension” doesn’t ring any bells.

Thoras: I believe it has something to do with the demonish ogre thing that had been turned to stone which the Company brought back to life at one point.

Piratecat: Bingo! Waaaay back, on our way to find the Crosser’s Maze within the city in a bottle. It’s been a while.

For folks who forget Parthol Runecarver, he was an archmage who faked his own death centuries ago and stayed hidden until we revealed him. It was he who paid for that early expedition in the desert that released the blood gargoyle. He’s as self-interested as they come, evil to a fault if it gets him more power. Last we heard he was still trying to bring over the Emperor, although not allied with the Sharshun or the Black Circle. Frankly, he’s kind of a dick who keeps trying to kill us.

steeldragons: Preciso. GET THE BAHSTAHD, DRANKO! ... er... Dran... who was that again?

Kaodi: I do not recall if anyone suggested this before, Piratecat, but I think there is a rule somewhere that there can be two supporting characters with the same name in a story. And, if by chance, the second guy with that name becomes famous and part of the main cast, well, at least the first guy could have the same name as a real hero. Even if the second guy was an enchanted horse, a mystical whip, or an underling who was renamed as part of his payment for being returned to life...



It's Blood

There's a moment when no one's heart is beating. Dranko breaks the silence. “Why is he in the house?”

None of his friends answer right away, so Parthol himself does. “Because I wanted to talk with you.”

Some in the party look at Eddings. No hostile creature can enter the Greenhouse uninvited, after all. “He came down from the upstairs,” he says. “But he didn’t look like that at first. He looked like Salk.”

Aravis stares holes at Parthol. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“And are you a *simulacrum*?” Dranko adds.

“No,” says Parthol. “No. There are only so many of those one can make before one grows a little short of life force.”

“Are you a lich?” asks Dranko.

“No.”

Dranko tries to look nonchalant. “Because we killed the last one...”

Morningstar hasn't said a word, but her face is a thundercloud. “You don’t look happy to see me, Morningstar!” exclaims Parthol. “But I’m not here to fight. Which is good. I’d hate to damage your furniture.”

“Shut up and talk,” Dranko spits.

“My, you are rude for world-saving adventuring types!”

“How many times have you tried to kill us?” Dranko blurts.

Parthol smiles. “Zero.”

Dranko shakes his head. “What about your *simulacrum*s?”

“Technically twice,” Parthol admits, “but I didn’t expect them to kill you. They were tests, which you passed quite nicely. I wanted to know how powerful you were, how worthy you were...” The old wizard looks around, and raises an eyebrow.

“Where’s the little guy, by the way?”

“Dead,” says Morningstar.

“I’m sorry to hear that. How did it happen?”

Grey Wolf leans forward. "You should be getting to the point more rapidly. We can replace the furniture if we have to."

Parthol sighs, and gives a small chuckle. "I'm here as a show of good faith, to give you information that you probably don't have. And, to let you know that I'm on your side."

Over the mind-link, Dranko groans. *Oh God. He really is on our side. The cigar smoke! It said NOT LYING.*

Parthol continues. "Would you prefer that I try to kill you some more? Because honestly, I'd rather you stay alive, so that you can fix things."

"How come you weaseled out and changed sides?" asks Dranko.

"Pragmatism," answers Parthol. "My plans will not go so well if the Black Circle gets its way. Aravis, I'm surprised you don't agree with this sentiment. You two as well, Kibilhathur and Grey Wolf. Wizards should be ruling things. The most powerful, most intelligent people should be in charge. It has been my intent all along to drag the other archmagi, kicking and screaming if necessary, to where they belong: on top, ruling the kingdom."

"In fact, if I and Alander and Typier and your current crop of archmagi had been running things all along, we'd probably be in charge of Kivia by now, which soon, I imagine, you are going to wish that we were."

"And why is that?" asks Ernie, tight-lipped.

"Assuming of course that we solve the bigger problem, do you fully understand that Charagan is just a backwater compared to Kivia? How long do you think it will be before the Ocirians decide that Charagan would look good as a protectorate or vassal state? How long before an invasion fleet shows up on the shores of Charagan that makes the Delfirian force look like an army of child's toy soldiers?"

"We'll sink their ships!" says Dranko. "Boom! Blub blub blub."

"What about a thousand ships, guarded by their most powerful spellcasters? This is the kind of thing that wizards would be thinking ahead about. Power is the way to rule properly, and the wizards have it. But that's neither here nor there. I'm here to earn your trust, so I'm not going to hide anything from you. It's true that I was in communication with Naloric Skewn, and also his son Naradawk, because..."

Dranko interrupts. "How?"

Parthol smiles indulgently. "Magic. You wouldn't understand." He turns to Aravis, Kibi and Grey Wolf. "Frankly, you wouldn't either. I'm a bit beyond you. But I *don't* think I'm powerful enough to take on all of you, and all of the archmagi. Also, I'm not powerful enough to take on Naradawk and his cadre by myself. But if I get the two of you to fight, one would be destroyed, and the other weakened. Then I could probably defeat the winner. That was kind of the whole point, up to now. I still wouldn't mind if it worked out that way. I think Charagan and the people in it would be better off if I were in control. But we have a bigger problem, as you probably know."

"Yeah," says Ernie. "A problem that's twenty-five feet tall with purple skin."

Parthol shakes his head. "You mean Naradawk? No, that's not what I'm talking about."

He puts his feet up on the coffee table. "Are you up on your religion? Do you know why the Gods came here in the first place? They were escaping, from the Adversary – a God before whom all other Gods quailed. And now Drosh is gone. Corilayna is gone, too – and if anyone understands the odds of this world surviving, it would be Her. Clearly, something very bad is about to happen. The Adversary is probably on his way."

There is silence from the Company. Most of this they knew or guessed already. "Do you know what the Black Circle is?" Parthol asks.

"A pain in our butt!" Ernie answers.

"No. I mean do you know, literally, *what it is?*" After a beat of silence, the party admit that they do not.

Parthol sits up again on the sofa. "This is what I'm going to share with you. It may give you a better understanding of what you're dealing with. How familiar are you with the Kivian pantheon? Yulan and Manisette are the Kivian Gods of Time and Creation. They created five Greater Gods, who in turn were tasked by Manisette to create the Lesser Gods. They were instructed to create one each, but one of them, Palamir, God of Magic, in his pride created four instead of one. And those four were imperfect, mere demigods.

“As punishment, Manisette unmade Palamir, and then recreated him as the God of Duty and Loyalty. But Manisette was a Goddess of Creation, not destruction, and apparently did not do a very thorough job. Some of the essence of that God of Magic never left the world, and it hovered above Abernia, waiting.

“That’s half the story. Now, the Adversary – there’s a reason he’s not here, wreaking havoc and warring again with the other Gods. He was trapped, and prevented from following the Travelers here. But a part of the Adversary, some piece of his body or his will, still managed to pursue the fleeing Gods through the reaches of time and space. It arrived some time after they did. It fell to the surface of Abernia, and just for a moment, an incredible pall of malevolence was thrown back and flung up from the surface. But it didn’t last long. A sliver of time later, it was reformed by the hovering essence of Palamir, an imperfectly unmade God of Magic. It gave the Adversary tangency, agency. Do you understand what I’m saying? The Black Circle *is* the Adversary, at least in part. It is a God of Magic, infused with the evil of the Adversary. All of the Black Circle adherents, from their lowliest neophyte to whomever was promoted to High Priest when you killed Cor Kek, are working, whether consciously or not, toward bringing the Adversary here in His entirety.

“Not you, not I – no one on this world wants that to happen. Honestly, all of my intrigues to get control of this kingdom don’t really matter, if an insanely powerful God is going to show up and have things His way.”

Ernie pipes up. “So why are the Black Circle so obsessed with bringing back the Emperor?”

“Because,” says Parthol, “the Emperor has the best chance to bring the Adversary here. With him in charge, every resource of the Kingdom would be dedicated to finding a way to accelerate the Adversary’s arrival. Of course, the current crop of Black Circle followers may not realize that consciously; they may believe that the return of Naradawk is the end goal. But collectively, this is all about the God and His return. Do you know what made the Emperor evil in the first place?”

Grey Wolf answers. “The black goo.”

Parthol nods. “And have you figured out what the ‘black goo’ is?”

Ernie goes pale. “I just did. It’s from where the hand of the Adversary hit the ground.”

“Quite literally,” says Parthol, “it’s the Adversary’s blood.”

Joshua Randall: I knew it! Now I just have to figure out where the mirror-universe Mrs. Horn fits into this whole mess, and I’ll have it all wrapped up in a neat bow.

“So that’s what is in that crater...” Morningstar breathes.

“And it’s what the Black Circle has been using to power their rituals,” Ernie adds.

“Yes. So. Now you have a greater understanding of the scope of your problem. I will attempt to learn more; some of this information has only recently become known to me. Honestly, it hasn’t been my focus recently. I had other things to consider. It took me a long time to figure out how to get into this house. It’s very well warded. Abernathy showed all of the improvisational genius of Alander, his master. He’s probably even greater than Typier was at abjuration. But for all that, Abernathy didn’t take into account the vagaries of the eddies of Astral travel.” Dranko squints, and realizes he can see a very thin silver line, like a shimmery rope, projecting out the back of Parthol’s body.

“Unfortunately,” Parthol continues, “it won’t last, and I don’t know when I’ll be able to do it again. Honestly, it was a great stroke of luck that I was able to slip in here when I did. I only have another minute or two. I’ve said what I wanted to say. Now I’ll go back to researching how we can take care of this problem. And when the Adversary is taken care of, one way or another, which wizards willing he will be, we can get back to the question of who should rule Charagan.”

“Why us?” asks Morningstar.

Parthol looks thoughtful. “There’s something about you. I don’t know what it is. But Alander did, and Abernathy after him. I knew Alander very well. He was second only to myself in power and knowledge. He had prescience, as did Abernathy. They picked you for a reason, and I trust that reason. If anyone is going to save Abernia and everyone on it, I think that Alander thought it would be you.” Parthol gestures to Aravis, Grey Wolf and Kibi. “Even you, who came on afterwards. Do you know how all of you were picked? Abernathy wrote your names on a scroll, but he didn’t *know* your names, or even what he was writing. He was merely casting a spell perfected by Alander centuries before. Originally there were seven names. The next day there were three more names: Kibi, Grey Wolf, Aravis. How did he know that? Your guess is as good as mine. I don’t have prescience. I merely have a towering intellect.

"I may not be able to Astrally Project here again. The Greenhouse actually accounts for it, just not in every case. It's self-adapting. Next time, you may just have to invite me in."

"How can we contact you?" asks Dranko.

"You won't. I will contact *you*. I am not reachable. You see, while I trust you, I don't know that the rest of the archmagi would tolerate me if they knew where I was."

Dranko can't help himself. "Do you have a lackey in Kynder Hold, or someone we can send a message to?"

Parthol looks surprised for the first time since his arrival. "Kynder Hold? Very good!"

"Oh, we've known that for years," says Dranko.

"Really. I'm getting soft in my old age. How did you find out?"

Ernie gives Parthol a grim smile. "I'll tell you this much: the information didn't come from a wizard." Parthol chuckles.

"Before you disappear..." Dranko begins. But it's too late. Parthol vanishes, leaving no trace. Dranko fumes. "And like I said, according to the cigar, he wasn't lying. He also had a silver tail. Did anyone think that was weird?"

Aravis explains about *astral projection*, and how that meant they couldn't have really killed Parthol even in the best case.



With much to think about, the Company go to sleep. That night, Aravis receives another vision from the Crosser's Maze. It is a direct vision, witnessed through the eyes of his wandering fragment.

There are two people in a small but fancy room – probably in an inn. Light and faint noise come through a closed window.

You've seen these two people in a previous vision, though only in silhouette, and before they were armored whereas now they are not. You can see them plainly this time – a tall, muscular woman and an extremely short and stocky man. You don't recognize their faces, though both are dotted with unsightly black lesions. The woman sits comfortably in a chair, while the little man paces.

"What's taking him so long?" barks the man. "He said he'd be here an hour ago."

"Are you in such a hurry?" asks the woman. "Personally, I hope he finds some reason to delay. I don't know about you, but I enjoy sunlight and breeze."

The man stops pacing and scoffs. "Pfah! I'm starting to think we can't believe a thing the man says. Or even that he is who he claims to be. His story makes no sense. And on top of everything else, Annon Dun is a myth. There must be a way down that's closer. Naradawk certainly thought so – or at least his father did."

"Naradawk is no longer relevant," says a voice in the doorway. The two others turn to look. A third person enters the room, a tall man, gaunt, with stringy black hair and sallow skin. "As if he ever was," continues the man. "But his agents of orthodoxy have failed again, and he's back to square one in his little prison world. No matter, I have..." He trails off, then looks around sharply. "Do you know that you're being watched?"

"What?" the woman jumps to her feet. "How? By whom? I thought your abjurations couldn't be..."

"Quiet!" orders the tall man, and the woman falls silent. The newcomer looks slowly around, almost like he's sniffing the air.

"Ah," he says, finally. It almost seems like he's looking at you. "Fascinating. We're being observed in a way I've never encountered. A wizard named Aravis Telmir is spying on us from a transcendently overlapping frame of reference. He's bypassing our protections because they don't exist in his unique locus – in some sense he's not watching us, but our spatiotemporal reflection. But I can remedy that. Aravis, since I owe you some small debt, I'll forgive this rude intrusion into our private business. You can apologize in person when we meet (again), right before Abernia's inevitable paradigm shift. Now, if you'll excuse us..."

The man waves his hand dismissively in your direction, and the vision ceases abruptly.

RedTonic: Yay! More updates! Thank you, Sagiro.

blargney the second: Oh. My. Sagiro, you are brilliant.

wedgeski: Man, serial updates. I'm drinking these in. Awesome stuff!

Cerebral Paladin: In addition to the omen from the cigar, there's more evidence that he's on the same side as the PCs (at least for now): consider just how annoying and obnoxious his behavior is. That's much more consistent with the pattern of annoying allies than with the pattern of likable villains.

Piratecat: See? Kind of a dick! The fact that he's telling the truth makes him that much more annoying.

That very very bad guy who just dismissed Aravis's vision? We've heard of him and have seen his image before, though we've never met. I won't spoil it, and it's quite possible that no one will remember (we didn't!), but bonus points to anyone who can guess.

Kodi: I thought it was Octesian and his buddies. I guess I was mistaken?

Sagiro: In that vision, the first two people are Meledien (long-time red-armored nemesis) and Tarsos (red-armored villain who got through the Gate at Verdshane before Aravis closed it). The third person – the man who detected Aravis watching – is someone who the party had certainly heard of, but (I'm pretty sure) had never seen. They have since figured out who it is, though I forget exactly how they learned his identity.

Octesian, a powerful Dreamwalker, was a red-armored contemporary of Meledien from early in the campaign. The Company learned (via another one of Aravis's Maze-o-grams) that Octesian went to try rescuing the Adversary by traveling to where the Dreamscape meets the Far Realms. He got too close, failed, went crazy, and is now making his way back to Abernia, killing as he goes. You haven't heard the last of him, I assure you.

Innocent Bystander: Oh that's some damn fine update you got there Sagiro. Another round for everyone!

The infamous 'P' returns. And uninvited into their home no less. At least it sounds like their home security system is adaptive. But still, might have to burn that couch now.

steeldragons: I'm not even playing this and I crapped my pants (figuratively) when I read Parthol was sitting in the Greenhouse... astral form or not! Too late now, but what woulda happened if someone had dropped a *dimensional anchor* on his astral butt? Hahaha. Still, as always, great writing and a great read! Thank you Sagiro (and players) for an unforgettable story.

I have no clue who the guy who recognized Aravis is though... I was assuming the red-armored crew initially. But Sagiro's explanation seems to indicate that it isn't Octesian. Can't wait to read on.



No, Not Even For One Measly Week

Aravis's vision is the main topic of conversation over breakfast. The party quickly deduce that the first two people are Tarsos and Meledien, red-armored servants of the Emperor. But who was the pale man with stringy hair, and what debt might he owe to Aravis? No one recognizes him, not even when Aravis draws out a sketch.

"Annon Dun" is also something heard once before – a place name, though not even the Hae Kalkas Sages' Consortium knew anything about it. Some in the party vaguely recall thinking that Annon Dun was the name of a distant continent, perhaps even the one that turned out to be Kivia.

But finding nothing specifically actionable about the vision, they turn to a more important task: the raising of Flicker from the dead. They march in procession to the Temple of Yondalla bearing the little halfling's remains, and Ernie instructs his friends to lay the salvaged pieces upon the altar. As congregants file in to witness the ritual, Ernie sets out their recently acquired gems, and burns incense of cinnamon and blacktallow. Flicker's parents, Crick and Mora, watch apprehensively from the front row. Soon the fane is filled to capacity; no one has performed a *resurrection* here in living memory.

When the crowd has quieted, Ernie speaks. "Yondalla, Flicker is your child too. I know sometimes he's a little reckless, and he values gold more than a person should, but he is a good and true servant to you. He has saved the world, and saved us, more times than I can remember. He is brave, loyal, and true... and we need him. Will you send him back to us?"

He casts *resurrection*, and when he's finished, the components vanish. Flicker doesn't immediately come back to life, which is not unexpected, given how long it has taken in the past. But instead of days, only ten minutes pass before Flicker's silhouette appears around his remains, and then forms into a whole and uninjured body. His eyes flutter open, and clerics of Yondalla move to cover him with soft robes. Ernie smiles. "Welcome back, Flick."

Flicker sits up suddenly and stares back, wide-eyed. "Ernie! I had a full house! I was finally going to beat him!"

Ernie is obviously taken aback. "Er... you consented to come back, didn't you?"

"Yes! I know! But did you have to do it right *then*?"

A murmur goes through the crowd. Those who don't know Flicker are clearly scandalized, while those who do are trying not to laugh.

"Do you... do you want to go back?" asks Ernie.

Flicker lets out a long breath. "No. If I wanted to stay more than I wanted to come back, I would have stayed. And thank you! Say, did we win?"

"Yeah," says Dranko. "We beat him, temporarily at least. Want to see?"

Dranko pulls out the skull of Ten Old Bones. This time the assemblage lets out a collective gasp of horror. Aravis whispers harshly: "Not here, Dranko!"

Ernie looks heavenward. "Dranko, *please* don't play with the lich's skull on Yondalla's holy ground."

As Dranko sheepishly stows the skull, Flicker's parents come rushing forward to hug their son. "It wasn't an easy choice," he tells them. "Heaven is... really nice." Then, to the party, he adds: "I was back at the Inn Between. It was different this time, though. I could have stayed there forever, and it would have been all right. Oh, and before I forget: when this is all over, we have to do what Belshikun asks us to do. That's what Barnabas told me to remember. I asked him how we'll know when it's all over, and he said, 'Assuming you're alive, you'll know. And if you're not, it won't matter.'

"Thanks for bringing me back."



After a celebratory lunch, the Company sit in the Greenhouse living room and discuss various threats and objectives. They have a surplus of life-force to power some *wishes* and *miracles*, and there are plenty of options for adjusting the world to their benefit.

The party went up to 19th level after Flicker was resurrected. We use Action Points in lieu of XP, and at leveling boundaries I allow the party to burn excess action points as XP to power spells like *wish* and *miracle*.

They settle on three things; two of them are Ten Old Bones' phylactery, and learning about the mystery man from Aravis's vision. For the third, Ernie decides that he can better serve Charagan and Yondalla by forsaking his martial training and becoming purely a cleric (he has long been feeling that he is serving neither role satisfactorily). After some closeted discussion with Morningstar, Ernie casts his *miracle*. Something changes inside of him, something small but with an anticipatory potential. There is no immediate shift in his abilities, but Ernie is satisfied that *something* has been put in motion, and that now it's in Yondalla's hands.

For Ten Old Bones, they spend both a *wish* and a *miracle*, thinking that it will take such extreme measures to achieve that sort of result. Morningstar and Aravis cast together: "We *wish* and *pray* that any and all phylacteries and soul objects connected with Ten Old Bones be irrevocably destroyed, and his soul be freed to pass on to its final destination, with no possibility of return."

A powerful wave of magic rushes outward from them, and both casters are treated to a brief vision: beneath the collapsed ruins of Nazg Hodeth, one-time lair of Zeg and home of the Necromantic Forge, there is a small leaden box. Inside that box is a collection of bugbear teeth. One of these, indistinguishable from the others, quietly disintegrates.

With that taken care of, Aravis casts again: "I *wish* to know everything possible about the third person in my most recent vision from the Maze." There is a moment when he realizes that his magic will be blocked. Whoever that person is, he has massively powerful abjurations and wards protecting him from divination. *Mind blank* is only a part of it. But Aravis's power is also formidable, and despite all of the target's defenses, his name slips through and comes to Aravis's mind: SEVEN DARK WORDS.

There are groans all around the room. The Mad Sculptor! The architect of Het Branoi, whose grand experiment to rescue the Adversary was doomed to failure, and who afterward wandered the Slices carving little statuettes of Kibi. He seems to have recovered from his madness, returned from wherever he ended up after Het Branoi was destroyed, and now has assumed a leadership position among their enemies. Great.



With Flicker back on his feet, Dranko takes him to check in with the Undermen. They stop by Turlissa's bakery en route, but this time, far from seeming happy to see him, she merely eyes him coolly, and with a trace of curiosity. Dranko figures she's just waiting out the one customer in the shop, but even after the store is vacant save for the three of them, Turlissa betrays no mischievous familiarity. "You're looking surprisingly yourself today," she comments.

"Should I look like someone else?" asks Dranko.

Turlissa glowers. "Is this another silly test?"

Dranko laughs. "Talk to me like I should know stuff but have forgotten it."

Turlissa isn't laughing. "If this is what we're playing at, I can't tell you anything more than last time, whoever you are."

Dranko tries to convince her of his identity by telling her about the secret entrances to the Guild, but that only makes her more standoffish. "Convince Lucas," she says finally, before turning her back on him.

Dranko disguises himself as Turlissa as he and Flicker enter the Manse via the abandoned tenement entrance. When several Undermen look surprised to see 'her' there, he drops the disguise and assumes his own visage. He expects immediate recognition and deference, but instead the closest guild member jumps back and draws a blade. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

Flicker shakes his head and decides to stay out of this, blending into the shadows. Dranko scratches himself. “Why do you want to kill me? I’m Dranko.”

“Who?”

A terrible feeling comes over Dranko. This is, after all, the first time he’s been back here since giving up his fame to a creature from the Far Realms. “Have you ever seen me before?” he asks the man. He hears the sound of more blades being drawn, all around him now.

“Should I have?” says the rogue. “Let me ask you again: how did you get down here?”

“Sorry,” Dranko explains. “I’m a special agent of Lucas’s – I don’t often come here.”

“Then why don’t you walk with us, and we can tell Lucas about it.”

Dranko’s preternatural senses tell him that one of his underlings is about to place a dagger against his neck. He quickly disarms him, tripping the fellow with his whip and sending him sprawling. The other half-dozen Undermen jump him, but it takes him only about fifteen seconds to knock them all unconscious and leave them snoring in a heap. Alas, the sounds of the lopsided battle bring more footsteps toward them from several directions.

He is relieved to hear the sound of Lucas’s voice. “Stop!”

Dranko smiles and waves. “Hi, Lucas!”

“Back off from him,” barks Lucas to the encroaching guild members.

“You know this man?” asks one of them.

“Yes,” says Lucas. “He’s an informant. He’s here to see me.”

“How did he know how to get down here?”

“He’s a *trusted* informant.” He snaps at Dranko, “Now, you, come with me.”

Lucas marches Dranko down the hallway to the Guildmaster’s office. Flicker catches up and joins them. Once they are inside with the door closed, Lucas sits down in a chair, and motions Dranko to sit in the Oracle’s customary seat.

“Of course,” says Lucas, already feeling a headache coming on, “you have a good explanation for this.”

Dranko nods. “Remember the time when I came back and I didn’t know who you were, because everything had changed?”

“Yes. But you know who I am *now*, so that didn’t happen this time.”

“That’s exactly right,” says Dranko. “Except for one thing. Last time I was here, everyone knew I was the head of the guild.”

“Um...” says Lucas. “No. No they didn’t.”

“Let’s assume this,” says Dranko. “I got hit on the head again, and this time I forgot why I’m supposed to keep it a secret when I’m here.”

Lucas manages not to cry, which is something. But he can’t help but blurt, “Can’t you stay out of trouble for *one measly week*?”

“If it makes you feel any better,” says Dranko, “we just saved the world from the Emperor, and destroyed an evil lich in the process. Really.”

“Dranko, I know your extracurricular activities are very important, and that we’re all in your debt once again, but...”

“Oh, and I have tentacles,” says Dranko.

Lucas stares at him. “Invisible tentacles, apparently.”

“No, I can sprout them when I want to.”

“I don’t want to see that,” Lucas says quickly.

“Neither do I, honestly.”

“So,” says Lucas rubbing his temples. “Someone hit you on the head, and you didn’t forget who *I* was, or how to get in here, but you forgot about all the protocols that you set up yourself, about the hierarchy of the Guild leadership?”

“As far as I know, I never set those protocols up. Can you explain them to me?”

Ye gods, he's not paying me enough. “You are the Oracle,” says Lucas. “I am who everyone *thinks* is the Oracle. You are who everyone thinks is an assistant, an agent, who doesn’t spend much time here, and you are someone who does not *ever* use his actual personal appearance.”

“What appearance do I usually use?” asks Dranko.

“Oh, gods, you don’t remember, do you? You said it was some baker you knew once.”

Dranko changes into Turlus. “Yes, that,” says Lucas. “That’s what you look like when in the Manse. For your own safety, you said, the true identity of the Oracle should not be known. Of course now a dozen different members of the guild have seen your actual face...”

“So have me beaten up and thrown out!”

“I just told them you were a trusted informant,” says Lucas. “How is it going to look if *now* I have you beaten and thrown out? It will look like I don’t know what I’m doing! Look, I’ll think of something else. But please, *please* stop losing your memory. For someone who claims to be part of a group that saves the world all the time, you are the most infuriatingly vacuous, bafflingly obtuse...”

“What actually happened,” Dranko interrupts, “was that I traded away my fame. Back then, everyone knew who I was.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” says Lucas harshly.

“No, that’s the way it really was!” Dranko insists.

“That’s never the way it’s been!”

Dranko tries one more time. “I traded my fame to a tentacular entity from the Far Re...”

“STOP!” shouts Lucas. “I don’t want to know any more details about this. I will take it on faith that now you know how everything works, and we’re all fine, and I will smooth things over with the Guild. Now, would you like a report?”

“Yeah,” says Dranko. “That would be great.”

Piratecat: Oh, lordy, it hurts just as much the second time. Whatever that Far Realm entity was, it was monstrously powerful. It reknit reality and caught me completely off-guard in the process. Poor Lucas.

For the record, after the tentacles I retrained my Leadership feat for Reckless Offense, which allows you to take -4 to AC for +2 to hit.

RangerWickett: A beautiful resurrection ceremony. A little odd that they brought a skull up there with them, though. I wonder who would have done that. I’ve read a lot about those famous heroes, and none of them seem so crass. It sounds like something a random vagrant would have done, but I don’t remember seeing anyone else with them.

carborundum: Well played... Fantastic ceremony, nice job guys!

Say, PC, had you forgotten about the whole fame thing by this stage or did you just want to see how it had all justified itself retrospectively in the evil DM-mind?

Piratecat: I hadn’t expected the change to be quite this... comprehensive. It wasn’t just reality that was unraveled, it was history too. And while “my” past instructions to Lucas made complete sense in retrospect, they never even occurred to me at the time.

RedTonic: What’s this “action points instead of XP” system? Is there a published variant on that or is it house-ruled?

Piratecat: Here’s the old first draft I wrote up for Sagiro, with some strikethrough added on things that later got dropped. [See following two pages.] It’s changed since this, too, but most of the fundamental house rules are correct.

RedTonic: Sweet! Thanks.



Angry Jack

Lucas leans back, takes a deep breath, and tries to pretend the encounter is just beginning.

“The Guild is doing well, I’m happy to say. The gem trade is thriving, and we have numerous merchants set up as fronts for our business. The ruler of Seresef is happy with our progress, and Greta tells me we have upwards of 150,000 gold pieces in our coffers at the moment.”

“That’s what I like to see!” Dranko exclaims.

Lucas continues: “The downside is, the gem trade is our sole trans-ocean business venture that has met with any success. The White Sun Cartel has managed to shut down all of our other operations before they could gain any steam.”

Proposed changes to the Experience Point System

- You no longer gain, or need, XP to level. PCs level when the DM decides (which is usually pretty obvious, about once every 10 sessions for us).
- PCs end up with $5 + \frac{1}{2} \text{ lvl}$ Action Points per level. The 5 points are kept track of separately from the others. Action Points can be used as per the rules on the SRD (see below); in general, an Action Point can be spent to add 1-6 points to a d20 roll or break the rules in some small, interesting way. I plan to be flexible with this, and if the PCs have other good ideas on the fly, that's fine. APs usually only apply to one die roll or one action.
- APs other than the 5 automatic ones can be turned in at 1000 xp/AP to form an xp pool. This pool can be used to power xp-draining spells, make magic items, and the like. In order to power such things, one character may donate his xp pool to another character at a conversion rate of 3 per 1. The two (or more) characters must be touching when this occurs.

The supporting character may donate all of the required xp if he has enough APs. Be aware that when making items, the item being made may reflect the supporting character in some way (more relevant for intelligent items, but anything is possible).

Example 1: Dranko and Aravis wish to help Morningstar cast *miracle*. Morningstar spends 3 APs for 3000 xp, and Dranko and Aravis each spend 3 APs to help her; those APs from Dranko and Aravis convert to a pool of 1000 xp each. With 5000 xp to fuel it, the *miracle* goes off.

Example 2: Grey Wolf wishes to cast *limited wish*. He burns 1 AP, giving him 1000 xp in his xp pool. He uses 300 of that xp to cast the spell, and has 700 xp left over for future powers or item creation.

Example 3: Flicker wants to donate the xp required to make *+4 gloves of dexterity*. Kibi will make it, but Flicker donates 2 APs. This creates an xp pool of $(2000/3 = 667 \text{ xp})$. The gloves require 640 xp to construct, so Kibi spends no xp and Flicker has a measly 27 xp left over in his pool. It still costs the normal amount of GP to make.

- At the end of a level, all remaining APs and xp pools disappear and are fully renewed. (I expect that folks will use up their remaining APs in the final battles, or make magic items before they train. That's just fine.)
- PCs are responsible for tracking their own APs and xp pools.
- ~~If a PC dies and is raised, they suffer a negative level from the death until they complete a quest that is mandated by the God whose power raised them. There is no way to circumvent this negative level, other than using magic like *true resurrection* in the first place. The negative level has physical and spiritual signs, and there may be societal implications to having returned from the dead.~~
- NPCs don't generally get any Action Points. Cohorts get 5 action points; enough to save their butt in times of crisis or pull the fat out of the fryer when really needed, not enough to be cooler than the hero. A player decides when a cohort uses their Action Points, not the DM, and the player is responsible for tracking them.

Metagame Analysis: Action Points

Action points give characters the means to affect game play in significant ways, by improving important rolls or unlocking special abilities. Each character has a limited number of action points, and once an action point is spent, it is gone for good. Action points give players some control over poor die rolls. Although this has little effect in an average encounter, it makes it a little more likely that characters will survive extremely challenging encounters and less likely that a single character will fall to what would otherwise be a balanced foe because of bad luck. A reserve of action points lets even careful players expose their characters to more risks, heightening the game's tension and opening the door to even more heroic action. This variant also makes it less likely that an entire adventuring group will fall victim to one powerful effect, such as *circle of death* or *cloudkill*.

Action points also make it more likely that the use of a character's most potent abilities will be successful. For example, although its overall effect on an encounter might be minimal, few things frustrate a paladin more than missing with a smite attack – an event that becomes less likely when using action points.

That said, action points can also lead characters to routinely get in over their heads (relying on action points to save themselves), and for GMs to unconsciously increase the difficulty of encounters (since characters are more likely to succeed against foes of equal power). This is fine as long as the characters have a reserve of such points to spend – but if they run out, encounters that would otherwise be merely challenging can become incredibly deadly. Keep the number of action points available to your characters in mind when designing encounters.

Using Action Points

You can spend 1 action point either to add to a single d20 roll, to take a special action, or to improve the use of a feat.

You can spend 1 action point in a round. If you spend a point to use a special action (see below), you can't spend another one in the same round to improve a die roll, and vice versa.

Add to a Roll

Character Level	Action Point Dice Rolled
15th-20th	3d6
21st-25th	4d6

When you spend 1 action point to improve a d20 roll, you add the result of a 1d6 to your d20 roll (including attack rolls, saves, checks, or any other roll of a d20) to help you meet or exceed the target number. You can declare the use of 1 action point to alter a d20 roll after the roll is made, but only before the GM reveals the result of that roll. You can't use an action point to alter the result of a d20 roll when you are taking 10 or taking 20.

Depending on character level (see table), a character might be able to roll more than one d6 when he spends 1 action point. If so, **apply the highest result and disregard the other rolls**. A 15th-level character, for instance, gets to roll 3d6 and take the best result of the three. So, if he rolled a 1, 2, and 4, he would apply the 4 to his d20 roll.

Special Actions

A character can perform certain tasks by spending an action point.

Activate Class Ability: A character can spend 1 action point to gain another use of a class ability that has a limited number of uses per day. For example, a monk might spend an action point to gain another use of her stunning fist ability, or a paladin might spend an action point to make an additional smite attack.

Boost Defense: A character can spend 1 action point as a free action when fighting defensively. This gives him double the normal benefits for fighting defensively for the entire round (+4 dodge bonus to AC; +6 if he has 5 or more ranks in Tumble).

Emulate Feat: At the beginning of a character's turn, he may spend 1 action point as a free action to gain the benefit of a feat he doesn't have. He must meet the prerequisites of the feat. He gains the benefit until the beginning of his next turn.

Extra Attack: ~~During any round in which a character takes a full attack action, he may spend 1 action point to make an extra attack at his highest base attack bonus. Action points may be used in this way with both melee and ranged attacks.~~

Ignore Attack of Opportunity: A character may spend 1 action point to perform an action that would normally draw an attack of opportunity. He must decide whether or not to use this action point before the AoO is resolved.

Improve Feat: A character can roughly double the effect of any one feat (other than metamagic feats) that they already possess. Each effect requires a free action to activate and lasts 1 round. Ask Kevin for details.

Spell Boost: A character can spend 1 action point as a free action to increase the effective caster level of one of his spells by 2. He must decide whether or not to spend an action point in this manner before casting the spell.

Spell Recall: Spellcasters who prepare their spells in advance can spend 1 action point to recall any spell just cast. The spell can be cast again later with no effect on other prepared spells. This use of an action point is a free action and can only be done in the same round that the spell is cast. Spontaneous spellcasters such as sorcerers and bards can spend 1 action point to cast a spell without using one of their daily spell slots. This use of an action point is a free action and can only be done as the spell is being cast.

Stable: Any time a character is dying, he can spend 1 action point to become stable at his current hit point total.

Dranko frowns, but Lucas just shrugs. "Honestly, as long as the gem trade remains fruitful, I don't much care. None of our other ventures, even had they panned out, would have been a tenth as lucrative. I have the usual misgivings about having all of our eggs in one basket, but they're very nice eggs."

"Sure," says Dranko, nodding in agreement. "And think of it this way. If that basket falls apart, we'll salvage what we can, and then I'll start a war against the White Sun Cartel, to shake things up a little bit."

Lucas opens his mouth, closes it again, thinks for a moment. "I suppose you did just defeat a lich, and prevent the Emperor from arriving here, so perhaps you really can win a war against the powerful mercantile arm of the Jewels of the Plains. You know best." Dranko just smiles.

Lucas clears his throat. "I continue to send out feelers looking for Farazil, but have not learned anything new. Octavius Hightower leads our efforts on that front, and he's very good. I expect we'll have some news there before too long."

"Other than that... there is one small item, that I thought you might take a personal interest in."

Dranko looks properly intrigued. "Tell me!"

"There has been some extracurricular burglary taking place in Tal Hae recently. The perpetrator is someone very accomplished and whom we have been unable to pin down."

"It wasn't Flicker, was it?" asks Dranko with a grin.

Lucas sighs. "The fellow calls himself Angry Jack. We don't know much about him – just rumors, that are placed all around the city. They are largely untraceable, but they all speak to Angry Jack's fame and prowess. We don't know if he works alone, or has accomplices. But it seems that he is doing his best to make a name for himself, and it's reached the point where it's imperative that we bring him in. Does any of this sound familiar to you?"

"Yeah," says Dranko. "It sounds like me!"

"Exactly," says Lucas. "Which is why we thought you might be the right person to deal with him."



Morningstar is deep in thought, a magical quill held uncertainly in her hand, when Dranko bursts through the Greenhouse door. "Would anyone like a fun extracurricular activity?" he asks.

"I'm not sure I want to know," says Ernie, coming into the living room from the kitchen with a platter of bread and cheese. "Do I?"

Morningstar sets down her pen. "I nearly died," she says quietly. "In fact, I'm pretty sure I *did* die for a second, and it would be very bad if I died again without having produced my holy writings for Rhiavonne."

"How about this," Dranko offers. "You help me out with this, and then I'll help you write. It'll only take an afternoon. There's a wannabe 'me' out there we have to deal with. Remember how I did the Oracle, way back when? We've got the same thing here, with someone calling himself Angry Jack and spreading rumors about himself. I'd like to have a little chat with him. I could do it solo, but stuff like this is much more fun with you guys along."

Aravis perks up. "I could scry him." He's quite eager to try out a new spell – *greater scrying* – which takes less time than the plain version, and is harder for subjects to resist. With Dranko's blessing he casts the spell, naming Angry Jack as his target. In his mirror he sees a broad-shouldered man in a run-down looking apartment, dressed like a servant. Though the walls are cracked and the window is filthy, the furnishings are actually quite nice; there are painted shields hanging behind him, and he eats off a metal plate with his feet up on an ottoman. He does not appear to be armed.

"I suppose that's him," says Dranko, upon hearing Aravis's report. "Though he could have some kind of magical defense in place."

For fun, Kibi casts *veil* to make every last one of them look like Sagiro Emberleaf, before Aravis casts *greater teleport* and brings the whole Company right into the room with the man. Grey Wolf laments over the mind-link that it would have been more satisfying to kick open the door.

"Hi, Angry Jack," says Dranko, motioning to the man's plate. "Do you have enough for all of us?"

The man looks entirely unperturbed by this. "Oh," he says, looking a bit bored. "You here to see Angry Jack then, are ya? He's downstairs cooking up some more grub." His accent is decidedly lower-class, and he takes another bite of his fish.

I'm not buying it, says Aravis over the mind-link.

"Stay where you are," Dranko instructs the man.

The man doesn't leave his chair, but he calls down the stairs. "Hey Jack! You got some visitors here! Just blinked in all magic-like!"

"Fine," comes a voice from below. It sounds gruff and annoyed. "Send them down."

Dranko blinks. *Huh*.

"I gotta warn ya," says the man. "Jack don't like surprises."

Dranko peers closely at the man. He's got good instincts for this sort of thing, and he doesn't *think* this man is lying. Maybe this servant and Jack have some shared enchantment that makes one detect as the other to magic spells?

Let's just settle this, shall we? thinks Morningstar. She casts a Silent, Still *detect thoughts*. She picks up the man's surface thoughts quite clearly. *Oh shit. Shit shit shit. Who are these people? All I have to do is get them downstairs, and I can get the hell out of here...*

Morningstar shares this with the others. "Just put down your food for a while," says Dranko. "And we'll have a little talk. Just you, and me, and my associates."

"You all look the same, you know," says the man. He's thinking: *I can get out through the window. All I have to do is distract that one and... that one, and I'll be able to make it. I may cut myself, and it's two stories down, but I know how to fall...*

Grey Wolf sidesteps over to stand directly in front of the window.

"I want you to know," says Dranko, "that we're not here to kill you."

"Are you here to kill Jack, then?" asks the man.

Dranko sighs. "However, if you want us to *continue* not killing you, you'll have to stop pretending that you aren't Jack."

"Oh, I'd love to be him," says the man with true sincerity. "You really think I'm him?"

"We can do this two ways," says Dranko grimly. "You can keep lying, and we can leave you unconscious or dead. Or, you can be honest, and I will make you a more friendly offer. Which would you prefer?"

The man is thinking: *I'm way outnumbered, they're festooned with magic items, and one of them's probably reading my mind...*

Morningstar smiles.

Now he's thinking: *That one*.

Aravis smiles.

They're all reading my mind?

They all smile.

Aw, shit. Out loud, he says, "And what is your offer?"

Dranko stares steadily at him. "What's your name?"

"It's **Jack**," the man finally admits.

Dranko raises an eyebrow. "Your name is actually Jack? And you call yourself Angry Jack? Don't you think that's a little obvious?"

"No one has figured out until now," says Jack. "Who are you? And what is your offer?"

"We are representatives of the actual Thieves' Guild. The Undermen. You're familiar with it?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. And you're thwarting it."

Jack smiles bitterly. "Good."

"Why good?"

"Because you deserve it," says Jack.

"And why do we deserve it?" Dranko asks.

"For not recognizing talent when you saw it."

"Did we turn you down?" Morningstar detects strong resentment from Jack at that comment.

Jack splutters, "You don't even remember... Say, in what capacity do you serve the Undermen?"

While Grey Wolf cracks his knuckles, Dranko says, "If you're smart, you might think I'm an enforcer."

"Yes," Jack admits. "I was turned down by the Undermen."

"Why?"

"I wasn't good enough, apparently. And also... also they said my attitude was not appropriate."

"Huh," says Dranko. "But I can see that you're a man of potential, of vision, and highly motivated."

"That's true," says Jack. "But still not good enough for you lot."

"I'm guessing you're also a lying pain in the butt to work with, and you'll make your friends look bad to make yourself look better."

"Yes, that's more or less a paraphrasing of what they told me ten years ago," says Jack.

Dranko is taken aback. Jack looks like he's in his early twenties. "Ten years ago?"

"I'm more skilled than I was back then... and I was quite good."

"Look," says Dranko. "Do you mind if I say something trite?"

"Say whatever you want."

"You remind me a lot of me."

Jack smiles. "I'm better looking. In fact, you look like a fop. But that's not really you, is it? What do you really look like?"

"You'll never know," says Dranko.

Jack laughs. "Are you afraid? You have me outnumbered, seven to one! I see – hiding behind illusions. Is that how the Guild works?"

Kibi thinks: *He really does remind me of you!*

Dranko ignores him. "Let me get this straight. You were turned down when you were twelve or thirteen years old?"

"So?"

"Back then, somebody different was running the Guild, and they didn't always recognize talent. I would like to foster your skills."

Jack sits up a little straighter. "You're offering me a paid position?"

"I would like to mentor you," Dranko clarifies.

Jack gives a disgusted snort. "And what if I don't wish to be 'mentored'? I think I'm doing quite well on my own, thank you."

Dranko shakes his head. "What you're doing right now is not acceptable to the Guild."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not. But that's okay. Your choices are, you can leave the city, or you can have access to a vast amount of wealth and knowledge, and the opportunity to hone your skills. It's up to you. Or we could kill you."

"I don't doubt that you could," Jack admits. "Though you did need to bring a half-dozen friends. Are they all with the Guild?"

"Nah," says Dranko.

Aravis smiles benignly at Jack: "We're here for the sport."

"And I didn't want to do my homework," Morningstar adds.

"If they really want me back," says Jack, "maybe I should make them work a little harder."

Dranko sighs. "Look. We don't *want* you back. We want you nullified. But frankly, I think you have great potential, and I'd like to see that developed. But we don't *need* you. We just *like* you."

"Well, *he* does," Kibi clarifies.

"You said I could leave the city," says Jack. "If I start operating in another city, you'll leave me alone?"

"Of course," says Dranko.

"When do I have to decide?"

"I'd prefer now."

"Otherwise you might run," says Grey Wolf.

Jack puts up his hands. "How can I run? You all just appeared in my house! You can probably *scry*, am I right?"

"You were thinking about jumping out the window not long ago," Dranko points out.

"Pfffft. Fifteen feet at most. What kind of operator do you think I am?"

"You're a pretty good second-story man," says Dranko.

"No. I am an *exceptional* second-story man, and I have a great many other talents besides. First among them, keeping an intensely unflappable demeanor." Well, *that's* certainly true.

"There *are* people who are better than you," says Dranko.

"Not many, or I would have seen someone like you long before now. But I'm not as good as you, that's clear. So, if I become an accredited member of the Undermen, I could rise to great heights?"

"You could rise to great heights right now," says Aravis.

"He's talking about *reverse gravity*," Dranko adds.

Jack falls silent, and thinks for a moment more. "I accept," he says suddenly. "What are the conditions?"

"You need to stop operating independently."

"Accepted."

"And I think your talents will be wasted on simple burglary. We may use you for more important jobs. What drives you? Money? Fame? Excitement?"

"Yes, though more the money and fame than excitement. And I do enjoy physical challenges."

"How good are you?"

"I'm extraordinarily good."

"How do you feel about travel?"

"I'd prefer to stay in Tal Hae," says Jack. "I think you'll find my local knowledge of great value, even to an organization like yours. In fact, I will bet you ten gold pieces that I know at least five things that no one else in your guild knows about Tal Hae."

Dranko takes a step back. "Not necessary. We'll have someone contact you."

"How do I know that the next visitor I get won't be an assassin?" asks Jack.

"Because if we wanted to, we could turn you to dust in less than five seconds."

"Really?"

Aravis casts *disintegrate* and vaporizes a chair. For the first time, Angry Jack's demeanor becomes somewhat flappable. While his mouth hangs open, Dranko slaps down a handful of coins.

Jack regains his composure. "For me?"

"Consider it a signing bonus."

"Thank you," says Jack. "Oh, and I didn't catch your name."

"I didn't give it. And I'm not going to. But we'll meet again."

"Do you need to be shown the way out, or will you disappear?"

In answer, Aravis *teleports* the party away. Back in the Greenhouse, Dranko smiles broadly. "I love you guys!"



In the Manse, later that day, Dranko returns, this time looking like Turlus the baker. No one glances at him or stops him as he goes to report to Lucas. He shares the details of his encounter with Angry Jack.

When Dranko is finished, Lucas just puts his head in his hands. "Gods, just what I need. Another one of you."

RedTonic: That was great – at least what's-his-name gets to help Aravis and the others kick that burglar into line.

Everett: Who, the half-orc? Was he an adventurer at some time?

thegreyman: I think he's someone's cohort. Kibi's maybe?

RedTonic: Is he a half-orc? I just thought he had dental problems. Anyway it's nice to see the heroes sharing the limelight like that!

steeldragons: Wait... who? That Lucas fellow is interesting... (Sorry, PC...)

Everett: Right, the leader of the Undermen. The guy with dental problems does his laundry, I think.

weiknarf: Wait, are you guys talking about Snokas?

Tamlyn: That's what I was thinking. Now he's someone worth remembering.

Piratecat: You know what this is? This is a thread full of people who forget I wield a banhammer! (Or don't care. Almost certainly don't care. *sob*)

This was a wonderful side adventure – all roleplaying, completely fun, and emotionally rewarding as it called back to Dranko's origins. It let us preen a little before we go get our asses kicked. This sort of thing puts adventuring in perspective.

carborundum: You know what this is? This is a thread full of people *living* you guys' campaign... Now that's a compliment!



Piratecat: We played last night; Sagiro reports that there's only a small chance that he'll be able to do an update before he heads out on his family vacation. That pushes the next update out to a month from now or so unless we get lucky.

Last night was game #260. We have about 9 more games left before the end of the campaign. I have trouble believing this.

In other news, I am pleased to report that a *Daern's instant fortress* proves efficacious in oh so many unusual circumstances, and that last night we kicked it old school by getting swallowed by horrible gargantuan creatures. Hilarity – and an excessive amount of digestive acid – ensued.

Sagiro: Well, here's a small update. It turns out that made the chance a bit better...

Shipsorrow Pinnacle

It is mid-evening, and over dinner at the Greenhouse the Company discuss what should be next on their agenda. Their thoughts turn to the three red-armored villains still at large: Tarsos, Meledien and Octesian. The last of these, according to one of Aravis's Maze-dreams, is marauding through the Dreaming looking for Morningstar, while the other two are in the company of the Black Circle adept Seven Dark Words. Aravis fumes at not knowing what that evil trio is up to, but it's unlikely that they'll be able to find out anything more via divinations.

Dranko suggests that the party search for Cencerra and her adventuring group, long missing after they had set off to explore beyond a Gartine Arch on the Dwarven island of Karth. That group, once the Spire's elite strike force, had served the cause well. They had cleared out one of the Black Circle bestiaries, and slain all of Lapis's original party, and prevented a second blood gargoyle from being released into the world by Black Circle agents. But no one has heard from them for well over a year, and attempts to communicate with them or divine their whereabouts have been uniformly unsuccessful.

Morningstar brings up the possibility of rescuing Tor from the clutches of the Delfirians, but there's the nagging problem that Tor doesn't *want* to be rescued. When that generates little enthusiasm, Morningstar also considers that they could venture into the Greatwood to seek Darkeye and the hidden fortress of the Sharshun. "I'm worried that if we leave her for too long, it's going to come back and haunt us," she says. Kibi, meanwhile, continues to beat the drum for liberating the enslaved dwarves in Kivia.

After some back-and-forth on these possibilities, the party decide that they will head to Karth, to see if they can learn the fates of Cencerra and co. From discussions with Ozilinsh, they know that *scry* spells and their ilk have failed, and that *true resurrection* had no effect (there was not even an inkling that Cencerra's soul was in an afterlife, declining to return, which makes the Spire hopeful that she is still alive). On the other hand, *commune* spells have resulted in answers akin to what was gleaned about the

Company during their seven weeks of presumed non-existence, leading the Company to wonder if the Gartine Arch leads to a parallel world, or takes people back in time. But the first thing to do is to *find* the Arch, before worrying about where it leads.

Before going to sleep, Kibi decides to cast *vision*, hoping to learn something more about his dream (now almost a year old) of the “thorn in the side of Abernia.” His spell succeeds after a fashion, and he is given a feeling that lasts less than a second: the emanating hot evil of the Adversary’s blood. Even that much leaves him staggered, his head aching.

After a calming mug of beer, he shakes his head. “I thought that the big lake of black goo was the thorn. Too bad there’s nothing we can do about it.” Which is certainly true, given that even with protective spells in place, the Company were unable to get within *miles* of the place.



The next morning they make arrangements to sail to Karth, opting to eschew the usual *wind walk*. Kibi feels this is a mixed blessing at best; he *hates* airy travel, but a shipboard voyage is hardly preferable. The party find that their old hired navigator, Sutton, is already out on the water and won’t return for over a week. (It seems he had gotten tired of waiting on extended retainer, and besides, the Company hasn’t actually paid him in quite a while.) But the party do find that Mad Captain Lyle, the risk-loving navigator they once hired years earlier, is available and looking for work. He’s been having some difficulty finding employment after what happened to his last ship. They find him in the back of a dockside tavern, getting an early start on a day’s drinking. He perks up immediately at the offer of employment.

“And where be we goin’?” he asks eagerly.

“Karth,” says Aravis. “And we’d like to go today. Immediately, would be best.”

“Karth,” repeats Lyle. He gets a twinkle in his eye. “Well, come this way. I’ll take you to my ship, the *Spotted Flotsam*.”

He leads them to the end of a battered pier, and the *Flotsam* is in sore shape indeed: peeling paint, broken railings, rusted anchor chain. “It’s a little run down, but it was all I could afford,” says Lyle.

But while the party still wish to sail, they see no need to go in a leaky bucket, and so they pop open *Burning Sail*. Lyle stands agog as the boat unfolds. “That’s the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen!” he exclaims.

“Wait until you see the invisible sailors,” says Dranko.

“Are you tellin’ me I don’t need to bring my own crew?” asks Lyle.

“Well, if you want, you can...”

“No, no!” says Lyle. “You don’t understand. There’s more money in me pocket if I leave ‘em behind! Invisible crew it is! All aboard!”

The party board the ship, and Captain Lyle takes a minute to get used to a crew of *unseen servants* that obey his commands with ready precision. As he steers *Burning Sail* out of the harbor, the Captain tells the Company, “We can get there faster if we go past Shipsorrow Pinnacle. I’ve always wanted to run that one!”

His suggestion is met with a nervous silence that lingers awkwardly for a few seconds, until Dranko grins and says, “Shipsorrow Pinnacle it is!”



Karth consists of one main wedge-shaped island, and a half-dozen smaller islands to the south and south-east. The large island is about 150 miles north-to-south, and half that east-to-west. Cencerra and her group had planned to start their search at the only coastal town on the large island’s eastern shore, a place called Elkin’s Bay. As Captain Lyle sails northward, he explains that the fastest route into Elkin’s Bay will be to come up from the south, though formations of rocky shoals and treacherous sandbars mean that a ship must run past Shipsorrow Pinnacle.

The Pinnacle is a slender spike of rock that extends up some sixty feet out of the water. The problem, explains Lyle, is that there’s barely room for a ship to squeeze between the Pinnacle and the cliff wall that forms the south-eastern shore of the island itself. They could try a safer route, going northward dozens of miles before a slow and still-perilous return south, but a successful “shoot of the Pinnacle” will shave a day and a half from their sailing time. Captain Lyle clearly can’t wait to try it.

Kibi has been down in the small hold, trying not to be sick, but comes up in time to hear about the plan to shoot the Pinnacle. Showing just how little he likes the plan, he asks plaintively, “Can’t we fold up the ship and just *wind walk* when we get to that point?”

Of course, as they approach the shores of Karth, a storm blows in, tossing *Burning Sail* about and sending Kibi and Ernie scurrying for the hold. The sun is setting behind the island, but Captain Lyle thinks there's enough daylight left to brave the narrows. Morningstar offers to use magic to quell the winds.

"No!" roars Lyle. "I want to take the Pinnacle on my own. How am I going to boast of my skills, if I had a priestess messing around with the wind?"

"How are you going to brag if you don't get back to port?" asks Grey Wolf.

"I'll make it," says Lyle. "I almost always do!"

He steers the ship toward the island; Shipsorrow Pinnacle is not yet in sight, as rain lashes the deck and wind ripples the sails. Up and down the ship pitches, as the cliff wall of Karth looms ever nearer.

"This is fantastic!" yells Captain Lyle from the helm. "I know we'll make it. I'll be a legend!"

Dranko casts *augury*, asking Delioch for a summary of their prospects should they continue on this course. The answers to such queries are often vague, but not this time:

WOE.

"God says woe!" shouts Dranko.

Captain Lyle is now laughing maniacally as he steers the ship, his sparse hair whipping in the wind. "Batten down the hatches!" he cries to his *unseen servants*. "The rest of you, either get down below, or grab hold a' something'!"

The ship plunges down alarmingly, and then up again at a steep pitch. Thunder rumbles and wild spray stings their faces. A huge wave sloshes across the deck.

"We've got to do something!" Morningstar yells over the din.

"We should let him try it," says Dranko. "We can always bail him out."

"You're insane," Morningstar answers, "and you haven't even invoked your tentacles!"

Through the failing light and shroud of rainfall, the rock tower of Shipsorrow Pinnacle comes into view, a shadow giant so close to the cliff wall that it seems impossible for a ship to fit between, even in calm weather. In this gale, it's clearly suicide. Everyone is grabbing onto ropes and trying not to be flung overboard, and a particularly severe wave sends the ship careening to the point where the prow is pointing straight to the sky, before it crashes back to the sea. Over the mind-link, Morningstar reminds everyone that they have *refuge* tokens which will take them safely back to the Greenhouse. Grey Wolf grips the hilt of *Bostock* with one hand, expecting that any minute now, not needing to breathe will come in right handy.

Closer, closer. It's obvious to everyone except Captain Lyle that shooting the Pinnacle in this storm is madness, but that's probably why he's known as "Mad Captain Lyle." Aravis, though, has a plan that will get them safely to shore without ruining Lyle's aspirations. He shares it with the others, and gets unanimous approval, given the certain alternative. *Kibi, Ernie*, he thinks. *You'd best get up on deck right away.*

Why? asks Ernie.

Because in a minute, the hold is going to vanish.

"Here I come!" roars Captain Lyle into the howling gale.

Grab ropes! thinks Aravis.

When everyone is on deck and secure, Dranko activates the *folding boat*, changing it into the smaller longboat version. As it starts to fold and shrink, the wheel starts to sink into the floor of the bridge deck. Lyle lets go, utterly aghast. "Oh no!" he cries. "What's happened to the boat?"

Then, just as suddenly, the world blinks, and Shipsorrow Pinnacle is somehow behind him. Aravis has *dimension door*-ed the boat and everyone on it, a trick that would only work with the smaller form of the ship. As soon as they've cleared the Pinnacle, Dranko orders the boat to expand again. The wheel rises again beneath Lyle's hands.

"No wonder!" shouts the Captain. "The narrows be enchanted! Some magic takes away your wheel, and sinks your boat while you cannot steer. But I got us through! We lived to tell about it! We did! They'll be tellin' stories about Mad Captain Lyle and his invisible sailors for a hundred years! Now, onward to shore!"

RedTonic: Wunderbar!

Neurotic: Bwahaha! What an idiot captain...

Piratcat: This game was hilarious, and my goodness does Sagiro do a fantastic Mad Captain Lyle. Rolling eyes, tilted head, pirate accent, everything you could want. I am not exaggerating when I say that we chose this method *solely* because we were having so much fun roleplaying with the NPC. That said, you can bet Dranko was wearing his *ring of water elemental command*. You know, just in case. Ahem.

Joshua Randall: For future reference, you get less seasick above decks (and facing the bow) than below. Of course, that does increase your risk of being flung overboard. Hmm. Maybe seasick is better.

Sagiro: Exactly. Ernie and Kibi weren't worried so much about sickness. Ernie wears full plate and Kibi, being a dwarf, is much less buoyant than a human. Both would sink like rocks if they went over the side.

Mathew Freeman: ["You're insane," Morningstar answers, "and you haven't even invoked your tentacles!"] That's the quote of the session, right there!

Tamlyn: I've been re-reading StevenAC's awesome PDF compilation of the Story Hour (thanks again, BTW) and was impressed (again) by Sagiro's incredible attention to detail. Specifically, when the party had the Null Shadow cauldron stolen by "Praska" and were tracking her down. They find her at the underground location where the Black Circle, presumably led by Mokad, had been active years before but hadn't been involved in the story for probably 10+ years in real life. But makes total sense as a hiding place in-game. Add to that, the party discover that "Praska" was reviewing Black Circle plans to free the emperor and "she" still feels that Mokad's plan was the best idea out there. This was something I missed the first time around, but I think is completely awesome knowing what I do now.

I just wanted to pile further kudos on Sagiro for his attention to detail. The Story Hour is just as entertaining, if not more so, the 2nd, 3rd, or 4th (or more) time through. Thank you very much for sharing this with us!

Sius: Good insight. I need to go back through the archives!

SolitonMan: Yep, gotta agree. I'm on my 3rd reading of the thousand-page (give or take) PDF of this story hour, and it's totally great! However...

I realize it was like nine years ago, but I just finished re-reading the session in which the second Parthol Runecarver *simulacrum* was fought by the PCs in the street outside the Greenhouse. The thing that's bugging me is that I couldn't understand why the PCs couldn't see the sim with *see invisibility*. Did I miss something? Was he using something other than *improved invisibility*?

Anyway, just wanted to ask while it was fresh on my mind. Back to reading!

Sius: I assumed, myself, that he stayed out of range. Off the top of my head (and I remember looking it up, but only just) *see invisibility* has a range of 60 feet. With flight going, Parthol could have easily evaded the Company while casing them or strafing them.

I actually believe there is a point where Morningstar flies around, trying to catch P. in her *see invisibility* radius?

Piratcat: It was a long time ago! Without going back to check, I'd guess one of three things: (a) Parthol's *simulacrum* was out of range; (b) rules gaffe; (c) we didn't think to use the spell (less likely, since I think Dranko had it in his eye patch by then). I'll check when I have a chance.

SolitonMan: Thanks, Piratcat. In the grand scheme of things it doesn't *really* matter, it was just the timing of my re-reading of the old material along with this thread that prompted me to write. FWIW, the story text does explicitly mention that Grey Wolf cast *see invisibility* and went to the various windows of the Greenhouse trying to spot the *simulacrum*.

Seule: It could have been *superior invisibility*, yes?

SolitonMan: Hey Penn, doubtful since the date of the run was 2002, and to the best of my knowledge *superior invisibility* was a 3.5 spell. But then, my knowledge is extremely limited.

blargney the second: *Nondetection* or (depending on your table's interpretation) *mind blank* could block *see invisible*, especially if the divination has a low caster level.

Sius: *Nondetection*? I'm using that at my next opportunity...



A few things. First, in real life, the game is *almost* over. I'd say between three and five sessions remain, depending on how things go, and then the story will be complete.

Second, just as an FYI, the Story Hour now lags behind the game by 33 sessions, or just about two years of real time. So there's plenty more story from a reader's point of view.

Third, the rate of updates is likely to stay slow for the next couple of months, at least. I have a number of other projects, including writing projects, that ought to take precedence over this one. I'll keep chipping away slowly, and once the game actually ends, I can cannibalize some of the time spent on game-prep for Story Hour writing instead.

Finally, I still promise that I won't stop writing until the entire story is told. (StevenAC, there's no way I could leave it unfinished after all of your work on the .pdf!) Now, there may be some plot threads that don't get tied up nicely, but many (most?) will, to greater or lesser degrees, and I hope you (and my players!) find it all satisfactory.

Oh, and while I'm here, have an update...

Downward Spiral

Though the storm has eased somewhat, it is still lashing the side of the boat with wind-driven needles of rain as Lyle steers *Burning Sail* into the small harbor of Elkin's Bay. The place is hardly a bustling center of trade; the village is almost a token presence, its buildings clustered on a hill overlooking the bay. Only two small boats are parked alongside the dingy and peeling pier. A few dwarves, hunched and hooded in the rain, mill about on shore. One is tugging a large net full of fish, but he stops and regards the Company's boat with suspicion once the *unseen servants* start to tie it down.

"How long do ya' think you'll be stayin' here?" asks Mad Captain Lyle.

Dranko wipes some water from his eyes. "We don't know. If we get sucked into another plane of existence, it could be a while. If not, maybe a week or two. Wanna go home? We can do that for you, if you want."

"In your magic boat?" asks Lyle.

"Well, with magic," says Dranko. "Different magic."

They explain about teleporting, and once Lyle is convinced it's safe, he assents. "The sooner you send me back, the sooner I can start braggin' about our voyage!"

In less than a minute, Lyle has been whisked back to Tal Hae. Dranko folds up the boat, which causes the nearby dwarf to drop his net and stare in surprise. "We didn't want to take up valuable space in the harbor," Dranko explains. "Say, can I buy one of your mackerel?"

The dwarf hardly knows what to say. "I... you... I mean, sure, I guess. Which one?"

"That one. And that one, too." Dranko gives the dwarf two silver pieces for two of the fish.

"If you don't mind my saying," says the dwarf, "you're an odd-looking lot. We don't see many visitors 'round here."

"I can see why," says Kibi. "It's hard sailing to get to this place."

The dwarf nods. "You must be in a great hurry, to have tried the approach in a storm!"

"Yeah," says Ernie, looking nervously at the water.

"Ernie, what's the matter?" Dranko asks.

"I can't swim," Ernie admits.

"You can't?"

"I don't need to swim. I have *word of recall*."

"So, you fall in a pond, and teleport back to your temple?"

"Yondalla wants me dry."

They make small talk with the dwarf, whose name is **Dellin**, as they all make their way up the hill to the town. They take shelter from the rain in a small tavern called The Sleeping Fish; the five dwarves already waiting out the storm there stop in mid-conversation and stare unabashedly as the Company walk in. Their suspicions are mollified when Kibi offers to pay for all of their drinks.

The party sit at a large table with Dellin, and while Aravis starts drawing a picture of Cencerra, Dranko keeps chatting up their new friend. When Aravis has finished, Dranko takes the drawing and shows it to the dwarf. "This woman came by about a year and a half ago. Have you seen her, or know where she is? She was here with a bunch of other people, who were also not dwarves, and they never came home. We think something might have happened to her."

Dellin looks thoughtful. "She wasn't a peasant, was she?"

"Why?" Dranko is immediately focused. "What happened to the peasant?"

"And how many were there?" asks Grey Wolf.

"Two," says Dellin. "I've been here about a year, and those were the only strangers I've seen come through this way. They sailed here like you, though not in a magical boat."

"There would have been four of them," says Morningstar.

Dellin shakes his head at the picture of Cencerra. "Nah, just the two. They were looking for some gateway, and we figured it was at the bottom of the Downward Spiral. Came about a year ago, not long after I arrived."

Waylander the Slayer: Does this mean that you are done GMing in the short term once this campaign is done?

Sagiro: In the short term, yes.

Somehow I'll have to fill my time with work projects [see www.cardhunter.com], board games, finishing up this Story Hour, reading books, composing music, participating in Piratecat's campaign, and taking care of the house and kids. Something tells me I won't be bored...

Longer term, I'll probably start up a 4E campaign eventually, but I'd guess that's one to two years away.

wedgeski: That's one hell of a line-up you've got on Card Hunter. I look forward to trying it out.

Siusi: Sagiro, your game is awe-inspiring, and also regular inspiring. I still mull over tidbits and snippets of your game when thinking through my own; I still think of Dranko, Ernie and Morningstar when I consider playing against type/playing for fun, rather than profit. You and PC have taught me a lot, through osmosis. Thanks for that.

Piratecat: Souks, that's incredibly flattering. Thank you from all of us.

Next to last game is tomorrow. It all comes down to this.

“What?” Grey Wolf exclaims.

“Never been down there myself, of course,” continues Dellin. “But the Downward Spiral is like a folded over fissure. Tonnig knows the history better than I do. Like I said, I haven’t been in Elkin’s Bay very long. Moved here from Wissing. But the locals here say that there’s a holy place, or something, down at the bottom of the Downward Spiral. We’re not supposed to go trespassing, so I don’t.”

“Has anyone else gone to visit it recently?”

“Yeah,” says another dwarf, who has drifted over to listen in on the odd conversation. “The smith. Heckern. He didn’t come back, though. Neither did the two peasants, come to think of it.”

Dellin introduces the new dwarf as **Chennik**, a carpenter. “True,” Dellin says, nodding. “Though it’s possible they all came back up, and left some other way, not coming through Elkin’s Bay.”

“Were the peasants wearing red armor?” Dranko asks.

“No,” says Dellin, looking a bit annoyed. “They were… peasants. A man and a woman. If they had been wearing armor, I would have called them something else. I remember one was tall and one was short. Don’t remember which was which, though. Humans all look the same to me.”

“Those two ragamuffins?” says Chennik. “Friends of yours? Surprised they had any friends. Rude, they were.”

“No, those weren’t our friends,” says Dranko. “You say they came by a year ago? Our friends would have come by at least a year earlier.”

Chennik looks at Aravis’s sketch of Cencerra. “Hey, she looks familiar. And yeah, there was a group of folk came to Elkin’s Bay around that time. Dellin, you weren’t here yet.” He motions to a dwarven woman behind the bar. “Hey **Carba**, come over here!”

The woman stands up and stomps over; Chennik shows her Aravis’s sketch. “Remember her?”

“Yeah, of course,” says Carba. “I think her name was Sarah. Didn’t stay long.”

“How many were there?” asks Ernie.

“Three or four, maybe? They barely stopped in to say hello. Same as the peasants later on. They all wanted to know about the gate at the bottom of the Downward Spiral. Now, I don’t know about any gate, but I told ‘em all the same thing. Don’t go. But it’s not my job to stop ‘em. I just serve ‘em drinks.”

“You said the place was holy,” says Kibi. “To Moradin?”

“I dunno,” says Dellin. “No one talks about it much. I think it’s bad luck or something.”

Chennik nods and shrugs. “That’s the story. They say that some centuries ago, divine beings created a shrine down there, and since then, it’s been generally understood to leave the place alone.”

Morningstar raises an eyebrow. “Do you know *which* divine beings?”

“Dunno,” says Carba. “But not dwarvish.”

So, it looks like there have been three outings to this “Downward Spiral” in the last couple of years – first Cencerra and co., then the two peasants, and then the local smith Heckern. None returned. An investigation is most certainly in order!



Dranko gets to chatting with Chennik for a few minutes. “What can you tell me about Karthian Oil?” he asks innocently.

Chennik laughs. “We use it for mining operations. Completely legitimate. If sometimes a barrel of it gets smuggled to the mainland and used for nefarious purpose, that’s hardly my business.”

Dranko smiles back. “The first time I heard of Karth, is when someone tried to explode me with a barrel of your oil.”

“Is that what happened to your face? Heh, heh! No, just kidding. Though you’ll find that we’re friendlier to strangers here on the coast. They’re less trusting of outsiders as you go inland.”

“Why is that?” asks Dranko.

"History! You do know that in the old days, we were slaughtered and enslaved by mainlanders, right? Ever since then, we've tried to limit our interactions with the rest of Charagan. And we kind of like it that way. But if you want to visit the big city, Yen Hae is only about a hundred miles from here."

Chennik takes a long pull at his tankard. "Let me give you some advice. You seem like nice people. Don't go down there, to the Spiral. The peasants didn't come back. And your friend Sarah didn't come back. Heck, even Heckern didn't come back, and Moradin knows what possessed *him* to go down there. Hell, I've seen him warn young kids away from the place. But then one day, he just up and left for it himself."

"Are there any belongings of his still around?" Dranko asks.

"Sure, in his smithy. We've made sure the place stays untouched, in case he comes back. Good dwarf, he was. But that was about half a year ago."



After a few more minutes of finishing up drinks and small talk, the Company head out into the rainy night to search Heckern's smithy for clues. Dellin goes with them, to explain to any passersby why mainland strangers are nosing about the place. The dwarf says that no new smith has taken over Heckern's work in the past six months; metal goods are purchased from inland peddlers. "Pity Heckern never took any apprentices," Dellin sighs.

Morningstar goes in first; the door creaks conspicuously as she steps inside and immediately she blankets the place with *thought captures*. Mostly she picks up ordinary smithing-type thoughts, and the only odd thought is one she picks up in the loft where Heckern slept. The thought is of the smith thinking, with no preamble: *Well, time to go*. She's reminded a bit of the mind-controlled commoners of Seablade Point, some years back.

The rest of the party come in afterward to poke around. Flicker and Dranko, the most observant and thorough at this sort of work, conclude that Heckern did pack before he left, in what looks like a mild hurry. There's a discoloration on the wall where a sword must have been hanging, but there's no sign of the sword. And to Dranko's disappointment, there's no paperwork or other evidence of *why* the smith decided to leave.

Aravis decides to bring out bigger, magical guns. He casts *vision*, naming "Heckern the smith" as his subject. His sight clouds, and a simple scene enters his mind.

Heckern is there, in his smithy, pounding on a glowing horseshoe. He's thickly built, even for a dwarf, and a long braided beard is tucked into his belt. Aravis hears the distinctive sound of the door creaking open, though Heckern doesn't seem to notice it as he hammers away.

Then, suddenly, he stops, for several seconds, staring into space, hammer limp in his hand. Then, as if nothing odd has occurred, he continues with his work, regaining his exact rhythm on the anvil.

The *vision* fades, and Aravis recounts it for the others. There's a collective groan; the entire party reach the same conclusion within seconds. "Farazil," says Dranko.

"Oh, Goddess," says Ernie, cringing. "Not again..."

But even if they're right, and King Farazil possessed Heckern and marched his body to the Downward Spiral, there's little they can do about it tonight. They open up the Lucent Tower on a bare patch of grass nearby and pile inside for the night. But before anyone goes to sleep, Morningstar decides to do a bit of scouting in *Ava Dormo*. She drops into a trance and sends her dream-self racing inland, ten miles in as many minutes, to the strange fissure that is the Downward Spiral.

It's like nothing else she has seen, geologically speaking. It's like a hole, or a very wide pit, with a path that snakes down into it. The rock of the walls juts out and folds over upon itself in many places, so that if Morningstar were solid, she'd be winding her slow way down through a tight vertical labyrinth, one that is often walkable but sometimes not.

At the bottom, some 300 feet below ground level, the Spiral ends in a large open cave. Even were it noontime, this place would be completely dark. In the center of the cave is a free-standing gartine arch. There are words carved into the natural stone above the center of the arch, but these are in a language foreign to Morningstar. She doesn't even recognize the characters.

But that's no real impediment to translation; with the ability to freely move her consciousness back and forth between *Ava Dormo* and the waking world, she draws the carved glyphs for Grey Wolf, one character at a time. Grey Wolf just happens to have cast *permanent comprehend languages* on himself, and so reads the sign aloud to the others.

ONCE ETERNAL, SLEEPING FAST.
REST FOR THOSE WHOSE DIE IS CAST.
MORTALS SHOULD NOT DARE TO TREAD,
WHERE SLEEPING LIE THE MIGHTY DEAD.

Aravis makes the connection immediately. "Naslund," he says. For the benefit of the others, he retells one of his visions from the Crosser's Maze from two months earlier.

Your dream is a vision, clear and cold. You have discovered a vast and lifeless city, and there are tombs here, underground crypts not meant for mortal remains. Through the Maze you have arrived, but you are not meant to be here. Gods fought, and gods died, and here are gods interred.

"They called it Naslund, the Great Necropolis," says the voice of King Vhadish XXIII, who stands nearby. "But who will tend it, with its Caretakers gone?"

Then he adds: "Hoo boy. I guess we're going in."

Dranko gulps. "I feel so out of my depth. I want thugs. I feel good about smacking down thugs, but this..."

There's a clear feeling of trepidation among the Company, but also one of inescapable destiny. Not a one of them doubts that they will soon be paying a visit to the forbidden Necropolis of the Gods.

carborundum: Hoo boy! That was a sweet piece of buildup, Sagiro! I'm so torn between saying "Take your time, it's your story, your free time..." and yelling "More!"

Fantastic. Thank you!

scrubkai: Just wondering, Sagiro: how do you play out your characters figuring out the clues you leave them? For example, that the arch leads to Naslund. Do you just put out the clue and leave it to the players to figure out (if so they must have a huge amount of info written down talking about this game) or do you give them some sort of clues/roll to lead them in the right direction to make the connection?

I'm asking because in my game I've dropped lots of hints, but I'm clearly not being obvious enough because the players normally just go hmm that's odd and give up before they make the connection...

Anyway as always I'm amazed at the story you all are telling, and can't wait to read the next chapter...

Sagiro: In the case of the inscription above the arch, that's all I gave them. My players figured it out in less than five seconds, but they've been wondering about the Necropolis off and on since Aravis first had his vision about it.

Generally, I don't need to give them extra nudges about plot clues, though occasionally, especially when we're talking about something that happened years and years ago in real time, I'll remind them about something that would certainly occur to the characters, but which may have slipped out of the players' heads.

I don't have to do that very often, because my players are extremely sharp. Also, every once in a while they spend an entire evening just reviewing all the extant plot threads and trying to piece things together. Also, they keep a written "to do" list of every major goal they hope to achieve (mostly, this is a list of bad guys they want to kill). So, despite the complexity of the plot and the long times involved, my players manage to keep most of it in their heads pretty well.

DarkMage: And Now for Something Completely Different... Who is Dranko? You know, I've been reading StevenAC's PDF files of this story hour and reached where the party are in the Vree Monastery. That's when I read this comment posted by PC:

Piratecat: 'Cause Kibi is prejudiced against half-orcs. *sniff* Poor Dranko – no parents, no one loves him, mocked at every turn, abused by dwarves, made to work his poor fingers to the bone...

Then add all the grief Dranko got when he gave surrendered his fame to his tentacle friend...

DRANKO IS RODNEY DANGERFIELD!!! Who knew...



[posted to EN World forum, 6 September 2011]

Holy \$#@!.
It's over.

The Warlock: Congratulations!

kuragara: It was a most excellent ending... Thank you, Sagiro.

jonesy: "What do you mean, I can't disbelieve the illusion?"

LightPhoenix: Congrats!

MorningstarofEll: Wow... Yeah, I don't believe it is over. A satisfying and bittersweet last run!

carborundum: Congratulations you guys! I'm glad it was a satisfying ending and look forward to finding out what the ending was.

StevenAC: I'm afraid my brain is having trouble processing this concept right now. Fortunately, I'm guessing I've got about another two years or so to come to terms with it...

RedTonic: Wow, that's amazing. Great job, guys!

Sagiro: It still has not fully hit home yet, that the game is done. I'd estimate that I've spent about 1500 hours of my life creating and executing the Charagan campaign, not including time spent writing up the Story Hour. It has been one of the most rewarding and enjoyable experiences of my life, and I'm happy to have the chance to share it with a few dozen EN Worlders.

I've probably said this before, but it's been hugely valuable to have written these up, and I'm not sure I'd have had the energy to do so without the feedback from you readers. So, to anyone seeing these photons: you've personally made a positive impact on the game. Thanks!

Tamlyn: I think you're underestimating the number of your readers just a tad.

In all seriousness, to Sagiro and everyone involved in this campaign, this story is amazing. The DM and players have worked together to create a truly amazing experience. I know it takes a ton of work to convert the game notes and tapes into Story Hour form and I truly appreciate it. We are humbled, flattered, and honored that you choose to share this with us. Thank you very much!

Innocent Bystander: I have to say, I'm constantly amazed at how seemingly small hints/clues and statements made in the past, and sometimes distant past, come to be so important later on in the campaign.

Absolutely incredible work, Sagiro.

Piratecat: Agreed. With the campaign having ended, I'm salving my weird faux-homesickness for Charagan by rereading the Story Hour via PDF. I'm finding stuff in session 9, 24, and even earlier that turned out to have a major impact later in the game. Kind of astounding to me.

It's also really fun to see where and how we ended up with major magic items. Dranko's bag of endless rope, which saved his life against an epic monster in session 260 or so, was found somewhere around session 10. Nifty.

Sagiro: Thanks! It turned out to be one of the advantages of compulsive over-preparation and note-taking.

A peek behind the curtain: Now, understand... on day 1, I did not decide that Aravis had been made a God of Cats in order to get into Naslund. After Aravis joined the party, I decided that it would be fun to make him a sort of cat deity, with the idea that at some point I'd find a reason to make that relevant to the larger story. Some time after that I decided he'd have to do something to save the rest of the cat demigods, but I wanted his divinity to be more central to the main story, so I kept my eyes open for other plots I could hook into. Then, when I thought up Naslund and its place in the story, I thought: "Aha! That's a perfect place for Aravis's divinity to matter!"

RedTonic: Awesome job! Thank you for sharing with us.



Nexus of Last Roads

Morningstar delivers a *sending* to Yale, so the Spire will know where they've gone:

Investigating where Cencerra went. Think we've found Naslund, burial place of the Gods. It's missing caretakers now that Drosh gone. Yikes. Guess we're going in?

Yale's reply:

Sounds like business as usual. Good luck!

Morningstar throws up her hands. "Did she not hear me say 'burial place of the Gods'?"

Flicker laughs. "Yeah, but put it in context. We've been inside a city in a bottle. We've travelled through time. We've defeated armies of the undead. Are you surprised she's jaded?"

Morningstar also *sends* to Rhiavonne, whose reply is more sensible:

Resting place of what Gods? Take the usual care. Will have Chroniclers investigate Naslund, if you want.

And finally she issues a third *sending* to Lucas, on Dranko's behalf. Lucas's answer:

Look, whatever happens, don't let them erase your memories. I don't want to have to explain everything to you again.



Morningstar starts the following morning with a quick *commune* in the Lucent Tower. She casts her spell and feels the holy presence of Ell around her. She asks her questions:

"Is Naslund through that archway?"

I CANNOT SEE.

"Did something control the blacksmith when he went toward the Downward Spiral?"

YES.

"Was it Farazil?"

YES.

"Was Farazil inhabiting the blacksmith's body when he went through the arch?"

YES.

"Were the two peasants who arrived and went through the arch, people whom we would find important?"

YES.

"Did Cencerra go through the arch?"

YES.

"Was she mind-controlled?"

NO.

"Were Farazil's interests opposed to our own?"

NO.

"In the past year, has anyone else been through the Arch, other than the two peasants, Cencerra and her party, and the blacksmith with Farazil?"

NO.

"If Farazil is the same now as he was when he went through the arch, would it be safe for us to trust him?"

IN THE SHORT TERM, PROBABLY.

"Was Farazil working for the king or the Spire Guard?"

NO.

"Was he working for another party?"

NO.

"Do we know the people who were disguised as peasants?"

I DON'T KNOW.

"Has anyone come out of the Arch in the last two years?"

I DON'T KNOW.

Morningstar sighs. Those two peasants were almost certainly *mind blanked*, which would explain the lack of divinatory clarity.

"Do you know anything of Naslund?"

NOT IN ANY MEANINGFUL WAY.

"We think that Naslund lies beyond that gate. We think that Drosh fleeing has left it without a caretaker. That's where we're heading..."

Before Morningstar can even form a question to go with this preamble, she receives as answer:
NASLUND CANNOT BE MY CONCERN.

"Should I not go, then?"

THAT IS YOUR CHOICE.

"Do you expect any more of the Gods to flee the oncoming Adversary?"

YES. BUT NOT ELL.

After that, Morningstar takes Aravis with her into *Ava Dormo* and they journey again to the archway at the bottom of the Downward Spiral. This is so that Aravis can judge the distance from the surface to the arch; armed with that knowledge, he then *dimension doors* the whole Company down, so they don't have to make the slow physical journey through the folded earth. As Morningstar saw, no light from the surface makes it all the way down to this place. Aravis casts *mass darkvision*.

The freestanding arch and its written warning stand silent, inert. Dranko walks through it in both directions, but nothing untoward happens to him. He narrows his eyes and thinks that he would like to go to Naslund. Immediately the gateway responds to his desire; the arch's interior space glows red, an opaque sheet filling the opening. "That's more like it."

He lights his cigar, hoping for a prophetic exhalation, but the smoke is just smoke.

"Screw it," he says, and he steps through. The others quickly follow.



There is no feeling of translation or travel. Their feet leave the ground of Karth, and touch down upon an old cobbled road... somewhere else. The Company stand in a group, looking around at their new surroundings.

Behind them, a gartine arch twin to the one in Karth stands half-embedded in a huge foggy gray wall that marks the edge of the demiplane. They have seen this sort of thing before; the boundaries of the Slices of Het Branoi looked like this. But this is not Het Branoi.

The road beneath their feet emerges from the archway and the gray wall, and continues straight away from it for about fifty yards. Its terminus is the base of an enormous pearlescent dome, easily a mile in diameter, that fills the sky in that direction (and indeed takes up most of the space in the demiplane). All of the ground outside the dome is flat and bare dirt, save for the stone road. It appears that there is a large arched doorway in the dome, where the road meets it.

Kibi takes a sharp breath, for he has noticed something else. Some twenty feet from the road to their left, lying scattered on the featureless ground, are four sprawled bodies, human-sized. Dranko notices a fifth body on the other side of the road: a dwarf. And he sees something else beyond the dwarf. It's... another road, shimmering, somehow both there and not there, a shadowy dream of a cobbled path. He stares at it, and though it doesn't come into focus, he then thinks he sees yet *another* road beyond that one. Both of the new roads, like the true one under his feet, radiate from the great dome in the center of the demiplane. It's like he's seeing, faintly, the next two neighboring spokes of a great wheel.

He turns and looks in the other direction, and to his left are yet more roads, shifting, indistinct. The longer he stares, the more roads he sees; there must be hundreds, all leading to the dome, but there do not appear to be any doorways save the one to which the solid road leads.

Morningstar grasps her holy symbol and feels Ell's presence within her, but muted, indirect.

Kibi looks up. The sky is a sunless, uniform gray, and everywhere is a sourceless light of an overcast afternoon. The temperature is perfectly neutral. He turns back to the archway through which they entered, and wills it to take him back to Karth. Nothing happens. He walks through anyway, and comes up against the unyielding boundary of the demiplane. For the moment, at least, there's no escape from this place.

The party's collective attention turns to the bodies. Did leaving the road somehow cause their deaths? Grey Wolf uses *telekinesis* to bring over the closest of the four human-sized bodies. They all recognize it immediately: it's Cencerra. Her corpse has been stripped of armor and items, and her clothes are torn. More disturbing is the burned out hole in her chest, where her heart should be. Instead of a heart, there is an ash residue in a charred cavity. As Grey Wolf retrieves the remaining bodies, they see that all the corpses have had their hearts incinerated. They've been dead for some time, though there are no insects or signs of putrefaction.

Dranko is bestowed with *death ward* and *fly* spells, and flies over to examine the dwarf on the other side of the road. This body is different; its heart is intact, and it still clutches a water-skin in a withered hand. It appears that the dwarf must have died of thirst or starvation. Dranko drags the body back to the road with his whip.

They are jarred from their focused attention on the corpses by a distant two-toned horn blast. It comes from somewhere outside the dome, off to the right in the shifting sea of ghostly roads. Dranko can make out movement in the distance; he is made invisible and flies over to get a closer look. As he flies, he sees that the many roads are shifting over and under one another, and he adjusts upward his estimate of their number. Thousands, tens of thousands, radiate outward like sunbeams from the huge pearly dome. But not too far away, marching down one of these streets, is an ethereal procession of giants.

They appear to him as though through a smeared lens, blurred around the edges. There are at least a hundred of these beings, and in the center of their host a dozen of them bear a large shoulder-mounted slab. On this slab rests the body of a truly enormous giant, twice the size of the others, with a huge and ornate shield upon its chest. Every twenty feet or so, the procession stops for a second while heralds at the front sound their trumpets. When they reach the dome, their bodies seem to pass directly through it, and before five more minutes have passed, the entire company of giants has disappeared inside the dome.



Morningstar tries casting *speak with dead* on Cencerra's body, but the spell simply fails. Whether this is due to the nature of the demiplane, or the mysterious absence of the target's heart, no one can say.

Grey Wolf wonders aloud what became of Farazil when the dwarf died. "Doesn't he go back to the Plane of Shadow if his host body dies?" asks Ernie, trying to remember what they once learned of the Carch Din.

"If he's still here, he'll possess us if he wants to talk," says Morningstar, only half-joking.

Dranko grins. "Hey, Flicker...!"

"Are you volunteering me?" squawks Flicker. "Because... no. No way!"

"I'm asking if you're still you," says Dranko.

Flicker's eyes go wide; the thought hadn't occurred to him. "Yes!" he exclaims, looking around. "And I'd like to keep it that way!"

There is more movement out among the wheel-spoke roads. Dranko flies again to investigate, and this time sees a single ghostly form, a perfectly-formed humanoid some twenty-five feet tall and radiating a divine light. Tears are streaming down his face, each a perfect diamond droplet. He holds a dead woman in his arms, a tall perfect being like himself, and slowly he walks toward the dome. Dranko tries to speak to the being, but either it cannot hear him or chooses not to respond. As Dranko watches, the man passes soundlessly through the dome, bearing his burden of grief.

Upon hearing what Dranko has seen, Ernie whispers, "I think these are the dead from all the different onions! That would explain why only one path is solid for us. But for those others..."

"They're all in different planes of existence," says Aravis. "But they overlap here."



It doesn't take long for the Company to walk the fifty yards to the dome, and its large, arched doorway. But the doorway is only cosmetic – there's no actual door, just the smooth glassy white surface of the dome. There are words carved into the dome wall above the doorway, in the same language as that back in the Downward Spiral.

NASLUND NEXUS OF LAST ROADS

"I wish to enter," says Ernie. When nothing happens, he turns to Aravis. "You're a God..."

"But I think I'd have to be dead," says Aravis.

Dranko tries pushing on the wall where the door should be. He is rewarded with a painful flash and a feeling like electricity in his hands. It feels as though the dome surface tried to suck out his life-force – and it probably would have had he not been protected by a *death ward*. "Guess I won't be licking it," he says, eyeing the dome with new respect.

Morningstar frowns. "So we can't go forward, and we can't leave."

"Guess we'll starve to death," says Dranko.

Aravis tries casting *knock* from a distance. Nothing opens, though he feels an unusual jolt of energy. Ernie tries channeling his faith into the doorway. The door remains unimpressed.

And so they stand there, flummoxed, for a few minutes more. Aravis casts a *vision* naming "Naslund" as the subject, but divinations are stifled in this place. At a loss for more esoteric solutions, Aravis decides that maybe he can succeed where Dranko failed. Morningstar supplies him his own *death ward*, and he steps forward to touch the doorway.

The stone in the doorway vanishes, creating an open entrance to the Necropolis. The party crowd around to peer inside.



Several weeks earlier, in the presence of the Feline Conclave, the cat Inkspot had spoken private words to Aravis:

You are the only directly divine human on Abernia. I don't think that came about simply to help the feline race. Perhaps there is a place you must go where only Gods are permitted, or a creature you must slay whom only a God can kill... Destiny is not finished with you, Aravis.

So it would seem. Aravis utters a prayer to Pikon, and another one to Quarrol, and the Company step across the threshold to Naslund, Necropolis of the Gods.

thegreyman: Erp!

carborundum: This IS creepy. And if the outside is this creepy... Erp indeed!

MorningstarofEll: Naslund... *shudder* Well, isn't that an appropriate place for Sagiro to be giving an update about now. This place made quite an impression on me! We were feeling fairly powerful at this point in the campaign and this place made me feel like a very small cog in a big cold lonely machine.

Morningstar had never been nervous about her soul in the afterlife before this point in the campaign. In fact before meeting the party, life had kind of seemed like a set of tasks to be done to get to death and the 'good part'.

After Naslund she gained two kinds of worry about her soul... but maybe I should wait for another update or two to explain why.

carborundum: Every entry ends on a cliff-hanger anyway; now you're piling on the pressure...



The Tree That Guards the Way

In some respects, Naslund looks and feels much like many other cities. It has streets. It has buildings. But in most ways, Naslund looks and feels like a graveyard without gravestones. The buildings are close-packed, lean precariously, and resemble drip-sand-castles that have hardened into granite. Carvings on every building depict funeral processions and other death-related imagery. The buildings themselves offer few hints of their function; their doors are locked, their windows clouded and opaque. Names are inscribed above each door in an alien tongue. Perhaps they are all mausoleums?

No sun shines overhead, but the dome is filled with a thin gray light that brings on a great and heavy sadness. Faintly, all around, there is a quiet susurration, as if hundreds of unseen beings are whispering. But there is no doubt that, for the moment at least, they are alone.

For a minute or two they just stand inside the doorway. The dome has re-sealed itself behind them. They talk briefly about what happened to Cencerra, and how their attackers gained access to the interior. They come to the conclusion that Cencerra and her group had been unable to enter, and so made camp outside, staying alive with magic and provisions. Then the two peasants had shown up, killed them, burned out their hearts, stolen their stuff, and entered the dome themselves. But how they did so is a mystery.

"Either they knew something we don't," says Aravis, "or one of them is a deity."

"And if they left," Grey Wolf adds, "they know a way out. Which we also don't."



Dranko glances nervously at the mausoleums of Naslund. "I'm screwed," he gulps. "This place is full of divine beings. There's a chance I'll run into some servitor of Delioch here!"

Ernie looks at him in surprise. "This is where divine beings come to get their eternal rewards. They're not going to stop you and give you a quiz!"

Dranko looks guilty. "But... but I used to insert dirty words into the morning prayers."

"Do your healing spells work?" asks Aravis impatiently. "Yes. So you're fine. Delioch is happy enough with you." He listens for a second to the sourceless whispers before adding, "You might want to tone down your irreverence while you're inside, though."

Just in case, Dranko fishes out his holy robes from the bottom of his pack and puts them on.



Rising up at the center of the city is an enormous amethyst tower, visible above the rooftops of the drip-castle buildings. It stands like a spike, so tall that it looks as though its apex must be grazing the top of the pearly dome. "I really wish we knew *why* we were here," says Aravis, as they start to walk down the street in the general direction of the amethyst tower.

Morningstar has a burst of insight. "We're following Tarsos and Meledien. The peasants must have been them. We know that Tarsos is short and Meledien is tall..."

Aravis recalls his vision of the two of them, with Tarsos handing Meledien a small drink. *Now you'll survive the trip*, Tarsos had said. "It's the black goo that got them in here," Aravis realizes. "It's the blood of the Adversary. It's divine essence."

"What about your vision of Naslund?" asks Morningstar. "Was there anything else important in it?"

Aravis nods. "Vhadish asked who would tend it, with its caretakers gone."

"I wonder what happened to them?" asks Ernie.

No one knows.

"You know what kind of guy guards this place?" asks Dranko. "A sarcophagi."



The streets are not straight, and the party wend their way through them, heading ever closer to the amethyst spike in the center of the dome. At one intersection, a ghostly horse and rider come into view. As it approaches, they can see a body is draped across the horse's back, and the tall, noble-looking rider has tears in her eyes. It passes in front of them, and melts away into the graying gloom.

It's about that time when the singing starts. It's an eerie, haunting sound, floating through the streets of Naslund like a ghost's pipe. The direction from which it comes is hard to discern, though most in the Company think it's coming from the amethyst tower. Dranko has an immediate desire to pray, and fervently, but he feels a disconnection, as though he's trapped in a box and Delioch is not inside with him.

To Flicker, Kibi and Grey Wolf, the song melts into the fibers of their beings, filling them with a crushing sadness and despair, as if everything good and important in the world has just died. And just as strongly, they feel that the only way to shed that despair is to find the source of the song. Ernie cannot help but notice that the color of Kibi's face has drained to a dead gray beneath his beard. "Kibi, are you okay?"

"No," says Kibi plaintively. "I'm so very sad. But we're going to find the source of the singing, right?"

Ernie nods. "Well, yes, but we're also exploring..."

"No!" barks Kibi. "Toward the singing!"

Ernie casts a *circle of protection*, but it does not banish the song or quell its effects. Flicker looks as though he's about to burst into tears. Morningstar casts *silence*, and this does block out the song as long as everyone stays close. The sadness remains, though the compulsion to find the singer abates. And *telepathic bond* – being a divination – doesn't work here in Naslund. They can only communicate with gestures while inside the sphere of silence.

Dranko casts *resurgence* on the afflicted, allowing Grey Wolf and Kibi to shuck off the soul-crushing effect of the song. Flicker remains in despair. He's weeping openly now. "They're all dead!" he wails. "The Gods... they're all dead..." He sits down and refuses to take another step. Morningstar sighs and casts *mind blank* on him. "Oh, that's better!" Flicker leaps to his feet. "Things don't seem so bad anymore. I don't even know why I was so worried!"

Dranko lights his cigar, and the smoke drifts in strange patterns, as if it's trying to form into prophecy but failing. Aravis, on a hunch, casts *rope trick*. The spell fails. Dranko is horrified, thinking that his *wide-mouth pouch* has become inaccessible, but it turns out that extradimensional spaces still function if they're small enough.

Around another corner they see a large ghostly procession, hundreds of shrouded humanoids, making their way down a wide avenue. A coffin is raised up in the center of the mob, held aloft by many hands. Ghostly petals are strewn ahead of the crowd, and they fade away after the last of the beings has moved past. The group of them turns a distant corner and fades to nothing.



It's only half a mile in total from the edge of the dome to the purple rock tower in the middle, so the entire journey is over quickly even though their progress is slow. They round one final corner and see that the road ends in a wide, round plaza that surrounds the amethyst tower. Large stone statues of noble visage stand in haphazard pattern throughout the plaza. The thirty foot diameter base of the spire is filled with doorways, dim, insubstantial, sliding over and beneath one another. The wake of shadowy humanoids is vanishing through one of these portals.

Only one door is really *there*, closed but solid, and planted directly in front of that door is an enormous Tree. Its fifty-foot trunk rises directly from the cobblestones of the plaza, and its long limbs stretch far overhead. It has no leaves, and appears dead, though its branches sway slightly in the complete absence of breeze. A few of its branches seem to have been severed, and lie upon the ground near its base.

Flicker, protected by *mind blank*, steps outside Morningstar's *silence* and can hear the song quite clearly now, coming from the Tree. He also notices that there is room for maybe one person at a time to squeeze through the doorway behind the Tree, assuming it was opened.

Aravis moves out of the *silence* as well, and though he hears the song, he suffers no ill-effects. While the others wonder if Tarsos and Meledien might have planted the Tree to slow them down, Aravis feels as though it *belongs* here.

The branches of the Tree quiver, and everyone in the party except for Aravis feel an assault upon their minds. They also become aware that on the cobbles near the trunk, there are three small black stains, smelling very faintly of Essence.

“We should, uh, maybe back up?” Dranko suggests. The others instead start to cast buffing spells, and then an enormous branch comes swinging down and clocks Aravis in the head. He may be immune to its song, but the blow feels like an iron pipe.

“Is there anything we can do to help you?” he asks it.

There is no response. It is, after all, a Tree.

Kibi glances at Aravis and decides to risk casting *xorn movement*. He sinks into the ground, and finds that the stone does not reject him. It feels ancient, older than any place in Abernia, and is unnaturally solid. There are no gaps or impurities; it is the rock of ages, and alien to him. He Quicks a *mirror image* just to be safe.

“What do I do?” cries Flicker. “Rush it? Or are we fleeing?”

“Neither, for the moment,” says Aravis. Flicker scoots out of range of the extended branches, while Dranko uses a healing wand on Aravis.

“Then what’s the plan?” asks Grey Wolf.

“We just have to get past it,” says Ernie. “We want to follow Meledien and Tarsos, and *they* didn’t kill the Tree.” Though, as he says this, more than one in the Company realizes that the black stains of Essence are probably bloodstains, indicating that there was battle here before now.

Ernie feels his bones start to stiffen, but he fights off whatever new magic the Tree was attempting. In response, Ernie casts a healing spell at range, hoping to change its behavior.

“We are not here to harm you!” says Aravis. “We want to deal with those who have *already* harmed you. Please, let us pass!” Aravis walks forward again, thinking that between his message and his divine nature, something must be getting through to the Tree. It slams him again with a stout branch, and this time it projects a sentiment into his head.

MORTALS SHALL NOT PASS ME.

Aravis sighs. He may have a divine spark, but he is still mortal. “What about the two who have *already* passed you?”

The Tree offers no response.

Kibi pops up from the ground. Unwilling to directly harm the Tree, he instead strikes it with a Maximized *ray of enfeeblement*. Its branches dip and sag. While Dranko heals up Aravis again, Flicker tries to run past the Tree to the door. It strikes him hard with another branch; even *enfeebled*, it still packs quite a wallop. Grey Wolf adds to the Tree’s weakened state with *enervation*, and this (combined with the *ray of enfeeblement*) probably saves Aravis’s life. With Aravis now in range of most of its branches, the Tree clubs him five times, driving him to the ground. Morningstar and Ernie rush in to heal him.

Aravis tries to turn the Tree into something smaller and less dangerous using *polymorph any object*, but plants, it turns out, are unaffected by such magics. Having failed at that, he rushes for the door, squeezes behind the Tree’s trunk, and touches the doorway it guards. The door is warm. It’s also locked, and while he thinks his divine nature will work upon it given time, it doesn’t open immediately. “Ah, crap!”

Kibi casts a *wall of stone* that creates a sort of long curved hangar, an open-sided tunnel of stone that shields about half the party from the Tree’s branches. Dranko casts *shield other* on Aravis. Grey Wolf saps the Tree with another *enervation*. The Tree remains undaunted, and seemingly determined to bludgeon Aravis to death. It brings several branches thundering down upon his head, and both he and Dranko are staggered.

As Ernie heals Aravis one more time, Morningstar sighs. “Are you *sure* we can’t just chop this thing down?”

Aravis shakes his head. “We won’t need to.” He casts *shapechange* on himself, Quicks a *shield* just in case, and assumes the form of the most hard-to-hit creature he can think of: a blood fox. The whole time he keeps one hand/paw pressed up against the doorway, and at last he is rewarded. The doorway vanishes, leaving an ingress to the amethyst tower. Using Kibi’s semi-tunnel for cover, the whole Company scramble for the doorway. Once they are all inside, the tower wall reasserts itself, and the sounds of the Tree’s creaking branches and song of despair are abruptly cut off.

They now find themselves at the end of a long straight corridor, its walls, floor and ceiling made entirely of amethyst. It slopes gently downward, and clearly extends past the far side of the tower, underground. Everywhere is a diffuse purple light. All along the walls, at head height, are carvings in the stone: battle scenes, Gods fighting, Gods dying.

In this place, there are no echoes.

RedTonic: Eeee! I'm so excited! I bet this latest entry was even more atmospheric at the table. That's pretty cool.

Totally gonna borrow some of that, I think. And find out what's in Sagiro's coffee, because that's what I should be drinking.

RangerWickett: Aww, I miss the blood fox.

steeldragons: I must agree. That was a bit of brilliant playing ("the hardest thing to hit he could think of...") on Aravis's player's part. We've come to expect nothing less from Abernathy's Company.

And a belated kudos and CONGRATULATIONS to Sagiro and all of the players for the conclusion of what is one of the GREATEST, most elaborate and entertaining Story Hours/campaigns I've had the privilege of finding/reading. I'm sure it was a bittersweet end. But with players and characters and a DM this fantastic, I'm sure we haven't heard the last of Charagan. Well done and congrats all.

Piratecat: I called Sagiro at 11pm last night and kept him on the phone for half an hour. I'm rereading the wonderful compiled PDF, and kept having questions pop up! So he indulged me and answered 5-6 queries of mine.

One thing that re-reading this has shown me is how consistent the campaign's plots and clues have been. There are a few idiosyncrasies, but damned few. Sort of astounding.

Tamlyn: So you bring up his brilliance yet refuse to share? Either these details are still spoilerific or you're being a jerk for teasing us. I really hope you're not being a jerk!

MorningstarofEll: I started reading the PDF again too, Piratecat! And yeah, so many things we learned early were so important. And we spent so much time traveling from one place to another!

I find that now that things are over I very much want to know about how the people we cared about and interacted with fared through the final chapters. I keep reading and going oh! Him... is he OK? Is that place still standing? Oh... what about her?

sigh I could poke Sagiro for answers till I was like Morningstar asking in *commune* about Step's horse... times 100 or so. In the great stories I've read I've been mostly content to learn how things ended for the heroes and make up any other bits of epilogue I wanted for myself... but it is harder with this story that I've been so much a part of.

While playing I never really minded this forum, but it always felt a little odd when I considered that we kind of had an unseen audience for our D&D game of all things. But now, I realize that this campaign log is also a history - a very tangible thing that I have to go back to and enjoy. I am very appreciative of the time Sagiro has spent writing it up, and the readers who keep him going, and StevenAC for putting it in such a convenient format. When it is done I am going to get the whooole thing printed (in several volumes probably) and keep it on a shelf with my other favorite stories.

A kind of funny side story... The day of the final game, I was really quite nervous. I talked to my Mom in the morning; she asked if that that 'thing of mine' was ending today. I explained yes and that I was actually kind of nervous and tried to explain why. The whole story had been building up to this. Would we make an end equal to it? What if I rolled really badly and it all came down to bad dice? (At least we were in a place with no bushes.) My mom paused for a while really trying to come up with something to say to me... and she fell back to "Well, honey, I am sure you will do just FINE." In the voice she has used for encouragement the day before any test I have ever taken in my entire life. I hung up and said to my real husband (Grey Wolf's human) "My Mommy says we will do just fine" and it actually kind of helped.

The last game was Grey Wolf and my 11th anniversary as a couple and we forgot to even say happy anniversary to each other because we were so preoccupied. But we probably wouldn't have ever started going out if it hadn't been for him giving me rides to and from the campaign, so I guess it is appropriate.

RangerWickett: This post is full of cuteness.

Piratecat: That's spectacular. Congratulations, you two!

I think we can indirectly trace three marriages to our D&D groups: Morningstar and Grey Wolf's players, Sagiro and Kibi's player, and Fajitas and WisdomLikeSilence (from the wonderful Halmae Story Hours by Spyscribe and Ellinor). Who says D&D isn't social?

Fajitas: Oh, I think you can pretty directly trace my marriage to your game...

And let me also state that my desire to run a D&D game again came as a direct result of reading this Story Hour. So thanks for that, too.

Can't wait to see how it ends.

Neurotic: You lucky rodents of dubious parentage!

Tamlyn: MorningstarofEll, I can only speak for myself, but I was initially drawn to this Story Hour because of Sagiro's compelling world and his tight, tight plotlines. Also because of how incredibly clever you guys are as players. It helped get me hooked on D&D early in my gaming career and I think made me a better player and GM.

It's easy (for me) to overlook the impact it had on everyone directly involved in the game. It gives me great joy to hear about the friendships, even marriages at the table. Hearing that your anniversary (11 years no less - congrats!) was at the table and that even your mom knew how important this was to you is no less than awesome!

Piratecat: Tamlyn, a few of my questions were spoilers, but the ones which weren't:

- When "something big got through," was that Meledien? It was Meledien, Octesian and Restimar, the first three red-armored warriors who breached the planar boundaries to prepare the way for the Emperor. Jerks.
- No one noticed giant invisible crates hanging over Kinnet Gorge near Verdshane? Nope. The Masking and powerful enchantments prevented that, and no one ever went there.
- What monsters were the "forest demons" outside of God's Thorn? They were possibly never statted up, since we weren't interested in fighting them.
- Later in the game a monster turns out to be impersonating someone. I wondered if that was actually a Chrik from the arch beneath Hae Charagan. Sagiro hadn't considered that, so no.
- And I had some Yrimpa questions and some Farazil questions that contain spoilers.

wedgeski: I've read the PDFs twice now and will read the whole thing start to finish when they're finally complete. I can't wait. I'll probably have more to say at that point, but for now I'll simply join in the chorus of congratulations and thank-you's, to Sagiro and the crew and to StevenAC, and say what I possibly haven't said until now: that this campaign has without doubt influenced my own game more than anything else I've ever read.

Sagiro: It's always gratifying to know that my campaign has had a positive impact on people's lives, whether it be inspiring their own games, or inspiring them to get married.

Morningstar, I can assure you that I was at least as nervous as you going into the final session. Every night for a week I would lie in bed, unable to sleep, thinking about how things would wrap up. Was I remembering all the plot threads I wanted to tie off? All the characters whose arcs needed to find resolution? Would the final confrontation be exciting enough? Too deadly? What about my highly experimental plans for a certain antagonist? And, overall, would my players feel like I was providing adequate closure?

When you work on something for 15+ years, you really don't want to screw up the ending!



Sand

Aravis jumps up onto Dranko's shoulders, thinking that the blood fox form is a safe way to travel. But once perched upon his friend, he begins to be overcome with a terrible hunger. Dranko smells so... so delicious! He must eat! A small part of his mind remembers that he's also a wizard (...so... hungry!) and just before he starts to burrow into Dranko's warm, succulent muscle tissue, he changes back into himself. "Ugh," he exclaims. "They truly lead an awful life."

The amethyst hallway takes them another hundred yards or more, always sloping gently downward but otherwise on a perfectly straight bearing. Every few yards is a small bloodstain, carrying the faint whiff of Essence. Then ahead they can see that the hallway levels out, though it continues straight on as far as they can see.

Something crunches beneath their feet – it's sand. The hallway has not only become flat, but is now covered with a film of sand – not solidly packed like a beach, but as if someone ahead of them had scattered large handfuls on the floor as they went. There are no footprints in it, and no more bloodstains. Dranko scoops up some of the sand and puts it in a pouch. A vaulted ceiling now soars high above them, and the hallway is twenty-five feet wide, but there's still an oppressive, almost claustrophobic aura about the place.

At last there is something to break the monotony: a side passage, fifteen feet wide, precisely perpendicular to the main hallway, branching to their right. Morningstar instinctively drops a *thought capture* before remembering that most divinations don't work here. The ceiling in this side passage is lower and flat, and they can see it ends in a chamber about fifty feet down. Dranko moves to investigate.

The room is mostly empty. Its only feature is a large sarcophagus, big enough to house a hill giant's corpse, upon a pedestal in the center of the room. A stone slab lid rests deliberately against the side of the pedestal, which itself is eight feet high – meaning Dranko can't look inside it without climbing up. This he does, and inside – nothing.

Aravis thinks this place is waiting – waiting for a divine being to die. Unconvinced, Dranko dangles his arm inside the empty sarcophagus, and still feels nothing. Finally, he 'accidentally' falls into it, and this truly convinces him that it's empty.

"You fell in on purpose!" Ernie accuses.

"I wouldn't have jumped in if I hadn't known it was completely safe," says Dranko, grinning.

Flicker, who has been checking the place for secret compartments while Dranko has investigated the sarcophagus, comes up empty. "Not that I was going to loot anything, of course!" he says.

Dranko frowns. "What kind of person builds an empty tomb with no secret doors?" Not only are there no secret doors, but the walls and ceiling are perfectly smooth amethyst. There are no carvings, symbols or adornments to be seen.

Reluctantly, the Company leave this uneventful side-passage behind and continue down the long straight corridor. The whitish-brown sand crunches beneath their feet. Not much further along, they encounter a second branching hallway, to the left this time, but with the same dimensions as the previous one. This second turn-off, however, is more interesting.

Two words are inscribed, one above the other, on the wall above the opening where the new hallway begins. They are written in different languages, neither of them familiar. Grey Wolf, possessed of permanent *comprehend languages* that is unaffected by Naslund's anti-divinatory nature, can read the top name: **LEANTHA**. The bottom word still defies his understanding. Above the two words is carved the image of an open book.

Dranko wants to scout down the new hallway, but he cannot. Even before he can take a single step that way, his mind balks, and he is filled with a great antipathy toward whatever waits in the chamber at the end of the hall. Somewhere in his soul, he knows that to go there would be... *wrong*. He looks helplessly at the others.

"It's to keep people from disturbing the resting places of the Gods," says Ernie.

Kibi peers down the new branch. He can faintly see that there are tapestries hanging in the chamber at the end. “But what if Tarsos and Meledien are down there, or have been there already?”

Aravis feels a revulsion similar to Dranko’s, but for him it is milder. He is able to walk down the side-passage about half way, though it feels like a psychic headwind is beating at him as he does so. At last, like Dranko, he is able to progress no further. And for him, it is worse: he feels – senses, somehow – that there is a great source of knowledge in the chamber, but it is out of his reach. Having a better look than the others, Aravis sees that the scenes on the tapestries are of people seated in a great library, all of them reading books. He also sees that there is a sarcophagus there, as in the previous chamber, but that the lid is not leaning neatly against it. Instead, it lies on the ground at an irregular angle, and is cracked in several places. Immediately the Company suspect that Tarsos and Meledien have indeed visited this tomb.

Aravis utters a quick prayer to Leantha. “We are here to destroy the looters of this place.” But he can still get no closer to the chamber; something has allowed him to go this far, but no further. He has a strong feeling of a divine presence in that room that prevents his approach. That is, of course, troubling. Was their enemies’ infusion with the Adversary’s blood enough to make them that much more divine than Aravis? How did they get in there to loot the coffin of Leantha?

Aravis turns and walks back. “Pardon me for my presumption,” he says quietly.

“I didn’t sign up for this,” Dranko mutters. “Nobody told me that someday I’d be walking through a huge amethyst filled with dead Gods.”

They leave the tomb of Leantha behind and continue along the main corridor. They pass another empty chamber on the right, and a few minutes later they spot a second one ahead on the left. But before they can walk that far, the sand on the floor starts to move, sliding and shifting and making a sound like an army of asps.

In a matter of seconds it rises up and congeals into six humanoid shapes, twelve-foot-high sand warriors, three on either side of them. Swords of sand form at the ends of their arms, and though these drip sand upon the ground, they are constantly replenished by more sand sliding up through the feet to maintain the creatures’ mass. No one doubts that, like the Tree, these beings are guardians set to protect the tombs from interlopers like themselves.

Kibi reacts instantly, dropping a fifty-foot-high *wall of force* that extends from wall to wall, with half of the sand warriors on the far side. One of these walks forward and when it meets the wall, it deforms and spreads. Individual grains roll about against the invisible barrier, but find no crevices through which to pour. A second of the creatures does the same, and when neither meet with any success, they reform themselves into humanoid shapes. All around, the rasping sound fills the hallway, sand upon stone.

That leaves the three on the near side of the force wall. One of them walks directly past Aravis, ignoring him, to swing its sand-sword at Flicker. The halfling ducks, and the sword shatters against the wall, spraying sand out in all directions. There is no core, no solid part of the creature’s blade; it’s all sand. But it quickly reforms into a sword-shape at the end of its arm.

Flicker reacts by slashing with his own blade. One swing sends a spray of sand outward and upward from the creature’s body – and it nearly stops, oddly, hanging like a cloud of tiny gnats in the air. The scattered volume of sand drifts slowly at about the height of Flicker’s head.

Dranko flicks out his whip several times at the creatures nearest to him. Some of his attacks go through the thing’s body with no effect, but two of them have results similar to Flicker’s attack. Blasts of sand are sent bursting from the creature’s torso, where they hover, clouds of granules, slowly rotating through the air as if unaffected by gravity.

Grey Wolf casts a *disintegrate* at the same one, but it only makes a tiny hole through its shifting body. Ernie has more luck dropping a *blade barrier* that cuts through all three of the guardians; they move quickly out of its cutting field, but not before huge swathes of sand are sent to float among them like misty tendrils.

One of the sand guardians on the far side of the *wall of force* disperses again, this time sending its sand upward. Kibi was unable to have the wall extend to the ceiling, and so the creature reaches the top of it and starts to pour itself down the near side. The sand creature assaulted by Dranko raises its non-sword “hand” and unleashes a conical blast of sand that envelops Dranko, Grey Wolf, Kibi and Ernie. Dranko whips his cloak around and avoids the blast entirely, but the others feel the scouring sting of the sand scraping away their skin. It looks afterward like their faces had been drawn upon in thin lines of red ink, and they have trouble seeing with the sand in their eyes. Yet another of the creatures swings its sand-sword at Ernie, but the shifting blade smashes harmlessly against his armor, scattering and reforming in an instant.

Aravis blasts the three present enemies with a Maximized *chain lightning*. All of them have shovelfuls of sand blasted from their bodies, and now the displaced grit is so thick in the air that it’s becoming difficult for anyone to see. Anyone who moves

can feel it brushing against their skin. Morningstar Quickens a mass curative before tossing a *chill seed* holly berry into the body of the closest assailant. There is a tiny pause, and then it detonates, blowing the creature entirely apart. The sand of its body fills the air, and now the party have to brush it aside in order to see anything.

Kibi uses *Mordenkainen's lucubration* to get back his *wall of force*, and stacks a new one on top of the original, one that allows the combined wall to go floor to ceiling and wall to wall. The remaining two sand creatures are thus unable to find any seam, and drop back to the ground, waiting.

The sand creatures seem to be suffering no ill-effects from the increasingly thick particulate floating everywhere; one blasts the party with another scouring cone. Morningstar is nearly blinded by the grit in her eyes, and finds it easier simply to fight with them closed. Flicker and Dranko launch minimally effective weapon attacks, but Grey Wolf loads a Maximized *acid orb* into Bostock and swings at one with a Quicken *true strike*. A large part of its shoulder erupts in a miasma of sand and acid, its granules joining the ever-thickening cloud. Bostock rejoices. *We will smite these creatures together! We can end this fight!*

Ernie remembers he's still carrying a *wind fan*. He uses it to cast *gust of wind*, and manages to clear a wide line of space through the middle of the debris field. The fourth sand creature, the one that had made it over the original force wall, drops down upon him, scraping his armor but otherwise failing to cause harm. The one nearest Grey Wolf, perhaps peeved at the acidic sword-swing, returns the favor with a brutal flurry of swings from its sword. Grey Wolf's face is lacerated, blood caking the sand in his eyes. He wipes it away, wincing, but a second later his pain is eased, along with everyone else's. Morningstar has cast *mass heal*.

Aravis blasts two of the enemy with a *lightning bolt*. Kibi follows up with a Maximized *earthbolt*, and another one of the sand creatures bursts into pieces. Two left, not counting the pair that prowl on the far side of the *wall of force*.

Make that one left, after Dranko unleashes a *hasted* full assault with his whip, releasing the sand from another guardian to float with all the rest. Now it's getting hard to breathe; each breath inadvertently sucks in sand particles. That last attacking sand creature is able to get one more attack, blasting Grey Wolf, Kibi and Ernie with a shredding cone. But the combined attacks from the rest of the party bring it down immediately after.

There are still two more, prowling on the far side of the *wall of force*, splashing nearly continuous sprays of sand against it, waiting. Everyone gets ready to attack, and Kibi drops the wall. The sand creatures are first to react, and the Company endure two overlapping sandblast cones. But thanks to Morningstar's recent palliative, they endure this fairly well, before returning fire. *Flame strike*. Maximized *cone of cold*. Maximized *lightning bolt* channeled through Bostock. *Searing darkness*. Another Maximized *cone of cold*. The last of the sand-guardians is ripped apart by magical energies, and their collective bodies now float around the party in a single enormous cloud.

Their cheers of victory are short-lived. All of the hovering sand begins to slide past their faces, and in a matter of seconds has congealed into an enormous compact ball some fifteen feet in diameter. The new sand-sphere sprouts tentacles, and something like an enormous eye opens in its center and regards the party balefully.

Dranko returns its stare and gulps. "Ah, crap."

Mathew Freeman: Congratulations to all for the game – to Sagiro, for writing it but not forgetting the players who bring so much to the table, too!
I'm stuck in a horrible yet familiar feeling – desperate to know what happens at the end but not wanting to get there quite yet.

Innocent Bystander: A beholder made of sand? I can't wait to find out what its eyes do.



Tombs of Dead Gods

The enormous spherical sand creature hovers a few feet from the ground, holding its shape and solidity while occasionally exhibiting slight deformations. Three of its extended pseudopodia lash out; Grey Wolf ducks beneath one, but Dranko and Flicker are sent flying backward to land prone and bruised. Ernie watches his friends soar past him, then drops a *flame strike* down on the sand-sphere. It resists. Ernie curses. For good measure he follows up with a Quicken *searing light*, and this penetrates the guardian's resistance, burning a small hole through its mass. The Company note with relief that the sand knocked free of the creature's body falls inertly to the floor.

Aravis looks back at Flicker and Dranko with some satisfaction. "Nice of everyone to get out of my way," he mutters, before casting a Maximized *cone of cold*. A significant chunk of the monster's sandy bulk is flash-frozen, after which it drops with a *CLUNK* to the amethyst floor.

As Dranko gets to his feet and advances, a huge spray of sand blasts from the creature's eye. Almost everyone is covered with a fine coating of silicate, which immediately starts to harden. Those so affected find it much harder to move. Only Dranko and Aravis (not quite in its range) and Morningstar (wearing a *ring of freedom of movement*) are unimpaired.

Flicker gets to his feet, but only barely; the sandy coating is like a stiff suit of skin-tight armor. And the creature attacks *again*, this time kicking out a storm of flying grit that burns skin off everyone in the hallway. Morningstar casts a *mass cure critical wounds* to undo the damage, and Kibi blasts the sphere with his own *cone of cold*. In response, the creature flicks three of its tentacles again, and this time Morningstar and Grey Wolf are sent flying, to slam painfully into the walls.

Ernie, crusted with sand, is just able to move his arms enough to cast a *mass cure moderate wounds*. Aravis casts *lightning ring* and steps up right next to the sand-sphere, while Dranko lashes the thing several times with his whip. He frowns as most of his whip-cracks go right through its sandy body without much damaging effect.

It again sprays the Company with silicate. Aravis finds himself slowed like the others... and the coating on Kibi and Flicker hardens completely, effectively rendering them petrified! Grey Wolf has barely stood back up again when it unleashes another sandstorm, flying around painfully in all directions. Morningstar casts another *mass cure critical*, but she's not sure she's keeping up with the guardian's damage output, and her spell has no effect at all on her petrified allies. Even as she ponders this, it smacks Dranko and Grey Wolf with powerful sand-tendrils, and they are sent careening away.

Ernie pegs the sand-sphere with *holy star*, burning a small hole into it. Aravis then strikes it with two free *lightning bolts* from his *lightning ring*, and it takes yet more electricity damage just from Aravis's proximity. Now there are huge piles of lifeless sand all over the floor, and pieces of glass are caught up in its roiling body. Aravis then casts *haste* on Ernie, which breaks apart the sand coating that slows him.

Dranko reaches into his mind, the insane part, and stops time. Every grain of sand freezes, perfectly distinct, and he watches them, fascinated. It's just lovely. But then he remembers himself, and moves gingerly around to the far side of the sphere. He heals himself with a wand, and readies an attack for when time resumes. When it does, he flicks his whip and removes another sizable chunk of sand from its mass. Grey Wolf immediately follows up with another channeled *acid orb*, but this one does little damage.

Again the sphere erupts in sand, and again Morningstar follows with a mass curative. Aravis delivers another round of electrical attacks, and now the sand-sphere is clearly having trouble maintaining its integrity. It wobbles and dips, but it still has enough binding magic to unleash another slowing spray. Aravis and Ernie, already coated, join Kibi and Flicker as sand-encrusted statues. Only Morningstar, Grey Wolf and Dranko are still in the fight.

Fortunately, that's enough. Grey Wolf's *rainbow beam* is blocked by the thing's resistance, but Morningstar drops a final *flame strike* upon it, and that one it fails to resist. It crashes to the ground, forming an inanimate sand pile that eventually comes to rest.



With the sand sphere's dissolution, the hardened sand shrouds on half the Company break apart. As they heal up, Dranko peers down the hallway, wondering what else might be down here. "If we die here, does that make us Gods?" he wonders aloud.

"Or maybe they'd toss our bodies out," says Flicker, "and that's how we're going to 'escape.'"

Ernie gives Dranko a stern look. "There are cockroaches even in fine inns," he says, "but that doesn't make them patrons."

After shaking the last of the sand from their hair and clothing, the Company continue their march down the long straight amethyst hallway. In a minute they have come even with the left-facing branch they had spotted before the sand creatures' assault. Like the previous one, they can see down into a square burial chamber, and again the lid seems to have been rudely levered from its sarcophagus. Again, there are two words above the branching hall, one of them unreadable. The second labels this as the resting place of **CABA**, and His symbol is a splash of red like a dancing flame.

Only Aravis can make any progress down the hallway, and as before it feels like he's facing into a strong wind. But where in Leantha's hall he gained a sense of great knowledge in the unreachable crypt, here he feels a rising heat. Half way down he can will himself no further, and more, he feels that he would burn if were to get any closer. "Leantha was a Goddess of Knowledge," says Aravis, rejoining the others, "and Caba was a God of Fire, or perhaps a Sun God."

They pass two more branches of a similar sort, alternating right and left. The first is for a deity called **ARANOD**, and Aravis senses his crypt is an infinite expanse. The symbol above the name is a star beside a crescent moon. Aravis stares at the unreadable word beneath the name Aranod; the characters have an alien, elusive feel about them. He almost thinks he could read it, but always his mind slides away from their meaning.

The next branch leads to the tomb of the God **KAZON**, and beneath his name is carved the image of a spider. With a gulp Aravis tests this branch like he did the others, and half-way down is stricken with horror, as if his skin is crawling with thousands of tiny arachnids. At least in these last two tombs – for Aranod and Kazon – the sarcophagi are undisturbed, their huge stone lids intact.

For a few minutes more there are no more branches, and then the pattern is broken; up ahead there are two branches at the same junction, one to the left, the other to the right. As the party draw near, Ernie cannot stifle a gasp; above one of the halls is the symbol of Yondalla, and above the other is the symbol of Ell. For the briefest of moments, the thought goes through his mind: *Have Yondalla and Ell died?* But Grey Wolf allays his fears: the name beneath the triangle symbol of Ell is **AURELIA**, and beneath the Yondallan shield is the name **NEMMIN**. Both names are accompanied by a second illegible word. The names are unfamiliar, though Ernie has a vague recollection of seeing the name Nemmin on an ancient roll of church heroes.

The sarcophagi in both of these chambers are undisturbed. Morningstar tries to walk down the hallway towards Aurelia's tomb, but cannot take even a single step. It's maddening; she feels as though she *could* go forward, even that she is *meant* to, but she cannot will her feet to physically take her there. Ernie experiences the same with Nemmin's tomb.

Morningstar tries dropping into *Ava Dormo*, and there is the same hallway, this time with some bright thing glowing in the tomb that she can sense but not see. Something very powerful is there, beckoning her, but even in Dream she is barred from Aurelia's resting place. She sighs in frustration. "I'm sorry," she breathes. "I'm not strong enough to make the journey." And she prays, achieving a remarkable serenity and happiness. There is something good and proper about this place and whatever is in it. But her prayer brings no tangible benefit. She drops out of *Ava Dormo*. "There's something very Ellish down there."

As before, Aravis is able to go about half-way down each hallway. Towards Aurelia, he feels as though he's falling asleep. Towards Nemmin, he feels himself becoming strong and desirous of battle. Aravis muses out loud: "What is the significance of these being next to each other?"

Dranko shrugs. "Maybe Aurelia and Nemmin died together in the same battle?"

After another hundred feet, the hallway again starts to slope gently downward, and soon after opens up into a large round room, off which many narrow halls radiate like spokes of a wheel. The floor is still sandy, though without footprints. The Company stop, scratching their collective heads. There is no indication of which way to go next.

From the shadows of the hallway opposite them, there is movement, and a robed person steps out. He appears solid – no apparition, this – and his footsteps crunch in the sand. He has a pale, handsome face, almost disturbing in its perfection, flawlessly symmetric and unblemished. An idealized human face. He wears a long black robe with a glowing rune of Drosh emblazoned on the front.

"Greetings," says Ernie, trying to remain calm.

The being gives the Company a long stare.

"We beg your pardon for disturbing the peace," says Aravis. "We seek two who do not belong here."

The Droshian turns to regard Aravis, and stares a moment longer before responding. "Aravis, they have already gone."

"Poo!" blurts Ernie.

The newcomer turns to him. "Ernest, that language is not appropriate in this place."

Ernie turns red. "You're quite right. I apologize."

"How do you know our names?" asks Dranko.

The being answers more quickly. "Now that I am standing in your presence, I know you quite well, Dranko Brightmirror."

He turns to regard Dranko, and his neutral expression suddenly contorts. He leans backward. "I'm sorry," says Dranko, knowing immediately what the being senses. "I'm carrying around a hitchhiker." *Madness... madness...*

"You should not be so glib," says the Droshian.

"I'm not."

The being recovers his equilibrium and peers again at Dranko. "No. You're right. Your glibness is a façade."

He looks at each of the others in turn, naming them. "Morningstar. Grey Wolf. Or would you prefer Ivellios? Kibilhathur. Flicker. My name is **Viersk**. I welcome you all more than the previous two. Meledien. Tarsos."

“What did they do?” Ernie asks.

Viersk frowns. “They killed... all of us. I am now the only remaining guardian. This place cannot be left without a guardian. As such, I have only recently been born.”

Dranko grimaces. “What did they want?”

“Wards,” says Viersk. “Wards of Drosh. Wards that allow them to exist in the presence of strong divinity. Which they took.”

Kibi glances back down the hallway. “Are they the ones that plundered the first two tombs we found?”

“Yes,” says Viersk. “Two they plundered. They might have taken more, but the more dangerous guardians here were starting to reform. Meledien and Tarsos fled. But they have Leantha’s Shield, the Bulwark of Knowledge, and they have the Spear of Caba.”

“How long ago did they leave?” Kibi asks.

“It was months ago now,” answers Viersk.

Dranko swears silently to himself. “So they took the wards from the old caretakers, and that let them raid the tombs?”

“That, or perhaps they were already able to go inside,” says Viersk. “They were possessed of a remarkable evil power. They had some mimicry of Godhood about them, different from yours, corrupt. Be thankful that it no longer afflicts you.” When none of the Company say anything, Viersk continues. “But, it is... nice... to have you here. I sense that I have been, and will be, very lonely. I do not think that there will be more of my kind.”

“Why not?” asks Dranko. But he knows the answer.

“Because Drosh has left us,” says Viersk. “This place is not as it should be. No one should be able to plunder the tombs. No mortals, however bolstered, should be able to defeat the Tree, or the Guardians of the Hall. But Meledien and Tarsos did it. And you must have done it. That would not be possible if Drosh were still sponsoring this place. It makes me very sad that he has abandoned me, and abandoned Naslund.”

“A new god has taken his place,” says Dranko. “Perhaps he will cause more of you to appear.”

Viersk says nothing, but shakes his head. He has no faith that Myr Madar will provide succor.

RedTonic: Totally awesome. I like the development of this god-afterlife. Were the sand guardians custom, re-skinned, or from a book?

Piratecat: We felt bad for Viersk. Crushing loneliness is no way to go through eternity.

Meanwhile, I've been reading through StevenAC's glorious collected PDFs in order to save me missing the campaign. I'm on page 756 or so. It's interesting how stark the difference is between the beginning (brief campaign summaries to remind Sagiro what happened), the middle (about where we encountered the Crosser's Maze around page 150), and the ending that is fully written as a story. Really superb writing.

It's fun to recall bits that I'd totally forgotten, such as some of the details of Dranko's encounter with the demonic Lord Tapheon. Knowing how the campaign ends, it's also wonderful to watch all the pieces falling into place even though we didn't recognize it at the time. This bit right here in Naslund, with Caba and Leantha, is one of those pieces.

wolff96: Sigh... Always with the teasing of future events...

I really liked the pseudo-beholder fight, with the gradual paralysis. It's a nice touch and a very evocative re-skinning, with the sand hardening into place. Creepy to think about, too, which adds to the scene.

Piratecat: We're using 3.5, but Sagiro had some really nice 4E monster tactics in this fight. For instance, the big solo monster got to act on (IIRC) three different initiative counts. That way it stayed active and threatening throughout the round, and our tactical situation kept changing.

I cried foul at the time but in retrospect like it much better than traditional monster design where the big monster gets all its attacks at once.

Sabriel: Awesome! Also, totally using the multi-initiative actions idea in my next game!

Innocent Bystander: What was the party doing ‘months ago’ when Meledien and Tarsos were in here plundering, and did the items they took make a battle or something more difficult later for the party?

Piratecat: *sob* You. Have. No. Idea.

Sagiro: Answering each of these:

(1) Around the time Meledien and Tarsos were plundering Naslund, the Company were fending off an assassination attempt by Lord Dafron.

(2) [spoiler redacted]

steeldragons: Sagiro, I have posted it before, but not in your (I hope) “direct presence”... Congratulations. I cannot tell you the anticipation I feel to hear the rest of the story. It is truly a pleasure to have to read.

Innocent Bystander: The party should have cloned themselves a few times over so they could be everywhere at once. It worked for ‘P’... Though technically those were *simulacrum*s, right?

Piratecat: They were. In other news, I've become aware that Dranko shows remarkable lambition. (Lambition: an obsolete word meaning “the act of licking or lapping.” Damn, I love language.)

Joshua Randall: Allow me to belatedly express my congratulations, as well, on the conclusion of a truly magnificent campaign. (I'll save my long-winded gushing for after the final update is posted.)

In other news: Kazon, the spider god? Heh heh. New drinking game: take a shot every time Sagiro uses a *Star Control II* reference.

Sagiro: First, thanks to steeldragons, Joshua Randall and others for your kind words about the campaign. And I'm especially pleased when someone gets my obscure *Star Control II* references...



Here's a short update where little happens but much is revealed...

History and Foreshadowing

Realizing that Viersk is facing perhaps an eternity of solitude in Naslund, the Company make him a gift of one of their oldest magic items: the *figurine of wondrous power* that transforms into Thriss the snake. Thriss seems content when he learns of this new arrangement, and Viersk is touched by the gesture.

"In return," says Viersk, "I will teach you some history, if you desire it. And I will give you a gift, and you will take others before you leave. How much do you know of what you have seen?"

"Very little," Aravis admits. "We can't even read half of the names above the entrances to the tombs."

"Ah," says Viersk, nodding. "The second names, the ones you cannot read, are the Gods' *true* names. Every God has a true name that comes into existence at the moment of its birth. To know a God's true name would be to have power over it. But the names are not known, even to the Gods themselves, until the moment that they die. Then those names are written, for the first and only time, above their tombs."

"Who was Nemmin?" Ernie asks.

"Nemmin was one of Yondalla's great semi-divine champions, who perished in the great wars."

Aravis nods. "And so it is Nemmin's *true* name that I cannot read."

"Yes," says Viersk. "You yourself have a true name, Aravis, but it cannot be known, and will not, until the day of your own death. Then, it will be written here."

"I hope that will be a long time from now," says Aravis.

"So much for stuffing you and storing you in the Greenhouse," says Dranko.

"What did you mean by the 'great wars'?" Kibi asks.

Viersk turns to the dwarf. "Are you aware that the Traveling Gods fled to this world from the great Adversary? When they arrived, they landed upon a continent called Kivia. And as is often the case in these matters, there was a... misunderstanding. The Kivian Gods believed it an invasion, and there was war. Many Gods, along with their champions and servants, were slain, before the Eldest God, Pikon, intervened."

Many in the Company are startled by this. Viersk continues, "There were Gods of Charagan before the Travelers came, and Pikon is the only one of those to remain. The rest of them, of those who made the Skysteel Archways, fled thousands of years before. No one knows why, save the Gods themselves. But Pikon remained, and Pikon agreed to take the Gods of Darvin – the world that the Adversary destroyed – as refugees, and shared Charagan with them. When the original Goddess of Death, Pikon's sister, fled, she placed Drosh in charge of Naslund. Now that Drosh is gone, Naslund is without patronage."

Morningstar frowns. "Having played something of a role in that, in Drosh's flight, is there anything we can do to help?"

"As one of you said, perhaps you can petition Myr Madar to take a more active role. I doubt he appreciates the importance of this place, in the great scheme of things."

"And what *is* the importance of this place?" asks Dranko.

Viersk looks surprised at the question. "Is it not self-evident? This is where Gods come when they are no longer. If they could not come here, where would they be? Left out in the world of mortals? No good would come of that, I assure you."

"I believe it," says Ernie. "We've seen what can happen when a God's essence falls into the wrong hands."

"Yes," says Viersk. "It would be a pity if that were to become commonplace."

"So how long did the war go on, between the Gods?" Dranko asks.

"I don't know that time had much meaning then. From your point of view, perhaps a blink of an eye. For them, maybe a decade or more, as you would see it. They do not experience the world the way you and I do."

Morningstar thinks she understands. "And Aurelia, and Nemmin, they died in that war?"

"Yes, I'm afraid they did, along with countless others."

"What about Yondalla?" asks Kibi. "She wasn't a Traveler."

"The Gods of other races have always occupied their own niches in the cosmos, and they make their own choices. Yondalla sent her champions to fight alongside the Kivian Gods. It was her home, too, that was being invaded. But since then, there has been a lasting peace."

Dranko continues his questions. "Which Gods were killed in the war?"

"You have seen them," says Viersk. "Leantha was the Kivian Goddess of Knowledge. Caba was the Darvin God of Fire, slain by Nifi. Aranod was the Darvin God of the Heavens. Kazon, who both slew and was slain by Nemmin and Aurelia, was the Kivian God of Spiders. They are the Gods who perished."

"And why are Aurelia and Nemmin buried across from one another?" asks Kibi.

Viersk turns to regard Ernie and Morningstar. "Because of you."

Ernie gapes. "Because it would be convenient for Morningstar and I to find them together?"

"Yes. And they are waiting for you."

Morningstar shakes her head. "But we tried to go to them, and we couldn't."

"That is because you didn't have this." Viersk produces from the folds of his robe a black disk on a chain, a disk with the symbol of Drosch upon it. "It is the final Ward. The one that Tarsos and Meledien did not take. If you are to find them and stop them, you may find it necessary."

"Should... should we return it when we're done?" Ernie stammers.

"No," says Viersk. "I don't know what is to become of it, or how exactly you will make use of it. But I do know that with it, you will be able to visit the final resting places of Nemmin and Aurelia. Take it. I believe it was meant to be yours. With it, there is hope, and hope is always better than its absence. Take care of it, and do not lose it, or let it fall into the wrong hands. And perhaps you should think upon why your enemies wanted them so much. I don't think it was only to plunder the tombs of Caba and Leantha. Those were targets of opportunity."

Ernie peers back up the hallway toward where the Tomb of Nemmin now awaits. "Maybe, if Nemmin and Aurelia killed Kazon, they were buried with something capable of killing a God."

"No," says Viersk, and Ernie's face falls. "But you may find you need such a thing, before the end."

"Any idea where we can find one?" Ernie asks.

"No. I'm sorry."

Dranko still thinks there's something too pat about all of this. "Were Nemmin and Aurelia moved here, just to make our lives easier?"

"No," says Viersk with a smile. "They have always been here. The Gods have great foresight, Dranko Blackhope." He peers at Dranko closely, and his smile fades. "No. You are Dranko Brightmirror. And also... hmm. You have many names; they are all obscured. Why is that?"

"Because he reinvents himself," says Ernie. "He decides his *own* true name."

"There's a monstrosity from the Far Realms affecting what people remember about me," adds Dranko with a grimace. "But I'm told it may come to great use someday."

"I hope so," says Viersk. "Though my guess is that it will destroy you."

"Maybe," says Dranko. "Maybe. But if I'm lucky, it'll be later rather than sooner."

Viersk now turns to Aravis. "You have a great curiosity, Aravis. Greater than most. And a source of knowledge greater than most, don't you?"

For a moment Aravis can't think of what Viersk means, but the others remind him of his fragment of personality adrift in the Crosser's Maze. He laughs. "I do sometimes forget things. Like the time I forgot about *magic missile* when we fought the blood fox."

"But now," says Viersk, "should you meet another such beast, you will be prepared."

Ernie laughs. "I, on the other hand, will be running and screaming like a girl."

Viersk turns on Ernie and speaks with a chiding tone. "No, you won't. You do not run away from anything, Ernest. It is your great strength. But are you prepared for great change, Ernest? Personal change?"

"I am prepared for anything Yondalla wills for me."

Viersk smiles. "You will need to give something up, both physical and not. And you will gain something, both physical and not. Yondalla will guide you."

"It is your lot to see and experience things that no other mortals have, or will," Viersk continues. "You have traveled to the past. You have traveled to worlds that few have encountered, and a world that never was. You will see things that none alive on Abernia have seen. And you will achieve great things, together, or you will perish. You, Kibi, will benefit especially from the full complement of your Company."

"You can give me any compliments you'd like," says Kibi.

Viersk looks puzzled. "I am unused to humor," he says. "But whether or not you consider this a compliment, I will remind you that you are still the Opener."

"Oh," says Kibi. "Do I have to do it again?"

"Yes. I cannot see any details of your path, as I have not been to Abernia. But I can see that you have a great destiny not yet fulfilled."

"Am I still the Slayer?" asks Morningstar.

"Yes, but do not be sad. And your moment may be upon you sooner than you think."

"And does Grey Wolf have a destiny?" asks Morningstar.

Grey Wolf chuckles. "I have a cranky sword. Does that count?"

"You should listen to Bostock more often," says Viersk.

"Can he kill a God?"

"No. But that will not stop him from trying. And listen... you all have a destiny, Morningstar of Ell, a destiny you may or may not meet. I cannot see your success or failure, because the future is written on water. Do not *rely* upon your destiny; it will not save you. But you have met it admirably thus far. Alander chose well."

"Is Alander here?" asks Ernie. "Or Abernathy?"

"No, they are not."

"Abernathy's kicking back on the Endless Shore," Dranko adds.

"He is not of a kind that ends up here, great though he was. But perhaps his part of the story is not finished, either." Viersk grows quiet for a moment, almost as if he's listening to something. "You are all unusually trustworthy," he then says. "Walk the Hall of Leantha, Aravis. I cannot guarantee what will happen, but perhaps you will have a question answered in some fashion. Aravis, go alone, for your thirst for knowledge is... unusual. And you, Morningstar and Ernie, take what the heroes offer to you. You'll need all the help you can get."

"We seldom turn down help," says Ernie.

"I know," says Viersk. "I know everything about you. And I am pleased."

"Wait," says Dranko. "Meledien and Tarsos were here. Could you see into their hearts, and... and know everything about them, like you do about us?"

"No. I wasn't here. I was only born after their departure."

Almost as an afterthought, Morningstar adds, "And what about Farazil?"

Viersk smiles. "He's right there." And Viersk points directly at Flicker.

carborundum: OoooohOooooOooooohhhhh!

Koedi: Uh-oh, Spaghetti.

blargney the second: Woah.

Silvy: That is a damned evil place to stop updating...

Neurotic: Twists and turns. Twists and turns. And then some turns and twists so it doesn't get repetitive...

Innocent Bystander: KABOOM! How many jaws dropped when that not so little bomb went off?

Mathew Freeman: My guess? ALL of them.

Awesome and informative stuff, Sagiro. I suspect people will be coming back to this post in times to come to check up what you were talking about.

Piratecat: Ah, this was the session where I missed some pretty amazing foreshadowing. No, two or three bits of pretty amazing foreshadowing, none of which would be made manifest for years, one of which (upon reading the collected Story Hour) has already been hinted at least three other times. One more reason why I love seeing how everything ties together. I also loved learning this history about the Gods, things that no one else knew, things that our religions would probably consider heresies. I'm so glad we left him Thriss.

And Farazil? NOT OUR FAVORITE PERSON RIGHT NOW.

Innocent Bystander: About Farazil, can he just ride along inside someone? If not, looking back were there any indications not all was right with Flicker? I guess that probably depends on how long he was in Flicker.

Piratecat: As a reminder, we were pretty sure that Farazil rode a local into this gate months and months ago. In fact, outside of this place we found a dead body that probably was this same person; not being able to enter Naslund or leave the outer demiplane trapped him. That means that Farazil was probably stuck, either bodiless or inside a starved corpse.

Apparently he solved this by entering Flicker as we passed by. Yeah, not my favorite person.

SteveAC: Looking back at the description of the party's entrance into Naslund:

Grey Wolf wonders aloud what became of Farazil when the dwarf died. "Doesn't he go back to the plane of shadow if his host body dies?" asks Ernie, trying to remember what they once learned of the Carch Din.

"If he's still here, he'll possess us if he wants to talk," says Morningstar, only half-joking.

Dranko grins. "Hey, Flicker...!"

"Are you volunteering me?" squawks Flicker. "Because... no. No way!"

"I'm asking if you're still you," says Dranko.

Flicker's eyes go wide; the thought hadn't occurred to him. "Yes!" he exclaims, looking around. "And I'd like to keep it that way!"

So either Farazil was already possessing Flicker, and was pretending not to be, or Dranko gave him the idea...

carborundum: Oooh, I'd love to know if it was planned this way, or if something the players said gave Sagiro a fiendish idea...

Sagiro: I knew that Flicker had become Farazil's host from the moment the Company went through the Arch. It was hard to keep a straight face when Dranko mentioned the possibility, and Flicker started vehemently denying it. Understand: Flicker wasn't lying. He didn't think he was Farazil's host, and really was horrified at the very thought.

Piratecat: Ladies and gentlemen, Sagiro may be the best ~~far~~ actor I know. Flicker's horrified denial was so convincing!



Will, Honor, and Knowledge

No one looks more agghast than Flicker himself. "What? No! NO!"

Ernie wheels on him. "Get out of my friend!"

Then Flicker's expression changes, as does his body language. "You're spoiling all my fun," says Farazil, addressing Viersk.

There is a collective sigh among the Company. Flicker's countenance changes again. "What? Why is everyone looking at me like that! I'm not Farazil! I'm not! Oh... crap."

Ernie regards him sadly. "Flick, you got Faraziled."

"Well," says Farazil, "he was the easiest one. And it was so boring, waiting, I had to possess *someone*."

Aravis peers at Flicker/Farazil. "How did you get in here in the first place?"

"I was doing exactly what I said I was going to do," says Farazil. "I was trying to find Tarsos for you. I tracked him to the Isle of Karth, so I jumped into the body of some dwarf, and found my way down to the arch at the bottom of the Downward Spiral. Then I found I couldn't get back out, and couldn't get inside the walls. The dwarf eventually starved to death. I didn't have enough food!"

Dranko nods. "And then when we came in, you jumped into Flicker."

"Yep."

"And you didn't bother to say, 'Hey, it's Farazil.'"

"I wanted to assess the situation first."

Morningstar glowers. "You mean, you wanted to wait to see if we were in horrible danger, and then maybe leave us trapped somewhere again?"

Farazil looks hurt. "Hey! No, no, no. Remember, I was under contract for that, and I hardly knew you guys. God's Thorn is water under the bridge."

Aravis shakes his head. "Now is not the time. We can nail him to a tree later."

"Look," says Dranko. "We've been looking for you, and we're glad you're okay."

"And I'm glad to be rescued!"

"Can you ride around in someone without taking full control?" Dranko asks.

"You mean like I have been the entire time, since I jumped into Flicker's body? Yes, I can do that."

"Then let Flicker slide forward and take control, and we'll chat with you later."

"Fine."

Flicker comes back to himself. "He was talking, wasn't he? He's really taken me over?" He gets nods and sympathetic looks. "Dammit! Get out!"

"Flick," says Dranko, "is it okay if he rides around in you for a while?"

"You've got to be kidding!"

"It's the only way he can get out of here," Aravis notes.

"Oh, that's terrible!" Flicker exclaims. "Sure wouldn't want to leave him here forever, to suffer the same fate that... ow! Ow, stop it! My tongue! Leave my tongue alone!"

Morningstar stares daggers. "Farazil, you're not helping."

"As much as I would enjoy it," says Aravis, "I don't think he should be left behind in this place."

Flicker throws up his hands. "Fine. I guess, at least if he's inside me, you all know where he is."

Ernie is nearly as incredulous as Flicker. "Yeah, inside the one of us who can sneak up behind people and inflict copious amounts of bodily harm!"

"You know," says Farazil, "I still wish to be a citizen of your fine Kingdom above all else, and I doubt King Crunard will look favorably on my petition *if I've murdered one of you?*"

"We can work something out," says Dranko. "It's all good."

Ernie wheels on Dranko. "When did you get all reasonable?"

"We need all the resources we can get at our disposal," says Aravis.

"Also," says Farazil, "please keep in mind that I followed your quarry just as I promised, and was rewarded with months of being stuck in this dismal place. I'm grateful for the rescue, and intend to be no trouble for you."

Dranko claps his hands. "Great. Now give Flicker back. And don't flee to someone else without talking to us first."

Kibi, seeing that there's little more to be done about King Farazil the Soul Eater, turns to Viersk. "So, how exactly do we get out of here?"

"It is a simple ritual. Here." He raises his hands, and knowledge comes to them. They are trapped in Naslund no longer.

"One last question," says Aravis. "Was the blood spilled by Tarsos and Meledien, that's partly Adversary blood – does it taint this place?"

"It is not causing any harm," says Viersk. "And it is now part of Naslund's history. If the blood is somewhat from a God, however malign, it is not out of place."

"We're sorry about the Tree," says Morningstar.

"Do not be. It will grow back its lost limbs, just as the Sand Guardians are ready to reform and attack. On the way out, stay close to whoever is holding the Ward. You are fortunate indeed that you came here *after* Drosh fled... or we would not be having this discussion."

"And Tarsos and Meledien would be dead," says Kibi. "Speaking of those two, what can you tell us about the artifacts they stole?"

Viersk looks aggrieved at the topic. "The Bulwark of Leantha is a very powerful shield, with strong divinatory powers. And the Spear of Caba – do not let it touch you. If it burns out your heart, it annihilates your soul."

There is a collective groan from the Company. There will be no coming back from the dead for Cencerra and her group.

As the Company prepare to head back down the long corridor of Naslund, Viersk bids them a final farewell. "I have enjoyed this visit. Perhaps destiny will elevate you, such that I will see some of you again."

"In the meantime," asks Dranko, "should we keep your existence a secret?"

"Use discretion," Viersk advises. "If you spread the word, it could spark pilgrimages, and the pilgrims would all starve outside the walls."

"Right."



Soon enough, the party arrive back where the tombs of Aurelia and Nemmin wait across from one another.

"Ladies first," says Ernie, and so Morningstar dons the Ward of Drosh and walks slowly down the short hallway to Aurelia's resting place. It still feels right for her to be here, and now there is no resistance at all to her approach. She clutches her holy symbol as she enters, and the moment she crosses the threshold, the room's aspect changes. Above her, instead of a stone ceiling, a night sky blazes with stars.

Beyond the sealed sarcophagus of Aurelia, on a short stone pedestal, rests a black steel hunting knife.

Morningstar can feel a presence in the room with her, a presence that brings the comfort of a deep and fruitful sleep; of Dreamwalking; of rendering aid to those in great need. "It feels like home here," she murmurs.

The answering voice sounds in her mind, soft and serene and full of power. *I have made it so. Welcome, Morningstar.*

"Thank you," Morningstar whispers. "You are Aurelia?"

I was. Now I rest eternally.

Morningstar kneels before the pedestal.

That is for you. Ell foresaw this need, long ago.

"It's a knife..." says Morningstar doubtfully.

Not for you.

While Morningstar wonders what that means, Aurelia continues. *I am honored to be in your presence, Morningstar of Ell. Your journey has been greater than mine. If you keep on this path, you will one day rest beside me.*

"That would be an incredible honor," says Morningstar, awestruck.

For both of us.

"I feel that I've made many mistakes..."

Of course! You are mortal, after all. But you learn from your mistakes. You'll make more mistakes before the end, I am sure.

"Is there anything I can do to serve?"

I want for nothing. And you are serving Ell most capably. Stay the course, Morningstar. Now, take your gift. It is Ell's Will.

Instinctively, Morningstar begins to utter the standard litany of evening prayers. Even as she does so, she hears a second voice echoing her own, praying along with her. When she touches the knife, it warms in her hand, bends, extends, and becomes a gleaming black morningstar with ivory spikes. And she knows: the name of this weapon is *Ell's Will*, and its powers are great.

This is the weapon that the Goddess gave to me. In part, it brought down the Spider God Kazon. It could not kill Him, but it caused Him great pain.

Morningstar stares with reverence at the weapon in her hand. "I hope to put it to good use."

I'm certain that you will. Dream of it tonight. It has even more to offer you.

Morningstar finishes her prayers and departs with thanks. Walking as though in a dream, she returns to her Company.

"What was she like?" asks Ernie.

"Wonderful!" is all Morningstar can say.

"Nice weapon!" says Dranko, looking at the glowing weapon in his wife's hand.

"Don't lick it," Ernie advises.

"It's called *Ell's Will*," says Morningstar. And then, thinking of one of her earliest battles when her weapon got tangled in a shrub, she adds with a laugh, "Bushes beware!"



Ernie's experience is quite similar in some ways, and altogether different in others. Like Morningstar, he finds that with the Ward of Drosch around his neck he can walk the full length of his hallway without hindrance. As he approaches Nemmin's tomb, he feels himself filled with strength, power and confidence. Once in the chamber itself he sees what could not be seen from without; the walls are festooned with weaponry. Beautiful pieces are everywhere: swords, axes, pikes, maces, more swords. But there is one spot, directly opposite the sarcophagus, where instead of an instrument of war, a holy symbol of Yondalla hangs from a silver peg.

"She is our blade and our bowl," Ernie says in a quiet but fervent voice. "She is our source and our shield. And... there's a lot of weaponry here, but only one of Her." He walks steadily to where the holy symbol waits.

Ernest! The voice sounds all around him. About frikkin' time!

"Sorry?"

It's all right. You showed up. That's something. The voice is boisterous, gently mocking but not at all cruel. It conveys vigor and a distinct lack of decorum.

"Well," says Ernie, taking a deep breath, "I lost track of time while I was out saving the world three or four times."

Yeah, yeah. You're really busy out there, I'm sure.

"And how have you been in here, Nemmin?" asks Ernie, warming to the tenor of the conversation. "Keeping everything polished, I see."

I don't do that, says Nemmin. Think I have to lift a finger in here? It's eternal rest for me!

Ernie smirks. "I suppose that's nice. What about food?"

I don't need to eat.

"Don't need to eat?" Ernie gasps. "What kind of eternal rest is that?"

You get used to it. I'm happy. But this little visit isn't about me. Ernie, you are going to become something. I don't know what; it'll be whatever your nature dictates.

"Will there be tentacles?" asks Ernie nervously.

I don't know. What have you been up to out there?

"It's not what I've been up to," Ernie grumbles. "But how do I start this 'becoming'? Do I pray?"

If you want. I'm sure Yondalla wouldn't mind. But if you just want to get on with it, take the thing on the wall. The Holy Symbol. The weapons aren't for you.

"I know," says Ernie. "I have one."

Yes. You have *Tava's Righteous Fury*. But you should say goodbye to it.

"Oh," says Ernie, unable to hide his disappointment. "Er... bye?"

Tava's Righteous Fury speaks. *Nemmin is right. My time with you is finished. You have done well, and ended your own goblin menace, but now I must go where I am needed more, to a place where goblins are still a threat.*

"That's the problem with goblins," says Ernie. "Always menacing."

They are a difficulty on many worlds. I have enjoyed our time together, Ernest.

Ernie smiles. "I have, too. I hope the next wielder has as good luck with you as I have had."

As for you, I am being replaced with something greater. You will not keenly feel my absence.

Nemmin, disembodied voice though he is, makes a sound of clearing his throat. *This is very touching, I'm sure, but can you let Ernie get on with it? I've been waiting a long time for this. I want to see what happens!*

Ernie reaches for the holy symbol, but somehow he finds his hand instead grasping the hilt of a sword. Its blade flares with golden light as he tightens his grip, and he feels himself changing, not a mere physical transformation, but a true metamorphosis of being. Inwardly he gains in perspective and piety, and the feeling grows stronger as the seconds pass. After a moment of this the fire in his veins dies down, leaving him an empty vessel waiting to be filled. In his soul, he knows: he is a true cleric of Yondalla. He drops to his knees.

Interesting.

"I didn't know I wanted this gift," Ernie whispers. "But now that I have it, I realize that I've needed it."

The sword is named *Honor of Nemmin*.

Ernie grins. "You had a sword named after you? Nice! And I'd say you deserve it, since you killed a God with it."

Almost. I wounded a God with it. I and that Ellish warrior woman, Aurelia, we were on the same line, facing down Kazon.

"She's across the hall, you know."

I know. We don't talk, but we feel each other's presence, and understand something of one another. She's... well, let's just say she probably wasn't the life of the party back when she was alive, but she was one fantastic warrior. As true a paladin of Ell as ever lived. So, yeah, take the sword. Go smite things with it. Its power will make you smite things. Prime you to smite things. It will take something out of you to use – you're still a mortal after all. You'll figure it out.

"Will it hurt?" Ernie asks.

Maybe. Not that it's ever stopped you before. It takes an anvil to do that! Nemmin laughs as he adds, Oh, sorry, should I not have brought that up?

"I have a list," says Ernie. "'Don't fight against anvils' is one of the first things on it."

Nemmin's voice becomes stern. Here's something else for your list. Take the Honor of Nemmin, and carve a bloody swath through your enemies. That's what I'd do if I were still alive! Just don't die the way I did.

"In battle?"

Spider bite.

"Ew."

I think your friends might be getting bored out there. Go kill stuff.

"It was an honor to meet you," says Ernie, bowing to the sarcophagus.

We could meet again, you know. You're most of the way there.

Ernie stammers. "No, I'm not..."

False modesty is a crock.

"It's not false!" Ernie protests.

Look. Ernest. Consider what you have done in this life, and what are you likely to do in the future. How does it compare with every other halfling on Abernia? Do you think everyone saves the world on a regular basis?

"They could have," says Ernie, "in the right circumstances..."

No. No, they couldn't. Yondalla chose you for a reason, Ernie. Your modesty is touching, but come on, cut the crap.

"Yes, sir."

It was good meeting you. I've had a long time wondering what you'd be like, and all joking aside, I'm impressed. Fight the good fight, Ernest Roundhill.

"Bloody swath, coming up."



Back in the main hall, the others press him for details about his meeting. Ernie shares his encounter and shows off his new sword. "I don't know what it does yet."

There is one more stop to make before departing the Necropolis of the Gods. As Viersk bid him, Aravis takes the Ward of Drosch and walks the hall to the tomb of Leantha, Kivian Goddess of Knowledge. In the burial chamber the walls are lined with shelves and the shelves are crammed with books. The lid of the sarcophagus lies askew on the floor, but to Aravis the thought of peeking inside is discomforting. There is an overwhelming sense of knowledge and understanding in this room, so much that if Aravis were to open his mind to it, he would surely be consumed.

Aravis! The voice sounds loud and imperious.

"Yes, my Lady?"

Once, I was knowledge. Her voice sounds twice – once when she speaks, and a following whisper like an echo. She pauses between each sentence.

Your trials will be great will be great. You may ask a question of me question of me. You may not understand the answer understand the answer. I don't know how you will receive it, for you are a mortal. But you may ask you may ask,

Aravis hardly has to think. One question overwhelms all others. "How do we stop the Adversary?"

For a moment there is no answer. Aravis asks, "Would you like me to restore the lid to your sarcophagus?"

That is not your task not your task.

There is another moment of silence before Leantha speaks again. Your question is difficult is difficult. Your Travelers, even in their collective might, could not stop him could not stop him. But I was Knowledge, and you may receive an answer receive an answer.

"Thank you, my Lady."

Go!

Siusi: Sagiro, your Story Hour here has directly impacted how I not only play, but view gaming in general. I am still somewhat agog at it being over. But... wow, man. Wow.

Piratecat: Oh Farazil, you complete and utter jerk. The fact that you aren't lying just annoys me more.

KidCthulhu was really pleased about getting to change Ernie to 100% cleric; she wasn't able to keep up with damage output as a fighter/cleric, and I know that she regretted how those fighter levels were keeping Ernie away from top-tier spells. I loved how Sagiro tied the change into in-game plot.

Innocent Bystander: Were there a lot of fighter levels to swap out? And what about Dranko – he's got a few cleric levels, hasn't he? No dead gods/avatars for him to snatch some cool toys from?

Piratecat: Dranko actually has 5 cleric levels, but even stretching it you couldn't exactly call him devout. Well, that's not true. He serves Delioch 100% faithfully in his own way. He's just not a big fan of church hierarchy, pomp, circumstance or rigamarole. He doesn't even think much of the church's high priest. That gets him spells but we've never had the sort of close relationship to Delioch that we've had with Yondalla or Ell.

And you know what? I haven't really missed it other than a few bittersweet moments – like this one, here in the necropolis. A close relationship with their Gods is Ernie's and Morningstar's thing. Dranko is defined by self-reliance, and it would be cutting in on their territory to pretend otherwise.

I've occasionally thought about somehow removing the cleric levels, or making them more useful, but I've never wanted to. They give him very minor offensive ability, but they're great for defense and utility, and more importantly they're a core part of who Dranko is. I'd have a lot of trouble playing the character without that religious grounding. (And also, I'm an inveterate optimizer who shouldn't be trusted to completely rebuild Dranko for more offense. Having a few cleric levels is useful for toning down his combat effectiveness.)

Everett: You say that all in present tense, like you're still playing him...

Mathew Freeman: Once again I find myself blown away by this story, and filled with admiration for the players.
Plus, "Bloody swath, coming right up!" is going on the list of Favourite Quotes.



Another One Comes Home to Roost

Of course, the Company press Aravis about what he learned in the Tomb of Leantha. "I could only learn what she chose to tell me. If I had tried to learn everything I could, it would have killed me."

"So what *did* you learn?" Morningstar asks impatiently.

"Nothing. Yet."

"Everything in due course," Grey Wolf mutters.

"What I *asked* was, how do we defeat the Adversary? She told me I *may* receive an answer."



Leaving Naslund is actually a simple matter; the ritual is short and uncomplicated, though it requires a handful of sand from inside the amethyst tower. The Company gather the bodies of Cencerra's group, along with the dwarven smith, and Aravis performs the ritual. (As he does so, Dranko scrawls a quick note to leave behind.)

Hi! You're kind of stuck here, maybe forever, because there's no good way for a non-God to leave. Sorry? Good luck!

Dranko.

When Aravis tosses the handful of sand through the gartine arch, it flashes to an opaque red. The party step through, and they find themselves at the bottom of the Downward Spiral. They have escaped Naslund intact, and are now in possession not only of two legendary weapons, but also of a powerful Ward of Drosch, which will allow them to survive in the presence of even a powerful Divine Being.

The mood is generally celebratory, but Morningstar is not smiling. She's staring down at her hand as if she's never seen it before. Specifically, she's staring at the blood-mark left there years ago by the winged ogre calling himself the Great One.

Her hand itches furiously; it seems that her long-awaited destiny as "the Slayer" may be upon her!

But before she can say anything about it to the others, Ernie turns angrily to Flicker. "All right. You. Out!"

Farazil chuckles. "Then which other of you would you like me to inhabit?"

Ernie splutters. "Why... I... you..."

"It's my nature!" says Farazil, raising Flicker's arms. "Excuuuuse me!"

"Your nature stinks," Ernie gripes.

Kibi clears his throat. "He did track Meledien and Tarsos for us..."

"I'm glad *somebody* noticed!" exclaims Farazil.

"You possessed my mother," says Ernie. "And now my friend. Forgive me for not appreciating you properly."

"Like we've asked you before," says Morningstar, "announce when you're leaving, and announce when you've come back. If you want to gain our trust, that's how."

"It's like entering someone's house," says Ernie. "You knock first, and wait to be invited in."

"I *couldn't* ask for permission," says Farazil. "That's not how it works! And Morningstar, I wasn't sure if *I* could trust *you*. I'm still not *entirely* sure that I can."

"Trust breeds trust," says Aravis. "We're going to have to start trusting one another. Because the world will end if we don't. Again."

Then Morningstar changes the subject. "I should probably mention that I'm getting the call to be the Slayer."



Finding the Way

As one might imagine, that little announcement causes quite the commotion. Right there, still in the Spiral, they sit and review everything they remember about their long-ago encounter with the ogres. The ogres had driven out the dwarves, the party recall, but were still nervous about a possible dwarfish incursion back into their subterranean empire. After the ogres had captured the Company, they agreed to free their captives if they would de-petrify their “Great One,” a blue-skinned bat-winged ogre. After Morningstar had broken the enchantment and returned the Great One to the land of the living, the monster had “rewarded” her by declaring her ‘the Slayer,’ and prophesying that ‘When the time comes for the Throggun’s ascension, you will be summoned, and you will slay again. Return here at once.’

No one knows what the “Throggun” is, but they’ve all had a sinking feeling for years that it won’t be good news for the benighted dwarves who still live nearby. They speculate that perhaps the war between the two races resumed with the return of the Great One, and now Morningstar will be asked to throw in her lot with the ogres.

The general feeling among the party is that they should at least go there and speak to the Great One. Aravis admits that while tracking Meledien, Tarsos and Seven Dark Words is their highest priority, the three of them are certainly *mind blanked* and the trail is months cold. With no good way to track them, they might as well deal with the Throggun.

Somewhere up above them, where the sun is presumably shining, it is late afternoon. They’re weary and beat-up from their excursion into Naslund; perhaps the Throggun can wait until tomorrow. Morningstar casts a short *commune* to find out for certain.

“Dark Lady, thank you for your gift. I will do my best to be worthy of it. I received a summons about the Throggun’s ascension. If we wait one day to answer, will it cause more harm to us or to the dwarves?”

ALMOST CERTAINLY NOT.

“*What if we wait two days?*”

PROBABLY NOT.

Clearly a trend...

“Farazil’s stated intention is that he wants citizenship. Can we trust his word on that?”

HIS CLAIM IS TECHNICALLY TRUE.

Her questions answered, she and the rest *dimension door* back to the surface, and hike back to Elkin’s Bay. They find the carpenter Chennik having a drink in the Sleeping Fish, and return to him the remains of Heckern the smith. Aravis explains briefly that the hapless dwarf had starved to death. “I would maintain your taboos against going to the bottom of the Downward Spiral,” he says.

Chennik shakes his head. “How did you get out, then?”

Aravis smiles. “We have many skills that ordinary people do not have.”

“Can you teach us?”

“No,” says Ernie curtly.

Chennik looks offended. “Well excuse me for asking!”

“You don’t understand,” says Ernie. “You can only get in or out if you have a particular characteristic that cannot be trained or acquired. Aravis here is the only person who has it.”

“Fine,” says Chennik. “I’ve been telling folk to stay away from that place for years, anyhow. We’ll give Heckern a proper burial.”

Flicker speaks... no, it’s Farazil. “I think Heckern will be happy in the afterlife. From what I know of the guy, I mean. I feel badly; he was a good dwarf, and didn’t deserve to die that way.” He sees Ernie staring daggers at him despite his comforting words, and adds, “But if you think I deserve some comeuppance, understand that I felt part of his suffering as he slowly died.”

Ernie fills his words with menace. “I don’t think you deserve *some* of the comeuppance...”

“Yeah, I know, you think I deserve all of it. I get it.”

"You were a hired assassin sent by Darkeye to kill us," says Ernie. "You're only trustworthy when someone's paying you. Hey, maybe we should pay *you* to infiltrate Darkeye's fortress for us!"

"I can't," says Farazil.

"Why not?"

"I just can't. Ask me anything else, but not that."

Morningstar looks up sharply at Farazil. "It's because you're still working for her, aren't you?"

"No. I promise you that I am not."

"Then what's the problem?" asks Dranko. "Could Darkeye recognize you, and blind you?"

Farazil doesn't answer. "Right," says Dranko. "You got your butt whipped."

"Technically it wasn't *my* butt," says Farazil. "It was someone else's, whomever I was in at the time."

"Did you see her?" asks Ernie. "See Darkeye? What does she look like?"

"No one sees her," says Farazil with a sigh. "It wasn't allowed."

"But you could show us where she is, on a map," Dranko prods.

"It's in the middle of a big forest..."

Aravis curiosity has been piqued. "Was Darkeye able to prevent you moving from body to body?"

"Yes," Farazil admits. "Not physically, but by a... forced agreement. Look, I was bound to the service of the Sharshun. I convinced them that I had fulfilled my end of our contract when I locked you in God's Thorn. But because it was a technicality, I made other agreements in order to be fully free of them altogether. Those agreements prevent me from going back there. If I do, bad things will happen. So, I'd both be going back on my word, *and* I'd get somebody else's butt kicked. Probably Flicker's. So, let me be clear: I'm not going. But I'll tell you this much: they're Sharshun. They have a castle, but it's not... there. I was never clear how it worked. When they let me out to come after you, it wasn't there when I left it. And when I came back, they had to bring me back in, and I don't remember the details."

"Were they in another dimension?" asks Dranko. "'Cause we understand that stuff, you know."

"Maybe it's like a glorified *Mordenkainen's mansion*," Aravis muses.

"I don't know," says Farazil. "I can tell you more or less where in the forest it is, but I'm not going close to it. I'll point out where I *think* it is on a map. It's heavily warded, in pretty much every way there is. Or at least it was. Good luck getting in."

But finding Darkeye is a task for another day. They *teleport* back to the Greenhouse, where Eddings greets them with arms full of cats. "Nice to see you again," he says with a bow of his head.

"We were just at the graveyard of the Gods," says Dranko with his usual grin.

Eddings blinks his magical eyes, the only sign of surprise. "Of course you were. Where exactly *is* the Graveyard of the Gods, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Right next to the Garden Shop of the Gods," says Ernie.

"Droll as always, Master Roundhill."

Aravis heads upstairs to the secret room and contacts Ozilinsh on the crystal ball. He delivers a full report, including the tidbit about the discovery of Farazil, and the unrecoverable deaths of Cencerra and company. When Ozilinsh asks what's next on their agenda, Morningstar answers: "The Throggun's ascension."

"Oh, that!" says Ozilinsh. "Tell me what a 'Throggun' is when you get back!"



While the rest of the Company prepare for sleep, and Aravis tries a fruitless *vision* of "Throggun," Morningstar drops into *Ava Dormo* and dreams herself to the holy city of Kallor, there to make a full report to the High Priestess Rhiavonne. It is testament to Morningstar's importance that the leader of her church drops all other business to make time for her.

"Thank you for meeting me so early," Morningstar says with a bow.

"It is no difficulty," says Rhiavonne. "Now, what is this all about?"

"You'll have to excuse me," says Morningstar. "It's been a long, strange day. We went to a place called Naslund, which is the burial place of the Gods."

Rhiavonne's eyebrows shoot up. "You did, did you? And where is Naslund?"

"The gateway is on the Isle of Karth. The only reason we could get both in and out, is because of Aravis, who has a partially divine nature."

"Ah, yes, the little cat godling you have with you."

Morningstar successfully stifles a laugh. "Some of what we learned, the Gods have intentionally obscured, and do not want generally known. But I feel like I need to talk about it."

Rhiavonne smiles. "I imagine you do. You can count on my discretion."

"We went in looking for Cencerra, a member of the Spire."

"I'm familiar with her. Did you find her?"

Morningstar's eyes tear up. "She's dead. And her soul has been destroyed."

"Is that an effect of dying in Naslund?"

"No. It's an effect of... Meledien and Tarsos entered Naslund. They infected themselves with the Black Evil Goo, which we now know is the blood of the Adversary..."

Rhiavonne interrupts. "The Adversary? The great malign God from whom Ell and the others fled?"

"Yes," Morningstar confirms. "There is a place in Kivia which is a great crater, filled with the Adversary's blood. Tarsos and Meledien infected themselves so that they could raid the burial places of the Gods. They destroyed the beings who were protecting it; the place was weakened by Drosh's abdication. They were able to steal a weapon that destroys souls."

"And they used it on Cencerra on their way out?"

"They used it on all of them."

Rhiavonne is silent for a moment, her head bowed. After allowing the High Priestess a moment of silence, Morningstar continues. "The part the Gods do not want known, is that when the Gods fled here from the Adversary, there was a terrible... misunderstanding between the Kivian Gods and the Travelers. Some Gods were killed. Those are buried in Naslund. It was Pikon who finally stepped in and called an end to it. He invited the Travelers to Charagan."

Rhiavonne lets out a long breath. "Amazing," she whispers. "I wonder why they don't want us to know."

"Shame, I think," says Morningstar. "And that they wanted there to be a peaceful accord among all the mortal children on Abernia."

"Best that such conflicts be forgotten, then," says Rhiavonne with a nod.

"Have you heard the name Aurelia?" Morningstar asks.

"Yes. Aurelia was a divine servant of Ell, if I recall my history. I thought she never made it to Abernia, that when the Gods fled the Adversary, she died defending them on their way here."

"No," says Morningstar. "She fought beside a paladin of Yondalla, against a Spider God of Kivia. I met Aurelia in Naslund. This weapon was hers." Morningstar lifts *Ell's Will* and hands it to her High Priestess.

"*Ell's Will!*" exclaims Rhiavonne. "You have *Ell's Will*. You... are greatly in Ell's favor. This was a weapon crafted at Ell's express instruction, only to be used by her most direct servants. Which you are, without a doubt, as we have seen several times over throughout the years. Wield it well!"

"I will do my best."

Rhiavonne runs her hands along the haft of the holy weapon, and only after a full minute does she remember to give it back. As she does so, she asks, "So, how's that chapter of holy scripture coming along?"

"That is part of why I'm here," says Morningstar. "I should write about what I learned in Naslund, but what would it gain anyone, if the Gods' war was widely known? It would only polarize the peoples of Abernia."

"Perhaps you can couch it in obscure verse or prophecy. Many of the oldest books and scrolls are written that way."

Morningstar sighs. "I was trained very well with a weapon and shield, but not with a pen. I've started the chapter several times. I'm... really rather better at fighting things."

Rhiavonne pats her hand. "Given recent events, perhaps your career as an auteur can wait until your retirement."

"I have a hard time imagining myself being retired," says Morningstar with a grimace. "If I'm going to write, I should do it. I'm in a very dangerous line of work."

"I'm certain I can have no true conception of the risks you face on a daily basis," says Rhiavonne. "Do as you think best, but I am putting no pressure on you. I was only curious."

"Right. Anyway, I thought I should tell you all of this before I go deal with the Throggun."

"Ah, that. I know that's been bothering you for some time. I am speechless as always when you give these kinds of reports. I envy you, and pity you at once."

"Why do you envy me?"

"Because you are extraordinarily high in Ell's favor, and your actions are powering the turning of the world. You are involved in events that millions of folk on Abernia will feel keenly. I, for instance, have never been to the City of Dead Gods."

Morningstar laughs. "It's a great responsibility," she points out.

"Yes. And that is why I pity you also. But you should feel neither pity nor pride; only gratitude."

"What I've gained that I most value is the comradeship of my Company. I am uncomfortable with the glory, I don't know what to do with it."

"It is yours to do with as you will. Let it blow from your back like dust; or shed it like a skin; or wrap yourself up in it. You can reflect it back on those you love the most."

Inwardly, Morningstar feels a great sadness. *Except for Dranko*, she thinks. *Glory will never be his.*

Rhiavonne continues. "Ultimately, glory is of no consequence. Would you do any different, if I told you you would live and die in obscurity, or if you would be the most renowned hero in history?"

"No," Morningstar admits.

"Well then. You should not dwell o'er much on it, I think."



Before Morningstar goes to sleep that night, Dranko asks her if she'll be able to sleep with the Great One's mark itching on her hand. "Don't worry about me," she says. "I'm a professional sleeper. What's more likely to keep me up is knowing I'll learn more about *Ell's Will* tonight."

But in truth she falls asleep almost at once, and she dreams. She dreams that she is in *Ava Dormo*, or maybe's she's actually there. It's hard to say. There is a tall woman there, with long white hair. She greets Morningstar with a salute.

"I am Aurelia. Or rather, I am your dream of her. May I?" She holds out her hand, and Morningstar hands her *Ell's Will*. For a moment Aurelia holds it, and remembers its past. It glows with a soft light.

"Now it is finished. *Ell's Will* will be dominant against those resistant to magic. Woe be to those that stand against you. And I also give you this." Aurelia touches Morningstar's forehead, and Morningstar feels her mind expand, in ways that relate to her understanding of *Ava Dormo*. She feels unbounded in Dream, that nothing can hinder her.

"Your needs will be great," says Aurelia. "Your strength will be great. Do your best. Save us all."

Abruptly Morningstar wakes up. It is morning, and though she feels as if little time has passed, she is wholly refreshed.

"Good morning!" she says to Dranko, giving her groggy husband a joyful kick. "Time to go! Time to find the Throggun!"



Everett: So how about some stats on Morningstar's and Ernie's new weapons?

Sagiro: Ell's Will is a +6 morningstar with the *ghost touch* ability. It allows Morningstar to Quicken one healing spell per day of up to 8th level. In addition, against creatures with spell resistance, it has a +5 unnamed bonus to hit, and does bonus damage per hit equal to the spell resistance of the target. (No, that's not a typo. That's some serious bonus damage!)

Siuis: This is a fabulous weapon and I am going to have to give it to an NPC sometime soon, to deal with all the rampant SR 60+ we've got going.

Everett: Without looking through the story archives, I can't recall if Morningstar has ever used a melee weapon. Was this the first time she'd used the weapon she's named for?

Piratetacat: Nope, although it's become less common as we've risen in levels. For instance, on the very first adventure where we met Sagiro, she fumbled and took out a bush. To her credit, it was one seriously badass bush.

Ell's Will gives her an option to use against monsters with untenably high spell resistance.

Sagiro: According to my notes, *Honor of Nemmin* is a +6 keen, good-aligned shortsword, which grants the wielder +10 feet to movement. Also, 1/day Ernie can invoke *Nemmin's Glory*, which lasts for the remainder of the encounter:

- +5 to BAB
- +10 sacred bonus to STR
- +4 sacred bonus to AC
- Anyone you damage in this form gets a -4 to hit penalty if they make a melee attack against anyone else.

Invoking *Nemmin's Glory* uses up an uncast 9th-level cleric spell, and while under its effects, Ernie cannot cast spells or use spell-completion items.

Siuis: Forgive my inherent munchkinism, but my first thought is, "In what situation is +10 attack, +5 (?) damage and marking an enemy worth losing spellcasting for the rest of a battle?" And then I thought about it. As epic games go, yours is definitely epic in scope, but as far as epic mechanics go, your game seems downright *manageable*. Which sounds like an insult because of the way I wrote that, but it's definitely not.

That's a fascinating level of trust, that I think I will actively work to engender. A character need only meet about 75% of their optimized potential, because for 99% of the game that will be more than sufficient. I think that's a sign of great DMing, that your players are willing not to twink out, but trust in your discretion.

oliverhenshaw: +5 BAB means an extra iterative attack too, doesn't it?

Enkhidu: I was thinking more along the lines of Power Attack being the silver lining, but yeah – extra iterative.

Everett: Seems pretty clear that Ernie would invoke the weapon's Glory only in a situation that calls for him to meet an enemy head to head, with the rest of the party providing backup while Ernie essentially fights as a paladin would.

Siuis: This is true. And didn't Ernie just drop some deadweight fighter levels? So this is a nice replacement to allow him to keep up the momentum.

My comment was more on my perceptions. Ernie has never been that kind of a character, never (as I recall) used a *destruction* or a *disintegrate*. Ernie is a darn awesome halfling who just so happens to occasionally be called upon to do his righteous duty. I can respect that. I just know that any effect that says "no more casting" freaks me out, but I am eternally a wizard.

Come to think of it, wasn't Ernie being a Wilburforce sort of a big thing? I got the impression that would be addressed at one point, at least like exposition. But I do not recall anything else about it. Am I misremembering? I'd reread the Story Hour but I've got some work paperwork to do and I know I won't if I start up again. Love this story, though. So much.

Joshua Randall: Ernie being a Wilburforce is a major plot point, starting all the way back in Chapter 1 of the collected Story Hour [see page 29 of Part One]. It gets resolved in Chapter 20 [see page 420 of Part Two].

Siuis: Hmm. I want to say I expected a bigger resolution, but now I have vague memories of saying this all before... Alas, my memory. She is not so good as I had hoped her to be.

I must say, though, I am continually impressed by the group's ability to be reverent towards the divine. That is something I have unfortunately been hard-pressed to find in any gaming group I've met in person...

Rimk

Knowing that he'll again be out of town for a while, Dranko pens a letter to Lucas:

*Survived latest hideous deathtrap that you won't
believe if I tell you. Now off to fight demonic
ogres on another continent. – Dranko.*

While he's writing, Morningstar sends to the winged ogre:

I'm being summoned? You have twenty-five words to respond.

She gets this response:

Yes. It is time for you to slay. Sooner is better. Meet me at the dragon's remains.

So, it's a date! They prepare to *teleport* to eastern Kivia, and the ogrish territory east of Gurund in the Stoneguard Mountains. As Aravis casts his spell, Dranko remarks, "You know what? It's now easier for me to go across the 'Uncrossable Sea' to another continent, than it is for me to walk to the next room to take a crap."

True enough. In an eyeblink the party are standing in what can best be called a roofless cavern, a gap in the mountains with steep slopes rising around them on all sides. As they remember, there is an enormous bleaching dragon skeleton here in this grassy enclosure. To the southeast are two enormous double doors set into the rock face, doors which lead to the ogres' domain. Ernie notes with annoyance that the journey has moved them seven hours later in the day; it is already late afternoon. "It's not right," he complains. "A meal just disappeared."

The winged Great One is not there, so Morningstar issues another *sending*:

We're here right now. Would you care to join us?

I will be there momentarily.

Soon the huge double doors open, and the Great One emerges into the enclosure. It's been years since the Company last saw him, but he has not changed. He is massive, tall, with deep indigo skin and enormous reptilian wings jutting from his back.

"You're looking well," says Dranko.

"Thank you," rumbles the Great One. Then the purple ogre realizes that Kibi is staring holes through him. "Mister dwarf," says the Great One with a small bow.

"Mister demonic ogre," says Kibi in sullen tones.

"I am not demonic," says the Great One. "I am draconic. My name is **Rimk**." Then, to Morningstar, he says, "I am glad you brought your friends. You will need them. It is good that you are here, as promised."

"Say," says Dranko. "We were wondering. What's a Throggun?"

"Throggun," says Rimk, "is an old Ogrish word that means 'winged terror.'"

Ah. "So the Throggun is your dad?" Dranko asks.

"Exactly. His name is Azhant the Ancient."

"What color are his wings?" Dranko presses.

"The same color as the rest of him: indigo." To Morningstar he then says, "I wish you to slay my father; I cannot lift a hand against him."

Morningstar regards the Great One with a neutral expression. "And why would we do that?"

"Because he has returned, and has ordered my people to prepare for war, against the dwarves and what remains of Gurund."

Well, that puts things in a somewhat different light! "And you don't wish to do that?" asks Morningstar, puzzled.

Rimk sighs. "It would be a great tragedy for all of us. The main reason I do not wish him to destroy the dwarves, is that that would call the unwanted attention of the humans. The ogres have lived long, separated from mankind, and it is well that it is so, for though we are mighty, you are... numerous. Should there ever be war, should the humans decide that they want to exterminate us, and bend all of their will to that end, they would succeed. There are champions among you that would cause us great trouble.

"The ogres will not listen to me on this matter. I hold great sway over them, but Azhant, indeed the mere memory of him, holds greater sway. My deep suspicion is that Azhant knows well the endgame of this, that it will serve his purpose for us to wipe the dwarves out, and for the humans then to wipe us out – and all to be weakened in the process, to serve his own goals, to solidify his power in the region. He cares nothing for ogres; there is nothing of ogre in him. He is powerful, cunning, and deadly. Honestly, if it weren't for the prophecy, I wouldn't give you much chance against him."

"Are we prophesied to win?" asks Ernie. Rimk just chuckles.

"Can you tell us anything about his abilities?" asks Morningstar.

"Little," says Rimk. "His breath is variable. He can change it on a daily basis, and sometimes more frequently than that. His resistances, likewise. He is also a powerful sorcerer in his own right. I don't know what you expect to do about him."

"Does he have any weaknesses?"

Rimk laughs. "No. He is Azhant. He has never been challenged, never been defeated."

Morningstar rubs her temples. "Where can we find him?"

"His home is known to the ogres as Gad Meng... Cloud Mountain in your tongue. It used to be called the Floating Stronghold by the dwarves; it was one of their great architectural achievements. They inhabited the entire mountain, ages ago. Azhant's abode therein is a series of caverns near the top, above the clouds. His lair is shielded from divinations, as he has had centuries to build up his defenses."

"Does he have minions?" Dranko asks.

"We believe so, but are not certain. He has not been active in this region in quite some time."

"Is his lair trapped?"

"It would not surprise me."

Dranko laughs. "Maybe Farazil could just possess him!"

Flicker/Farazil turns to him. "I can't possess a dragon. Are you crazy?"

Ernie, annoyed at Farazil saying anything at all, musters up some unexpected sarcasm. "I thought you were good at this."

Flicker becomes a bit glassy-eyed, and then Ernie himself, in an odd tone of voice, says "Don't mock me." Then Flicker says the exact same thing a second later.

Morningstar is furious. "Farazil, you have just broken faith with us *again*."

Once again occupying Flicker, Farazil spits a sullen retort. "Then maybe you should treat me with some respect."

Morningstar glowers. "The moment your word becomes worth anything, you'll earn our respect. Until then, what you are is a liar and a cheat."

Ernie, realizing what has happened, loses his temper. He slams Flicker up against the nearby wall of the mountain, and his voice is a blade of cold anger. "If you ever do that again, I will kill you, even in Flicker's body. Him, I can *resurrect*."

"Ernie!" shouts Flicker in alarm. "Let go of me!"

Ernie does not let go. "I do not *ever* want you inside my mind again. Do you understand me?"

Farazil is defiant. "Yes, and I do not *ever* want to be insulted again. Do *you* understand *me*? You know, I could jump into one of these ogres any time I wanted, and you'd never see me again. I could make your lives very uncomfortable. But I'd rather not. I'd *like* for our relationship to be more agreeable. But if you're just going to constantly mock me, while I'm standing right in your midst, then that will make things extremely difficult."

"We're not mocking you," says Dranko. "We fear you. We fear what you can do, and we still have a lot of pent up frustration over the trouble you've caused us in the past."

"You've had years," says Farazil. "Get over it."

"ENOUGH!" thunders Aravis, and that buys everyone a few seconds of silence. Then Kibi mutters, "Maybe if we don't want Farazil to take over Flicker, we shouldn't keep talking to him."

Flicker agrees. "Seriously! Do you know what? It's really creepy when you're suddenly talking to me as if you've just been talking to someone else and I have no memory of it."

"He's just going to bide his time until he can find a way to betray us again," says Morningstar.

Rimk has watched all of this with a great fascination. "Have you all gone mad?" he asks, looking from one to another of the Company. "What was that?" No one answers him. "I must say, my confidence in your ability to kill Azhant has not been bolstered – though I have gathered that you are all extremely belligerent..." – he points at Flicker – "...toward that one."

Dranko is quick to change the subject. "So, how do we get to Cloud Mountain?"

Rimk points to the south-east. "It's about twenty miles that way, and up. The mountain itself rises up to the clouds. I believe his lair is at the top." Perceiving a certain nonchalance among the party, he adds, "Do not underestimate him. He is not just another monster in your long list of conquests."

"Right," says Dranko. "So the whole 'Throggun's ascension' thing..."

"It was a metaphor for Azhant's return from seclusion and likely rise to power," says Rimk. "He has not been seen in decades, until just a few days ago."

Morningstar asks, "Do you know what's motivating him to do this now?"

"I don't know," Rimk admits. "Whatever he was doing before, I suppose he has grown bored with it. It is in his nature to seek power. But understand this, Morningstar: the prophecy does not guarantee success, but you *must* make the attempt. I think you

were chosen because you have the greatest chance of defeating the dragon. And make no mistake; killing Azhant will save many dwarfish lives. I tell you this truthfully: my personal long-term objective is to see peace between the ogres and the dwarves.”



Rimk leaves them to plan and scheme. The Company spend some time discussing dragon-fighting tactics. “When you fight a dragon,” says Dranko, “don’t do it somewhere it can fly. Better to fight it somewhere indoors, and restricted. And I always have our secret weapon: let it swallow me, and activate my *immovable rod*. Problem with that is, it turns out that you can’t cut your way out of a dragon’s gullet with a whip.”

“We should have as many different kinds of damage ready as possible,” says Morningstar, considering Rimk’s warning.

“I bet he’s not immune to ass-kicking damage,” says Dranko.

Joshua Randall: *snicker* Our group calls it ‘sword to the face damage,’ but the point remains. (Heh, ‘point’... *groan*)

Before the discussion goes too much further, Morningstar makes the sensible decision to scout out Cloud Mountain in *Ava Dormo*. It won’t tell her exactly where the dragon is, or if it has any allies or minions, but knowing the topology of Cloud Mountain’s interior could be invaluable. All she has to go on is Rimk’s vague ‘about twenty miles that way,’ so she drops into the Dreamscape and heads in that direction at top speed. It doesn’t take her long to cover the distance, but what she finds is simply more mountains, stretching in their dozens for miles in every direction, with many of them rising upward to vanish into the cloud layer.

Knowing that the dragon’s lair is near one of the high peaks, she spends fifteen more minutes flying directly upward, until she herself is looking down upon a puffy white floor of clouds. It is extremely bright, a cobalt vastness into which protrude a scattering of snowy mountaintops, like islands in a cotton sea. She spends another hour hopping from peak to peak, each giving her a new perspective on the others, and her thoroughness is rewarded. One of the highest mountains has a tunnel bored into its side, just above the cloud layer. If one could walk upon the clouds, one could step off one and directly into the tunnel.

Back outside Rimk’s domain, she lets the others know of her discovery. After a quick conversation, she casts *dream anchor* on Aravis and Kibi, and takes them into *Ava Dormo* with her. This way they’ll have seen landing spots for *teleports* when it’s time to launch their actual assault. But in the meantime: more scouting!

Innocent Bystander: Whoa, a dragon. Is this the first (live) dragon the Company will face? What was everyone’s reaction to learning who/what their target was? I’m guessing everyone was thinking they’d have to go slaughtering some great dwarven hero/leader or something.

Piratecat: We’ve fought two other (smaller) dragons; one at Verdshane, one ridden by the Emperor’s rakshasa servant back in the past. None this old or puissant. As for the target... it was a surprise. I’m going to speculate for a moment. I suspect that Sagiro had many possibilities and, in order to forestall Morningstar’s moral concerns about working for the ogre, gave us a task that was in no way reprehensible! It actually felt (to me) a little simplistic and too neat, in that there was no gray area or moral quandary at all. I kept expecting a double-cross that never came. I’ll be curious to hear his opinion on this.

Also, dragons suck.

Joshua Randall: Puissant is a great, Gygaxian word.

Sagiro: I’d always known that Morningstar (and by extension the rest of the party) was going to be summoned back to kill a Big Bad Dragon. Now, at the very moment that I first mentioned “the Slayer” and “the Throggun’s ascension,” I didn’t know *exactly* what was going to be involved. (I remember having the idea at the time that the big dragon skeleton was going to turn out to be the one they’d fight, but I dropped that idea once the party fought the dracolich in the ravines of Il-Drosh.)

To address Piratecat’s question more directly: it was very early on that I decided that it would be a straight, no-moral-quandary battle royale with a dragon. And what led me to that decision was the party’s collective certainty that there *would* be a moral quandary; as I’m sure you surmised, I enjoyed subverting player expectations from time to time... I figured I’d let you all spend a few years worrying that you’d be called on to kill a bunch of dwarves, and then give you the (pleasant) surprise of a guilt-free draconic ass-kicking. Simplistic and neat? Yeah, maybe. But I figured the game hadn’t lacked for moral conundrums over the years.

As for the specific timing: I always knew I’d spring this one fairly late in the campaign, since I wanted it to be an extremely tough dragon, and so needed the PCs to be high-level in order to stand a chance. I was waiting for a good secondary plot hook to come along, and the party’s actions in Naslund gave me a very specific role the dragon could play.

Oh, and you missed three other dragons: the skeletal dragon *and* the dracolich from the ravines in Il-Drosh; and your very first dragon, the baby white from the Black Circle bestiary.

Piratecat: Aha, great to know!

Innocent Bystander: Boy, do I need to go through the PDFs for a refresher. Good thing I’ve got two weeks of holidays coming up.

I (now) recall the dragon at Verdshane, and the one in the past. The dracolich is hard to forget, and I also remember the skeletal dragon; they were the reasons I wrote ‘(live) dragon.’ I have no recollection of the baby white, though. Wow, was that a long time ago.

Everett: The battle that marks Morningstar as “the Slayer” would be unsatisfying somehow if they had to slog through moral quandaries to get to it, given that Morningstar almost never shares the party’s moral uncertainties.



Making Their Pitch

The tunnel near the peak of Cloud Mountain is a straight bore into its west-facing side, some fifty feet in diameter. Just inside its mouth, and then spaced evenly at the edges, are the remnants of smashed pillars. Kibi believes they were of dwarven craftsmanship. The walls are cracked and scarred and haphazardly blackened. Recently created objects are not reflected in *Ava Dormo*, but Morningstar imagines that in the real world this place is likely filled with the rubble of a once-grand promenade, reduced to wreckage in later years.

Morningstar, Kibi and Aravis move quickly down the tunnel. Small, dark chambers are connected to this main hallway; each shows similar signs of ruin. After 150 feet a pit opens wide in the floor, itself 40 feet in diameter, heading straight down into the mountain's heart. It's wide enough that even a large dragon could fly up and down easily.

Floating through the Dreamscape, the three scouts descend into the pit, which continues downward for over three hundred feet before emptying out into an enormous empty cavern. (Of course, it could be filled with any number of things – piles of treasure, ancient statues of dwarves, an angry and powerful dragon – but there's no way for them to find out in their dream-walking state.)

At the bottom of the vast cavern, a (relatively) small tunnel, no more than 15 feet wide, snakes away into the north-facing wall. It's well hidden by rocky outcroppings around the entrance, but Kibi can sniff out that sort of thing in his sleep. This new tunnel twists and corkscrews down deeper into the mountain, descending well over five hundred feet before opening onto the floor of a second, equally large cavern. Like the previous one above, this one could also be home to Azhant, but there's no way to tell without coming back corporeally. There is one unusual feature of the lower cavern; near its top is an odd stone latticework that extends horizontally across the entire volume, like a very poorly concealed false ceiling, or a huge stone grating. Above this rocky lattice by about 50 feet are a number of niches, themselves about 20 feet in diameter, set into the *actual* ceiling. The gaps in the latticework are typically about ten feet by ten feet – large enough for most things, but not for something the supposed size of Azhant the Ancient. Kibi is certain that there are no other ways out of the lower cavern, so both he and Aravis take some time to memorize various *teleport* locations around both of the huge caves, before Morningstar returns them all to their physical bodies.

After a brief bit of talk about anti-dragon tactics, and some magic-item swapping for maximum fightin' efficiency, they are ready to take on Azhant the Ancient! Buff spells are liberally applied, and Aravis *teleports* the party just above the stone "Swiss cheese" drop-ceiling of the lower cavern.

Their noses are assaulted immediately by a musty, lizard smell, which is a sign they've come to the right place. Even with their *darkvision* there is little to see, as the walls are all more than 60 feet away. But all around them are sounds – rasping, scaly sounds and occasional high-pitched cries. Grey Wolf, with *enhanced senses* cast, sees faint shadows flitting on the walls of the niches above their heads. He flies up to investigate.

A scaly head on a sinewy neck pokes out from the nearest alcove as Grey Wolf arrives. The niches are nests! At least this one is, filled with bones, refuse, and a few rotting tree limbs. It also contains a small black dragon, about the size of a large cow, which Grey Wolf immediately pegs with a *lightning bolt* before flying down and away.

In the bright flash of electric light, the Company can see numerous black dragons – at least a half-dozen – starting to snake out of their ceiling caves. They have large, sharp teeth, and the air suddenly reeks of heat and tar. One of them flaps its way down toward them, opens its toothy maw, and spits a glob of steaming black glop into the midst of the party. Everyone but Grey Wolf and Flicker is coated with steaming black tar which burns their skin and immediately sets their clothes on fire.

Four more of the dragons do the same! *Energy buffer* spells are discharged, and several *protection from energy* spells are entirely burned off, as the party are thoroughly sludged with burning pitch. No one drops, but no one is exactly happy, either. Kibi is quite badly burned, having failed to evade any of the dragons' attacks.

Dranko realizes that he'd need to waste valuable combat time to put himself out, so he lets himself burn while lashing out at the nearest dragon with his whip. Its body is narrow, serpentine, with four sharp claws and two leathery wings. It hisses back at Dranko. "You don't date much, do you?" the half-orc quips.

Ernie casts *mass cure serious wounds*, easing the pain of his many burning allies. Kibi then puts himself out (and out of harm's reach) by moving into the stone of the latticework. Three of the remaining four dragons breathe, each horking up steaming balls of boiling tar onto Morningstar and Aravis. The last of Aravis's elemental protections are gone, and he starts popping charges of his *ring of evasion* to stay (relatively) unburned. The final dragon, finding itself next to Dranko, tries raking the half-orc with its teeth and claws, to only modest effect.

Aravis allows himself to continue burning; he has better things to do with his time. To wit: he *shapechanges* into a large yellow dragon, flies to a good tactical location, Quickens a *shield* spell just because, and then unleashes a *prismatic spray* upon three close-clustered black dragons. One of the three is unaffected, and a second is only mildly singed by fire, but the third vanishes entirely, involuntarily plane-hopping.

Morningstar also chooses not to extinguish herself. Instead she casts a massive *fire storm*, engulfing all of the enemy dragons in cold black flames. Some dodge, some don't, and all scream in pain. Then she grips *Ell's Will* and concentrates on the nearest dragon. She learns exactly how spell resistant they are (SR 26), and knows just how much stronger her weapon will be against them.

Grey Wolf Quickens a *true strike* and charges the nearest dragon, striking it with Bostock loaded with a Maximized *acid orb*. **SPLOOOP!** There's a huge gout of acid, Bostock flares with blue light, and a dissolving mass of dragonish remains falls through a gap in the latticework and out of sight.

A number of the dragons launch a counterattack. Instead of breathing tar, they set to their victims with teeth and talons. Two savage Flicker, while another two chomp down on Ernie and Morningstar. While painful, the traditional claw-n-bite attacks of the dragons are much less troublesome than the fiery pitch. Dranko and Ernie strike back, and Kibi unleashes a Maximized *cone of cold*. Ice is certainly the right tool for this job; two of the dragons are badly wounded, one badly enough that it is forced to land on the stone lattice. A third dragon is flash-frozen – a few seconds later everyone hears, somewhere in the darkness below, what sounds like a huge glass chandelier smashing onto a stone floor.

The Company slowly whittle down the number of enemies in a fast-moving aerial battle. As the dragons succumb to the might of the heroes, the barrage of burning-tar breath grows more and more manageable. Kibi dazzles one with a *rainbow pattern* (“Here, dragon dragon! Follow the sparkles!”) and while it snaps at the motes like a puppy chasing soap bubbles, Grey Wolf and Flicker carve it up like a turkey. Aravis invokes *lightning ring* and blasts holes in several more. Morningstar has perhaps the finest moment of the combat, as she strikes a dragon several times with *Ell's Will*. Bolstered by her enemies' spell resistance, she shears through the dragon in four successive swipes with the weapon, as if she's in combat with a lizard made of cottage cheese. Her last swing takes off her foe's right wing like she's plucking a petal from a dying flower. As the pulped remains of the dragon fall into the darkness, she watches, stunned. Dranko just grins at her.

The final dragon, already struck by a Maximized *ray of enfeeblement*, tries to flee, but Aravis gives chase and grapples it. Both of them start to plummet, but after a hundred feet of falling, Aravis *dimension doors* away at the last minute, leaving the tar dragon to splat into the stones. “Don't f**k with an archmage,” says Dranko.



The Company gather at the bottom of the cavern to heal and regroup. Dranko may or may not engage in a “we just killed nine dragons” dance. But while Azhant may not be lurking in this lower of the two large underground chambers, there's still the one above. Once again they prep for battle, and *teleport* as a group, but the upper cavern is devoid of dragons, small or large. Quickly they sweep the space with a battery of divination spells: *see invisibility*, *darkvision*, *greater arcane sight*. Nothing shows up immediately, but after several minutes of searching they do discover a huge illusory heap of treasure “heaped” in one corner. Ernie examines this with *true seeing* and finds that the phantom loot pile conceals dozens of tiny tripwires crisscrossing at ankle height. Grey Wolf sniffs the air; it smells distinctly draconic, and he thinks a dragon has been here recently, but not too recently. Where is Azhant?

Kibi has his own ways of getting answers. He touches the wall of the cavern and casts *stone tell*. He senses the stone's ancient and lugubrious cognizance. **KIBILHATHUR**, says the stone.

You know my name, says Kibi. He's been told before that *all* the stones know his name, but it's startling all the same.

OF COURSE, says the stone.

We're trying to find a dragon, says Kibi. **We were wondering if there were any other rooms he has nearby, besides this one, and the one below.**

I HAVE HEARD RUMBLINGS FROM FAR DOWN. The wall speaks in the slow voice of aeons. **ROOMS MADE BY YOUR KIND – DWARVEN KIND – BUT THEY WERE DESTROYED LONG AGO, BY YOUR RECKONING. ONE OTHER LARGE CAVERN, FAR FROM HERE, MADE BY DWARVES ALSO. A GREAT HALL, A TOWN, BELOW, FAR FROM ME.** There is a pause, as the stone wall collects its slow, massive thoughts. **A LARGE CREATURE COMES HERE SOMETIMES. SMALL CREATURES LIVE HERE, TOO. NEW CREATURES, SMALL, NEAR TO YOU.**

Kibi frowns. **Do you know, does the big creature go to the dwarven halls?**

I DON'T KNOW, answers the stone. **THAT IS FAR FROM ME.**

Where are the dwarven halls?

DOWN, says the stone. Thinking in more earthy terms, it adds: **TOWARD A VERY LARGE CONCENTRATION OF SILVER.**

Are there gaps between here and there?

NOT NEAR TO ME.

Is there anything else you can tell us? asks Kibi.

I AM IN PAIN, says the stone. **ALL OF THE STONES ARE IN PAIN. YOU SHOULD HELP US.**

Kibi grimaces. **What can I do?**

I DO NOT KNOW, the stone laments. **THE SOURCE OF THE PAIN IS FAR, FAR, FAR BELOW ME.**

In this mountain?

IN ALL MOUNTAINS.

Kibi thinks, *The Thorn in the side of Abernia*. **I'll try my best to help you**, he says. **I don't wish you to be in pain.**

There is silence, and Kibi thinks the stone is done with him, but then the wall speaks one more time. **KIBILHATHUR? YOUR ANCESTOR SAYS HELLO. HE IS ALWAYS WATCHING.**



Kibi relays his conversation to the others. Upon hearing that Cranchus had conveyed his greetings, Ernie asks Kibi if the ancient dwarf can help them out. While Kibi shakes his head, Dranko lights his cigar. **DWARVES ABOVE ALL.** Ah, well.

"Hm," says Dranko. "So this isn't his home. All the little dragons lived here, but the big one took up residence somewhere else in the mountain."

There's nothing else to see in this upper cavern, so they return to the lower one and do a more thorough search. They find *another* pile of treasure, bigger than the one above, and this one is more promising. It radiates magical auras, but is not disguised by illusions. Gems and coins glitter among a collection of valuable-looking items. Flicker reaches down to pick up a shimmering dagger, but something catches his eye at the last minute and he yanks his hand away.

Dranko casts *detect poison* and discovers that every coin and gem and object in the hoard is coated with venom. Flicker dons gloves and gingerly fishes out a gem. It's glass. Then he picks up a gold crown, one which Dranko indicates is magical, and finds that's actually cheap tin, painted gold. It's not even of enchantable quality, though someone has cast a low-level magical aura upon it. "Crap," says Flicker. "We're zero for two on actual dragon hoards."

Morningstar takes Kibi on a short excursion into *Ava Dormo*, so that they can scout the lower halls of the mountain. They find the enormous entrance, now collapsed and clogged with debris. Staircases and tunnels once led upward into dozens of smaller chambers and halls, but all of these are now in ruins, choked with rubble, bones and decay.

After they return, the party ponder their next move. With no better leads, they cast *find the path* to find the "*place mentioned by the wall that contains a large quantity of silver.*" The spell indicates that the best way to get there would be to first exit these two huge caverns via the shaft and tunnel Morningstar discovered on her first dream-scouting trip. That indicates they'll have to leave the mountain altogether and reach a new entrance farther down.

The Company are made to *wind walk*, and they waft up the long vertical shaft, and thence to the long tunnel that leads out the side of the mountain, just above the cloud layer outside. They can see the exit, a bright spot of blue some fifty feet away, when they hear the sound of heavy, flapping wings. There is a flash of glittering purple outside the tunnel mouth, as something huge and draconic rises up from below, breathes a torrent of lightning into their tunnel, and then vanishes upward and out of sight.

There is no longer a need to find **Azhant**. He has found them first.

weiknarf: Yay!

Graywolf-ELM: Sweet, I just this evening finished the last .PDF and came back to ENWorld and re-registered and finished up the thread. This was the best icing. Thank you, Sagiro.

Kain Gallant: [“Don’t f**k with an archmage,” says Dranko.] Wise words. Thanks for the new update, Sagiro!

coyote6: My players were always flustered when they got attacked while *wind walking*, torn between dismissing the spell to quickly fight back (while losing the spell) vs. maintaining the spell for further use, but sucking up the long change time. It was always a little amusing, in an evil GM kind of way. Also, new update! Woo-hoo!

carborundum: Argh! Typical Sagiro... Interesting, tense fight – check! Quarry not where expected – check! Surprise extras – check! End on a cliffhanger – check! Now I’m just as hungry for an update as I was last week...



All the Stops

The dragon’s sudden assault triggers a flurry of activity among the Company. Morningstar dismisses their *wind walk* and Quickens *divine favor*. Kibi then casts a *wall of force* across most of the tunnel mouth, leaving only a gap large enough to allow him to summon something on the far side of it – which he begins to do. Various other buffs are hastily cast: *fly* spells, *protection* spells and *invisibility purge* among others. Flicker slathers himself in *oil of slipperiness*, just in case.

Aravis *shapechanges* into a xorn and moves through the wall so that he can poke an eyeball out the side of the mountain, to see what Azhant is up to. The mighty purple dragon is wheeling around up near the mountain’s peak. A bright sun has burned off the cloud layer, allowing for nearly unlimited visibility in all directions. A celestial roc appears, and goes flapping up toward the dragon.

Reaching an unspoken agreement, the party decide that they’re going to bet everything on a quick and decisive battle, *right now*. They pull out the big magic guns. “I *wish*,” says Kibi, “that the dragon who just attacked us has its spell resistance suppressed to the greatest extent this spell allows, for as long as is possible.” A massive ripple of magic blasts outward down the tunnel and into the air, rocking everyone a bit on their feet.

Azhant flinches, feeling his innate protections lessen. He stops, hovering, and glares down at the little humanoids below. Emboldened, Dranko sticks a hand through the gap between Kibi’s *wall of force* and the wall, and casts an *ice storm* on the hovering dragon. Chunks of ice bounce harmlessly from its plated hide. “You can surrender now!” calls Dranko.

“Okay, sure,” growls Azhant. “I’ll be right down.”

“Yeah, you will be,” laughs Dranko.

Ernie unleashes the next mega-salvo, casting a *miracle*. “Yondalla, you’ve recently given me much greater power, and I hope I’m about to use it wisely. I’d like the dragon out there to lose its ability to fly for the next hour.” Another wave of magical power bursts outward and into the air outside the mountain.

Aravis sees the dragon lurch downward, and flap its wings futilely for a few seconds before going into a controlled downward glide. Knowing now that Azhant cannot fly, and should be much less resistant to his magic, Aravis leaps from the side of the mountain, changing form from xorn to yellow dragon in mid-air. He pursues Azhant downward. When he gets close enough, he pegs the fleeing dragon with *energy drain*. Thanks to Kibi’s *wish*, the spell bypasses Azhant’s spell resistance. Luck is with him, too; the spell has its maximum possible effect, stripping away spells, life force and fighting capacity from Azhant.

Azhant casts a spell – Aravis is not sure what – and then goes into a steep dive down the mountain’s nearly sheer slope. The celestial roc, suffused with holy golden light, shrieks and pursues. It is nearly as large as Azhant, but being much lighter, it fails to grapple the descending dragon and flaps away, frustrated.

Aravis also catches up with Azhant, getting close enough to catch his prey in a Maximized *cone of cold*. The magic of his spell peels away as it reaches Azhant, leaving the purple dragon entirely untouched. “*Antimagic field*,” mutters Aravis. He’s pleased that the field is not negating the ongoing effects of the *wish* and *miracle*, but he understands that the party’s options will be quite limited for a while. He could try a *disjunction*, but while that *might* strip away the anti-magic, it would be much more likely to eliminate the effects of Kibi’s and Ernie’s magics. Still, he knows that the party have some tricks up their collective sleeves.

Azhant swoops away, banking sharply around a spur of the mountain and disappearing behind tree-covered rocks. At the behest of his friends, and entirely against his better judgment, Kibi activates his *ioun stone of tongues*. “Hey roc,” he shouts. “Will you please carry us and pursue the dragon?”

“Whatever you say!” answers the roc. It starts to wheel upward toward them, and when it’s close enough Kibi orders it to hover, at which point he *dimension doors* himself and everyone else except for Aravis and Ernie onto the roc’s back. The roc tips slightly at the sudden weight, and has some trouble flying with so many passengers, but soon it steadies itself and begins to

give chase to Azhant. (Ernie, meanwhile, has boarded his *flying carpet*. It's not as fast as a roc, but seems much safer, and reduces the extent to which they're all in dragon-breath formation.)

Dranko sinks into the soft golden feathers of the celestial roc's back, and lights a cigar. The smoke streams away behind them, but Kibi is pretty sure it would have spelled "Kibi is insane," or something similar. He clutches for dear life and laments his decision more and more with each passing airborne second.

Farazil takes possession of Flicker just long enough to comment, "I know I told you I wouldn't take over Flicker without permission, but I have to say, this is fantastic!"

Dranko nods. "We really have the best job in the world. We're fighting an ancient evil dragon while riding on a celestial roc, and I have 180,000 gold pieces worth of gems in my pouch. Does life get any better than this?"

"Yes!" squeaks Kibi, his eyes shut tight. "I hope so!"

Aravis swoops around the rocky out-jutting, and there's no sign of Azhant. The Company carefully scan the mountainside, while Aravis wheels and flies to the last place they saw their quarry, but Azhant the Ancient has vanished. He has almost certainly dropped his *antimagic field* and *teleported* or *dimension doored* away.

With no better lead on the dragon, the party continue to *find the path* towards the large concentration of silver mentioned by the stones. This leads them down the mountain, and around it clockwise. Twenty seconds later, there is a massive wave of powerful magic that coruscates through the air and makes all the party's skin crawl. It's just like what they experienced when Kibi cast his *wish* and Ernie his *miracle*. Azhant has effected similar magic, most likely to rid himself of his negative levels, to reestablish his ability to fly, or to restore his spell resistance.

A minute later the *find the path* has led them to a well-concealed tunnel into the mountain, cleverly concealed beneath a large overhang, but otherwise similar to the one a thousand feet above them. It bores its way into the mountain, and is easily wide enough for Azhant. Kibi's celestial roc drops them off in the tunnel mouth, and after thanking it for its service, they fly down the tunnel. Aravis changes form to a housefly and rides on Dranko's shoulder. The *find the path* spell indicates a *greater dispelling screen* across the tunnel a couple of hundred feet in, masked by an illusion. Aravis changes form to a Digger and tunnels around the trap.

After that, the passage takes a series of downward banked hairpins, and the smell of dragon grows increasingly strong. They can see up ahead that this latest stretch of tunnel empties out into some wide, dark space... and from somewhere below the level of the tunnel mouth, Azhant flies upward, breathes a blast of sonic force upon them, and continues to rise until he's out of sight again. Well, that answers the question of which debilitating effect Azhant chose to dismiss. It also hurts!

(In fact, Azhant, horrified at losing his greatest tactical advantage, *teleported* back to his lair. It was his last *teleport*, as the *energy drain* had stripped him of the ability to cast more. Among his hoard's many magic items was an ancient crystalline idol that would grant a *wish*, and from among the likely options, he wished that his ability to fly be restored.)

In for a penny, thinks Morningstar. "Dark Lady, please remove the dragon's ability to fly for the next hour... again!" The power of her *miracle* floods the cavern. Kibi, with *tongues* still active, hears some draconic profanity roared out in the darkness. Grey Wolf rushes to the tunnel mouth and looks down, but the dragon is already too far away to spot. Looking up, he finds that the roof isn't much higher than they are, no more than fifty feet away. There is a gorgeous mural carved into the ceiling of this vast cave, depicting dwarves in their multitudes, smithing and crafting weapons. Hundreds of dwarves must have worked for years on the mural, but it has already been smashed and defaced in dozens of places, probably by Azhant in his younger days.

Dranko sprints to the end of the tunnel and leaps out into space, flying downward, hoping to discover specifically where the dragon is. Even before he spies Azhant he hears the futile flapping of wings, steadily moving ground-ward. He smiles.

Ernie *heals* Morningstar and then Quicksens another *heal* (on Kibi) using his *quickscroll tube*. Somewhat restored from the blast of dragon breath, the whole party fly downward, descending nearly five hundred feet before discovering Azhant, who has landed on the floor of his cavern. Azhant is deeply troubled that these pesky humanoids have now twice stripped him of his ability to fly, but he still has hope that he can turn this around. After all, he has a trump card that has never failed him in these sorts of encounters.

Aravis manifests a *Bigby's clenched fist* above the dragon, but it winks out as it comes into contact with the dragon. Azhant has remanifested his *antimagic field*.

"Oh, please," growls Azhant. "Now, who among you is going to come down and fight me honestly?"

"Oh, please," mocks Ernie, "You think we're going to fall for that old trick?" His mockery is somewhat undercut by Dranko simultaneously volunteering. "I will!" says the half-orc.

"Okay, then," says Azhant, glaring upward.

But Dranko doesn't come down, and neither does anyone else. It's an impasse. Azhant won't lower his *antimagic field*, but unless he does, he cannot breathe on the party or cast the spells he has remaining. The heroes know that the dragon can't fly (and so they're safe in the air), but if they descend to ground level to attack, their magic items will be useless, and the dragon can savage them with physical attacks.

Seemingly bereft of better options, Dranko starts to pee on Azhant's head. Azhant lumbers out of the way, but Dranko follows. "Whatever you're trying to do, it's not working," growls Azhant, disgusted.

"It's working pretty well, actually," says Dranko. "I've had to go for a while." But Dranko is soon finished with his business, and the détente continues. Azhant squats on the floor of the cavern, his tail lashing to and fro like a cat's. His hide is crusted layers of jagged amethyst scales. All he wants is for one of those morsels to come within reach.

"So," calls down Morningstar. "How do you feel about prophecy?"

"Are you suggesting that you are prophesied to defeat me here?" scoffs Azhant. In a more thoughtful voice he adds, "I must say that your collected magics are impressive. Too bad, then, that they will have no further effect on this encounter. Now, I ask again, who is going to come and fight me?"

"Are you going to stop running like a coward?" asks Morningstar.

Azhant laughs. "You think you are going to goad me into some unwise action with your silly little insults?"

"I was hoping that was what peeing on you would do," Dranko admits.

"No, I simply found that was disgusting."

"You're not the only one," says Ernie.

"But I would expect no less from a half-orc," sneers Azhant.

Dranko sighs, makes eye-contact with Ernie, and nods. Time to end this impasse. The most important thing is that Ernie and Morningstar not be grappled, so Dranko takes that upon himself. He swoops down, and Azhant, cat-quick, grabs him out of the air in an enormous claw. "At least I'll bite off *one* of your heads today. Any more piss you want to get out before the end?" Dranko smiles confidently, which makes Azhant suspicious.

Ernie moves in and transforms into the warrior aspect granted by the *Honor of Nemmin*. "For Yondalla!" he yells, and ripples of golden light play over his armored body. He feels something akin to rage, but more controlled – a righteous aggression.

"Very impressive," says Azhant, "but I don't... AAAAAARRRR!" Ernie swings his blade, and it bites into Azhant's hide, shearing away a swath of purple scales. Azhant looks down, aghast; his *antimagic field* is still active, but the little sword seemed not to care.

"Excuse me," says Azhant to Dranko. "I think you may no longer be relevant." The dragon flings Dranko away. "Don't go anywhere," he admonishes the half-orc, and then he unleashes his full physical fury upon Ernie. Ernie would be dead, well and truly, if Azhant had not been *energy drained* earlier by Aravis. Even weakened, Azhant nearly tears Ernie to pieces with his massive jaws, razor claws and smashing tail. But Azhant fails to connect with one of his wing barbs (unthinkable!) and so Ernie is left a bloody mess, but (barely) conscious.

"You got any more?" Ernie manages, spitting out blood.

"Oh, I have plenty more," says Azhant, leering. "Why don't we keep trading blows for a while and see how it turns out?"

"You really are underestimating us," says Morningstar. She moves in, winds up, and lets fly with *Ell's Will*. As with Ernie's blade, the sovereign magic in the morningstar is unaffected by the anti-magic, and gouges a bloody furrow into Azhant's flank.

"You're next," glowers Azhant. "I just need to finish off the midget first."

Flicker tries a flurry of shortsword attacks, but even while flanking the dragon he is unable to land a single strike. "My sword gets heavier right before it hits him," he grumbles. Dranko has more luck. Even bereft of its enchantment, his whip does impressive damage to the dragon, ripping away purple scales and scoring deep gashes.

Kibi seethes for a moment, frustrated that all of his magical arsenal is useless, and settles for summoning a huge earth elemental. “You can’t touch the dragon,” Kibi warns it. “Try hitting it with something else.” The elemental lumbers off to find a piece of masonry it can swing.

Having finished lashing with his whip, Dranko holds it up so Azhant can get a good look. “See this? Magic or not, I’m going to use it to take out one of your eyes.”

Azhant looks meaningfully at Ernie, still clutched in one of his mighty claws. “So, no negotiation, then? No ‘I agree not to kill some of you before you kill me, and you let me go instead?’” Dranko shakes his head.

Ernie has been counting on using his *quickscroll tube* to heal himself, but too late remembers that invoking the *Glory of Nemmin* has removed his ability to use spell completion items. His sword arm is still free, so he carves some gashes into Azhant’s wrist.

“Any last words, little man?” growls Azhant. Ernie can’t think of anything, and besides, Azhant means it only rhetorically. He opens his jaws wide and bites off a quarter of Ernie’s head, along with a good chunk of shoulder and torso. “Mmmmm,” he says, chewing. “Moist.” He drops the remains of Ernie’s corpse and turns to Morningstar. “You’re next.”

He savages Morningstar with the remainder of his attacks, though Morningstar is protected by a *stoneskin*, and much of the damage is blunted. “You’re a little tougher than the little guy,” remarks Azhant, flexing his jaw a bit. “But now you’ve got the classic dilemma on your hands. You can damage me, but you also will need to start healing yourself.” He laughs a deep, unkind laugh. “But while I’m grinding you down, human, what exactly brought you here in the first place? Was it just the loot?”

Dranko answers. “We have been sent by the rulers of Mirj, who want to see you destroyed.”

“Mirj?” Azhant sounds skeptical. “The House of Law doesn’t have the balls. You’re lying. But you know what? I don’t blame you a bit for trying to trick me into attacking that cesspool. What a rotten pile of human depravity *that* place is.”

Morningstar lands another hit with *Ell’s Will* and Quicken a *cure* spell on herself. “You know, that’s starting to hurt,” says Azhant. “I’m getting seriously annoyed. Though I’m also impressed. Ninth-level spells. Epic weapons. Why have I never heard of you before? Are you from what’s-it-called... Charagan?”

All of this time, Aravis has been digging, in the form of a Digger, beneath the dragon. He’s been preparing a pit, leaving a surface crust thick enough that the dragon won’t fall through until Aravis weakens it. He’s starting to realize that his progress just isn’t fast enough, but with little else to do, he continues to dig.

Flicker finally lands a sword-hit on Azhant. The sneak-attack damage he does while flanking with Dranko is not diminished at all by Azhant’s anti-magic, and takes a huge bloody chunk out of the dragon’s tail. “Hey! Watch it!” growls Azhant. In his mind he’s starting to wonder if he’s going to win this war of attrition. *Antimagic field* is typically a trump card against adventuring sorts, but these guys have all sorts of tricks up their puny humanoid sleeves. He can’t *teleport*, and he can’t fly, and there’s no ground-level exit from this cavern he can fit through. For the first time in centuries, honest-to-evil fear creeps into his draconic heart.

Dranko savages him with more whip strikes, the last of which nearly does take out his left eye. “I told you,” says the half-orc. “I’m going to rip that eye out of your head.”

Kibi’s elemental has found a long broken pillar, but the creature isn’t much used to attacking with anything but its fists, and its swings bounce harmlessly from the dragon’s scales. Azhant glances briefly at the elemental before returning its focus to Morningstar. He savages her with all of his attacks, but the *stoneskin* absorbs nearly half the damage, and he chips a fang. “Don’t think I don’t feel what you’re doing down there, by the way,” he calls down to Aravis. He sidesteps away from the pit being dug beneath his feet.

Morningstar Quicken a *revenance* on Ernie’s body. The dead halfling coughs and gets to his feet. He’s a ghastly sight, with large parts of his upper body missing. “Man, that hurt!” he exclaims. “Oh. I see. Still dead. Well, I’ll do what I can.”

“Neat trick,” grumbles Azhant. “Now I can kill him again!”

Grey Wolf casts *lucubration* to restore an *indomitability*, which he immediately casts upon Morningstar. Kibi uses *limited wish* to cast *stoneskin* on the newly-animated Ernie. Flicker attacks but fails to land any damaging blows. Dranko has more luck. He lashes with his whip and does massive damage to Azhant. “One! Piece! At! A! Time!” he calls, while systematically gouging out pieces of the dragon.

“Fine,” says Azhant. “Forget the stone girl. You’re the primary target now.” He grabs Dranko, claws the half-orc’s body,

lashes his face with his wings and tail, and then stuffs Dranko into his massive jaws. In a voice made mushy by the adventurer in his mouth, he asks, “So, are you ready to bargain, or should I keep chewing?”

“Don’t bargain!” calls Dranko, even though he’s a bloody mess and won’t survive another attack. “Just kill him!”

“You’re not really in a good position to threaten me,” says Azhant. He chews a bit. “Mmmm, was that your ankle?”

Morningstar would like to cast *mass heal*, but it won’t affect Dranko who’s inside the mouth of the anti-magicked dragon. “Just get ready to cast it,” says Kibi. “I’m going to try something.” He flies up toward the cavern ceiling and casts *earthquake*, wincing at the thought of wreaking more destruction upon the ancient mural. Huge chunks of rock fall from the darkness, cascading around Azhant. Normally this wouldn’t bother him any more than a mild hailstorm would bother a rhino, but because of his negative levels, an unlucky crack on the head from a large boulder causes him to cough Dranko about half out of his mouth. This leaves the half-orc’s leg dangling outside of the *antimagic field*! Morningstar casts her *mass heal*, and Aravis (who has given up on his pit and returned to dragon-form himself) casts *dimension door* on Dranko, evacuating him from the dragon-maw grapple.

That’s enough for Azhant. Despite his bluster, he is nearly dead from all the attacks that have landed upon him. His only hope, he decides, is to flee, drop the *antimagic field*, and breathe on his enemies. With luck, these pesky adventurers will then try spells instead of physical attacks, and his spell resistance might save him. If only he could fly!

His plan never gets past the first stage. He starts to flee, and endures a battery of parting shots. Flicker and Dranko land devastating sneak attacks, but Azhant is still barely alive. Morningstar brings down *Ell’s Will* and crushes Azhant’s spine. The dragon drops. “You’ll... see me... again...” gasps Azhant dramatically, before flopping dead onto the hard stones of the cavern floor.

Soon after, the *revenance* expires, and Ernie likewise drops dead.

carborundum: Wow. Just wow.

steeldragons: AHHHH! NOT ERNIE!!!! *breathe... breathe...* OK. Morningstar’ll fix him all up... right? RIGHT?!



Knowledge

“Will you be staying, Ernest, or do you feel like you still have more to do?” Dolly bustles about the Inn Between, and talks to Ernie over her shoulder. She seems more businesslike than Ernie remembers her, a trifle less warm.

“I like staying here,” admits Ernie, reaching down to pet one of the resident cats, “but there’s so much more left on our plate. There’s still that world-saving thing.”

“Well, stay as long as you’d like,” Dolly shrugs.

“Ah, don’t be so hard on the kid,” calls Barnabas from his customary table at the back. “Ernie, come and sit with me until your friends call you back. I want to see that fancy sword of yours...”



In the land of the living, Aravis removes Azhant’s head by *disintegrating* the neck; the party figure it will serve as proof that they’ve finished the job. But more importantly, the Company discover Azhant’s true hoard hidden behind an illusionary wall at the far side of the cavern. Unsurprisingly, a majority of the loot seems to have once been the property of the dwarven Empire of Gurund – non-magical weapons and armor of dwarvish design and size, coins and bars stamped with dwarven likenesses and symbols, and many pieces of jewelry obviously of dwarf-make. Mixed in with the dwarven plunder is plenty of stuff from other parts of Kivia – Azhant the Ancient has been building his hoard for centuries.

Morningstar casts a *sending* to High Priestess Rhiavonne in Kallor, requesting that the temple there be readied for a *true resurrection*. Then the rest of the day and evening are spent shoveling as much of the dragon’s treasure as possible into the Lucent Tower, which seems like the fastest way to transport such vast quantities. There are a number of highly magical objects mixed in, the identification of which will be first on the agenda after Ernie’s resurrection, though one in particular inspires particular reverent interest. It is a closed and sealed book that they discover resting at the very apex of the largest hill of treasure. The book is thin but weighty, made of dark grey leather and embossed with a fancy “L” on the front cover, overlaying the symbol of Leantha, one-time Kivian Goddess of Knowledge.



This time, with souls moving properly between this world and the next, Morningstar's *true resurrection* runs properly from midnight to dawn. The ceremony has been fast-tracked, and the chapel is only half-full. The priestess **Anhaya Sunblossom**, leader of the church of Yondalla on Charagan, is in attendance with two under-priests; they watch attentively as their faith's greatest living hero is brought back to life. If Morningstar hears some murmurs from the crowd wondering why Rhiavonne herself isn't performing the ritual, and that perhaps Morningstar is likely to be Rhiavonne's successor, she pretends to take no notice. As the muted sun crests the horizon beyond the eternal twilight of Kallor, Ernie's eyes flutter open. His last memory of the Inn Between is of Dolly, hands on her hips, telling him that as much as she enjoys his company, she'd rather not see him quite so often.



Having taken care of that order of business, the Company move on to the more enjoyable fallout from the battle with Azhant—combing through the loot. They open the Lucent Tower in the yard behind the Greenhouse and coins spill out onto the grass. Given many hours to sift through the monetary and artistic pieces, Flicker estimates that the coinage, bars, gems, jewelry and *objects d'art* are worth in total about 200,000 gp. There are also dozens of minor magical items (*rings of protection*, weapons, armor, shields and ability-boosters of the +1 and +2 varieties, and miscellaneous stuff of minimal use to near-epic adventurers like the Company), worth an additional 70,000 gp.

After dinner, they set about divvying up the best of the magic items. Two are set aside immediately—a warhammer and suit of plate mail both heavily enchanted for dwarven fighters. None in the party can make good use of them, but surely they can find a dwarven hero who can. The remainder of the most potent items are distributed among the Company.

Kibi gets the *Pulse of Abernia*, a deep purple gem infused with Earth Magic. Kibi has seen similar gems in the workshops of his grandfather Cranchus. This one, according to their divinations, was made by an earth mage named Golquan, who long ago served the First Dwarf of Gurund as his court wizard. He was killed by Azhant's sire in the midst of the ogre war. When held by an Earth Mage, the *Pulse of Abernia* has a chance of augmenting every spell he casts, in a variety of possible ways. It also increases Kibi's natural armor bonus.

Dranko claims *Alazar's Tongue*, a black leather weighted whip. It is a +5 weapon once used by the infamous mercenary Alazar, killed by Azhant about 150 years ago. It can cast *dimensional anchor* or *dismissal* on a creature struck, each once per day. Also once per day, it can inflict a -4 penalty to saving throws to a creature struck, with the effect lasting until the end of the encounter. Finally, on a critical hit, the victim moves at half speed on its next turn. Dranko also takes the *unshakable boots*, the wearer of which cannot be knocked down, gains a bonus to grapple checks, and will never run in fear from compulsory magic.

In addition to taking a +5 *ring of protection*, Grey Wolf is the natural claimant to the *sheath of blessed honor*, a sword sheath inscribed with prayers to Palamir, Kivian God of loyalty, duty and honor. When identified, the result is that it "bestows blessings upon blades of Palamir." Its effect upon Bostock, one-time paladin of that god and current longsword in Grey Wolf's possession, is that it allows it to *lay on hands*. Once per round, as a move-equivalent action by its wielder, it can heal someone within five feet, up to 80 points per day.

Ernie doesn't feel as entitled to the best loot as some of the others, having recently acquired an epic blade, but he is still pleased to don *Laramon's favored shirt* (Laramon is the Kivian Demigod of Luck). It's a silver and green silk shirt, emblazoned on the front with Laramon's coin-and-bolt symbol. When the wearer is at half of his maximum hit points (or lower), it grants a +4 luck bonus to AC.

Flicker takes a matching pair of straight silver daggers; they are *returning daggers* +5, and there is no penalty for throwing them up to 100 feet distant. They also return to the thrower after each attack.

Morningstar gets *Tokma's Radiant Barrier*, an iridescent breastplate that reflects subtle rainbow hues in any light. It had been worn for years by Tokma, a female paladin of the Kivian goddess Heros, until she was slain by Azhant's breath weapon. It is a *breastplate* +6, and grants the wearer resistance 10 vs. all five energy types. She also pockets *Laramon's jade clover*, a small four-leaf clover carved from jade, with each leaf etched with the coin-and-bolt symbol of Laramon. While the *clover* is in her possession, once per day, Morningstar can decide to roll three times on a d20 and then take the most desired result. Lastly, she takes a +6 *belt of strength*, more appropriate for her now that she wields *Ell's Will*.

Aravis takes the *gloves of the displaced source*, which allow any spell shaped as a line, cone, or burst, and that normally originates at the caster, to instead originate from any square within ten feet of the caster, and to which the caster has line of effect. He also claims the *battlestone of St. Jenniver*, a smooth, flat gray oval stone. Once per day the user can trade away damage dice on any area-effect spell and heal all allies in the area by the number of dice removed. Any allies so healed do not take any damage from the spell. When used, at least one and no more than half the spell's damage dice can be traded off.

But all of those things, while useful and powerful, are sidelights to the main attraction of the dragon hoard. While in Naslund, Aravis asked Leantha for the answer to his most pressing question: "How do we defeat the Adversary?" Now he holds the gray leather book, which only he can open, and hopes to find his answer.

Inside are a series of beautiful child's drawings – as if an artistic genius had been tasked to create the works in the style of a toddler. Slowly Aravis turns each page, committing each drawing to memory.

The first page shows a map of the known world, with Charagan at the western edge, Kivia at the eastern edge, and the Uncrossable Sea between them. Not far from the center, but somewhat to the north, is a small island.

On the second page there is a great castle. In the doorway of the castle, a huge, dark male figure is being stabbed in the back by a smaller female figure with a long golden sword. The sword is shattering from the blow. Outside the castle seven others are fleeing, as are hundreds of tiny figures at their feet.

The third page pictures a fissure in the side of an immense cliff. Two stones with embedded Divination Sinks, like the ones the party found at Het Branoi, sit on the ground outside of the fissure.

Across the next two pages is a drawing of a Sharshun woman, her face a hidden shadow, holding aloft a long, serrated golden dagger. It is clear from the coloring and artistic style that this golden dagger and the shattering golden sword are, at very least, made from the same metal.

The sixth page shows a dwarf with a well-groomed beard, and a pile of rocks at his feet. The dwarf holds aloft that same golden dagger. He is smiling.

On the seventh page is drawn an ambiguous humanoid figure, wearing the distinctive uniform of the Spire Guard, lying dead, the golden dagger clutched in one hand.

Drawn large on the eighth page is an image of a Ward of Drosh, hanging from its necklace.

The ninth page shows a scarred man with protruding tusks and white priestly robes. He is shouting as if in great pain, while blood runs from his eyes.

And on the tenth and final page is shown a silver coin emblazoned with a lightning bolt – Laramon's holy symbol.



The party talk at great length about the pictures in Leantha's book. They all agree that the dark figure being stabbed with the golden sword is the Adversary, and that the stabber is Uthol Inga. The other seven figures must be the remaining Travelers: Brechen, Delioch, Ell, Werthis and Corilayna, as well as the deceased Caba and Aranod.

The fissure with the Divination Sinks is a mystery, though the most popular theory is that it's the entrance to the Sharshun headquarters hidden in the Greatwood. They're more certain that the Sharshun woman holding the golden dagger is Darkeye, and Farazil confirms that Darkeye is rumored to possess a powerful dagger known as the *Watcher's Kiss*.

The exultant dwarf holding the dagger is obviously Kibi, and the half-orc bleeding from the eyes is clearly Dranko. ("Ugh," Dranko grumbles. "Kibi gets to smile, and I get to scream while my head explodes. Great.")

As for the dead figure wearing the raiment of the Spire Guard – who knows? It could be one of the Company, though Dranko is inclined (with no real evidence, admittedly) to think it's Rosetta.

The picture of the Ward of Drosh is a dead-on match for the one given to the party by Viersk in Naslund. As for the silver coin, it's the symbol of Laramon, Kivian Demigod of Luck. With Corilayna having fled with the coming of the Adversary, it makes sense that Laramon may be extending his influence throughout the world. As for its meaning, the Company agree that Leantha is telling them that to defeat the Adversary, they're going to need good luck, and lots of it.

Duncan Haldane: I've been reading this story since Sagiro first started posting it, and I'm glad to see it still going strong after all this time. Sagiro, you are an amazing DM with a fantastic group of players. I certainly envy you all.

EroGaki: And now I'm all caught up. I've been enjoying the Story Hour for years now; I'm both thrilled and saddened that it has finally reached its conclusion. At least I can look forward to the next couple of years as you catch up. Congratz, Sagiro and crew! And thanks for an epic read.

Cervante: This story hour never fails to impress... Thanks, Sagiro!

carborundum: That's some sweet loot!

Love the way Ernie's death this time was so... routine. Two interns, a piece of tinfoil and a plaster death mask from the souvenir-shop later... If he dies again he may just get kicked straight back and resurrected on the spot so he doesn't clutter up the Inn! (Or was Dolly annoyed more by the *revengeance* than the deaths in quick succession?)

Quartz: So, the heroes are going to see Azhant again. I wonder what form he'll take? Ghost, dracolich, or clone?

Everett: Yeah, what was that about? Just one last stab at ominousness, or the real deal... a dracolich?

Glad I didn't check in until today, so I could read the search for Azhant, the battle and the aftermath all in one fell swoop. (It's been at least 3 months since I last checked in with Sagiro's Story Hour.) And because it's been so long, I can't say I have a single clue as to who the Travellers or Leantha are. Can someone fill me in? (Where they first showed up in the Story Hour, plot function, etc.)

Piratecat: Aha! We were trying to remember what Ernie's third death was. For the life of me I couldn't recall. This one was a lot more perfunctory. I think it's because although the battle was deadly, it was really frustrating. We spent a lot of time discussing strategies that were quickly shut down by "it's immune to magic." That's why Dranko went to the extreme measure of whizzing on him... I was eager to goad him into a mistake. No such luck. The loot was glorious, though.

The Travellers is the name for the "new" Gods who most of us follow: Ell, for instance. Here's [<http://home.comcast.net/~dorian.hart/gods.html>] an old web page with details. They travelled here while fleeing the Adversary. Leantha was the Kivian goddess of Knowledge, now apparently killed (in a war against the other Gods after the Travellers arrived).

Kain Gallant: That was a great fight! And reading about the loot was surprisingly enjoyable. I'm also just a bit sad that Azhant bit it. From his brief appearance, he seemed like he would have been a fun long-term adversary against the party.

Richards: It's funny - I've been aware of this Story Hour for literally years, through having read Piratecat's "Defenders of Daybreak" Story Hour, but I had never read it. I tried to start it on several occasions, but in each case I was intimidated by its enormous size. ("That's what she said!" - Michael Scott) But one day I found myself stuck on a computer with nothing much to do, and recalled this Story Hour, and told myself I was just being silly. After all, I already knew I would enjoy it, having previously become a big fan of Sagiro's (not only of his parody songs, but also of his portrayal of Velendo, my favorite "Defenders of Daybreak" PC). So I hunted it up, found the handy PDF downloads, downloaded the first one, and had at it.

That was a little over a month ago. I don't have the luxury of being able to access the Story Hour at work (no doubt a good thing for my productivity!), but great swaths of my free time at night and on the weekends have been taken up with this fantastic campaign. Not only that, but I couldn't help passing on tidbits from the campaign world to my son, and about when I was halfway through the second PDF he asked me for the first one, which I still had stored on my jump drive. I just finished the third PDF last night and caught up to the most recent update here on this thread; he's about halfway through the second PDF and going strong. (And now that I've read all there is to read thus far, I envy him! Also, I can't wait for him to find out the original homeworld of the Travelers, as in our AD&D 2nd Edition campaign he ran a druid PC named Darvin the Wanderer.)

Sagiro, it's been said by many before me, but this is one of the most exciting D&D campaigns it's ever been my pleasure to experience. I stand in awe of your ability to mentally juggle and weave various plot threads together. (And you are truly a master of the cliffhanger as well!) And before I forget, StevenAC - excellent job on the PDFs! They have made an exciting read even more pleasurable. You guys are a very lucky gaming group, and thanks to everyone for passing that luck on to those of us who stand in awe at the sidelines, looking on in wonder.

Finally, I have one piece of advice for Piratecat: now that Dranko has not only taunted a demon lord in his own throne room but also flipped off the Emperor to his face, I'd drop the pseudonym "One Slippery Squid" - if you really want to use a Djawish name, I'd recommend "Two Gigantic Balls."

- Johnathan

Piratecat: Johnathan, considering how much joy you brought to us with your classic "Ecology of..." *Dragon* articles, it's a delight to get to return the favor in some regard.

I think Dranko ended up settling on "One Slippery Slope." Fortune favors the bold, at least briefly! You will be delighted when Dranko, in some small measure, gets what's coming to him in exchange for his bravado (courtesy of the aforementioned demon lord?)... and it triggers a fascinating real-life discussion. Not for a while, though.

Sagiro: Johnathan, that's extremely kind of you to post; I'm glad both you and your son have enjoyed the retelling of our long years of adventure. But reading Piratecat's post above... You're the guy who wrote those Ecology articles for *Dragon* all those years ago? Excuse me for a minute while I go into another room and squeal like a wonder-struck fanboy.

...

...

Okay. Back now. I hope I didn't wake the kids!

I'm finishing up a couple of work projects in the next month or so, after which I should have more time to devote to the remainder of the story. Though I'm getting (relatively) close to the end, some of my favorite (and I think most exciting) bits are still to come.

To Everett: here's a teaser - the party *will* see Azhant again. Sort of. In a very unusual context.

Tamlyn: Let me guess - Azhant is going to grow and groom a luxurious mustache and start calling himself the Lord of Roses?

Everett: It would have to be nine years later. P will show up with his head as a trophy, perhaps. Or Dranko will get new cigar tobacco.

As always and above all: I just hope it's not another nine years until I find out... (For the record; I've been following this Story Hour for about seven.)

Sagiro: To EroGaki, Duncan, and others who have enjoyed the Story Hour - thank you both for reading it, and taking the time to post! I always appreciate knowing I'm entertaining a few people out there in cyberspace.

Mathew Freeman: More than a few! Count me in the list of people that have been reading this for years. When it's done I'm certainly going to get the PDFs and read through the whole thing again. It's wonderful storytelling, and even more wonderful to know that it was done as a collaboration.



Loose Ends

While all of the pictures in Leantha's book are intriguing to say the least, investigating the island depicted on the first page seems like a good place to start. But before that happens, the Company choose to attend to a few loose ends and side projects.

The red-armored dream-warrior Octesian, apparently driven mad by his attempt to free the Adversary from his Far Realms prison, has long been prominent on Morningstar's list of concerns. Deciding it's time to start preparing for his arrival in earnest, she visits with Evenstar, and the two of them set out to recruit a thirteen-woman dream-warrior strike force. Sadly, some of the most promising students - most notably June, but also Maltha, Opaline, Eleanor, Onyx of Minok and some of Evenstar's best - were slain by Octesian in the Battle of Verdshane. Still, combat training has proceeded well at many temples, and Morningstar is able to identify many promising candidates.

The most capable fighter is one of Evenstar's students, a tall, wiry woman named **Scola**. She is pure fighter – not overly pious, and utterly disdainful of church politics. She was present at the Battle of Verdshane, and that proved a catalyst to an almost fanatical desire to improve herself. In the waking world she'd be a formidable fighter, and she has a great facility to make subtle adjustments in *Ava Dormo* itself to give her tactical advantage.

Evenstar herself is a powerful cleric (though not in Morningstar's league), and while old and feeble, she does not flinch or grow flustered in battle. Evenstar also recommends a pair of paladin-sisters, **Starbrook** and **Fautish**. Fautish was present at Verdshane, and her sister Starbrook has been training hard since hearing the stories from that battle. She was very close to some of Octesian's victims.

Obsidia and Previa have been with Morningstar from the beginning – the former a cleric/warrior, and the latter a straight cleric (and excellent Chronicler, of course). Talking to various priestesses from around the kingdom, Morningstar finds several competent Dreamwalker Shields to round out the force – **Sable** of Kallor, **Leona** and **Raven** from Minok, **Belle** from Hae Charagan and a young, feisty paladin from Kynder Hold named **Gyre**. The twelfth member of the team is Swan.

For the thirteenth, there are two likely choices. One is a Shield from Kallor named **Corinne**. She has always been suspicious of Morningstar, and against the whole notion of Daywalkers despite the various proclamations that have come down regarding them. She will join the team if asked, and is an excellent dream-fighter, but makes no secret of her hostility toward Morningstar. The other choice is a perfectly competent and loyal priestess from Tal Hae named **Molly**. She is clearly not the fighter that Corinne is, but is also guaranteed not to be a morale problem. Morningstar chooses Corinne with almost no reservations.



Dranko checks in with Lucas Blackwell, the man who runs the day-to-day operations of the Undermen. Lucas delivers a thorough report. On the economic front, the news is mixed as usual. On the one hand, pressure from the White Sun Cartel is eroding some of the profit margins on the gem trade. On the other hand, the Undermen have landed an unexpected and lucrative contract with the Weavers' Guild in Trev-Lyndyn. That group carefully guards a secret loom design that produces tough, luxuriant fabrics, and the Undermen are now the sole conduit of their goods into Charagan. Lucas speaks highly of the diplomat who arranged that contract, a savvy woman named **Vanya Ashdown**. She used some residual bad blood between the Weavers and the Cartel to win the deal on excellent terms, and the Undermen are already seeing some small profits from resale. According to Lucas, Vanya has traveled tirelessly through western Kivia since the Boundary came down, learning local politics and becoming an expert in Kivian relations.

In other news, Octavius Hightower, leader of the Starshine Players, came to Lucas four days ago with a strange report. Octavius and his bards have noticed some odd trends and occurrences in the past several weeks, and only recently has Hightower begun to wonder if any of them are related. Specifically:

- The weird fluctuations of luck have not gone unnoticed by the general population, though the phenomenon has been lessening of late. There is a strong rumor in some circles that the Goddess Corilayna has either died or abdicated her position.
- There have been a number of small earthquakes in various unrelated locations around the kingdom, none large enough to cause any serious damage.
- In the past two weeks, nine different people in nine different towns have been found dead in their beds, faces contorted in similar expressions of horror. Octavius doesn't see any connections among the victims, beyond their manner of death.
- The people of Sand's Edge have noticed a terrible smell blowing in from the Mouth of Nahalm, which has ignited renewed fears of Turtle Sickness.
- Twice in the same week, two different workers in the deep copper mines near Sentinel stabbed their wives to death, and went back to work the next day as if nothing had happened. They recall the slayings, but don't seem to understand the fuss. Both men had exhibited no previous criminal behaviors, but nonetheless are in custody and awaiting execution.

Finally, Lucas reports no success in finding King Farazil.



Dranko then accompanies Grey Wolf and Aravis on a journey to Djaw. Aravis is gravely concerned that Naslund has been left relatively undefended following the abdication of Drosh and the deadly incursion of Tarsos and Meledien. In Djaw the three hope to gain an audience with clerics of Myr Madar, Kivian God of Judgment, who has subsumed the portfolio of the God of Death. After an hour of fruitless wandering in the streets, with nary a sign of a temple to Myr Madar, they visit a shrine to Palamir, God of Loyalty, Duty and Honor. (The folk there are amazed to find one of their most famed paladins, Bostock the Blue, contentedly occupying Grey Wolf's sword. Bostock gently declines their offers to house him in their temple.) When

asked about the location of any temples to Myr Madar, the clerics of Palamir inform Aravis that there *aren't* any. By Myr Madar's own divine mandate, there are no churches, shrines, priests or worshippers of that deity. Otherwise, goes the common wisdom, Myr Madar might be seen as showing favoritism.

"Great," grumbles Dranko. "The new God of Death has an epic level rod up his..."

"Excuse me," interrupts Grey Wolf, "but where is your donation box?"

Aravis proposes a plan B. Given his personal divine ties to Quarrol, Kivian God of nature and animals, he thinks perhaps he can get a message to Myr Madar that way. A sage in Djaw tells them that the largest shrine to Quarrol is a wooden fortress some thirty miles outside the town of Trev-Lyndyn. A couple of *teleports* later and Aravis finds himself speaking to the High Priest of Quarrol, a bent and aged man leaning on a maple staff.

The High Priest bows low before Aravis. "What may we do for you, Holy One?"

"I need to get a message to Quarrol," Aravis explains.

The old man looks puzzled. "You cannot simply talk with him yourself?"

"I don't know," Aravis admits. "I've never tried." At his request, the High Priest takes him to an enormous tree with a small woodsy shrine built up around it. He sits and meditates, but though he does achieve a pleasing inner peace, he fails to manifest a direct line of communication to Quarrol. In the end he settles for explaining his dilemma to the High Priest, who casts *commune*.

"Is Myr Madar aware that Naslund is unprotected?"

YES.

"Can He do something to help protect it?"

HE CANNOT. ONLY DROSH CAN.

So, that's the end of that. For the meantime, at least, Viersk is on his own.



While Morningstar is recruiting dream-warriors, and Aravis, Dranko and Grey Wolf are trying to contact Myr Madar, Kibi and Ernie *teleport* to the dwarven lands of Gurund. With Azhant slain, the ancient halls of Cloud Mountain now lie fallow and unguarded, waiting for new tenants who don't mind a fixer-upper. It's obvious to Kibi that the place once housed tens of thousands of dwarves, and together with the surrounding hills and woodlands, could probably serve as the home to the entire dwarven population of Gurund.

The capital city of Gurund is still under the yoke of the Guild of Chains, with large and numerous Guild guardhouses and offices rising over the shorter buildings of the dwarves. Guild soldiers patrol the streets and their camps are everywhere. They are a constant physical presence, and the dwarves go quietly about their business, heads down, avoiding the humans entirely.

Years ago, after their first unpleasant encounter with the Guild of Chains, the Company had quietly left a large sum of gold with a dwarven elder named Athulf, someone they deemed a possible spark of rebellion. Kibi casts *veil* upon himself and Ernie, making them look more like the locals in dress and features, before making discreet inquiries regarding Athulf's whereabouts. It doesn't take long before they are hustled off the streets by the locals, and then passed on through a chain of hands to a small nondescript building in a crowded residential neighborhood.

Athulf sits at a low stone table, drinking a beer. Ernie thinks he looks even older and more careworn than at their last meeting. Kibi introduces himself, and briefly explains the nature of their errand. Athulf listens with frank skepticism.

"That's an interesting story you have there, Kibilhathur Bimson," he says when the tale is done. "But I've told you people before, I'm just a dwarf. I don't want any trouble with anyone. Honestly." He nods meaningfully toward the door.

Kibi has donned the party's *cloak of diplomacy* for the occasion. It whispers in his mind: *The Guild may suspect that Athulf is up to something. They may have tried this sort of trickery before to get Athulf to admit to fomenting rebellion.*

"My story is true," Kibi insists. "What must I do to convince you?"

Athulf rubs his chin. "Can you wait outside for about half an hour? I need to think this over. But let me be clear about something first. Whether or not you're with the Guild of Chains, I don't want trouble. Understand me?"

Kibi nods. He and Ernie depart and wait on a stone bench outside the house. Dwarves bustle past on errands, seldom taking

any note of the two of them. Ernie takes a short walk and notes that this particular house is unusually far from any particular Guild edifice or patrol route.

By and by the door opens, though Athulf doesn't come out. They walk back inside and close the door. Athulf has been joined by a trio of burly dwarves, conspicuously armed with axes.

"So, Ernie," says Athulf. "Describe who was with you the last time you were here?"

Ernie smiles. "You probably remember my friend the half-orc, with the foul body odor and no manners. And the tall, white-haired pale woman – who's now the half-orc's wife, by the way. There was a half-elven woman with dark fly-away hair. A dour-looking guy with a sword who grumbled a lot. And me, of course."

Athulf glances at one of his companions. "OK, yeah," he says. "And somebody in your group gave me something. Who was it, and what did they give me?"

"It was me," says Ernie. "I gave you a big pile of money."

Athulf turns to the dwarf next to him, who nods curtly. The other two exit the room.

"Okay, Ernie. Kibi. You told me that you had just defeated a dragon named Azhant who was residing in Cloud Mountain, which used to be a dwarven city, but now lies in ruins."

"And we're thinking maybe you could make it not so ruined, now that there's a vacancy," Ernie says.

"Is it big enough for the entire population of Gurund?"

Kibi nods. "If you include the surrounding areas, I think so."

Athulf strokes his beard. "And what stops the Guild of Chains from enlisting the armies of the White Sun to get us back after we relocate?"

"Well, mountains, for one thing," says Kibi. "There's no good way for an army to approach. A small number of dwarves could easily defend the mountain passes from a much larger force."

"Also," says Ernie with a grin, "there would be ogres between them and you."

"And how would we gather up a hundred thousand dwarves from all around Gurund without the Guild of Chains figuring out what we're up to?"

"I admit, there are some transportation difficulties," says Kibi. "But we can set up teleportation circles."

Athulf's head bobs up and down. He's obviously intrigued, despite the logistical hurdles. "OK, OK, but then we have the problem of the current population of dwarven slaves. Every slave is someone's brother, or father, or cousin. Even if we could move everyone else to Cloud Mountain, the current slaveholders would start shipping us ears and fingers until we cracked and came back."

"We could solve that," says Ernie. "A *wish* or *miracle* could get every current dwarven slave to a teleportation circle, all at once."

Athulf's eyes go a bit wide at these assumptions of power, but they also fuel his enthusiasm. "With your help, I think this is workable. I didn't waste your seed money, you know. We've been stockpiling weapons and armor. We also pay a decent chunk to diviners, so we know who to trust, and who might be a Guild stooge. We even ran some divinations on you while you were waiting outside. If you're willing to help us again..."

Athulf asks for a few hours to assemble a team of engineers and stone-wrights, and for transportation to Cloud Mountain. He wants to check out the location himself, to make sure it's a suitable new home for the dwarves of Gurund. When the group of dwarves is set to go, Kibi *teleports* them to the base of Cloud Mountain, after which Ernie casts *wind walk* upon them to allow easier scouting of the ruins. After a couple of hours wafting through the cracks and landslides of the shattered halls, the scout team is quite optimistic. They request more time to scout the surrounding regions; Kibi agrees to return in a week to ferry them back to Gurund.



Two days later, the Company have again gathered in the Greenhouse to discuss their plans. Dranko puts his feet up on the table, lights up a blacktallow, and breathes out smoke that curls into the words **KIBI IS A GENIUS**. The dwarf smirks.

In light of Octavius Hightower's report, and still considering the Book of Leantha, there are now several possibilities for the Company's next move. They could:

- investigate the various persons found dead in their beds (though the party are unanimous in their opinion that Octesian is to blame).
- travel to Sand's Edge and look into the bad smell blowing in off the sand. (Dranko is certain that one of the Ventifact Colossi has died.)
- look into the baffling murders at the Sentinel copper mines.
- seek out the Sharshun's hidden fortress in the Greatwood, to wrest the *Watcher's Kiss* away from Darkeye.
- visit the mysterious island, long protected by dint of being in the Uncrossable Sea, shown on the first page of Leantha's tome.

They decide to decide after breakfast.

Richards: Awesome! I'm glad to see that events are being put into motion to free the dwarves from the Guild of Chains.

SolitonMan: Me too! Boo, slavers! Booooooooooooooo!!

Neurotic: They should've already done it!

Piratcat: For me, this is the turning point – everything gathers momentum from here. The noise you hear, at least in my memory, is the rollercoaster cresting the rise.

Heh. Looking forward to this.

carborundum: Go ahead, make me want to read it EVEN MORE!

StevenAC: This made me laugh a lot, when I remembered the following comment, posted by Kidcthulhu over a decade ago:

We've just finished playing. The group agrees. We are so amazingly f#\$*-ed. There are not words for how much trouble we're in.

Several runs ago, Sagiro told us that much of the story until now has been the big, long upward climb of the rollercoaster. Well, children, it's time to put your hands in the air and scream, because we've just crested the top, and seen the long, long down.

You'll find that moment near the end of chapter 6 of the collected Story Hour – in the run-up to the Company's confrontation with Mokad and the Black Circle's attempted planar conjunction in Kallor. I well remember how amazingly epic that fight seemed at the time – it's still one of my favourite parts of the story. Today, as chapter 28 nears completion, it's obvious that Sagiro's rollercoaster was a lot bigger than anyone ever imagined...

Solarious: Remember back when the world changed, the Emperor's goal was to continually *dig down into the earth beneath Tal Hae?* And now people digging deep into the earth have suffered a complete morality degradation to complete psychopath... Why, its almost as if they were exposed to the Evil Black Goo of the Adversary. I'm sure this is a complete coincidence and it will in no way get worse and even more horrible to learn more about...



Uncharted Territory

A curious guardsman fishes out his keys and spins them in his hand until he finds the right one. “You sure you’re okay being left alone with him, sir?”

Dranko shows a tusk grin. “Yeah, I’m sure. You can wait outside in the hall.”

The guard unlocks the cell door and then hustles away, leaving Dranko to open it. The cell is dark, cramped, and smells of rat droppings. A man in the back, dressed in gray prison rags, saunters forward and looks Dranko up and down. Perhaps impressed with the half-orc’s Spire Guard uniform, along with his armor and weapons, the prisoner chooses to be cooperative.

“So,” says Dranko. “What are you in here for?”

The prisoner answers in a thick, dull voice. “Killed some guy.”

“Yeah? Do you do that a lot?”

“No.”

Dranko takes a deep breath. “So, if you had a choice, between being hanged tomorrow, and not being hanged, and allowing someone else’s personality to steer you for a while, what would your choice be?”

The prisoner looks confused, but does show he absorbed the first part of Dranko’s question. “Depends,” he says. “Do I still get hanged the day *after* tomorrow?”

Dranko tries another approach. “Well, see, I have a guy, he’s pretty cool, but he doesn’t have a body. It’s magic stuff.”

“Are you offering me a pardon?” The prisoner looks both perplexed and hopeful.

“Your body would be moving around, and your mind would be in there,” says Dranko. “You just wouldn’t be driving. Do you understand what I mean?”

“No.”

“Right,” says Dranko.

“Is this a pardon?” the prisoner presses.

“No.”

“Too bad.”

Dranko tries again. “If you *could* get a pardon, but never be the one in charge of your body again, would you do that?”

“Wait... what?”

Dranko sighs. “Look, have you ever been dominated?”

The rest of the Company have been following this exchange over the mind-link. Someone giggles. The prisoner doesn’t answer; he shifts nervously from one foot to the other, then picks his nose and wipes his finger on his shirt.

“We’d give your body a pardon,” blurts Dranko.

“My body. All right. That sounds good, I guess.”

“And for your mind, you’d be sleeping.”

The prisoner shakes his head. “I don’t get it. Don’t I have to be awake to accept my pardon?”

“No you’d... Hmm. Do you ever sleepwalk?”

“How should I know? I’m asleep!”

“But you’re okay with this? Better than dying?”

The prisoner scratches face. “Yeah, but what’s this about sleepwalking?”

“Imagine you were walking around doing stuff, but didn’t remember it.”

“Wait,” says the prisoner. “Do I not remember it while I’m doing it, or not remember it later?”

“Neither.”

“But I’m doing it. No, wait, someone else is doing it? You know, I still don’t get it. You’re talking crazy.”

At this point the others urge Dranko over the mind-link to just get the poor condemned back to the Greenhouse, so Dranko calls for the guard to lock the door again, and then goes to find the local magistrate.

“My name is Dranko Brightshield, Knight of the Spire Guard,” he says, once he’s standing in the magistrate’s office. “You’ve got a prisoner due to be hanged tomorrow.”

“Yes,” nods the magistrate. “**Anton Fish**, his name is. Real piece of work, isn’t he? He committed murder in the course of a robbery.”

“How do you feel about remanding him into my custody?”

The magistrate gestures to Dranko’s uniform. “You have the authority, sir. Also, you’re a known associate of the Spire Guard – that group that lives on Baker Street, if I recall rightly? I didn’t realize you had been promoted. Congratulations.”

Dranko bites his tongue, and fills out the paperwork. A few minutes later two guards bring the prisoner into the magistrate’s office, hands and feet bound in chains.

“Anton Fish,” the magistrate intones. “You are now officially in the custody of the Spire Guard and Dranko Brightshield. The conditions of your release are that you do whatever this man says, and make no attempt to escape his custody. If you should violate the terms of your release, you will be returned here and your execution will be expedited and carried out at once. Do you understand all that?”

“Expedited? What does...”

“Do what he says, or we’ll kill you after all,” the magistrate clarifies.



In the backyard of the Greenhouse, Farazil appraises his new body through Flicker's eyes. "If you're going to use him as your pony," Dranko explains, "then if you need to abandon him somewhere, do it where he can't hurt anyone else."

"Oh, I'll bring him back," Farazil promises. "Unless he gets killed, that is." He looks expectantly at Dranko and asks, "Will I be a citizen of Charagan, once I'm legally and officially in the body of this man?"

Dranko shakes his head. "I don't have the authority to make you a citizen."

"You don't?" Farazil sounds skeptical. "Bigwigs like you? You're just about the biggest wigs there are!"

"No, we're not," says Aravis. "There's the King. There are dukes..."

Farazil interrupts. "Well, can you get the Duke to make me a citizen then?"

"I promise we'll work on it," says Aravis.

"Because that's what I'm really after," says Farazil. "Citizenship, and the... the acceptance that comes with it. I promise to be a good boy, but you promise to keep working on getting that for me, right?"

"Yes," says Aravis, "like I said, we promise."

Farazil reaches out with Flicker's arm and puts his hand on Anton's shoulder. Flicker shudders and blinks his eyes. "What happened?" he asks.

"That's Farazil," says Grey Wolf, pointing to Anton Fish.

"Can I punch him in the nuts?" asks Flicker.

"Now, that's not very nice," says Farazil with a chuckle. "I think I treated your body quite well. Consider, I could have jumped you off a bridge or in front of a moving cart any time I wanted! But it's better if I stay on your relative good side."

"You'll never be on my relative good side," hisses Ernie, "because you dominated my relative!"

Farazil ignores the belligerent halflings, and addresses Aravis. "So, the plan is, I take this body, and go see what I can find out about those inexplicable murders in Sentinel. I'll be back when I know something."

"We'll keep in touch with *sendings* if anything comes up on our end," says Dranko. "Say, do you have any money?"

"Gosh, Dranko, I don't know!" exclaims Farazil. "Let me check the pockets of this condemned prisoner you found for me." He makes a show of turning the pockets of his rags inside out. "Nope, no money! What a surprise!"

Dranko glowers and hands over a pouch with a hundred gold coins. "If you come back and we're not here, find a room in an inn somewhere nearby."

"You mean I can't stay in the Greenhouse? It's nice in there."

"No," says Ernie flatly.

"Just asking! Well, I'd best get started. Thank you all... I mean it. And I won't let you down, I promise." And just like that, Farazil takes his leave of the Company.



Now... the island. The primary logistical hurdle is an inability to *teleport* to a location never visited. All they know is an approximate location, somewhere in the once-uncrossable sea, as shown in Leantha's book.

"This should be no problem," says Dranko.

"Oh?" Aravis raises an eyebrow. "And how are you proposing we find our mysterious island?"

"Easy," says Dranko. "I ask the smartest person I know." He gives Aravis a meaningful stare. Aravis sighs.

They discuss various plans, and discard most of them. Sailing a ship around in the ocean would take too long. Ditto preparing thousands of scrolls of *dimension door*. Morningstar casts *find the path*, but it fails. (Could that mean the fissure with its Divination Sinks is on the island?) Then someone remembers that *greater plane shift* promises a precise landing location, unlike the 5- to 500-mile perturbation of the lesser version. That sets Aravis to making himself a larger version of Leantha's drawing. He spends an hour drawing lines and doing math, and figuring a location that's going to be extremely close to the island, assuming Leantha's map is to a proper relative scale.

"Got it," he says at last. "1600 miles due east from the eastern tip of Charagan, and then 550 miles north from there. We'll need a *plane shift* to get off Abernia, and a *greater plane shift* to come back."

"And a boat," adds Kibi.



Since no one has *greater plane shift* prepared, the Company have to wait until the next morning to enact their plan. Bright and early they *plane shift* to Yoba's home plane. There's some small chance they'll end up close enough to Yoba's actual location for Ernie to pay his love a visit. "I hope I get lucky," he says, his wistful tone undermined by the leering snickers of Flicker and Dranko.

They land in a forest. It takes a few minutes for them to find a clearing large enough to unfold *Burning Sail*; they create the boat in its smaller aspect, propped up against a tree to keep it upright. They board the vessel, and Ernie casts *greater plane shift*, aiming for the spot Aravis indicated on their map of Abernia.

They appear in the middle of the ocean, as they expected. Before anyone can glance around to see if an island is visible from the deck, a huge wave sloshes over the side. *Burning Sail* is lifted high on a huge swell and rocked to a precarious pitch. They immediately transform the *folding boat* to its larger aspect, and drop the anchor to give them some drag, but even the heavier vessel is tossed around casually by the storm in which they've appeared. A powerful wind whips up spray, and combined with a cold, stinging rain, lowers visibility to near zero. The *unseen servants* do their best to prevent their ship from capsizing, though it's not at all clear how long they'll be able to succeed.

As the ship reaches the bottom of a swell, Aravis casts *Mordenkainen's magnificent mansion*, and the Company hurriedly pile into it, even while Dranko is folding the boat back into a small box. Sopping and panting from the effort, the party are soon sprawled just inside the doorway; the smell of the magical feast wafts over to them. Outside the door, the storm still rages, but for the moment that is forgotten.

Only Dranko doesn't immediately tuck into the gourmet repast; instead, he ties one end of a long rope to a stone column in the foyer and the other around his waist. After using a magic ring to effect *water walking*, he leaps out the door. Over the mind-link the others can hear his glee. *I'm surfing the ocean in the middle of a storm, tied to a rope that's dangling out of a mansion that's hovering in mid-air. Do we have the greatest job in the world, or what?*

Aravis shakes his head. *Are we going to scout, or are we going to sit around abusing magic in various ways?*

That second one, answers Dranko.

Kain Gallant: Ha ha! I love this! High-leveling adventuring really is the greatest job in the world.



After the meal, Morningstar gets down to the business of finding the island. She drops into *Ava Dormo* and exits the mansion; outside, the sea is like glass. The Dreamscape has no weather.

She has fully mastered the ability to divide her consciousness between her conscious and her dreaming minds. "I can see for miles in every direction. There's no sign of the island," she tells the others. At Aravis's suggestion she flies upward, as high as possible before her vision of the ocean floor grows hazy. From there she starts an out-spiraling search pattern.

It takes about ninety minutes for her to spot the island, a tiny speck of land to the north-west. She flies towards it, and as she draws near she is better able to judge its size. The little land-mass is quite small, a rough oval two miles along its long axis, half a mile on the short. Most of the island is occupied by a single, towering mountain.

She flies around the island's perimeter, getting the lay of the land. There's not much space for any buildings or habitation; the sandy shore runs right up to the foot of the mountain, buffered only by a sparse fringe of scraggly green-brown scrub. The mountain itself is a steep cone of unforested rock, lacking any trails or pathways.

But there is one relevant detail. Near the far side of the island, the base of the mountain is a sheer cliff rising up out of the sand. And in one place, that cliff side is gashed by a fissure at ground level, a ten foot wide crack that opens into either a cave or a tunnel. It looks conspicuously like the picture in Leantha's book – the one showing a fissure flanked by Divination Sinks.

I think we're here.



The Girl Who Has Been Waiting

“I think we’re here,” Morningstar says to the others.

Dranko gestures to the banquet table. “But we still have a hundred courses left to eat!”

Morningstar casts *dream anchor* and brings the three wizards into *Ava Dormo* with her, taking them directly to the beach nearest the cleft in the cliff. They study the location for a few minutes, return to their bodies in the mansion, and the party prepare to *teleport*. Flicker stuffs one last cinnamon roll into his mouth before the party dangle themselves outside the mansion for a group translation.

One drawback of using *Ava Dormo* for scouting is that transient objects are not reflected in the Dreamscape. So it is that the party are unpleasantly surprised to find the beach strewn with bodies poking out of the sand. A small population of gulls are pecking at the briny flesh rotting upon their skeletons. They were humanoid but not human – tall, four-armed, muscular and with thick skin. They’ve likely been dead about six months. None in the party recognize their race, but it hardly matters now. There are fourteen bodies here, and every one of them has a charred hole burned into the center of its chest.

“I hate playing catch-up,” Dranko grumbles.

Beyond the smell of ordinary decay, the Company can detect the faintest whiff of Essence permeating the scene of carnage. Grey Wolf casts *enhanced senses* and finds that among the unpleasant odors, he detects the scent of dead *human*. Flicker notices a skeletonized human hand sticking poking its fingers up through the sand, and when he pulls, an entire human arm comes out, ripped from the socket of its absent owner. They’re not sure, but they think it’s a woman’s arm.

Dranko smiles. “Looks like Meledien’s been disarmed.” He takes the arm and drops it into a *bag of holding*.

There are two other objects that catch the party’s collective eye: at the base of the fissure, one on either side of its opening, are two enormous Divination Sinks, huge stone barrels glowing blue from within.



With *mass darkvision* applied, the Company enter the cracked opening in the side of the cliff. It leads to a long, narrow tunnel, straight as an arrow, boring through the mountainside. The floor is flat and polished, though the walls are rough-hewn, and the ceiling starts to descend as they progress. The minutes pass, marked only by the muffled echoes of their footsteps.

After a mile of this monotony, long after the pinpoint of light marking the entrance has disappeared behind them, the tunnel abruptly ends. The ceiling has come down to only eight feet, and the passage has narrowed to little more than five feet wide. In the floor, just short of the wall that marks the end of the tunnel, is a perfectly round hole. It starts a cylindrical shaft that plummets straight down into the darkness, past the range of their *darkvision*.

They tie a sunrod to the end of a long length of rope and slowly lower it into the shaft. The illuminated curved walls are a smooth, glistening stone. Down goes the sunrod into that perfect well, until the light is so dim it seems no more than the glimmer of a distant candle. Only after they have paid out some two hundred feet of rope does Dranko feel it touch the ground, the rope going slightly slack.

Something tugs on the rope, gently, three times. Dranko is so startled he nearly lets go. “Who’s there?” he calls, but no answer rises up to meet his question.

He starts to pull the rope back up, and just for a second it resists, as if someone has grabbed the far end, but then it pulls free. “Don’t pull it all the way back,” says Kibi. “Leave it most of the way down. I’m going to scout.”

The dwarf casts *xorn movement* and sinks into the floor. With Scree at his side, the two descend straight down parallel to the round shaft, offset by a few feet. He realizes that the Divination Sinks have cut off the *telepathic bond* he usually enjoys with his comrades, though he can still communicate mentally with Scree.

Still twenty feet short of the depth where the sunrod touched bottom, Kibi finds he can go no further. He has come up against an impervious “floor” of blue marble, though ordinarily such stone would prove no barrier to him. Perhaps he has reached some sort of underground prison?

Scree, I’m going to stick my head into the shaft and see what’s below us.

Are you sure that’s a good idea? asks Scree nervously. *If I volunteered to do that, you’d probably tell me not to.*

Maybe, admits Kibi. *But I need to learn what we’re dealing with.*

Kibi slowly sticks his head out of the solid rock and into the shaft, while effectively lying on his stomach atop the marble layer. He cranes his neck out and downward, and finds himself looking into a large round chamber. No, not entirely round – it's a ten-sided room, and on each wall is a large symbol inlaid in gems. But before Kibi can focus on these symbols, he notices that directly below him, staring up and watching him intently, is a human girl, maybe nine years old. She's wearing a simple blue dress, and her long brown hair hangs straight to her scrawny shoulders.

"Hi," says Kibi, taken aback. "Are you... are you friendly?"

"Hey mister, that's a neat trick!" says the girl.

"Thanks," says Kibi. "So, uh, what are you doing down here?"

The girl smiles. "Waiting."

"For what?"

"I don't know! Maybe you?" Then she frowns. "You're not with those other three people, are you?"

"No," says Kibi quickly. "Are you?"

The girl makes a face, like she's eaten something rotten. "Me? Of course not!"

"What did you think of them?" asks Kibi.

"Not very nice," says the girl. "Oh, and I like your beard. It's so fuzzy!"

"Thank you," says Kibi again. "Have you always lived here?"

"Yes."

"How old are you?"

The girl shrugs, lifting and lowering her dress a few inches. "I don't know. I was asleep for a long time."

"What woke you up, then?"

The girl's voice sounds a little unsure as she answers. "The people on the ships. And Posada. And the other one."

"Did the people on the ships come here, then?" asks Kibi.

"No."

"But you woke up once Posada's Boundary came down?"

She scrunches up her face like she's trying hard to remember something. "Yes. That sounds right."

When Kibi doesn't immediately offer another question, the girl poses the dwarf one of her own. "Are you ready?"

"For what?" asks Kibi.

"To go into the Depths. That's why you're here, right?"

Kibi gulps. "You mean... underwater?"

The girl giggles. "Part of it probably is. I don't know. I've never been there. I'm not allowed. I can only let people in."

Kibi frowns. "Those people who came before us... did you let them in?"

The girl makes her sour-milk face again. "Them? No. I hid from them. But you know what's weird? They let *themselves* in. And they're not allowed to do that!"

"Can only Divine beings let others through, then?" asks Kibi.

"No, only me. That's why Yulan put me here." Kibi recalls that Yulan is the Kivian God of Time and Reality, and Father of all the Kivian Gods.

"So, mister bearded, is it just you?"

Zelc: I'm rereading the story, and was wondering what would have happened if the group decided to stop the Stormknights from killing the Ventifact Colossus. I seem to remember from past comments that maybe the Sharshun's attempt to rewrite history would have been stopped, and instead Naradawk would have gotten through at Verdshane. Sagiro, how would you have handled the story if the party chose to go this along this route?

Sagiro: Oh, goodness, I have no idea. I probably had some ideas back when it was happening, but remember, that was about fifteen years ago, and I have a very spotty long-term memory.

I do remember thinking at the time that the party was *highly* likely to choose to prevent the turtle's rampage. I had a pretty good grasp on how my players thought, and they weren't likely going to choose the "let's let thousands of people get crushed by turtles with no real proof things will be better that way" option. As a result, I spent much more time thinking about the consequences of them stopping the Colossus.

Zelc: Hah, I thought that might have been the case. It was worth a try. Maybe the story of that alternate "reality" would have to be written by the fan-fiction groups...

"No, I have friends up there. We lowered the light down on a rope, and wondered who was down here when you tugged on it."

"Oh, it's just me. My name's **Ula**."

"My name is Kibilhathur Bimson," says Kibi.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Bimson. Why are you in the rock like that?"

"I don't like climbing down ropes," says Kibi. "It makes me nervous."

"Oh," says Ula. She peers upward into the well. "It looks like fun!"

"So," says Kibi, "those people who came before and let themselves in even though they weren't supposed to. Did they take anything out when they left?"

Ula seems surprised at the question. "Oh, they didn't come out. They *can't* come out. It's one-way."

"So once you're in the... the Depths... you're in there forever?"

"As far I as I know. That's the whole point of the Iron Barrier. No one goes in, no one goes out." She gives Kibi a look of surprise that he didn't know something so obvious.

"So what's in the Depths?" asks Kibi.

"I don't know exactly. A whole world. Like you have up there. Cities, civilizations, creatures... stuff like that. I've never actually been there."

"Is there someone down in the Depths that can let people back up?"

"I doubt it. It would be against the rules!"

Kibi decides it's time for the others to join the conversation. "Do you mind if my friends come down too?"

"Sure. I think you won't hurt me. Not like those other people would have. There was something very wrong with them, you know. And they killed all the guardians! Can you imagine? I didn't think they could do that, either. There's something not right, here. But you're right. Right?" Kibi nods, smiles, and swims back up through the rock to join the rest of the Company. He relays everything about his encounter with Ula.

Soon enough, all seven of them are down in the ten-sided room. It's spacious, some fifty feet across, with blue marble walls, floor and ceiling. Two metal rings, like handles, protrude from the center of the floor, directly beneath where the tunnel opens into the ceiling. On each wall of the room is a symbol, set in silver gemstones: a loom; a tear-drop; a man on fire; a sword blade; a sun; a wave; a shield; a bloody crescent; a tree; and the Rune of Drosh. They are the symbols of each of the ten primary Deities of Kivia: in order, Manisette, Goddess of Creation; Heros, Goddess of Mercy; Nifi, God of Fire; Tiria, Goddess of Chaos; Kemma, God of the Sun; Posada, God of the Ocean; Palamir, God of Soldiers; Dralla, Goddess of the Night; Quarrol, God of Nature; and Drosh, God of Death. Yulan himself is indicated with an hourglass symbol on Ula's forehead.

"What about the ones who died?" asks Ernie.

"I think the room had more walls while I was sleeping," says Ula. "I'm not sure, though."

Ernie looks at the thin girl, slightly taller than himself. "Are you hungry?" he asks. "You've been here a long time..."

Ula smiles at him. "No, but thanks. Say, what's your name?"

All of Kibi's companions introduce themselves one at a time, and Ula nods politely at each until Dranko's turn. "Dranko? That's a funny sounding name. Can you say it again?"

Dranko looks at Ula warily. "Dranko."

"Dranko!" says Ula. "Dranko Dranko Dranko Dranko Dranko..."

"Do you get bored?" Dranko interrupts.

"No."

"How did you hide from the others?" asks Grey Wolf, looking around the room. He doesn't see any cover or other exits.

"Oh. Like this!" Ula vanishes. A few seconds later she appears on the far side of the room.

"Where did you just go?" asks Ernie.

Ula shrugs. "I don't know."

"And you only appeared here when the sea became crossable?" asks Aravis.

"I think I was here all the time," says Ula uncertainly. "I was just asleep. I think Yulan put me here not long after he first arrived."

"And where did he come from?" presses Aravis.

"I don't know."

Dranko describes the persons of Tarsos, Meledien and Seven Dark Words. Ula nods. "Yeah, that was them. The greasy hair man was the worst. He's the one who actually opened the door, and that doesn't make sense, since I'm the only one who can open it. That's the whole reason I'm here! Those three went in, but at least I know they can't come back out. It's only one-way."

"And how did they open it?" asks Grey Wolf.

"I don't know. I didn't see. I was hiding. If they can kill the guardians, they could kill me too!"

"Where is the door they opened?" asks Aravis.

Ula points to the handles set in the middle of the floor.

Aravis considers that if Adversary blood let his enemies pass, his own divine nature might let him succeed as well. "May I try opening them?"

"Sure, but it won't work."

She's right. Aravis grips the rings and pulls, but they don't budge.

"So," says Dranko, "tell me about the place beyond this. The Depths."

"Like I told your beardy friend, I've never been there. I think it's like your world up on the surface, but underground."

"You mentioned something called the Iron Barrier...?"

"Oh, yes! It's what Yulan put around the world, to make sure all the people in the Depths wouldn't come up and wipe out all the people on the surface. Because they could have done that, I think. It's very big, it goes around the whole world, and it's very thick."

Kibi looks alarmed. "Do the people in the Depths *want* to destroy the surface?"

"I don't know," Ula shrugs. "I've never met them. Maybe. No one's ever come up, so I think it doesn't matter."

"And your job is to let people through who want to go?" asks Kibi.

"No, my job is to figure out who *should* go through, and then open the door for them if I think they ought to."

Kibi takes a deep breath. "Do you think we should go through?"

Ula's young face breaks into a grin. "Yes, of course! Assuming that you're ready, and have everything you need."

"And what do we need?"

"I have no idea," answers Ula. "But understand, once you go through, you can't come back. So if you *don't* have everything you need, then once you go, you won't be able to do whatever it is you need to do. What *do* you want to do down there, anyway?"

"Stop those other three people from doing whatever awful thing they're planning on," says Kibi.

Dranko eyes the two metal handles in the floor. "I think we have everything we need," he says.

"What if we need the *Watcher's Kiss*?" asks Grey Wolf.

"We could cast a *commune*, just to be sure," says Ernie.

"But what about the Divination Sinks?" asks Kibi.

That's a problem easily mended. Aravis casts a *rope trick*, and Morningstar goes inside to ask questions of her Goddess. Dranko keeps Ula occupied by teaching her how to play cards.

Morningstar sits down in the little extra-dimensional pocket and casts her spell. Ell is with her.

"Hi, Ell," Morningstar says with a weary wryness. *"Guess where I am now?"*

ASK YOUR QUESTIONS, CHILD.

"Do we need the Watcher's Kiss before we descend into the Depths?"

YES.

"Is there anything else we need, that we don't have, before we descend into the Depths?"

NO.

"Is there anything else we might want?"

YES.

"Do you have any sense that Meledien, Tarsos and Seven Dark Words are present on the surface world?"

I DON'T THINK THEY ARE.

"We suspect they've already been in the Depths for six months. Are we already too late?"

NO.

"Should we seek the Watcher's Kiss immediately?"

SOONER IS BETTER.

"The people who were killed in their sleep. Did Octesian kill them?"

YES.

"Should we seek Octesian before seeking the Watcher's Kiss?"

USE YOUR JUDGMENT.

"The murderers in Sentinel – is it imperative that we deal with that before going into the Depths?"

THE QUESTION IS TOO VAGUE.

"Are those murderers connected with a known enemy?"

YES.

"Are they connected with Octesian?"

NOT MEANINGFULLY.

"Are they connected with Meledien or Tarsos or Seven Dark Words?"

YES.

"The task we need to do in the Depths – does it have anything to do with the Thorn in Abernia's side?"

YES.

"Will Farazil substantively abuse the trust we've placed in him?"

PROBABLY NOT, SHORT TERM.

"Is there a way to send Farazil back to where he came from?"

YES, BUT HE WOULD RETURN.

"Is there a way to confine him to one body?"

YES, WITH GREAT EFFORT.

"Will the dwarves be safer if we move them to Cloud Mountain?"

SOME WILL.

"Will Azhant return?"

I DON'T KNOW.

"Thank you, Dark Goddess."

When Morningstar emerges and relays Ell's answers, a nervous twitter passes through the group, given how close they were to pursuing their Black Circle quarry without first acquiring the *Watcher's Kiss*. Having learned everything they're likely to from Ula, and with a renewed sense of urgency, they bid her a fond farewell.

"Nice meeting you all," she says with a smile and a wave. "I guess I'll see you again pretty soon, huh?"

Cerebral Paladin: Ula is interesting. I wondered what Ula's nature is – is she a god? Some form of avatar of Yulan? A construct of some sort? An empowered mortal? Did the Company spend time talking about that?

(It seems notable that her name is a subset of Yulan's, but...)

Everett: Your second guess seems most likely. An avatar of a *part* of Yulan... imbued with His or Her powers but not with the omniscience of a God, so she appears as a playful child.

StevenAC: I'd just like to note that it's exactly a year ago today since Sagiro made the following historic post...

Holy \$#!@!.

It's over.

It seems very fitting that on the anniversary of the campaign's conclusion, we've just got our first glimpse in the latest update of the one-way door leading to the endgame. Sagiro, how hard did you have to work to hint to the party that they weren't actually ready for that yet?

Sagiro: Listening to the tape, I didn't have to work all that hard. Beyond the actual words of Ula herself, I only had to give them one small DM-nudge. There was a very brief discussion about whether the pictures in the Book of Leantha were chronological (in terms of when the party should deal with each), and since the fissure pic came before the *Watcher's Kiss* pic, a pro-chronological argument might have led them to assume the golden sword was down in the Depths somewhere. I dropped one comment that the Book wasn't necessarily chronological, and that's all it took to make them *commune*, just to be sure.

Zelc: That would have been... amusing. The party decide to jump into the one-way portal too hastily. Sagiro's brain turns to overdrive to figure out how to salvage the situation so a ~14-year campaign doesn't end with an inevitable TPK.

Piratecat: Really, how do you know it didn't?

coyote6: Spies.

Everett: Because Morningstar's player posted months ago about the final run and her tone was far too peppy and upbeat for an epoch-ending TPK. Nice try, PC...

Neurotic: He would have Farazil jump in behind carrying what's needed. Easy.

Cerebral Paladin: I don't assume that the portal is totally one-way. We're told that it's one-way by Ula, but she also tells us that no-one is allowed in without her approving them and yet three other people did anyway. I suspect that the rules are that it's one-way, but that there are ways to circumvent the rules. Still, far better for our heroes to not have to.

Enkhidu: I don't know about you, but I would be upbeat and peppy as a player if a long running campaign ended in a TPK. Of course, for that to be true, we would have to be TPKed in a battle with the Big Evil of the campaign and take that bastard with us.

Everett: Well, we'll just ask Sagiro *how* the TPK went down, shall we?

Piratecat: Anything I say might reveal too much. I'll keep my mouth closed. Let's just say it was a heck of a game session...

Joshua Randall: The most epic campaign I ever DM-ed technically ended in a TPK... but the players still loved it. The PCs sacrificed themselves to recreate the universe after it had been destroyed by the Big Bad.

"A stage full of dead bodies" was a cliché for Shakespeare, and some of the Greek tragedies end that way too. Yet those plays are immensely satisfying nonetheless.

LightPhoenix: Don't worry, it's not like anyone will remember Dranko's part anyway.

Piratecat: Et tu? *sob*

Everett: And for another refresher, if someone would – I recall Meledien as one of Morningstar's *Ava Dormo* adversaries (who had her own red armor, like Octesian?) because she's mentioned often, although I think it's been years real-time since she figured in the story – but I don't recall Tarsos or Seven Dark Words. Were they another part of the Black Circle cell that the Company killed when performing the rite to free Praska from the other Black Circle-ite inhabiting her?

I recall Drosh and Dralla only because the being that Aravis handed over custodianship of the Maze to was a servant of Drosh, and I re-read that subplot recently. ("I'll tell you this, Morningstar of Ell... Dralla is Drosh's child, and He loves Her dearly...")

Sagiro: Brief refresher for you and anyone who's losing track of things:

Way back when, Emperor Naradawk managed to slip three elite red-armored agents through the planar boundary: Restimar, Octesian and Meledien. Restimar's job was to impersonate humanoid Gods/leaders and whip the orcs, gnolls, etc. of the world into attacking the more civilized peoples. Meledien was tasked with breaking open boxes full of hidden monsters that Naradawk's father, Naloric, had left behind. Both of these tasks were geared toward the greater goal of distracting the Archmagi, who were the ones keeping Naradawk locked out of Abernia. Octesian had a similar goal: scout out the Dreamscape, and prepare for a dream-assault on Semek's tower that would be timed with Naradawk's battering down of the planar portal at Verdsheane. (Semek's tower, and Semek himself, were critical to keeping the portal sealed.)

Restimar was killed by the Company, while he was impersonating a legendary orcish warlord known as the Chun Aggrat. Meledien was driven away from Verdsheane by Cencerra and her adventuring group, but escaped. Octesian was driven out of the Dreamscape by Morningstar and her Ellish sisters during the Battle of Verdsheane, but he also escaped. Eventually Octesian decided to try traveling through *Ava Dormo* to the Far Realms prison where the Adversary was imprisoned. He planned on trying a rescue, but failed, and his brush with the Far Realms drove him mad. Now he's come back to seek revenge on Morningstar for her past transgressions, and is apparently killing people in their sleep. That's something the party will have to deal with, and soon.

Tarsos is another one of Naradawk's red-armored cadre. He was one of the soldiers who made it through the planar portal at Verdsheane before Aravis closed it again. He eventually joined up with the missing Meledien and infected/"blessed" her with Essence (Adversary blood). The two of them then went to Naslund to steal Wards of Drosh, which allow mortals to survive in the immediate presence of Gods. While they were there, they killed Cencerra and her party, and also stole two powerful artifacts from the tombs of dead Gods. (One of these is the Spear of Caba, which destroys the souls of victims whose hearts are burned out with it.)

Finally there is Seven Dark Words. He was an immensely powerful Black Circle wizard and the architect of Het Branoi, an experiment originally intended to be a beacon to the imprisoned Adversary. Seven Dark Words and his Black Circle team made two critical errors: they thought the Adversary was trapped in the Abyss (and not the Far Realms), and they tried powering Het Branoi with an Eye of Moirel. As you may recall, the Eye went haywire, ripping away numerous pockets of other planes and stringing them together in an enormous web. Seven Dark Words was driven mad, and wandered through Het Branoi, carving little statues of Kibi, who, a part of his brain prophesied, would be the one to "fix" his experiment.

When Het Branoi was shut down, all the bits of planes – and the people trapped inside them – were returned to their original worlds. Seven Dark Words eventually recovered his sanity and *plane shifted* back to Abernia, where he joined up with Meledien and Tarsos. The three of them, infused with Adversary Blood, have apparently broken through Yulan's Iron Barrier that separates the surface world from the underground world of the Depths.

That was about six months ago. They're probably not up to any good.

Everett: Thanks. I had no idea the Adversary was imprisoned in the Far Realms. And here's another thing I should probably know after seven years of your story, but don't: who or what exactly is the Adversary in relation to Naradawk and Naloric? An ancestor or just a primordial evil that the Emperor represents?

Sagiro: To answer your questions, I will refer you to a pair of Aravis's visions from the Crosser's Maze. They both occurred around the time the Company was dealing with Lord Dafron's assassins.

You are back in the tavern again, sitting across from yourself. You have the distinct feeling that, in the Maze, much subjective time has passed since the last time you were here. Also your double's face seems to shimmer and shift slightly, as if someone – you? – is struggling to see what he really looks like. You get the distinct impression that it's not you. It's someone you've never met, but you did meet them, once, in a strange place that's much like where you are now. It's very confusing.

"...found something for you," says your double. "It's disturbing. I won't go back there again – too dangerous. And I don't know what it means. Here, I'll share it with you." Your shifting double reaches forward and grasps your hand, and you are wrenched into another vision – a vision within a vision.

In the inner vision, there is a place of black madness, and something is trapped there. There is an exit from that place, but it is closing rapidly, a hole that is sealing itself, and the being trapped there won't escape in time. In its anger it reaches a hand through the hole, and the hole closes, and the hand is severed, and so detached it flies through a great void, falling, falling through the ages...

You are back in the tavern again, its time and place unknown. You sit across from yourself, though it is not yourself, but rather that elusive someone whom you both have and have not met. He has been speaking to you.

"...history. I find it rather tragic." Your double grasps your hand, and again you are plunged into a vision within the vision.

A tall man dressed in kingly garb stands in a dead and lonely field. He glances to the sides, as if fearing he was followed here. The full moon illuminates his handsome face.

The field is not simply dead. It is corrupted, its grass black and reeking, and this man of royal countenance wrinkles his nose even as he takes slow steps inward. He stops when he reaches the center of the field, his feet at the edge of a still black pool hardly bigger than a puddle. He looks down at the pool intently, as if it is whispering and he strains to hear what it's saying.

The man's lips quirk. "What do you want?" he asks in a trembling voice. "Why have you called me here?" He listens again to the silent field, and then reaches down to touch the surface of the pool...

The first of those visions is about the Adversary being trapped in the Far Realms, and his hand being severed by the closing prison. (His hand pursued the fleeing Travelers (the Gods of Darvin) to Abernia, where it impacted the surface and splattered Black Goo, a.k.a. Essence, a.k.a. Adversary Blood, in various places around the world.)

In the second vision, an ancient King of Charagan (Hagdan Skewn) is drawn to one of those pools of Essence. (He touched it and became corrupted, twisted and physically powerful. Hagdan's son was Naloric, and his grandson is Naradawk.)

Everett: My only other question would be: when was the Adversary first trapped in the Far Realms? (And would "when" have real meaning, the Far Realms being outside of conventional concepts of spacetime?)

Or is the Adversary's own story so far back that you never detailed it in your world-mythos as the campaign unfolded?

Joshua Randall: You know, it has taken me until today to realize/remember that Restimar and Octesian are names from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I knew they sounded familiar.

Everett: Hmm. Wiki'd it. Like the parallels. That would certainly have never occurred to me unprompted, unless I re-read the book for some reason in the future.

So hey, story question: What is King Farazil the Soul Eater the "king" of? I've been wondering that for, like, years.

Sagiro: At this point in the story, no one knows over what lands or people King Farazil reigns. Does he just call himself that? Is he really King of something? Who knows?



Many as One

"Hi, Eddings."

The Company file into the Greenhouse, freshly *teleported* home from Ula's island. Dranko drops into a chair and lights a cigar. "We have to go someplace that we're never coming back from," he tells the butler.

Eddings smiles indulgently. "Ah. And is this one substantially different from the many other places you warned me you might not be coming back from? Given your descriptions of previous adventures, I have developed an unshakable faith that you will return from just about any excursion, no matter how perilous."

"This one might be different," says Ernie.

"Well, I suppose we'll see," says Eddings.



For some time the party talk about how they might find and assault the Sharshun base of operations in the Greatwood. Various ideas are discussed and discarded. Morningstar finally sighs and gives up. "So," she says, "as usual, the plan is 'Get 'em?'" "We need Abernathy to give us advice," says Ernie plaintively.

Into the seconds of silence that follow Ernie's comment, Dranko speaks. "I miss Abernathy."

"I don't," says Aravis. Everyone turns to stare at him. "I never met him!" he explains.

"But you would have missed him," says Flicker, "if you had..."

He's interrupted by an earthquake. No, not the magical kind; this is an honest to goodness tremor, albeit a mild one. The windows rattle for about fifteen seconds, and the trophy case swings open. Eddings deftly catches a flatworm tooth before it can drop to the floor.

Then, as suddenly as the tremor began, it's over. The Company can hear some shouting in the streets, but it's unlikely that the city suffered any serious structural damage. Dranko casts *omen of peril* to find out if he'll be in danger during the next hour. The answer is LOW. But still, it's an alarming occurrence, for the reason that there has never been an earthquake, even a mild one, recorded in the history of Tal Hae.



The excitement of the quake soon passes, and the Company are left once again with the daunting task of recovering the *Watcher's Kiss* from the Sharshun. To delay the decision-making further, they decide to quickly investigate the bad smell blowing off the Mouth of Nahalm into the city of Sand's Edge. (They're pretty certain that one of the Ventifact Colossi has died, but it can't hurt to be certain!)

They *teleport* together to Sand's Edge and immediately their nostrils are filled with the reek of dead turtle. For completeness' sake they fly out over the desert, figuring they can locate the deceased creature by smell, but what they discover is worse than any of them had imagined. The smell grows strong whenever they approach *any* of the hardened-sand mountains that accrete on the great turtles' shells. It's not just one of the Colossi that has died. It's all of them.

Morningstar wants answers. Still on the back of one of the turtle-islands, and ignoring the reek, she casts *commune*.

"*Ell, did we kill the turtles?*"

NO.

"*Did they die of natural causes?*"

NO.

"*Did Octesian kill them?*"

NO.

"*Are all the Ventifact Colossi dead?*"

YES.

"*Were the Sharshun behind the turtles' death?*"

NO.

"*Was the Black Circle responsible for the death of the turtles?*"

YES, INDIRECTLY.

"*Is the fact that the return of the Adversary is drawing closer, responsible for the death of the turtles?*"

PROBABLY.

"*Is the departure of the Gods responsible for the death of the turtles?*"

NO.

"*Is the death of the turtles related to the recent earthquakes?*"

YES.

"*Have we met the person responsible for the death of the turtles?*"

IN AN INDIRECT WAY.

“Were the turtles intentionally killed?”

NO.

“Was their death a symptom of the Thorn in Abernia’s side?”

PROBABLY.

“Does their death pose a threat to the people of Sand’s Edge?”

SOME, FROM DISEASE.

“Is continuing on our quest to get the Watcher’s Kiss, and then dealing with the Thorn in Abernia’s side, the best way to deal with this threat?”

PROBABLE, BUT UNCERTAIN.

“When last I asked about going into the Greatwood and confronting Darkeye, I was told we weren’t ready to face her. Is now the time?”

YOUR READINESS NO LONGER MATTERS.

“Is Darkeye related to Grey Wolf?”

I CANNOT SEE CLEARLY.

“Do you sense an Eye of Moirel in the Greatwood?”

NO.

“Is there Earth Magic in the Greatwood?”

YES.

“Is seeking the cause of the earthquakes more important than finding the Watcher’s Kiss?”

BOTH ARE NECESSARY.

Before departing from Sand’s Edge, Dranko has Morningstar cast a *sending* to Tomnic, requesting priests be sent that can cast *cure disease*. Morningstar sends another one to Ozilinsh:

*All Ventifact Colossi dead. Related to earthquakes and Thorn in Abernia’s side somehow.
Headed to Sharshun HQ to get Watcher’s Kiss. Morningstar.*



The first stop on the mission to find Darkeye and obtain the *Watcher’s Kiss* is the Shadow Chaser, finest inn in Verdshane. It was one of the first places the Company visited in the employ of Abernathy, and later was the command center in the Battle of Verdshane, where Naradawk was prevented from making ingress to Abernia.

They *teleport* directly into the common room, and the sudden appearance of their heavily armed group causes a great commotion of chairs sliding back and weapons being drawn. “It’s okay!” calls a woman’s voice from the back. “Everyone, they’re friends!”

“Hello, Minya!” Ernie greets their friend, the owner of the Shadow Chaser, with a wave and a grin.

“We haven’t seen you since the war,” says Minya with an affected frown. “You might have stopped by now and then to say hello.”

“We’ve been busy,” says Ernie.

The Company sit at a table, order a great quantity of food and drink, and start discussing how they might go about finding the Sharshun’s long-hidden fortress in a forest spanning ten thousand square miles. Many have combed those woods over the years, and none have found any sign of the place. Divinations have been tried, and all have come up empty; it has been long assumed that the Sharshun’s dwelling is shielded from such magics.

Hours pass. Ideas are conjured and discarded and new ones take their place, only to be discarded as well. Finally, Ernie cracks the problem’s shell. “Darkeye’s fortress is hidden *now*,” he muses. “But what about back when the Emperor was in charge?”

Running with that idea, Grey Wolf casts *limited wish*. “I wish I had a map of all major settlements in the Greatwood at the time of Emperor Naloric’s reign.”

There, in front of him, appears such a map. He only has time for the briefest of glances before the anti-divinatory magic of the

present day erases it, leaving him with a blank white page – but that one glance was enough. Being a wizard of mighty intellect, Grey Wolf can recall with near perfect clarity the locations of four clearly marked dots on the map, and he quickly draws them in the locations he remembers, on their own current map of Harkran. (The largest of these dots was placed on Verdshane itself, presumably marking the Emperor's one-time capital of Kinnet Vulthani.)

Aravis chooses one of the smaller dots arbitrarily, the one close to the little town of Dunheth. He casts *vision* on that dot, hoping for some clue about the settlement that once occupied that location. Even better than a clue, he gets nothing at all – as if some outside force is preventing his spell from functioning! "Found it," he says with a smile.

And that is all well and good, but now the question on all of their minds is: have these magical end-arounds somehow alerted the Sharshun that the Company is zeroing in on them?



Soon they are *wind walking* above the trees toward Dunheth. In a little over an hour Grey Wolf stops, figuring they're close to the spot indicated by their short-lived map's incriminating dot. Nothing about the tree canopy seems suspect, so they spend an hour flying in a random pattern centered on that spot, frequently dropping through the leaves to ground level as part of the search. They find no unusual features of the forest, no dwellings, no people. Their *telepathic bond* stays active throughout, an indication that they have not wandered into the volume of a Divination Sink.

Kibi does make one discovery. This patch of forest is thrumming with a strong undercurrent of Earth Magic. He feels it each time his boots touch the ground. The Company feel this is a strong signal that they're on the right track, given the historic connection between Darkeye, the Sharshun, and the Eyes of Moirel.

They enact the second part of their search plan. Kibi uses *wish* to spoof *commune with nature*, imploring Abernia to give up its secrets concerning buildings, people, and powerful unnatural creatures within the spell's 19-mile range. There are no people, that is certain. There is one building, five miles to the north-west. There are several powerful unnatural creatures, either insect or arachnid, just over twelve miles to the south.

They first inspect the building, but find that it's merely an empty hunter's cabin, abandoned for years and fast succumbing to nature's encroachment. Kibi thinks the hum of Earth Magic is weaker here than where he cast his *commune with nature*. That leaves the insects as their only lead.

As the Company *wind walk* above the treetops, Kibi can feel his sense of Earth Magic growing stronger and fainter at the same time: stronger, because he feels he's getting closer to its source, but weaker because he's flying and gaseous. Before long he loses its sense altogether and is forced to land and solidify, and once his feet touch the ground the vibrations of Earth Magic course through him. He confirms again that both the location of the insects and the source of the Earth Magic are in the same direction, and they launch back into the air.

Ten minutes later they stop, having reached the approximate location indicated by Kibi's *commune with nature*. They descend through the thick leafy ceiling, and find that the forest here is quite sparse on the ground, with occasional clearings and trunks spaced far apart. The spreading branches are thick with spider webs, which gives the heroes a good sense of what to expect, but there is no sign of any spiders, or of a fortress or other dwelling.

Kibi and the others land in a clearing and become solid. Kibi feels the source of the Earth Magic is quite close now, and he's more or less on top of where he detected the spiders. Dranko peers through the trees in the direction Kibi thinks the Earth Magic is coming from.

An enormous man-sized spider appears in the air above him. He blinks. Dranko can *see invisible* at will, and the spider was not invisible. One moment it wasn't there, and the next moment it was. Then he hears his friends crying out in alarm, as seven more huge arachnids pop into existence and drop from the trees around them, filling the air with a sudden cacophony of hissing and chittering.

Hardly even thinking about it, Dranko lashes out at the nearest spider with his whip. The creature is larger than a sheep, red-skinned, with glowing red eyes and knife-sharp mandibles. Its front two legs are tipped with deadly claws. Three whip-snaps later and the creature is a pulped mass of ex-arachnid.

Grey Wolf Quicksens a *true strike*, channels a Maximized *acid orb* into Bostock, and steps into a swing at a second spider. Acid gushes from the point of impact and the spider is nearly dissolved. It staggers back, its mandibles melting in its mouth. It tries to strike back, but its mushy pincers squish against Grey Wolf's armor to no effect.

Morningstar chants and prays and casts *darkbeam*, sending out beams of black energy that strike six of the seven spiders

(missing only the badly wounded one, now cringing behind a tree). Three of these are dazed by the beams, chittering madly. One of the spiders still with control over its faculties manages to land a bite and claw on Morningstar, but its damage is minimal. A second attacks Ernie, but all of its pointy bits are foiled by the halfling's plate. Assuming there are only the eight of these things, there doesn't seem to be much to worry about.

Flicker hefts one of his new magically returning daggers and flips it nonchalantly at the mostly melted spider. It thunks into the creature's last functioning eye, then quivers and returns whistling to Flicker's waiting hand.

"This is a piece of..." he begins. But he is interrupted; the surviving spiders – even the dazed ones – all stand up on their hind legs, and from deep in their throats their frenzied clicking becomes eerily synchronous. Their color changes, turning a deeper crimson; their hairy hides bulge grotesquely as their bodies enlarge to the size of donkeys; the wounds from Morningstar's beams knit and heal; and their mandibles sprout extra barbs.

They understand immediately, and Ernie yells what they're all thinking. "It's a spider Seki!"

Joshua Randall: Curious, Sagiro... What would you have done if the PCs hadn't used powerful magic (*limited wish*) to locate the Sharshun base? Was there any particular solution you had in mind, or were you just going to let whatever they tried, work?

Not criticizing, but trying to understand your mode of DMing.

Sagiro: I knew going in how the Sharshun HQ was hidden, and what sorts of protections it had. I could think of a couple of ways the party might find it, most notably Kibi's innate ability to sense Earth Magic, but it was largely one of those "it's not my job to solve your problems"-type scenarios.

When they tried the "create a map of how things were in the past" ploy, I considered on the fly that the Sharshun's protections probably wouldn't prevent such a map from being conjured, but *would* destroy such a map if it existed. Thus, Grey Wolf had to make an INT check to remember what the map looked like from a split-second glimpse. I could imagine all sorts of creative solutions that wouldn't have worked, so no, it was not a matter of "whatever they try, it'll work."

Joshua Randall: P.S.: Still hoping Mrs. Horn fits into the endgame somehow.

Sagiro: *whistles innocently*

Solarious: You rodent of uncertain parentage! Stop teasing us about beloved abandoned PCs!

thegreyman: If Mrs. Horn is Darkeye, or has a Eye of Moirel stuck in her head, I love this [even] more...



Out of Time

Ernie lashes out with his sword and hacks a gash in the nearest of the chittering spiders. The creature drools out strings of goopy saliva and clacks its mandibles. Ernie makes a face of disgust. "Ewwwww!"

Aravis activates two of his new magic items: his *gloves of the displaced source* which allow a spell to be cast from a spot nearby, and his *battlestone of St. Jennifer* which will cause an area spell to heal allies caught in the blast. He casts a Maximized *cone of cold* which flashes over all half-dozen of the arachnids, while providing a bit of healing to his friends.

Kibi follows up with a scroll of *horrid wilting*, which sucks moisture out of most of the spiders. Two of them are utterly desiccated, their corpses shriveling even as they collapse to the grass. But the remaining four let out another synchronized screech; their wounds heal as their skins swell and ripple like the surface of a bubbling stew. Their skin changes from a dark red to a deep black, and when they're done stretching and writhing, they stand as tall as giants. Kibi swears and Quickens an *earthbolt* at the nearest two, blasting them with shards of rock thrown up from the ground.

Grey Wolf confidently casts the reliable combination of a Quickened *iron storm* followed by *chain lightning*. The raging electrical storm crackles as powerfully as ever, but though many trees are left smoking, none of the spiders are affected in the slightest. They have acquired spell resistance in their latest incarnations! Dranko tumbles to the side and launches a whip attack on the closest monster, but all of his strikes thump harmlessly against its leathery hide. It seems the spider-Seki has become physically tougher as well. Morningstar steps back and casts a *flame strike* that sears the spiders with cold holy flames; her spell penetrates their resistance, and they have no immunity to cold damage. They squeal obscenely in their pain.

Two of the spiders heave their bodies over to Dranko and savage him with their mandibles and barbed claws. Dranko winces as one of the mandibles sinks into his shoulder, just missing his jugular. He sees from the corner of his eye that the remaining two spiders have scuttled over to Kibi and are doing similarly to the dwarf.

Flicker cringes at the sight of his friends being ripped open by spiders, but retains his focus enough to tumble beneath the legs of the closest beast, spring up on the opposite side from Dranko, and plunge his dagger deep into its convulsing bulk. He is rewarded with a gout of ichor to the face, and grins as he splutters. Ernie casts *flame strike* on the two spiders attacking Kibi, but while they suffer the holy wrath of Yondalla, the creatures have become immune to fire.

Aravis casts a *chain lightning* of his own into the *iron storm*. Flicker quickly ducks behind a tree and flinches as its trunk is blasted, and then looks on dismayed as again the spiders are unharmed. Aravis is sure he imbued his spell with the focus to pierce the creatures' resistance; they must be immune to electricity as well as fire! He curses, takes a step, and Quickens a *mass haste*.

Kibi casts defensively and blasts the spiders in front of him with a Maximized *cone of cold*, which gets through their spell resistance. One of them falls backward, frozen, and the remaining ones chitter and froth in unison. Not wanting to stick around for another attack, he sinks into the ground via *xorn movement*.

Grey Wolf casts *reverse gravity* on the closest of the remaining three spiders. It soars upward until it crashes into the thick mass of overarching branches some thirty feet above, but there it stays, waving its enormous legs madly. Grey Wolf gives it a sardonic wave.

Dranko tries again with the whip, and this time, with Flicker's dagger distracting his target, his attacks have more success. Two strikes rip out huge chunks of arachnid flesh, and the third tears the monster's mandibles right from its head, killing it from shock. That leaves two remaining, and these thrash and chitter, their skins stretching and undulating and taking on a chitinous sheen. A conspicuous bulge forms right behind the head of the spider facing Dranko, as if it has developed a hunched back. The whole of its body has grown again, and it looms over Dranko, casting him in its misshapen shadow. "For the record," he says, "I do not want one of these for a pet."

Morningstar Quickens a *flame strike* upon the spider towering over Dranko; since her fire spells deal cold damage, she's more optimistic about its effects. But it seems that with their latest transformation the enormous spiders have become immune to cold attacks as well. Despite its size, the spider nimbly dodges part way out of the column of black flames, and is only minimally damaged by its holy power. Morningstar frowns, but still finds the wherewithal to cast *heal* on Dranko, bringing him back to robust health. And just in time! No sooner has she healed his wounds, than the towering spider pierces his shoulder with a razor claw and sinks fangs the size of tennis rackets into his thigh.

High above, the spider caught in the inverted gravity column flips itself over and scuttles along the underside of the tree canopy until it clears the spell area, at which point it drops thirty feet to the ground. It heaves itself to his feet, looks around for a victim... and vanishes. Aravis smiles. "Enjoy the *maze*," he says.

The remaining spider still proves problematic. It shrugs off a *searing light* from Ernie, endures whip strikes from Dranko, and evades both Flicker's stabs and Morningstar's attacks with *Ell's Will*. Kibi pops up from the ground and blasts it with a Maximized and Empowered *earthbolt* but it resists the magic of that as well. Grey Wolf has the most success, melting a section of its body with an *acid orb*, but having withstood the party's attacks, the spider again savages Dranko. If not for Morningstar's recent healing, it's not at all clear that Dranko would still be alive.

Ernie's had enough. He casts *withering palm*, steps beneath the spider's great bulk, and slaps it with his open hand. Strength and life force drain rapidly from the huge arachnid, and in seconds it collapses backward in a jittering heap. So, for the moment, there are no more enemies, as the last remaining unit of the Seki is trapped in Aravis's *maze*. They crowd around the spot where it vanished, ready to deliver a group *coup de grace*.

Two minutes later, it arrives, and immediately transforms one final time. It grows again, shoving the Company backward, and its skin hardens into rock-solid chitin. The hump on its back bulges outward, and a deformed human torso bursts forth. The creature almost resembles an arachnid centaur except with two heads, or a riding beast with a stubby malformed rider atop it. It's as if the thing was trying to grow a person out of its back, but failed. The misshapen head of the humanoid figure opens its mouth and lets out a piteous howl.

Kibi casts *Otto's irresistible dance*, thinking that if the creature is rendered helpless, it will be easier for his friends to finish it off. Alas, this is how they discover the final form of the Seki is imbued with *spell turning*. Kibi feels the spell discharge back into his own body, and he immediately starts executing a capable dwarven wedding dance. His face goes red, and he bellows with anger. The mouth on the human head twists into a smile.

It stops smiling as it fails to dodge a *disintegrate* from Aravis. Chunks of its body are blown outward and sheared away by the force of the blast, and the main ray leaves a clear hole directly through its middle. Ernie waves at Grey Wolf through the gap before it starts to fill up with gore. Kibi is so pleased that he dances with joy.

Grey Wolf Quickens a *true strike* and channels *acid storm* through Bostock. The sword itself shears through two of its legs, and the weakened body of the Seki dissolves into a huge puddle of sickening goo. Again, the forest is silent.

“Yuck,” says Morningstar. The others quite agree.



“We’ve learned one thing,” says Ernie, as he and Morningstar attend to the post-battle healing. “We’ve come to the right place. Those things must have been put here to guard the Sharshun.”

That may be, but there’s still no sign of any habitation, Sharshun or otherwise. Kibi concentrates and focuses his mind again on the Earth Magic permeating the forest, and thinks he can discern the direction of its source. They head off into the quiet woods, all of them keeping a constant lookout for anyone watching, or more spiders, or simply anything out of the ordinary. (Grey Wolf regrets his application of *enhanced senses*, since the reek of dead spider fills his nostrils long after the others have ceased to notice it.)

The strength of the Earth Magic grows, until Kibi reaches the edge of a small clearing. He takes a few steps into the clearing itself, finding that the sensation maintains its peak intensity. “We’re here,” he tells the others.

They look around. The trees around the clearing are sparse, and pleasant light slips through the leaves high above their heads. The meadow itself looks no different than a dozen others they’ve passed while traversing the Greatwood. There’s no sign of any man-made structure or other habitation. Their *telepathic bond* is still functional, which means the Sharshun aren’t employing Divination Sinks in the area.

Given that it’s Earth Magic they’ve been following, Kibi sends Scree on an underground scouting trip. The elemental sinks into the earth and makes constant reports. *It’s very strong down here, all over the area. It’s uneven; there are stronger and weaker pockets. I don’t think the Earth Magic is coming from the rock, which makes no sense to me. Where else could it be coming from? I can’t tell! Oh... wait. I think I’ve found the edge of it. Now the Earth Magic is growing weaker.*

Can you trace the perimeter of where the Earth Magic is strongest? asks Kibi.

Sure! It’ll take a few minutes, though. I’m well over a hundred feet from you. It’s nice down here, you know. Some interesting minerals, though nothing exotic. I always enjoy finding a bit of quartz, don’t you? Not there’s anything wrong with a nice slab of granite, mind...

When Kibi tries to convey the details of Scree’s geological survey to the others, Dranko snorts. “This is the most boring part of adventuring,” he says. Kibi just smiles.

“Remember,” Morningstar reminds the others, “Moirel was an Earth Mage, and she created the Eyes. If she’s Darkeye, it stands to reason there’d be strong Earth Magic around here.”

One more thing, says Scree. When I go downward more than about thirty feet, the Earth Magic starts to get weaker again. One second... okay, done. The area is hundreds of feet long and just about as wide. Or maybe it’s hundreds of feet wide and just about as long. It depends on how you look at things! But there’s no sign of anything else unusual, besides the fact that I can’t figure out the source of the power.

“I’ll bet they’re in an extra-dimensional space,” says Dranko, when he hears Scree’s report. “We should use every magical detection method we have. I’ll go first.”

One of the “gifts” granted to Dranko by the creature from the Far Realms was the permanent ability to detect magic. He walks around the area described by Scree, but detects no magic beyond what his friends are carrying. Morningstar goes next; she casts *true seeing* and scans the woods. For just a second she thinks she spots something out in the trees, but it’s gone before she can focus on it. She stares in that direction for an extra minute; no, it must have been nothing. “Damn,” she says. “I almost thought there was something out there.”

“Let me try,” says Dranko. “I’m better at spotting things than you.” Over the protests of Morningstar and Ernie, he reaches into the lurking madness buried in his brain, and calls upon his own *true seeing*. His eyes un-focus, and an unsettling light gleams in them. “I can see them all around,” he giggles. “Tips of worms, squiggling into our world, squirming, probing. Maybe they’re looking for me?”

He retains enough of his sanity to remember what he’s doing. He gazes outward into the zone of Earth Magic, and with his heightened senses he grasps for clarity. He almost sees... almost sees... yes! There’s something, large and blurry, an enormous object or building or creature, in and around the trees here, sliding always away from his direct vision. For a panicked second he thinks he’s looking directly into the Far Realms; there is a flash of stars, a space, a charged emptiness. But no, it’s something else, somewhere else. There is no madness there, only... nothing. It’s a confusing distortion of space. He

forces himself to concentrate harder, pushing back the madness, and... there, right over there, part of the edge of the blurriness is brighter than the rest. It reminds him of an arch, but it's not an arch. It's nothing. It's gone. "It's here," he whispers. "It's here, but it's not, but it is, and it's filled with stars. There's a gateway, that there isn't, and it's here."

Dranko strides to a spot at the edge of the clearing about a hundred feet away, and mutters to himself. Kibi moves to join him, and standing on that very spot he puts his hand on the ground. To the dwarf's mind comes a clearer, sharper sense of Earth Magic – not just in its intensity, but in its specific application. He's felt this aspect of the magic only once before now... when the Company stood within the Mirrors of Semek and traveled impossibly into the past. He tells this to the others, and everyone is quiet for a second.

"Ooooh," says Ernie. "They're out of synch with time."

Zelc: Hmm, when dealing with the Seki, did anyone try to get all of them low and then finish them off all at once with an AOE spell? Would that have worked?

Tamlyn: [Kibi is so pleased that he dances with joy.] Awesome!

Joshua Randall: D&D and time travel go together like... like... things that go together even better than chocolate and peanut butter.

Piratecat: ...like squirming tentacles and Wisdom loss?

carborundum: Just popped in to say I've been commuting by train recently and finally took the opportunity to read the entire thing. I've been following it for quite a while but never read Books 1 and 2 before.

Wow. So now I'm even *more* desperately waiting for every little water torture dripfeed that appears here. It's so darn good!

Thank you Sagiro, and Sagiro's players, for creating such a wonderful story.

Chronikoce: I stumbled across this Story Hour two, maybe three weeks ago and after reading through all of the posted .PDF files (huge thanks to Steve!) I could not stay silent! I cannot express enough my thanks to players and DM alike. You are all excellent and a great source of inspiration. I cannot wait to get back to playing again (hopefully will get to join a game in January!).

Special thanks to PC, and the players of Kibi, Aravis, and Morningstar for giving me great ideas for future characters! I will admit that when I last played I was an optimizer but this Story Hour and your characters especially made me realize how amazing roleplaying can be. My first thought during character creation is no longer how to be amazingly strong but rather what would make an interesting character and story!

I have a character in the works that is loosely based on Dranko with plans to be a whip wielding Swashbuckler/Rogue and another that is a Dwarven Wizard. It is going to be a hard time deciding which one to pick when I get to start playing again!

Thank you all again!



Triple Play

Given the strong ambient Earth Magic, Kibi thinks perhaps the solution is as simple as him merely *willing* local time back into alignment. He tries this, but with no success; such an endeavor would require far more power than he possesses. But the attempt does give him a clear sense of a massive object, only minutes removed from normal time. He has no idea how to bring it any closer. “Can’t we just wait a few minutes?” asks Dranko. Kibi sighs.

Time for another approach. Morningstar drops into *Ava Dormo* and observes the local dreamscape. She definitely senses the same large object as Kibi, though it’s out of focus and she can’t conclude anything about it. Morningstar closes her eyes. She filters out all distractions from her mind and concentrates with single-minded purpose. *I want to see...*

She opens her eyes, and is looking at the hulking outline of a stone castle. The only parts she can see are the walls and exterior towers – the parts adjacent to normal space-time. She estimates it to be over four hundred feet long, and at least half that in width, and the spot where Kibi and Dranko are concentrating is the main arched entrance into the castle. Morningstar walks her waking body to that spot, and hears a faint sound, like many overlapping whispers.

Next up: *thought captures*. Morningstar exits *Ava Dormo*, stands at the invisible entrance to the time-shifted castle and casts four consecutive spells to discern what’s been thought there.

The first thought is Dranko’s – alien, tentacle-ish thoughts that make her shudder. She quickly forgets them.

The second thought is Kibi’s, as he concentrates furiously on channeling Earth Magic.

The third thought is Dranko again. *Ah, that’s better.*

The fourth thought – ah, that’s the one. Someone is concentrating very, very hard on thinking the words, *My life for Naloric*. Is it a passphrase that gains entrance to the castle? Perhaps. But no one is keen to speak it right then, because for one thing, they’re all quite resource-depleted after the battle with the arachnid Seki, and for another, there might be some sort of binding power or compulsion in speaking such an inauspicious phrase.

“I have one more thing to try,” says Aravis. “I’m going to cast *time stop* and see what this so-called castle looks like.”

His friends freeze in mid-motion, the sound of the breeze is quieted... and there’s a huge castle. Right there, right in front of him, clear as day. Its wooden front doors are right where they expected, thick and iron-banded, and set into a large stone archway. Fortunately there are no people up on the thirty-foot walls waiting to repel invaders.

There is one particularly strange feature, though. Rising up from behind the wall, at least a hundred feet distant, is what looks like a detached chunk of outer space. Aravis guesses that it’s a volume of the Astral Plane, hovering inside the castle, and large enough that the top of it is higher than the walls. He can’t see most of it, but Aravis figures it’s a vaguely spherical blob of Astral-stuff, some forty feet in diameter. But what is its purpose...?

Time kicks in, and the castle, with its orphaned splotch of Astral Plane, vanishes.

Just to be safe, Aravis casts a *mind blank* on himself, and then he and the other wizards *teleport* the entire group back to the Greenhouse. They’ve learned enough for one day.



Around the living room table, Aravis shares with the others what he saw. Ernie wonders aloud if they should tell Ozilinsh, but that only brings about an awkward silence, a silence broken when Kibi suddenly grins and says, “It’s too dangerous for him to know!” Soon enough the whole Company are laughing, thinking back to the way Abernathy was so reticent with information, at the start of their adventuring careers.

“That may have been petty,” Ernie admits, “but it felt good to hear.”

Soon, though, they get down to the business of figuring out how they can gain access to a time-shifted castle. As is typical when they try to crack this sort of nut, they start throwing out ideas, most of which are quickly ascertained to be untenable. These include finding a way to stabilize the mysterious chunk of the Astral Plane and *plane shifting* into it; inking enough *time stop* scrolls to allow everyone to gain ingress; casting *time stop* on just a few people, who will be carrying the others on their backs; and even just having Aravis cast *dimension door* while frozen in time, with the hope that once inside they’ll get caught

up in the castle's local time-stream. In the end, though, they work out a solution to their problem. It's a solution that makes most of the party quite nervous, but it *should* work.

The next morning Morningstar makes a quick *teleport* journey to Kallor, to make a report to the High Priestess Rhiavonne. Rhiavonne has independently learned that it is Octesian who is murdering citizens in their sleep, but is happy to have corroborating evidence through Morningstar's *commune*. When Morningstar tells her what their plans are for the day, Rhiavonne looks aghast, and then shakes her head. "This is why you are the field agent, and I, thank the Goddess, am merely the High Priestess. If things go wrong, and you need... recovery... how will anyone recognize you?"

Morningstar laughs. "I'll be the black one."



Back in the Greatwood, they find that the Seki bodies have not been cleared away. The corpses stink and swarm with flies.

At the patch of grass where the castle entrance lurks several shifted minutes away, Morningstar applies *mind blank* to Dranko, Aravis and Kibi as a precautionary measure. Grey Wolf makes them invisible. Kibi casts *see invisibility* on himself, lacking the permanent divinatory enchantments of the other two. There's not much point in buffing up anyone else, as they soon will no longer technically be among the living.

"Are you ready?" asks Aravis. Everyone nods.

"Cheer up!" says Kibi, to Grey Wolf, Flicker, Morningstar and Ernie. "Most people never get such a wonderful opportunity."

Before they can answer, Aravis begins to cast his prepared battery of *polymorph any object* spells, and one by one, he turns four of his friends into small pebbles. He clenches these securely in his fist. To Kibi and Dranko, he says, "I'll go first." He casts *time stop*.

There's the castle, same as before, its walls still undefended. Before him is the large wooden door; he peremptorily casts *knock*, and is satisfied to hear the clanking sound of a large metal bar falling on the door's far side. Then he frowns; so much for secrecy. Aravis puts his shoulder into the door and heaves it open far enough to squeeze inside.

He's looking into what, for the most part, is an ordinary castle interior. A long wall runs through a scraggly yard, partitioning the grounds. Numerous buildings crowd against the walls, including a squat stone keep in the center, and some 150 feet away to the left is a smaller wooden door leading to some other parts of the castle. No, the only odd thing is that hovering mass of Astral Plane peeking over the partitioning wall. He quickly scoots into the shadows of one of the nearby outbuildings, just before normal time resumes for him. He holds his breath, hoping that he has merged with the local flow of time. Morningstar, Flicker, Ernie and Grey Wolf are still tightly gripped in his left hand.

From Kibi and Dranko's point of view, Aravis has just vanished. "I hope it worked," says Kibi, worriedly.

"Let's find out," says Dranko. The half-orc reaches into that spot of black madness deep within his psyche, calling upon the tentacular powers to stop time. They assent, and Kibi is standing motionless, while all around Dranko sees so many things, so many... He shakes his head and tries to focus. What he mostly sees is a large castle with its door slightly ajar. He slips inside, takes stock of his surroundings, and notes Aravis, also motionless, lurking in a corner. He moves to join his friend, and time returns, though not his full sanity.

Kibi is now alone in the empty wood. "I wish I got to be a pebble," he mutters, and then he casts his own *time stop*. The castle leaps out from nowhere to loom over him, its door swung open. He hurries inside, pushes the door closed, and replaces the bar. He has enough time to join the others, currently still as statues, before time returns.

It's quiet. Aravis, Dranko and Kibi look around the yard, each of them feeling an odd chill of transformation as the local time-stream accepts them. Kibi finds it particularly thrilling; Earth Magic is its source.

He grins at the other two. "Looks like we're in!"

blargney the second: Thanks for the update, Sagiro! I like seeing the way you present significant obstacles to your players with no apparent solution.

Mathew Freeman: That's a real example (in two different ways) of how the party has come on. Firstly, not telling Ozilinsh something because it's "too dangerous for him to know." Brilliant, and I can see why the whole group collapsed in giggles.

And the other thing – having them cast multiple *time stops* to overcome the protection. Wow. That's some high-level stuff right there!

carborundum: Don't have a fixed solution, just a fixed problem. Brilliant! I've had great fun doing this in my own campaign – thanks for the idea, Sagiro...



Darkeye

With some time to look at their surroundings, the three time-travelers see that most of the inward-facing walls are damaged. Chunks of stone have been gouged out of them in many places, and the edges of the yard are littered with debris that has fallen from higher up. One building not far from Kibi, a small rectangular structure made of wood and stone, is riddled with holes, as if it had been a giant's sparring dummy. Kibi puts his eye to one of the holes and sees an ordinary store-room, with barrels, crates, and small heaps of detritus.

Dranko giggles. "I enjoy this place. It makes me tingle!"

Aravis notices that his hand is cramping. "Oh, right." He carefully places the pebbles a few yards away and casts *dispel magic*. His friends appear in a sprawling pile of bodies. "Oops. Guess I should have spaced you out a little." Morningstar, Ernie, Grey Wolf and Flicker get to their feet and look about, confused.

"You cannot see us!" Dranko cackles. "But we are here! Invisible! We cannot be seen!"

Now that Kibi can target all of his friends, he casts *veil*, making the entire party look like termites. Grey Wolf casts *enhanced senses* and sniffs the air. Castles typically reek of manure, smoke, and sweat, but this one carries only the faintest whiff of such typical odors. Morningstar reestablishes the mind-link and then, ever suspicious, casts *true seeing*. She finds that the spell makes it harder to see. To her divinatory sight, the air above the castle is now quite blurry, and she cannot see any of the trees outside the castle's perimeter.

Something rises up from behind one of the walls. It's a head. With tentacles. At first the party think it's a beholder, but it's not quite the same. This one is a bit smaller, and they certainly are tentacles and not eyestalks. Dranko panics, but realizes that the tentacles don't remind him of Cleaners. The creature's face is surrounded by short tentacles like a wriggling beard, and two long tentacles sprout from its "back" and hang down like obscene pigtails. The tentacled head bobs for a few seconds at the top of the wall, turning slowly to and fro, and then descends back behind the wall and out of sight.

Did it see them? Or were they successfully hidden, *veiled* as bugs? The floating head didn't show any signs of having seen them; it was probably investigating the sounds of spellcasting. A moment later two new heads float into view (or maybe it's the same one, with a friend). The two heads sweep back and forth along the top of the wall, clearly looking for something, but after a minute they again descend and retreat behind the wall.

Confident that he won't be seen, Dranko flies upward, a tiny flying termite, and peeks over into the space beyond the near wall. It's the floating chunk of star-field that dominates the scene, a twinkling patch of Astral miasma that confounds his visual perspective. Swooping to and fro in looping arcs are a dozen more tentacled heads; they don't appear to be guarding anything in particular, unless it's the Astral field itself.

The buildings here are even more heavily damaged. One tower has fallen completely onto a building below it, caving in its roof, and the ground here is even more strewn with shattered rubble. There's no sign that anyone has tried effecting repairs, and the rubble itself is not overgrown, suggesting that whatever happened was a recent event. Dranko thinks that the Astral splotch is at the center of the destruction, and opines that something must have emerged from it and assaulted the castle.

Just as Grey Wolf starts using a wand to cast *fly* on everyone not already so enchanted, a human figure comes flying out of one of the distant towers. Her skin is as ebony as her long robe, and no hair grows on her head, hardly surprising in a Sharshun stronghold. Dranko is far enough away that he cannot make her out more clearly, though his natural ability to detect magic is nearly overwhelmed by the strength of her auras. There are two distinct sources of magic on her person. One, unspeakably strong, casts her whole self (to his magic-sight) in a deep black shadow. The second, somehow even stronger, originates at her right hand, and emits a bright golden glow which gilds the edges of her darker aura.

Dranko blinks furiously as the dark shadow magic starts to draw him in, like it's attempting to pull out his soul. He starts to move toward her in defiance of his own will, and barely manages to save himself by wrenching his gaze away from her. He frantically informs the others of all of this over the mind-link.

The woman speaks, and even from a distance her voice sounds clear to all present, bolstered by a faint telepathic presence. "I'm very impressed," she says, "that you were able to get in here. Remarkable! Would you like to talk?" The floating heads have perked up a bit, and are looking in the same direction as the woman, though they still don't seem to notice them.

"You have a certain... radiance... about you," Dranko says.

"That's true," she admits.

“Should I ask?”

“Certainly,” says the woman. “Would you like to ask in a more comfortable setting, or would you prefer to stay flying around up here while your friends are down below?”

Are we attacking her or not? Kibi thinks over the mind-link.

Yes! thinks Dranko.

We’re almost ready, thinks Aravis. *Keep her talking.*

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” says Dranko, “but aren’t you anathema to everything we love and believe in?”

The woman smiles. “No.”

“No? Really? Who are you, exactly?”

She chuckles. “I’m sure you’ve figured that out by now.”

“Are you Darkeye?”

“Yes, Dranko.”

“Are you also Moirel?”

“Very good!”

“All right! We met your dad, you know.” *And killed him,* he thinks, though he refrains (barely) from saying this out loud.

Kibi rises up, shielding his eyes from Darkeye as best he can, and drops a *greater dispel magic* on her. He feels that his abjuration is strong, and so is very disappointed that she doesn’t stop flying. *Two possibilities,* he thinks to the others. *Either she’s a ridiculously powerful caster, or her magic is being generated by an artifact.*

Morningstar casts *blindsight* on Aravis, and Quicksens a second one on herself. Now, at reasonably close range, the two of them will be able to engage Darkeye without looking at her. Aravis changes into a beholder, flies upward until he crests the wall, and shines his anti-magic cone over his target. She remains airborne. While the dark magic around her seems somewhat suppressed, the golden glow doesn’t diminish in the slightest. Moirel turns to regard him, and sighs. Aravis vanishes. His thoughts do likewise from their mind-link. The dark magic around her reasserts itself.

Dranko tries not to let his worry color his voice. “I don’t suppose you want to give us your dagger and let us go?”

“No, I don’t want to do that,” says Darkeye. “I’d rather just talk.”

“And what do you want to tell us?”

Darkeye sighs again. “I don’t know! *You* came to visit *me*. When I woke up this morning, I assure you I hadn’t planned on telling you anything.”

“Say,” says Dranko. “Who did all the damage to this place, anyway?”

“I did,” says Darkeye. “It was an accident.”

Grey Wolf joins Kibi and Dranko flying above the wall. Like the others, he shields his eyes as best he can while keeping her in his peripheral vision. “Ah, Ivellios,” says Darkeye.

“Yes,” says Grey Wolf. “You don’t mind if I don’t look at you, right? What exactly did you do to Aravis?”

“I have him,” says Darkeye flatly.

“Where?”

“Away. Now, are we going to come to blows, or shall we talk?”

“You seem to know a lot about us,” says Dranko.

“I’ve been following your... exploits... for quite some time,” she says with a smile.

Ernie casts *divine power* on himself. Grey Wolf sniffs the air again with his enhanced senses, and discovers Darkeye carries an unusual but familiar scent. She smells like Sagiro did, when he was the Lord of the Roses. Kibi confirms that powerful Earth Magic is rolling off her in pulsing waves.

"I thought this place would be a busy hive, swarming with Sharshun," says Dranko. "What happened? Did you kill them all?" Darkeye's countenance darkens. "I sent them away," she says.

Without warning, Darkeye launches herself high into the air, so that she can easily look down upon the assembled Company. She fixes her gaze upon Flicker, and like Aravis did a few seconds ago, the little halfling vanishes. He finds himself in a translucent, dark-gray room, like a small prison cell made of smoky quartz. It has a window, and out of that window he can see Dranko and the others hovering below him. With a start he realizes that he's looking out from right about where he just saw Darkeye... "We're inside an Eye of Moirel," says Aravis, who shivers as he paces the small cell.

Flicker can feel a deadly cold seeping into him, sapping him of life and strength. "You've got to be kidding me," he complains. "I'm not," says Aravis. "She has us trapped inside her eye, I'm guessing. I think if we concentrate hard enough, we might be able to escape."

"So I'm doomed, then," says Flicker. He looks like he's about to say more, but the little room shudders and shakes, sending both occupants reeling into the walls. Kibi has closed his eyes, and used his keen sense of Darkeye's emanating Earth Magic to peg her with a volley of *magic missiles*. The spell has gotten past her innate resistance, scorching her and causing her to flinch. She clucks her tongue.

Morningstar also shuts her eyes, not needing to be precise in her targeting as she lets loose with a *fire storm*. All of the floating heads are incinerated with cold flames, and Darkeye herself has clearly been burned as well. As she hovers above them, smoke rising from her robes, golden light from the object in her right hand flashes around her, bathing her momentarily in its light. But her wounds don't heal, and there's no other obvious effect. Nodding with satisfaction, Morningstar Quicks *divine power*.

Aravis sets his mind to escape, and in an eyeblink finds himself returned to the spot at which he was hovering before Darkeye captured him. While the prison's interior had returned him to human form, he reappears as a beholder, and his central eye's anti-magic ray is pointed right at Kibi. The dwarf plummets about fifteen feet before Aravis closes his eye. "Sorry!"

Ernie (shielding his eyes like the rest) casts *energy drain* on Darkeye. "You are a bad, bad woman!" he scolds as he casts. "You have done many horrible things!" His spell is drawn entirely into the golden light surrounding his target, where it harmlessly dissipates. Ernie grunts, flies toward Darkeye, and releases *Beryn Sur*.

"Ernest," says Darkeye, "that was rude."

Ernie is incredulous. "You're trying to bring back the horrible, evil Emperor, and *my* hitting *you* is rude?"

"Yes," says Darkeye. "This is my home. You are an intruder. I would have expected a cleric of Yondalla to understand that."

"This is more like exterminating a nest of fire ants," Ernie retorts.

Darkeye calls out to Grey Wolf. "Ivellios! I'm sure you will understand, that everything I have done has been to restore our good family name."

Grey Wolf lifts an eyebrow. "Family name? It's in pretty good order right now, thanks. You're not really improving it."

Shaking her head, Darkeye frowns at her descendant. "I am disappointed, though. It appears that our Earth Magic did not travel down the family line. You're not even a true wizard, are you? Of course, neither am I, any more."

"What are you now, then?" asks Dranko.

"I am Darkeye. I am a Sharshun."

"Great!" Dranko exclaims. "Let's both jam our tongues into the top of our mouths and see which one of us survives!"

Grey Wolf Quicks a *true strike*, channels a Maximized *acid orb* into Bostock, charges, and swings. He's keeping his eyes mostly shut, but uses his keen senses to sniff her out. Grey Wolf does catch a quick glimpse of his foe and ancestor; one of her eye sockets is filled with dark crystal, and in fact many parts of her body are covered with patches of smoky gemstone. She wields a golden sword – certainly the *Watcher's Kiss* – and the weapon, as Sagiro's was in Het Branoi, is grafted to her arm by the crystal that grows upon her skin.

Grey Wolf swings, and Darkeye is deluged in a flood of hot acid. Her skin, both true and crystalline, smokes and runs. She winces in obvious pain, before whispering, "I suppose we do have to do this the hard way, then. It's a shame. I was looking forward to talking to you."

“And what would we talk about?” asks Grey Wolf, mockingly.

“How about this,” says Darkeye. “The Emperor is my enemy also.”

Grey Wolf cannot hide his surprise.

“Now are you listening?” Darkeye asks. “But, if you wish to continue with fisticuffs...” She glances downward as Dranko streaks towards her, ready to strike while she’s distracted by Grey Wolf. She narrows her eyes... and Dranko vanishes. He reappears in the little crystal prison, where Flicker is looking decidedly pale and weak. He himself feels a shiver as the room sucks the life out of him.

“We have to get out of here,” Flicker stammers, teeth chattering. “It’s... it’s cold...” Dranko attempts to heal Flicker with a wand, but the magic fails. He curses under his breath, as he looks out the window at Grey Wolf, Ernie and the rest.

Even as Darkeye’s crystal coating starts to fill in the worst of her wounds, she swings the *Watcher’s Kiss* for the first time. She lands three blows with it upon Grey Wolf – damaging, but by no means what he had been expecting from a weapon of that power. But he hears Ernie also cry out in pain. All of the same wounds the sword made upon Grey Wolf, are opened in the same places upon the nearby halfling. Darkeye then tries to draw Ernie into her crystal prison, but he resists.

“If the Emperor is your enemy,” asks Kibi, “why do you keep trying to bring him back?”

“It’s not that complicated,” says Darkeye. “We can talk about if your comrades stop hitting me with swords and splashing me with acid.”

Kibi has no such intention. He flies directly at Darkeye, casting *Otto’s irresistible dance*, and touches his quarry. The spell is absorbed into the golden light and has no effect on the Sharshun. Kibi curses, but is secretly relieved that she didn’t have *spell turning* active.

“I attempted to restore time, to rehabilitate my father’s name,” says Darkeye. “No doubt he was killed for his failure. For *my* failure. My divinations tell me that he died long ago. When I failed to return, I’m sure his experiment was deemed a waste of time, and that the Emperor had him killed. Had my attempt been successful, to rewrite time, my father’s work would have been vindicated.” So, whatever else she might know, she *doesn’t* know that she’s currently facing down her father’s killers.

“What’s your opinion of the Adversary?” asks Kibi.

“A fool’s errand.”

“The Adversary is coming,” says Morningstar, flying towards her and drawing *Ell’s Will*. “We need the *Watcher’s Kiss* to stop him.”

Darkeye shakes her head. “You may *think* that is true, but it is not.”

“No, we’re pretty sure it is,” says Kibi.

“Fine. But I’m not giving it up.”

Morningstar arrives at her target and smashes *Ell’s Will* into Darkeye’s stomach. A spray of crystal shards flies from the point of impact, and Darkeye grimaces in obvious agony. “This...” she wheezes, “this is why I sent everyone else away.”

Aravis flies close enough that he can target Darkeye with his *blindsight*. He closes his eyes and pegs her with a *disintegrate*, which she largely shrugs off. Ernie and his dancing blade each make a flurry of slashes, nearly all of which are deflected by the patches of black crystal. Up close, Ernie can also see that even where her skin isn’t covered in crystal, it’s still somewhat gnarled and rocky-looking – something he and the others have seen on both Cranchus and Condor.

Grey Wolf locks another *acid orb* into his sword, and lands another strike. Again a gout of acid splashes outward, but this time Darkeye is utterly unaffected by it. Hmm.

Inside the dusky prison, Dranko has chalked **We killed your father** on the walls. He tries to will himself free, but has no more luck than Flicker. He too feels the deathly chill starting to seep into his bones, but as there’s little he can do about it, he does the only sensible thing he can think of. He licks the wall. It’s cold and glassy.

Darkeye’s wounds continue to heal at a rapid pace. She turns to Kibi, who has moved into melee range, and lands four painful strikes. As each blow lands, an identical wound is opened up on Grey Wolf and Ernie. (For whatever reason, Morningstar is not affected.) Kibi responds with *power word: stun*, to no effect. Morningstar takes a full round of attacks with *Ell’s Will*, and

while she inflicts some real damage on Darkeye, the Sharshun woman flicks the *Watcher's Kiss* deftly, and Morningstar's holy weapon falls from her hand, to go spiraling some eighty feet down to the yard below.

As they often do in these grand encounters, things look grim indeed. Darkeye is healing her wounds at an astounding rate. The *Watcher's Kiss* seems to absorb most magic, and its attacks damage not only its target but its target's allies. Dranko and Flicker are both entrapped in Darkeye's prison and rapidly losing life energy. It's not at all clear that they will survive this crucial encounter.

Aravis decides to take several appalling risks, all at once, by casting *Mordenkainen's disjunction*. He knows there's a chance he could destroy the *Watcher's Kiss*. He knows there's a chance he'll permanently lose his spellcasting abilities. And he knows there's a chance he'll inadvertently catch one of his friends in the spell's radius, given that they're flying around Darkeye in attack formation. But he casts it anyway, and luck must be with him, because none of the awful possibilities come to pass.

A terrible cracking sound comes from Darkeye, and huge chunks of crystal start to fall from her body. Kibi feels a surge of Earth Magic bend reality around him, feels the very stones of the castle warp and flex. Flicker and Dranko appear where they had last been flying.

Aravis stares defiantly at Darkeye. "Now are you ready to give us the *Watcher's Kiss*? Or would you like to die?"

It looks like she might die anyway. Blood is pouring from her eye-socket that is no longer caked with crystal. Her arms are limp at her sides, though the golden glow of her weapon still keeps her aloft.

"Yes..." she croaks. "You may have it. Just... please, don't let me die."

Dranko casts a healing spell at range, and Darkeye regains a little bit of strength. "It's gone," she whispers. "It's gone. It's no longer controlling me!"

Hovering above her castle, still bathed in the light of the *Watcher's Kiss*, Moirel begins to cry.

Piratecat: It will come as no surprise to anyone here that in order to show his disdain Dranko considered peeing in his tiny crystal prison. "Ha ha, I peed inside your magic artifact!" He thankfully refrained.

Joshua Randall: So apparently the information about Moirel being driven mad (after losing the Eyes) was false – she doesn't appear particularly insane, here. Although the party got that info from one of the Eyes (the cyclops one, I think?). So maybe she used to be insane but got better? Or we just haven't witnessed her insanity yet? Hmm.

Also, I've been wondering this for years: it is MOY-rell or MWAH-rell? (Or something else?)

SolitonMan: I always thought it was moy-RELL; at least that's how it's always sounded in my head while reading the Story Hour.

Thanks for the update, Sagiro!

Sagiro: It's MWAH-Rell, with a smidge more emphasis on the second syllable.

Piratecat: I'm pretty sure Moirel went whack-a-doodle insane and got better, where "better" means "being possessed by a sentient eye for an absurdly long time." And the sword she's carrying – that thing was used to stab the Adversary, for goodness' sake. It's not exactly good for sanity.

I was really surprised by this encounter. I'd expected Moirel to be surrounded by her Sharshun, safe in her enclave and protected by suicidally loyal servants. Dranko considered her a fool for dismissing them. If there's one thing the anti-social half-orc has learned, it's that you hang on tight to the people who have your back.

LightPhoenix: Even if no one else remembers you were there.

Piratecat: Quiet, you!

I'm still trying to figure out how to use this to my advantage. Steal a ton of money and have no one remember who I am? Nope... I'd just get blamed as "that guy who's the real thief's lackey." Man, Sagiro's a JERK.

Mathew Freeman: *mumblemumblenoonetoblamebutyourselfmumble*

On a more serious note, the story of "how Dranko ended up with tentacles in his head" is a great one to show what a good 'Instigator' player can look like. You took a moment to do something completely random at a moment of great panic (which, as a fellow player, would probably have had me gnashing my teeth and wailing at you at the time, but appreciative of later). Sagiro, as a good GM, picked up on it and decided to run with it, and you then in return made a great character choice that's caused all kinds of amazing in-game moments.

This is an example of both great work as a player and as a GM. Kudos to both that even all this time later you're still mock-agonising about it!

Kaodi: Might be low impact, but perhaps you could try trivia and gambling. Bet folks that they cannot guess which member of the team accomplished certain deeds which Dranko did. Since no one remembers who Dranko is, there should be no way for them to guess correctly. You could even add lie detection magic to the trick to make it look legit. Unless maybe that sort of thing has already been ruled out by Sagiro...

Were Dranko not the monogamous sort of half-orc, he might have been able to one-up Kay's (?) amorous father with this ability to not be remembered. Except... errr... I guess that could get "messy" because none of the children would know who their father was, which would be bad if they ever met...

If Dranko was really good at art, he could do paintings and sculptures and perhaps build up a mystery around the artist who nobody knew about and inflate the price of his works. Which, of course, he could always miraculously "find" more of.

Actually, that might not be a bad line of thought in general: exploit the allure of an unassailable mystery to your advantage.

Innocent Bystander: My question would be, does the magic pertain only to past events or would it affect future events as well? Think of all the crimes Dranko could commit and not worry about getting caught because if he did, his captors/accusers wouldn't be able to truly remember it was him at the trial.

Kaodi: I do not think it would prevent him from being caught, or even a trial or anything of that sort. It just prevents people from thinking he is particularly notable; they dismiss and forget him. Perhaps one way it would help is that it might protect him from being recognized as a serial thief. Since no one has ever heard of "Dranko Blackhope" his lawyers could perhaps successfully plead every case as if it were his first crime.

thatdarncat: I'm pretty sure the wording was pretty specific, about his fame being what was lost? If so, would infamy be different? Dranko gave up being a famous, respected hero.

Kaodi: I guess we will have to ask if anyone has ever heard of Dranko Blackhope, Licker of Everything. That can only be the sort of thing one is infamous for, hehehe...

jmuccihello: Yeah, but if he ever gets caught and thrown in jail, he's never getting parole.

A: "Should we release Dranko Blackhope?"

B: "Who?"

A: "I don't know. It's a name on the list."

C: "I don't remember any prisoner with that name. What did he do?"

B: *shrugs*

A: "Don't know."

B: "Must be a paperwork error. Let's move on."

Piratecat: Yeah, for Dranko's bargain it's the spirit of the thing, not the letter. (This is true both in character and out of it. Sagiro is one of my best friends and I trust him, and his judgment, completely.) Dranko traded fame for something horrible that sits encased in his mind. What is it? He has no idea, and any time he pokes at it it drives him insane. That's a trade-off for some power, and I think it'd be a pretty poor bargain on behalf of the unmentionable abominations if Dranko's gift actually benefited him.

I suspect that every time he wishes he was famous and remembered, that hollow frustration tastes so sweet to the entities who inhabit him.

Everett: Two things: (1) Why didn't Aravis, Kibi and Dranko all cast *time stop* together to enter the castle? Kibi thought he'd maybe just lie down and nap while the others went on in?

(2) Darkeye's desire to talk, like other honorable villains the Company has encountered, was apparently sincere. Why didn't they listen? An encounter with a mysterious, supremely powerful adversary claiming good intentions is not particularly inspiring when the good guys all act like mistrustful eight-year-olds. Dranko's allowed to act that way; everyone else should have a little more sense.

Piratecat: I think it's that even simultaneously *time stopped* people aren't actually simultaneously time-stopped. There may also have been the question of whether one person could bring in everyone else (the answer to which was no).

As for talking to Darkeye? Screw that. No good could come of it. It didn't matter what she wanted, or whether we were technically allied on a minor point. What we need to do is fundamentally opposed to the reason for her existence. And she set the Sharshun on us. And set Sagiro, and the Carch-Din on us. And we killed her dad. And she had an eye of Moirel possessing her, and she was carrying a shard of the blade that actually hurt the Adversary. And we felt the time pressure; Seven Dark Words and the other red-armored warriors were far too far ahead of us. Nope, some times you just need to kick someone's butt. But hey, we spared (and saved) her life. That's something.

This was a fight that was very different from what I had expected. I anticipated negotiation, politics, infiltration, lackeys. The truth was so much simpler than that.

Everett: Then her behavior doesn't make a lot of sense. Someone as nigh-indomitable as her doesn't need to keep asking for parley if she knows enough about the Company to know why you're there and that you won't want to talk.

LightPhoenix: So despite my teasing of Piratecat, I think people *do* know and remember Dranko, it's just that he'll never be famous. The way that I've pictured it is that Dranko has been hit with the same effect that kept the Sharshun a secret. Dranko still exists as an entity that can be interacted with, but he's basically been removed from the history books. This also means that if someone *really* wanted to know, they would discover Dranko was a Hero of Charagan. However, for all intents and purposes people don't/won't know Dranko's part of the story.

RangerWickett: Ha. The campaign needs to end with Aravis bringing a new group of adventurers into his wizard tower and asking them to remember the word "Dranko."

Everett: [Aravis decides to take several appalling risks, all at once, by casting *Mordenkainen's disjunction*...]. I'm curious what the chances of any of these things happening actually were? And what the hell Sagiro would've done if Aravis had lost all his spellcasting abilities at this point? There are no other adventurers in the known world as powerful as the Company is at this point, correct?

LightPhoenix: The first thing that comes to mind is that, IIRC, a piece of Aravis is still in the Crosser's Maze. Now, I obviously can't speak for Sagiro, but I probably would have utilized that in some way, probably in combination with some sort of level loss. I think that Aravis was also allowed into the tombs of the gods due to his deific nature; he could have gone and visited that dead god of knowledge.

Everett: From the spell definition:

Even artifacts are subject to disjunction, though there is only a 1% chance per caster level of actually affecting such powerful items.

Additionally, if an artifact is destroyed, you must make a DC 25 Will save or permanently lose all spellcasting abilities. (These abilities cannot be recovered by mortal magic, not even *miracle* or *wish*.)

So if the *Watcher's Kiss* had been destroyed, which would have brought the story to a halt by itself (they're all level 20 or 21, right? So a 1-in-5 chance) and if Aravis had then lost his spellcasting abilities – the god of magic/knowledge in the tombs could've restored them I suppose, as the god's magic is obviously beyond mortal magic, but a simple "there you go, don't play with that spell again" seems a little insufficient. Some kind of quest for Aravis could be involved but that, again, would've derailed the campaign.

Piratecat: No clue what would have happened if Aravis had blown out his spellcasting, but I suspect Sagiro would have asked the player to retire the character. He knew the risks, he gauged the reward. You have to respect that sort of gambling. Giving the player an out would invalidate it.

Sagiro: Gah. If Aravis had lost of all his abilities, I'm not sure what I would have done, given how important [spoilers redacted]. Thank goodness I didn't have to decide, is all I'll say about that!



Damned Lies

Ernie immediately casts a *mass heal*, including Moirel in the effect. But while their enemy's wounds are healed, Moirel shudders and starts to fly erratically down to the ground. As the Company watch, fascinated, she touches down, falls prone, twitches several times, and goes unconscious.

Ernie drops to her side and examines her. His healing spell has covered her eyeless socket in smooth skin. "She's alive," he announces. "And that's impressive, because she's suffered some sort of internal trauma that's hard to imagine."

In game terms, she has suffered massive ability score damage to *every* ability score.

A few inches from her limp hand lies a long glowing dagger. It is the only thing within several feet of itself that appears to have color. Its surroundings – Moirel, Ernie and the ground on which they rest – are cast in black and white, as if the blade has drawn all the world's vitality and hue into itself to power a strange golden fusion.

Morningstar casts *greater restoration* on Moirel, but to her consternation it has no effect at all. None of the ability damage is restored. "Huh," she says. "Guess she'll have to wake up on her own."

Dranko perks up. "Then let's pillage!" he exclaims. He and Flicker start with Moirel herself, easy to loot while unconscious. Unsurprisingly, she is possessed of several items of enchantable quality, none of which are still magical. "Stupid *disjunction*," Flicker mutters.

Grey Wolf looks down while the rogues rifle through Moirel's pockets. It's hard to tell with Sharshun, but he thinks she's in her late 40s or early 50s, in human terms. Dranko snickers. "She looks pretty good for your great great great great great great great great grandmother."

Still disguised as termites courtesy of Kibi's *veil*, the Company set out to explore the grounds. Dranko expresses surprise that the castle appears to be empty, now that Moirel and her weird floating-head monsters have been dispatched. "I was kind of expecting to find Rosetta here," he adds.

Aravis flies over to hover near the blob of Astral Plane that still hangs suspended in the courtyard. With more time to examine the surrounding area, he is certain that in the fairly recent past there was a massive explosion centered on that extraplanar mass. "I'm very disappointed at how careless they were with our castle," he chuckles.

"Not much use," says Flicker, "if you have to turn us all into pebbles and cast *time stop* every time we want to go in or out."

"I don't think that's a problem anymore," says Kibi. "Listen."

Everyone grows quiet, and wonders for a moment what the dwarf is talking about. Then they realize. They can hear the sounds of birdsong, and wind in the trees – from somewhere *outside* the castle perimeter.

Kibi nods. "I think when Aravis *disjoined* the Eye, this place snapped back into real time." And, indeed, he no longer feels the pleasant tingle of Earth Magic.

There's little else above ground to interest the Company. The buildings are entirely mundane, containing food stores, blankets, building materials, bunkrooms and a small smithy. Grey Wolf does discover a small, hastily built graveyard with thirty-odd mounds, still fairly fresh. Before too long the party have made a modest exploration of the above-ground portions of the castle, though there is a staircase leading down to a basement level. As the Company know from experience, when you're dealing with Black Circle types, the bad stuff is in the basement.

Before tackling that, Kibi walks back to where the *Watcher's Kiss* still rests on the ground, a foot from Moirel's limp hand. He picks it up. Immediately his hand and lower arm are drained of their color, though he feels no discomfort. Kibi can tell right away that the dagger is not an Earth Magic weapon, though it is quite light. He feels that it is slowly binding itself into his life-force, but not in a way that would put him in danger. He feels rather that the blade is prepared to call upon his vital essence should the need arise.

He also feels, quite clearly, that the *Watcher's Kiss* would like to kill Aravis. It's not a compulsion – Kibi is sure that the weapon has no inherent impetus to action – but all the same he can keenly feel its desire to end Aravis's life.

Begrudgingly, Kibi hands the dagger to Grey Wolf, whose experience is much the same. Morningstar casts *detect evil* on the blade and gets nothing, though with an item of this potency, divination spells are no sure thing.

"It's a god-killer," says Aravis, pride and worry overlapping in his voice. "It wanted to kill the Adversary, and now it wants to kill me too."

"I wonder why I'm fated to used it," wonders Kibi, thinking aloud about Leantha's book. He takes the dagger and strikes the same pose as in the crayon drawing, but nothing happens.

Dranko takes it next, and is relieved that blood does not immediately run from his eyes, though his face is bathed in grayscale as the weapon takes all surrounding color into itself.

Aravis rubs his chin. “I think now that we have the *Watcher’s Kiss*, the next step is to go back to the island, and go after Meledien and Tarsos.”

Kibi makes a mild protest, as he doesn’t want to make any irrevocable journeys until the repatriation of the Gurundian dwarves is taken care of, though the rest think that saving the world should perhaps be made a higher priority. Ernie raises the point that enemies might find out they now possess a god-killing blade and come after them, and so they should not dawdle. On the other hand, none of them are particularly eager to give chase to someone with a spear that annihilates souls.

Morningstar is also quick to remind her friends that Octesian is still at large, killing people in their sleep.



Though the castle is no longer time-shifted, the Astral Blob still hovers above the courtyard. Aravis spends a few more minutes examining the phenomenon, and decides that it’s probably not connected to the rest of the Astral Plane, but is rather more like a Slice from Het Branoi.

It starts to drizzle, so Grey Wolf gently lifts Moirel and carries her into a building before she becomes soaked. He thinks her breathing might be growing a bit less ragged, though she’s still unconscious and pale. And he keeps carrying her, as the Company decide it’s time explore the subterranean portion of the castle, and are unwilling to leave Moirel by herself.

It doesn’t take long for the party to find something worthwhile. Beyond a small warren of cold rooms and wine cellars, the Company discover the secret heart of Moirel’s fortress. There are two main rooms here, and the first of these is a small study. The wide desk there is crammed with notes, the shelves crowded with books, and the walls adorned with planar maps, all of which depict the Astral Plane in various contexts. Aravis glances through the notes on the desk, and realizes that the entire project here is dedicated to understanding the nature and properties of the Astral Plane. Some of the books are little more than introductory primer material, but the book opened in the center of the desk contains some extremely advanced planar theory.

The second room is closed, and from behind the door comes a faint whiff of Essence; not as strong as the Black Book from Kallor, but still worthy of a *circle of protection* from Ernie before they open it. Dranko carries the *Watcher’s Kiss* at the moment, though it’s wrapped in cloth and tied to his belt. The Company have no torches or lanterns lit; they are relying on the daily *mass darkvision*. Though the spell usually restricts vision to greyscale, Dranko glances down and sees the bright gold of the *Watcher’s Kiss* peeking through the cloth.

Flicker pops the lock on the door and pushes it open. Beyond is a square stone room, twenty feet on a side, and squatting in the middle is a large black-iron cauldron. The wizards flinch, but there is no taint of null shadows here. There is a foul reek coming from it, a smell that none of them can identify, though all agree is unpleasant. From the doorway no one can see what, if anything, is *inside* the cauldron. The only other object in the room is a large wooden stick, intricately carved, with an obsidian cap on its upper end. It leans against the back wall of the room.

Dranko stares at the cauldron for a moment, using his innate ability to *detect magic*. He doesn’t have the knowledge to fully understand what he’s looking at, though he does ascertain that the cauldron’s magic is both extremely complex and monstrously strong. As for what it does – well, the answer to that question is made clear by a page of notes the Company came across while researching the Necromantic Forge and Califax’s Soul Shard:

Gurthin’s greatest claim to fame was his forging of the Three Cauldrons: Shadow, Smoke and Lies. In the Great War he used the first two to produce fell soldiers to counter the Spire’s greatest heroes. Their wizards quailed before the Null Shadows, and their priests uttered oaths at the sight of Smoldering Ghosts. But it was the Cauldron of Lies that was his greatest achievement, for knowing lies, one discerns truth. Of course, while lies are treacherous, the truth can be even more so. The story is told that when Naloric stirred the Cauldron of Lies, it told him that he would be trapped forever in the Prison of Volpos. Perhaps it would have been better for him had that been true, since he was slain by Alander soon after his escape. Let us hope Darkeye makes better use of it.

Ah. So this is the Cauldron of Lies.



“That’s awesome!”

Everyone turns to stare at Dranko. They do not immediately share his optimism.

He blows an exasperated breath. “If we stir the cauldron, then it tells us a lie. Whatever it tells us, we know it won’t come true.”

Aravis, whose inhibitions are scarce when there's something new to experience, wants to stir the cauldron straight away. Grey Wolf and Kibi take a step back, wanting nothing to do with it. "It's evil!" Kibi protests. "It's more evil than the Null Shadow cauldron was! Why are we even *thinking* about messing around with it?"

But the dwarf's concerns do not dissuade Aravis and Dranko. The others are mildly curious, but not enough to stir them to action. Ernie reluctantly agrees to accompany the two would-be cauldron users into the room, so that they can stay within the penumbra of his *protection from evil*.

Dranko peers into the Cauldron of Lies. At first he thinks it's empty, but then he sees that the bottom third of its volume is swirling with thick black vapors. Aravis picks up the obsidian-capped stick, dips it into the cauldron, and begins to stir. He feels a tingle in his hands, and experiences a tactile illusion of the stick becoming slimy and befouled. As the seconds tick by, a deep malaise comes over him, a despairing lethargy that threatens to overwhelm his senses. But he stays focused, girds his will, and continues to swirl the vapors.

After a minute or two of this, the vapors leap vigorously from the iron vessel, filling the air above it and forming into words as if pressed onto an invisible tablet. The others cannot make out the forms of the letters, but Aravis can read their message clearly.

CORILAYNA HAS INDEED JOINED DROSH IN THE CROSSER'S MAZE.

Then the vapors break apart, and Aravis is left feeling drained and fragile, as though he has just had an unpleasant emotional encounter with someone he loves.

Dranko displays his usual sympathy. "So? How'd it go?"

Aravis staggers to the nearest wall, sits, and puts his head in his hands. "I feel... awful. But I learned something, I think." He tells the others the message from the cauldron, but there is some disagreement about which part is the lie. Did Corilayna go in, but Drosch had left? Or is Drosch still in it, but Corilayna is not? Or are *neither* of them there? None of them can say; it's a bit out of their ken.

"Well, you didn't die, and that's good enough for me." Dranko picks up the stick himself, and finds it heavier than he expects. With an effort he lifts the end of it into the cauldron, though it's difficult to muster the will to even hold it. Gritting his teeth, he begins to stir, and like Aravis is overcome with sadness and depressing thoughts. He's reminded of his argument with Kibi about talking back to Lord Tapheon, and of his worst days suffering the cutting discipline of Califax. His arms continue to stir, but soon he has personally lost interest, and has nearly become lost in his own misery when he realizes that words have formed above the squatting black pot.

TAPHEON HAS FORGOTTEN ALL ABOUT HIS ENCOUNTER WITH DRANKO.

The stick drops from his hand with a clatter. "Are you okay?" Ernie asks.

"I'm fine. It's alright. Any time now Tapheon will seize my soul, and there'll be eternal torment, and blah blah blah."

"My turn next!" says Flicker.

"Let's wait," says Morningstar. "Let's wait to see if this..." – she motions to Dranko and Aravis, both of whom have grown quiet and morose – "wears off, before anyone else tries it."

Ernie gives Dranko and Aravis some food, and this cheers them up slightly. Flicker lights a cigar and puts it in Dranko's mouth, and that improves the half-orc's spirits further. "Group hug!" says Ernie, and before too long Aravis and Dranko are feeling more like their old selves.

"I think," says Aravis slowly, "that this cauldron *distracts* you with lies. It's telling us things that are true, but which in the grand scheme of things aren't important. I mean, we *knew* Tapheon hadn't forgotten you, Dranko. Now we'll just worry about it needlessly."

"This is like, if everyone jumped off a bridge, would you?" says Ernie.

Dranko laughs. "Have you ever jumped off a bridge? It's actually kind of fun!"

Ernie still has no desire to try his hand with the stirring stick. "Is it really worth our time trying to out-think a pot?"

"If we can't, that's embarrassing," says Flicker. "I still think I should stir it."

Dranko turns to him and grins. "You know how we always say, 'at least you're not as unwise as Flicker?'"

“You say that?”

“Not in front of you, we don’t.”

“Fine. I’ll go scout out more of this basement.” Flicker heads out into the hallway to check for secret doors.

“You know,” says Kibi. “I think I’ve changed my mind. I’m going to try it. I don’t really *want* to, but it’s a possible source of information, which is something we never seem to have enough of.” He picks up the stick, and adds, “And even if I became mopey and depressed, you guys probably wouldn’t notice any difference.”

Kibi stirs the cauldron, and fights his way through the unnatural depression it brings. The smoke rises before him, and brings this message:

THE CRANCHUS YOU REMEMBER IS ALIVE AND WELL.

Aravis frowns. “See? Kibi, it’s a distraction. Remember, people change. We don’t know what it means.”

Kibi sits heavily, tears coming into his eyes.

“Kibi,” says Ernie gently, “he could have lived a long and good life, and still have died of old age by now.”

“It’s not like I could have visited him anyway,” says Kibi sullenly.

“Kibi needs a hug,” says Dranko. “Ernie! Hug the dwarf.”

Joshua Randall: All three of those statements are sufficiently ambiguous that even *knowing they are lies* doesn’t tell us anything useful. Well played, Sagiro.

Piratecat: Oh, foreshadowing, you sure are foreshadowy. Re-reading this now and knowing what I learned in the final game session, I can not believe that Sagiro told us this. Yeah, what he *didn’t* say was the really, really important bit. I hadn’t realized that he’d dangled such major spoilers in front of us with impunity. Well done, you big jerk!

Tamlyn: “Hello, Kettle. This is Pot. You’re black!”



Moirel

From the hall outside the cauldron room comes a loud and alarming noise of grinding stone, followed immediately by Flicker crying out, “Jackpot! Secret room!”

“What’s in it?” calls Dranko.

After a brief pause, Flicker answers, “Animal statues.”

“What kind?”

“The kind with gems in their eyes! Wait... don’t come in yet.” The sound of small objects plinking to the stone floor can be heard. “Well, gems in *some* of their eyes.”

“Guess what?” answers Dranko. “I stirred the pot again. It said, ‘Flicker isn’t a dick.’”

It’s a treasure trove, literally. The statuettes – probably Moirel’s private collection – are exquisitely carved from obsidian, jade and crystal. The gems in their eyes are flawless, and Flicker sets the value of the set easily in the six-figures.

Aravis ignores the gleeful exclamations of his more monetarily-minded comrades and returns to the study, where he spends the remaining hours before bed examining the reams of papers therein. His conclusion: the person who compiled them was brilliant, but knew nothing about planar theory when they started their researches. Assuming it was Moirel, she learned a great deal in a short time and was a quick study. By noting the handwriting on many of the papers, Aravis realizes that Moirel built her own set of basic planar theory books with very little to go on. From the dates on the papers, it seems she went further in her understanding of the Astral Plane in less than a year than most scholars would have done in twenty.



In the morning, Moirel’s condition has markedly improved. Ernie casts *greater restoration* on her, and color comes instantly back to her face. “We should wake her up,” says Morningstar.

“She might still be evil,” Dranko cautions. “What do we do with her, if she’s not Little Miss Sunshine even without her Black Eye?”

They defer to Grey Wolf, since Moirel is his great-great-etc. grandmother. “I agree that we should question her,” he says. “Thoroughly. Let’s get a read on her before we decided whether or not to let her live.”

Ernie mixes some herbs and holds a pungent wad under Moirel’s nostrils until she wakes. As she flutters back to consciousness, Morningstar tries twice to cast *detect thoughts* upon her, but both times her target’s natural mental defenses repel the attempt. With a sigh, she busts out the big mental gun and casts *brain spider*. It works, and Morningstar begins to concentrate on monitoring the thoughts of their prisoner.

Moirel’s eyes open, and flick back and forth among the Company standing around her. “Are you hungry?” Ernie asks.

“Who... who are you?”

“I’m Ernest Roundhill at your service, but only if you don’t do anything hideously evil. Who are you?”

Moirel blinks confusedly. “I’m... Moirel? Yes, that’s it. Moirel.”

Grey Wolf leans forward. “Do you know where you are?”

“I’m... in my castle.”

Morningstar gets a clear indication of wonderment, puzzlement, and outright disbelief that the Black Eye is no longer overshadowing her mind. Having recast *telepathic bond*, she shares her observations with the rest.

“That Eye was not good for you,” says Ernie.

Moirel blinks again, then tries to stand but cannot. She is still too weak. “How did you get in here?”

“We’re very clever,” says Grey Wolf with a smile.

She’s thinking: *They must have learned the real password. ‘Refuge Asynchronous.’*

Aravis cannot help but ask, “Are you the one who was studying planar theory and taking the notes that we found?”

“Yes. Yes, but... what do you want here? Aravis. Your name is Aravis. I remember... dreading meeting you all. Was that me?”

“No,” says Aravis. “It was probably the Eye.”

Ernie hands her a cup of water, and she sips while he asks, “What is the last thing you remember from when you were really you?”

Moirel looks as though she doesn’t quite understand the question. “I’ve always been me.”

“But you haven’t always been alone,” says Ernie.

“No, I... it... the Eye changed me. For the worse. But it empowered me for the better. It’s all gone now, isn’t it? My magic is gone. I did it to myself.”

Kibi glances at the ceiling. “Was that the big accident that happened upstairs?”

While Moirel pauses to ponder the question, Morningstar shares more observations about her subject’s mental state. *She has trouble remembering things that happened recently. Her mind is muddy, confused. She’s telling the truth that she’s always been herself, because something was letting her, but undermining her nature at the same time, bringing out her worst tendencies. Adding malice to her, and its own high-level agenda.*

“There was an accident, yes,” says Moirel. “It was my last thought... to get my revenge. On his son, because he is dead. But I failed. The most important thing in the world to me... and I failed at it.” When no one answers, she continues, “The Eyes are destroyed, aren’t they? Not just mine, but all of them. Invane failed. And that was my great hope for my father. I’m sorry you never knew him. He was a great man.” Seven great heroes keep seven very straight faces.

“The funny thing about hope,” says Ernie, “is that it’s very difficult to kill. If you still wanted to beat him...”

“I’m out of options,” Moirel interrupts. “I have no magic left. I was one of the greatest wizards of my age, and now...”

“How did you lose your magic?” asks Dranko.

Moirel takes a deep breath, and spends half a minute gathering her muddled thoughts. Morningstar senses that she is rapidly regaining focus.

"You know about Volpos," Moirel begins. "You know that is where Naloric was, and where Naradawk now is. It can't be reached. It is a Prison Prime. But I wanted him. He killed my father, and I swore to kill his son. And I thought I could do it. Through the Astral Plane. It's coterminous in a way that other planes aren't. Before the... before, I had temporal powers. I tried to bore a hole through time and space, using the Astral Plane as a conduit. But... I was out of my league. I knew there was risk, but not how much risk. There was a great deal of energy released when I finished my ritual. I..." She pauses, and Morningstar senses a great sadness well up in her. "I killed almost everyone here. The *Watcher's Kiss* kept me alive, shielded me, kept me safe." Morningstar feels Moirel's mind become instantly frantic. "Where is it, by the way?" asks Moirel in a sudden panic. "I need it. I need it!"

"Why?" asks Aravis calmly.

"Because I... because it... I..." Her mind calms. "I don't know why. It is very powerful. Very. It gave me authority, protection... no, I don't need it, do I? What would be the point? I don't want to kill anyone else. Just him. And I can't do that now. There's no way to get to Volpos, it was a fool's errand... but it was my last hope. After I failed, after Inivane failed me..."

Ernie pats her hand. "You are an intelligent and focused woman. Take some time, rest."

She becomes confused again. "You're not going to kill me?"

"No," says Ernie, smiling.

"You should," says Moirel, closing her eyes. "If you knew the things I've done... I remember doing them, and remember *wanting* to do them."

"Are you sure it was you who wanted to do those things?" asks Aravis.

"Oh, yes. Some of them. Even now, if you gave me the choice, I would rewrite history, so that my father's name would not be disgraced and he not killed. I would do anything for him. Naloric sent me through the plinths because he didn't trust my father. He felt my father was trying to trick him, which was not the case. My father, Condor, he valued his work above all else. If I had a way to avenge him, I would, in a heartbeat."

Aravis nods in sympathy. "I can understand your desire to bring your father back at any cost. If I were given that option, I don't know what I would do for my own father. But you should consider: Naradawk is trapped in his prison, and that may very well be worse for him than death."

"He has tried to get out before," says Moirel. "He may yet succeed."

Dranko snorts. "And so you thought making a tunnel between here and Volpos was a good idea?"

Moirel looks peeved. "It would not have been permanent. I would have gone through, and the tunnel would have closed behind me. I would have found him, and killed him. That's why I needed the *Watcher's Kiss*. To kill Naradawk. And I would have, and he may have killed me, but that wouldn't have mattered." Moirel says nothing after that, and so there is silence around her cot. According to Morningstar she is losing focus again, and dreaming of plunging the *Watcher's Kiss* into Naradawk's heart.

"Say!" says Dranko, wanting to keep the conversation going. "Do you remember how to banish King Farazil from this plane?"

As he hoped, this snaps Moirel back to the here and now. "Ah, yes. Farazil. But I have released him from service. He fulfilled the technical terms of a contract I had made with him... to kill you, if I recall correctly. In light of your continued existence, I shouldn't have been so ready to declare the contract upheld. Oh, yes, he can be killed. Banish him to the Plane of Shadow, follow him, and kill him there."

"And how do you banish him?" Dranko presses.

"How do you banish any extraplanar creature? And if he is resistant to such measures, you may have to work at it. He's a crafty thing, isn't he. Slippery. He..." She pauses, trying to remember. "He wanted something. I don't remember what it was. Beyond merely his freedom from my service, I mean."

"If you could remember, that would be great."

When Moirel seems to have nothing more to say on that subject, Aravis asks, "Were your temporal powers magic you already possessed, or were they related to the Eye?"

"They were my own!" says Moirel, though Morningstar senses some lingering uncertainty. "I am... was... the second greatest Earth Mage of my day. Only my father was more powerful."

Morningstar confirms that the name of Cranchus is nowhere in her thoughts. Moirel continues. “The Eyes were my father’s greatest creation, and the controlling Eye – the Black – the most powerful of all of them. I remember holding it, while the others circled around my head. Father assured me it was safe, that everything would be fine. He had worked out the details. I trusted him, but... there was something odd about the Black one. Condor was forced to use some of that... that stuff that Naloric had – just a little – to make it function properly. It was the year 200 when I left. Condor said I should arrive sometime between 500 and 1000 years in the future. That I should verify that fact, and then use a second ritual to return to my own time.

“And so I went. To travel through time, was a thing of such exquisite beauty and power. I was so proud of my father. Naloric was a fool; he didn’t understand the true extent of my father’s knowledge. He knew more – thought deeper – than Naloric could ever know. For all his power, the Emperor was a monster. He was also my Lord, and I served him without question, but he was a monster, and we both knew it.”

The Company are transfixed by Moirel’s narrative, hardly daring to breathe as they listen.

“So I traveled,” says Moirel. “It worked! I came forward in time some 800-odd years. And when I arrived, the controlling Eye... took me over. I was... gone for a while, I don’t know where. When I came to, the other Eyes had abandoned me. Scattered themselves. And the Obsidian Eye was there, with me. It became me. It was greater than I was. But it left me my personality. It didn’t dominate me in a conventional sense, but in most ways this was worse.

“I set out to discover what had happened. I learned that a hundred years earlier, Naloric had been banished following a long war. So I did what made the most sense – I found this place, where his capital used to be. Most of the city was wrecked, ruined in the war, but this castle was still here, hidden by powerful illusions. The Sharshun, those that had not fled with Naloric, still held it. But it would not have stayed hidden for long from the Spire, not with Naloric gone.

“So, I hid it better. I shifted it, the Eye shifted it... no, I shifted it. The knowledge was mine. I was still myself, a little, and I was the greatest living mage. The leader of the Sharshun... I destroyed him, took his place, and saw to it that we devoted all of our energies to finding the seven other Eyes, so I could send someone back in time. But I couldn’t leave. The Obsidian Eye wouldn’t let me leave. It was needed here to keep the place safe. I was a spider trapped in my own web, but I had many faithful servants. The Sharshun obeyed me without question. They knew better than to question anything I said or did. And so I sent them out to find the Eyes. You found some, they found some...”

Ernie interrupts, whispering. “What did you do to Sagiro?”

Moirel laughs. “The Eye dominated him, of course. The Eye could dominate anyone completely, lastingly, utterly. It left their personality alone, and in some ways they were still themselves. But they obeyed... us... me... unquestionably. Until the day they died, and possibly beyond.”

“Is Sagiro dead?” asks Morningstar.

“I don’t know.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

Moirel thinks. “I... sent him to find one of the missing Eyes, and I never heard from him again. One of my many failures.”

Morningstar shakes her head. “Why would the Eye not want you to return to Naloric? Why did it not let you return to your own time?”

“I think,” says Moirel slowly, “that, ultimately, it was under the control of my father. Had it gone back, it would have been under my father’s control again. It desired to be in control, rather than to be controlled. Like all of the Eyes, it had a mind of its own.”

“And,” says Aravis, “If it was made with the black essence, it had a larger goal in mind.”

“Naloric,” spits Moirel. “There was something he wanted. It was all he thought about, day and night, night and day. He dug for it, convinced it was deep beneath the earth. He controlled everything, and what did he do with all the slave labor he could wish for, drawn from every corner of the kingdom? He dug.”

Dranko thinks to the others: *Naloric dug, but what he didn’t know is that the underworld had been sealed off. That was why our red-armored friends have gone beneath the barrier. To find what Naloric was after.*

Morningstar agrees. “It’s all to free the Adversary,” she says to Moirel.

Moirel looks confused. “The Adversary? You mean, the Adversary from story, from whom the Travelers came here fleeing?

Perhaps Naloric wanted to kill that being. What he was looking for was called the Fist of the Godslayer. I remember that now... it's what he was digging for."

"What did it do?" Dranko asks.

"Slay gods, presumably. Honestly I didn't give it much thought. I always considered it a fool's errand."

Maybe it's a giant hammer, thinks Grey Wolf. *That would be cool.* But internally, the Company think it far more likely that Naloric, infused with goo, was looking to free the Adversary, not kill him.

"He was digging in many places," says Moirel. "Like I said, a fool's errand. He never seemed to find what he was looking for, and eventually he had to curtail his efforts in order to prosecute the war with the Spire."

"I guess you don't know, then," says Aravis. "But that black substance, that he used to craft the Black Eye? That's the blood of the Adversary."

"How... how did it get here?"

"Part of Him came to Abernia," says Aravis, "and crashed to the ground."

"So He's here?"

"A portion is."

"What portion?" presses Moirel.

"His essence," says Ernie. "He was trying to reach through the door of his prison, and it closed. Some of his spiritual fingers, as it were, were sliced off."

"And those... fingers... escaped and came here?"

"He's been giving us the Spiritual Finger ever since," Ernie grumbles.

Morningstar gives Moirel a grim smile. "The Black Eye, infused with Adversary blood, had control of you all of these years. You have been doing its bidding all of this time."

Moirel again grows quiet, but Morningstar knows she's thinking furiously, trying to integrate this new information with her own fragmented memories. Her mind jumps to Sagiro, and to the Cauldron of Lies. "I have... I have a cauldron," Moirel says out loud.

"We know," says Ernie.

Moirel laughs. "Of course you know. You are Alander's Chosen. The Eye knew about you. It feared you. That was one of the reasons it stayed here and wouldn't leave."

"What did the Cauldron tell you?" Dranko asks.

"That's the confusing part. It said 'Sagiro, in the end, will fail you.' And he *did* fail me. So how is that a lie?"

"Couldn't you use the Cauldron again?" Dranko suggests.

"A person may only stir the Cauldron once." She closes her eyes again, thinking hard, and then asks, "If the stories of the Adversary are true, He would destroy the world! Who would let that happen?"

Aravis sighs. "There are always people who are convinced that they will be spared."

"Then they are idiots!"

"Remember," says Kibi, "they're controlled by Black Goo just like you were. They can't help but try to bring the Adversary back." Then he says, "You said your life was a failure, and your only goal to avenge your father, but do you really think that's what your father would want?"

"Yes!" Moirel exclaims.

"Wouldn't he rather see you happy, than to..."

"He was a man of great pride, as well as great intellect," says Moirel. "He would understand that I wouldn't be happy until he was avenged."

"While you may have failed to kill Naradawk," says Aravis, "by preserving the *Watcher's Kiss*, and keeping it away from those who wanted to destroy it, you have allowed it to come to us. And that may be what lets us destroy the Adversary, and by doing so destroy the source of Naradawk's power."

Moirel thinks, and then smiles. "And if that comes to pass, Sagiro will not have failed me, after all."

Quartz: More! More!

Mathew Freeman: Very interesting discussion. Things falling into place rapidly now, about what's really been going on all this time. And I can see how this might go, if Our Heroes are victorious... but we're a long way short of that, and there are an awful lot of save-or-die saving throws to be made.

Incidentally, what sort of levels are the PCs at this stage, and do they level up again before the end (spoilers permitting, of course)?

Chronikoce: Woohooo! Update! Makes me want to start reading from the beginning again!

carborundum: Excellent stuff! But... hang on a minute, a person can only stir the cauldron once? Didn't they just go on a crazy stir-fest?

Sagiro: Aravis, Dranko and Kibi each stirred the cauldron, but only once.

carborundum: Thanks! Amazing that *both* of them showed such self-control... Adventurers are usually more impulsive.

Piratecat: We were aware that some things are best not meddled with too frequently.

I don't remember what level we were at this point. 19th, I'd guess.

carborundum: Jolly wise! OT: did your high-level combats take spectacularly long or only when it got really tense and suddenly sixteen pages needed to be checked for footnotes?

Piratecat: Hmm. I don't remember most combats taking a particularly long time, but that may be faulty memory. Certain fights (the dragon, and the upcoming epic battle against Octesian) took longer than normal or multiple sessions. But it was 3e/3.5e, and I don't remember combat feeling like it was dragging until we were ludicrously high level (and even then, we were dishing out so much damage that things went fairly quickly).

Worth reiterating that this encounter with Moirel went *nothing* like what I'd expected. It's fun to stay surprised.



In Which Something Finally Goes Right for a Change

Before the Company take their leave, Moirel has a warning, and a final favor to ask. "There are two other Cauldrons," she tells them. "They create dangerous monsters in the hands of the Black Circle. The Ghost Cauldron was destroyed centuries ago by the Silver Shell, but the third, the Shadow Cauldron, is capable of..."

"Already taken care of," says Aravis, grinning.

"Oh. Good."

"Yeah," says Dranko. "So, what's the favor?"

"I'm sure that I'm wanted by the King for my various past crimes," she says. "I'd appreciate if you wouldn't mention to anyone that I'm here, at least for a while."

"We won't," Aravis assures her. "When we return from our mission beneath the earth, we will intercede with King Crunard, and get you a pardon."

"I would go with you," she says, "but with my magic burned away, I am no longer capable of heroics."

"Now that the castle isn't protected by your time powers," says Morningstar, "someone might come across you by chance."

"I have an idea," says Dranko. "I'll get in touch with Lucas and we'll send the Overmen to guard her."



It's only mid-morning, so they *teleport* home, intending to spend the remainder of the day relaxing and planning. The first thing they do is cast *identify* on the *Watcher's Kiss*, and to their surprise the spell is not suppressed or otherwise prevented from functioning. The golden blade has a number of extremely powerful properties:

- It's a +6 dagger.
- It does an additional 10d6 damage per hit against Divine targets. (Dranko points at Aravis: "Don't shave with it.")
- When one strikes and does damage with the weapon, it does equal damage to all same-aligned creatures within thirty feet.
- Once per round, as a free action, you can automatically end a grapple, deal 6d6 damage to the grappler, and fling them thirty feet.
- If the wielder is damaged by an energy type, they are thereafter immune to that energy type until the end of the encounter.
- The wielder is constantly flying and has evasion.

That all sounds great, but there's one catch:

- At the end of any encounter in which someone uses any of the *Watcher's Kiss*'s abilities, or deals damage with it, that person takes 3d6 damage to every ability score. That damage cannot be restored until the victim has had a full night's rest.

Having discerned all of that, they give the *Watcher's Kiss* to Flicker, with strong admonishments that he should only use it in dire emergencies. Once Flicker has calmed down, Eddings brings the party a late-morning meal while they discuss what to do next. The endgame is in sight now; none of them doubt that they should be wrapping up loose ends, and making preparations to pursue Seven Dark Words, Meledien and Tarsos into the Underdark, to prevent whatever Adversary-rescuing plans the Evil Trio has going.

Dranko pulls out the written list they keep of their ongoing quests and entanglements. "Wipe out the bugbears," he reads, nodding to Aravis.

"It seems unlikely," the wizard admits. "I'd like to avenge my parents, but we have more important things to worry about now."

Other items that seem like they'll fall by the wayside include killing Parthol Runecarver and wiping out the Council of Nine. "I may hate them," says Aravis, referring to the assemblage of intelligent rats, "but Quarrol created them, and it's not for me to destroy them."

Looking over Dranko's shoulder, Ernie reads, "Kick Farazil's butt."

"He's working for us now," says Kibi.

"Can't we kick his ass once he's done?" asks Flicker.

"I have to wonder," says Dranko. "What benefit is he *really* after, asking for citizenship. What's in the fine print?"

Some other things can now be crossed off the to-do list as substantially completed, mainly dealing with the Sharshun and Darkeye, and destroying the remaining Black Circle cauldrons. They decide that the short list of things still on their collective plate includes assisting the relocation of the Gurundian dwarves, rescuing Tor from the Delfirians, and stopping the red-armored Octesian who's now murdering random citizens in their sleep.

Dranko pays a visit to Lucas at the underground HQ of the Undermen, explaining as much as he can, and stressing that he'll soon be going somewhere from where he's not supposed to be able to return. But before Lucas can even shake his head in annoyance and resignation, the two hear a commotion from somewhere above. One of Lucas's minions pokes his head into the office. "Sorry to disturb you, but you really should get up to the street. Something's happening, down at the docks."

Lucas and Dranko exchange glances, and Dranko hustles up through the warrens of the Manse to the surface. Once on the streets of Tal Hae, a foul smell greets his nostrils. The city has a faint tang of fish at all times, but now there's a horrid rotting smell wafting through the salt air – and he's still a good quarter mile from the harbor. As he dashes through the streets, mind-link chatter tells him that the others have also caught wind (so to speak) of something unusual occurring, and they wind up meeting atop a small hill that overlooks the harbor.

There's a wall of people down at the harbor's edge, jostling for a view, but also wrapping their faces against the powerful ambient stench. From their high vantage point, the Company can easily see what's causing it. Dead fish are washing into the harbor from out in the ocean, in such vast quantities that they have already formed a thick, unbroken carpet of aquatic corpses. For as far out towards the ocean as they can see, the surface is a thick mass of dead sea creatures, now baking in the August heat. A few brave souls have moved to the edge of the water with nets. "What happened?" asks Flicker.

"Same reason all the turtles died," says Dranko. "Something bad."

A few of them fly down for a better look, and on closer inspection see that the fish are mostly of an unusual sort, and not the mackerel, cod and silverscales that comprise the bulk of the fishing fleet's usual catch. Many of the creatures are more like eels than fish, or have oddly shaped bodies, strange dangling appendages, or unusually large, toothy mouths. "Deep sea fish," says Aravis with sudden understanding. He flies higher, and sees that the ocean beyond the bay is topped with a mass of dead sea creatures for as far out as he can see. There must be millions of them.

Dranko wrinkles his nose. "I think the only thing we can do about this, is to get going after Meledien and company, before it gets worse."

It appears that the clock is ticking a little faster than they thought.



As the Company return to the Greenhouse, Kibi receives a *sending*:

This is Teggin, leader of the dwarven scouts. We've had some unexpected good developments in the last two days. Hope you've been okay. Come visit!

Kibi replies:

Okay. I'll be there soon.

Dranko has an odd request on the way back. "Flicker, I need to borrow the *Watcher's Kiss* for a few minutes."

"Oh?" Flicker is immediately suspicious. "Why?"

"I want to show it to someone."

"Who?"

"Berthel. My old landlady."

"Why in the Gods' names would you want to do that?" asks Flicker.

"Flicker, just indulge me."



Berthel has fixed up the old tenement since his last visit, and in fact has purchased the entire building with the money Dranko had left her. Dranko hears the sound of children laughing from the second-floor dwelling, and smiles. "This is nice!" he says, sitting back in a comfortable chair.

"Let me show you the best part!" Berthel answers jovially. She opens a closet door to reveal a wine rack, burdened with a dozen bottles of cheap wine. She pulls out one of the bottles, opens it, and pours two glasses. "Saved this one for you," she says.

"I got you something too," says Dranko. He produces an expensive bottle of Elvish wine, knowing full well that its subtleties and flavors will be lost on his old landlady.

"Hm," says Berthel, looking at it doubtfully. "Will I get drunk if I drink it?"

Dranko smiles and nods, and then grows a bit somber. "You may never see me again," he tells her. "I'm going off to do one of those things that will probably get me killed."

Berthel chuckles. "You're on the run from the law, aren't you," she accuses.

Dranko doesn't answer, but says instead, "Also, I wanted you to see this." He pulls the *Watcher's Kiss* from its scabbard, and its golden glow immediately captures all light and vitality in Berthel's apartment. Everything else goes gray.

"What is that?" asks Berthel, awed.

"That's the dagger that a Goddess used to stab another God in the back. And now you're one of the only people who's ever seen it."

Berthel's eyes go wide, and then she laughs. "You're carrying around a sword that one God used to stab another God? Come on, Dranko, pull the other one." Dranko sighs, and moves to the window.

Berthel takes a long sip of wine. "Goodbye, Dranko. Take care of yourself."

Dranko gives her one last smile, and jumps out.



After another *sending* to learn the dwarves' exact location, the party *teleport* to Cloud Mountain, one-time abode of Azhant the Ancient, and now prospective new home of the oppressed dwarves of Gurund. At once the smell of rotting sea creatures is replaced by the bracing fresh pine smell of mountain air.

A few things are immediately evident. One, a large portion of the collapsed entrance hall has been cleared out and built back up. Two, there are dozens of dwarves busily at work here – many more than Kibi left here a week ago with the mission of simply scouting out the area. Three, there are nearly as many halflings here as dwarves.

As the Company look around, bewildered, they hear the sound of grinding stone coming from around the corner of the great hall. Behind that sound comes the lovely strains of harp music. The party move to see the source of these sounds, and discover two halflings seated on chairs, surrounded by about ten dwarves looking nervously curious. As the halflings strum on small golden harps, it appears that a small army of *unseen servants* is moving rubble, building columns, mixing mortar and putting

up walls. Three of the dwarves are loudly explaining to the halflings about how the building should proceed, and what things should look like. The place is renovating itself to the music of the harps!

The dwarf **Teggin** approaches, a broad grin parting his beard. “Kibilhathur!”

“Teggin,” says Kibi. “You’ve been... busy!”

“I’ve hardly done anything, personally,” says Teggin.

“Who are these halflings?” Kibi asks.

“Oh, they’re from Appleseed, a country a few hundred miles to the north. They move quickly, but then, we asked them to as part of the agreement.”

“Oh?”

“Limited mining rights,” says Teggin. “The halflings can always use more mineral resources, and Cloud Mountain is a nearly endless supply. It’s mostly iron and silver, but it’s high-quality stuff.”

“But how...?”

“It turns out that some of the dwarven resistance in Gurund had contacts in Appleseed,” says Teggin cheerfully. “You know, the resistance that you funded a while back. Those contacts have been working on an agreement for months now, and it finally paid off. The halflings have some wizards who can teleport, and some magic that lets them turn into air and fly incredibly fast. That’s how most of ‘em got here so quickly. And they have these things...” He gestures to the halflings playing the harps. “They’re called *lyres of building*. It would have taken us months to do what these little beauties have managed in a couple of days!”

Kibi can only look astonished at this turn of events. “And that’s not even the best part!” says Teggin, his grin growing wider. “We’ve got some extra muscle on hand. You ever heard of Galeb Duhr? They’re big living rocks that walk around. There was a whole colony of Galeb Duhr living in this area, mostly staying – ahem – underground, hiding from the dragon all these years. No more dragon, so they came up to see what we’re up to. They agreed to help! They’re incredibly friendly, if a bit weird and hard to understand. Between them and the halflings, the future is looking bright as crystal.”

He waves over one of the halflings. “Hey **Sara**, these are the people I was telling you about. The ones that killed the dragon and opened Cloud Mountain for business.”

An armored halfling strides over and greets the Company individually by name, though she’s never met them before. Dranko’s is the only name she can’t seem to remember. “High Priestess Maple Sunblade sent me,” she said. “I’m to brief you on what’s been happening. Please, walk this way.”

Sara leads them to a small side room, in an area that was a jumble of fallen masonry and splintered stone last time the Company were here. It’s been furnished as an office, and they all crowd inside. Teggin joins them.

“We’ve signed a treaty,” Sara says. “We’re going to be giving the dwarves a great deal of relocation assistance, as well as helping restore this place to accommodate the expected influx. Some other details need to be worked out.”

“But what about the Guild of Chains?” asks Kibi.

“Maple sent a military detachment to Gurund, to serve as a protective military force during the relocation. We’re guessing that One Supreme Intellect will not wish to start an international incident over this affair, though it’s possible that there will be pressure from the Guild of Chains, leading to... physical altercation. In the worst case, the Jewels of the Plains could send their massed armies against us, if Supreme Intellect and the nobles feel it’s in their economic interest. But we feel that is highly unlikely, as Djaw also has trade agreements with Appleseed that they won’t easily toss aside. So, we’ll see how this goes.

“The Guild may act on its own, of course, and One Supreme Intellect is unpredictable. It’s a highly fluid situation, and we won’t know what to expect until we have enough troops on the ground in Gurund. But things have been extremely quiet along the Anlakis border for a few decades now, and Appleseed boasts a great number of seasoned military professionals who are looking forward to some boots-on-the-ground action.

“Of course, for us, it’s all about the mining rights. Appleseed is farmland-rich but mineral-poor; we’ve always had to import most of our raw ores. The opposite of Cloud Mountain. There are many synergies at work.”

Kibi’s mouth hangs open in surprise. Sara smiles at him. “In the meantime,” she says, “we’ve gotten into a new business – slave purchasing. Because there’s nothing that says we can’t free them as soon as we’ve bought them.”

“But can you afford it?” asks Kibi.

“It’s a significant expense,” Sara admits, “but Appleseed has a sizeable treasury. Our bureaucrats say the value of the minerals will offset the outlay. We’ve been hiring human agents so as not to arouse suspicion. We’re trying to maintain the same general buying patterns that they’re used to. By the time they figure out what we’re doing, we want it to be too late.”

“The thorniest part of the whole operation is the *teleportation circles*. We have two wizards in the kingdom capable of creating them in a permanent sort of way. The problem is finding places close enough to Gurundian population centers to get enough dwarves out before the Guild of Chains figures out what’s happening. It’s a big country, and our soldiers can’t defend all of it. We’re hoping to do it on the sly for as long as possible. And if we have a large enough force on the border facing Djaw, that may compel the Guild of Chains to write off Gurund. Not that we have much experience with the slave trade, but our bean counters back home think that the non-dwarfish slave market may still be lucrative enough, that the Guild will not wish to overreach and risk all of their profits. And even if they were to defeat us, it might leave them weakened enough to succumb to anti-slavery forces in the Djawish court.”

Kibi takes a deep breath, hardly daring to believe that everything has worked out so well. “We’re going to be leaving for a while,” he tells Sara. “Probably forever. So, if there’s anything we can do before we go...”

“You can help us set up extra *teleportation circles*,” says Sara. “The more we have, the quicker and smoother the evacuation will go.”

“Things are looking up,” says Teggin, “and we have you to thank for it. We’d hardly be moving in if there was still a dragon living in there. It also turns out that your names have some value up in Appleseed. I guess you guys did a favor for them recently?”



And so, still giddy with the good news, the Company *teleport* back to the Greenhouse with one more thing to check off their list. “It’s about time,” says Kibi, “that something worked out for us, and for the dwarves, without us having to do all the work.”

“It’s a pleasant surprise,” Grey Wolf agrees.

Alas, the Company’s next surprise is going to be much less pleasant...

SolitonMan: So great to hear that the Gurundian dwarves are finally seeing light at the end of the tunnel. Even with darkvision, they must be relieved...
Thanks for the update, Sagiro!

Piratecat: This is a good example of why not to over-prepare. I am told Sagiro spent a ton of time figuring out how we might overthrow the Guild of Chains and free the dwarves in a major political adventure. Then other things took precedence, the moment passed, and all that prep work wasn’t needed. I feel bad! Or I would if he hadn’t just done the same thing to me in my campaign.

Dranko would feel bad too, but, eh... dwarves.



Swan Song

Knowing that a confrontation with Octesian cannot wait much longer, Morningstar visits Previa that evening at the temple. They exchange pleasantries for a few minutes, catching up on each other’s lives. Previa seems tense, which is not unexpected given the coming dangers.

“I was a rock for a while,” says Morningstar, as she tells her friend as much as she can about the assault on Moirel’s castle.

“You appear to have gotten better,” says Previa, wincing. “Or at least, you’re looking more yourself.” She pauses, then adds, “Your life is very strange.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” says Morningstar. “And I had to do it, for the *time stop* to work.”

“You can stop time?”

Morningstar laughs. “Aravis and Kibi can. Dranko can too, because of the tentacles in his head.”

Previa doesn’t laugh. Instead she grows intensely pale. “That’s... interesting,” she says, her voice catching a bit. “And not in a good way. Our investigations into the murders – Octesian’s murders – have included *thought captures* cast both in Dream and the waking world. Every single person who has been killed, died in the same way. In their dreams, they all had... had tentacles jammed down their throats. And you say that... your husband has magical powers he has gained due to tentacles? I don’t mean to offend, but have you been... keeping tabs on him all this time?”

"It may be the same source," says Morningstar, "but I'm sure it's not Dranko."

"All the same," says Previa, "you may want to make sure he's not doing anything he can't remember afterward. I'm not saying that it's him, of course, but it's just a strange coincidence that you mention it."

Dranko, like the rest of the party, is listening to all of this over the mind-link, and comments, *Octesian is mad. Remember, he went looking for the Adversary in the Far Realms.*

Morningstar explains to Previa about Octesian's powers and motivations. "It's all part of the enemy's plot," she says. "To bring back the Adversary."

"So he went to the... the Far Realms, and acquired some tentacles, and now he's using them to suffocate people?"

"Looks that way."

"But there's still no connection that we can see among all the people he's murdered. What's his motivation?"

"We don't know," says Morningstar, "but it's possible he's just trying to get my attention."

"Then what will you do?" Previa asks. "How will you find him?"

Grey Wolf makes a suggestion over the mind-link. *We could send Dranko out to scout. After all, he and Octesian have something in common.*

You mean like a Dream Goat? says Ernie. They can hear his smirk. *Or Dream Chum?*

I do not approve! Dranko protests. But there's actually something to the idea after all, and after Morningstar finishes her debriefing with Previa (learning that the Dream Team grows stronger and more proficient every night), the Company gather back at the Greenhouse. Morningstar casts *dream anchor* and brings the entire party into *Ava Dormo*, directly outside the Greenhouse door.

Everyone looks at Dranko, expectantly and little nervously. He himself is not entirely sure what he's supposed to do, but he takes a deep breath and focuses his will inward, on the black source of his tentacular nature. He prods the soft, juicy core of madness that was placed there by the creature from the Far Realms, and it's like touching the skin above a deep bruise. Deep inside his mind is that unspeakable, unknowable horror that he dares not dwell upon.

Wincing, he lets loose the madness that surrounds that place of horrors in his brain, casting it outward, a nascent insanity loosed upon the Dream. The others, watching, think that maybe, just maybe, they detect something squirming beneath the skin of his face. "It's just a dream," Grey Wolf mutters to himself. "It's just a dream."

He and the rest feel waves of utter *wrongness* rolling out from Dranko, as the half-orc extends his mad senses into *Ava Dormo*. He need not extend them far. "He has been here!" Dranko exclaims. "Right here, or somewhere very nearby. And recently! Octesian has been trying to gain access to the Greenhouse."

"Perhaps, as Morningstar says," says Aravis, "he has been trying to attract our attention."

Dranko's voice is slow, wavering, layered with irrational overtones. "His very presence distorts the nature of the dream. The dream is a heavy sheet, and Octesian was like a heavy weight, that distorts the fabric even after he's gone."

But Dranko, even casting his turbulent mental net farther afield, cannot sense where Octesian is *now*. And Morningstar doesn't want a confrontation here anyway, not without her dream warriors. "Come back, Dranko," she says.

With an effort, Dranko reels in his violated psyche and regains his senses. When he sees the others regarding him with revulsion, he assures them, "All the squirmy bits have been pushed behind the door, and the door has been closed."

Morningstar creates a black triangle of stone the size of a book, and wills words to appear on its surface. **OCTESIAN, I AM LOOKING FOR YOU.** She drops it on the ground outside the Greenhouse door. Dranko wants to chalk some rude graffiti directed toward Octesian on the walls of the Greenhouse, but is voted down.



Morningstar takes her friends to one more stop while still in *Ava Dormo* – the temple there in Tal Hae. There are always sisters on watch, and she finds Obsidia there, training with Leona and Raven – three of Morningstar's thirteen-woman strike team.

"Morningstar!" Obsidia exclaims. "What a surprise!" Raven and Leona say nothing, but are awed to be in Morningstar's presence.

"We're here following up on something Previa told me," Morningstar tells her sisters. "Has she told you that the victims who have been dying in Dream, have all perished from tentacles pushed down their throats?"

The three Ellish sisters look stricken. "No!" whispers Obsidia. "We haven't been part of the investigation. Is it some aquatic monster that's killing people, then?"

"No," says Morningstar. "I just told Previa this an hour ago, but it's my old nemesis, Octesian. The one who you're all training to fight."

Obsidia looks grim. "We have been training hard," she says. "And we've beaten him once, so we know we can beat him again... though I hope with fewer casualties. Evenstar's bodyguard, Scola, has progressed beyond any of us – she's become one of the best fighters I've ever seen, and she's even better in Dream than in the waking world. With you, and Swan, and Scola and Evenstar on our side, I like our chances." Morningstar nods, but says nothing.

"Oh, there was one other thing," says Obsidia, becoming uncharacteristically shy. "I understand you carry a holy Ellish weapon. Can... may I see it?"

Morningstar draws *Ell's Will* and hands it to Obsidia, who holds it reverently. "To be in its presence," she breathes, "and in yours. It's just incredible." It's all Morningstar can do not to roll her eyes.

"Dranko," she says, turning to her husband. "I hate to ask this of you, but can you see if Octesian has been here as well?"

Dranko once again opens his mind to his inner madness and quests about with some ineffable sense. He deduces that Octesian indeed been lurking about the Ellish temple, though not quite as recently as at the Greenhouse.

"But members of our church are here every hour of every day, keeping watch," says Obsidia. "I think your husband is mistaken."

Dranko wheels on her. "I'm mistaken about a lot of things. My attractiveness. How funny I am. How good my cigars smell. But I am *not* mistaken about this."

To Obsidia, Raven and Leona, Morningstar delivers a stern warning. "It's going to be soon. I'm going to press him. Have our team ready to fight tomorrow at midnight."

She leaves a second message for Octesian. **I WILL BE AT GOHGAN'S BASEMENT, TOMORROW, MIDNIGHT.** She leaves an identical stone next to the first one, back at the Greenhouse.



That night, asleep in the physical world, Morningstar has a dream. Octesian is there. She finds herself in a nebulous, frustrating state, aware of having the dream as it unfolds, but being unable to affect it. At its deepest level, it is simply an ordinary dream, and only upon waking does she recall it completely. But in other ways, it is far from ordinary.

Octesian appears in front of her, clad in his red mail. His face is covered by his helmet, but tentacles sprout from beneath it, and indeed protrude out from other parts of his armor like corrupted cilia. The scene around them shifts, from the Greenhouse living room, to the Battle of Semek's Tower, to the basement beneath Gohgan the rug merchant's shop where the two of them first met.

He speaks, and his voice is both quiet and frantic. His words come stuttering, punctuated with gasping breaths, as if finishing each sentence is causing him pain.

"I met him, you know... I went to the... the... d... to the distant place. Where *Ava Dormo* borders the Great Far Reaches. He... told... told me... to ... bide my time. I c... c... couldn't free him. Not that way. But it doesn't matter. He t... he told me, he... to... he told me to bide my time. That he would not be trapped for long. His... his time is almost come! He'll have... he... he'll have... vv... his revenge on... Uthol Inga and the rest. But... but before that happens, he... told me to **KILL** you!"

With this last utterance, his voice rises to a shocking screech. It takes him a few seconds of wheezing breaths to recover before he continues, and there's a new feverish pitch to his monologue.

"He... told me that... and so I will. I will... he told me... to kill you but... I don't see anything wrong with..."

Morningstar catches a glimpse of something squirming in his mouth.

"...anything wrong with... playing with my food before I eat it." Octesian pauses here, and cocks his head to

one side. "Excuse me," he says. He reaches a tentacle into the air and pushes it through a rift in space, as though he's just parted the fabric of dream like a curtain of opaque silk. The tentacle vanishes into the rift, up to Octesian's armored shoulder. "I... have to... have to... even the odds a bit." His voice grows strained, even more gasping, as his tentacle works its unseen business beyond the rift. "I know... know what you are doing, but... but your friends can't help you. Nnnnnggh! Especially not... not... this one! Aaaaaagggn!" Octesian pulls the tentacle back from the rift, and it's entirely coated in fresh, steaming blood.

Morningstar seethes in frustration. She is *there*, in some sense, but not one that matters.

"That... took some doing," Octesian says, his voice taking on a gleeful, frantic edge. "I didn't know if it would work from here. It did. It worked. But d... don't worry. I'll save killing the rest for when you're all together, because I want you to see them... when it happens to them. They're not ready. You're not really ready either... but... they're not like us." He takes a couple of deep, spastic breaths before continuing. "I've seen Him, you know... He told me to kill you. He talked to me. I c... couldn't... couldn't breathe. But it doesn't matter. He'll be out soon anyway." He splutters and retches, as though it pains him to recall these memories. "It's been too long Morningstar, too long since we've met in person. But that will happen soon now. You want it, and I want it. It will happen soon." He licks the end of the bloody tentacle. "You'll just have to do with one fewer. I have to be going now... lots of p... preparations to make. Is it tomorrow at midnight, you said? Down below, in that basement? Did you think of that yourself? You have such a sense of... st... story... and oh, it'll be a story I'll be telling for a long time. I'll tell Him when I see Him again. Goo... goo. Good bye. Oh, and tell your husband..."

And here his voice drops an octave and sounds like it comes from a dozen throats at once.

...that we all say hello.



Morningstar wakes up at that moment, soaked in sweat, recalling her dream in full. A *sending* has woken her, from Sable, one of her team.

Morningstar, please come to Kallor. There's been an incident. Something has happened to Swan.

carborundum: Whoa. Jiminy Cricket, that's horrible. Did you do the voice? PC, did he do the voice?

Piratecat: He did the voice. Oh, God. The voice.

Everett: Is Swan someone who's ever appeared in the Story Hour?

And Sagiro, as we approach the boss fight, would you give us a recap of the party's history with Octesian? I don't recall specifics.

Sagiro: Sure thing! If you search on Swan's name in the "Complete Part One" of StevenAC's awesome PDFs, you'll see how she was involved early on. Short version: she was once one of High Priestess Rhiavonne's most trusted advisers. She was an early advocate of what eventually became the Day-walker movement, the fact of which made her *persona non grata* with Rhiavonne for a time thereafter. And she was present at Octesian's assault on Semek's Tower in *Ava Dormo*, concurrent with the Battle of Verdsheane. Oh, and Swan was the priestess who first learned how to cast *dream anchor*, the prayer that allows Dreamwalkers to bring non-Dreamwalkers into *Ava Dormo*.

As for the party's history with Octesian: he was one of the three red-armored servants of Naradawk who were "squeezed through" the planar gate near the start of the campaign. (Of the other two, Restimar was killed by the party early on, while Meledien has joined forces with Tarsos and Seven Dark Words and is currently on some fell mission beneath the surface.) Morningstar first encountered Octesian in the Dreamscape while scouting out the ruins beneath Gohgan's rug shop; she didn't know who he was then, but he was clearly villainous. Not long after, Morningstar was granted a vision by her avatar, of Octesian and Meledien meeting in the Dreamscape, a meeting which made it even more clear that Octesian was a powerful and proficient Dreamer.

The party's primary interaction with Octesian was, as mentioned above, when he and a small force of dream soldiers attacked the Tower of Semek during the Battle of Verdsheane. Though he was driven away and his assault cut short, he managed to kill fourteen Ellish Dreamwalkers in the battle, since he had the rare ability to deal real physical damage when attacking a person's dream persona.

After that, the party has learned that Octesian eventually journeyed far afield in *Ava Dormo*, searching directly for the Adversary's prison in the Far Realms. Alas for him, as he approached the boundary between *Ava Dormo* and the Far Realms, close enough in fact to hear the words of the Adversary, he went utterly insane.

And now he's back, be-tentacled from his close brush with the Starry Madness, and killing people, horribly, in their sleep.



Tonight, Morningstar

Morningstar answers the *sending*: *Yes, I felt it happen. I'll be there immediately.*

She wakes everyone else as quickly as possible. "Octesian killed Swan," she says simply. "We need to get to Kallor right away."

At the Ellish temple in Kallor, Swan's body has been moved to a side chapel where healers examine it. It appears that she died in her sleep, hours earlier, from something akin to suffocation. Morningstar considers the option of bringing her back from the dead to help fight Octesian, but realizes that there's not enough time.

Sable, one of the local members of Morningstar's "Dream Team" and a friend of Swan, stands somberly over the body.
"Octesian did this," Morningstar tells her quietly.

"The one we've been training to fight," says Sable, sounding quite calm though her lip trembles. "How did he do it?"

"He sent me a dream," says Morningstar. "In the dream, he accepted my offer of a time and place for our showdown, but he also reached out a tentacle and shoved it down Swan's throat."

"A tentacle?"

"You don't want to know," says Dranko. The rest of the party stand at the back of the room, giving Morningstar and the Ellish sisters a respectful distance.

Sable turns on him, her face dark but resolute. "Yes, I do. I'm going to help fight him, and I fully expect to die in doing so. I think I deserve to know everything."

Dranko blows out a breath. "Fine. Long story short, we were lost in a timeless network of demi-planes that were all linked to one another, when..."

"What?"

Morningstar translates. "He means when I was on the strange journey when no one could find me."

"Right," Dranko continues. "I accidentally threw a bottle into..."

"Accidentally?" Grey Wolf throws Dranko a look.

"Fine. I threw a bottle with a note in it, into the Far Realms."

Sable looks puzzled. "Why?"

"Because he's an idiot," says Grey Wolf.

Dranko ignores the commentary. "Haven't you ever stood on the edge of the ocean, and thought, wouldn't it be cool if you threw a bottle with a note in it into the ocean, and someday it washed up on a far shore, so other people could find it?"

"Is that common?" asks Sable.

"Yes," says Dranko. "Yes it is. And so, with my bottle, somebody found it."

"Somebody found your bottle... in the Far Realms."

"Yes."

"So people live in the Far Realms?" Sable asks.

"No. Not people. Monsters. I was visited by a hideous tentacled monstrosity, of an intelligence that I cannot even begin to fathom."

Sable tries her best to understand. "Okaaaay. Did you fight it?"

"I didn't have the ability to fight it, unfortunately."

Sable frowns. "But we have the ability to fight Octesian?"

"That is correct," says Dranko.

"The tentacled monstrosity has a link to Octesian's ultimate goal," says Morningstar.

"Octesian embraced these intelligences, and I did not," says Dranko. "So now he's very tentacle-y."

Slowly, Sable tries to summarize. "He acquired tentacles, because of his association with the monsters of the Far Realms?"

"It's like he sold his soul to an insane devil," says Ernie.

"And he's lost most of his sanity in the process," says Morningstar.

"Right," says Dranko. "My very small encounter with one of the monsters has left me with certain abilities, which Octesian may also have. For instance, I can stop time. I can sprout tentacles, which can attack my enemies. I can see magic, all the time, everywhere. I can push anything living away. Octesian might be able to do those things, too."

A new priestess appears at the doorway to the side-chapel, breathless, and waves over the healer attending to Swan. They have a short, hushed discussion. It appears that in one of the smaller shrines, on the other side of town, there's been a similar murder of a sister there, a Chronicler named Florinda. Suffocated in her sleep, like the others.

"We'll kill him," says Sable, resolutely. "We've trained enough. We're ready, I think."

"He's been watching you train," Morningstar warns. "You may want to plan something unexpected. We're assembling at midnight in the Dreamscape, beneath the building that was once Gohgan's rug shop in Tal Hae. Don't worry, I'll scout it out ahead of time, and make sure we all meet safely."

Outside the temple, a sizable crowd has gathered. At least fifty or sixty people are milling around the front door, and some of the louder and more aggressive members of the mob are shouting for answers. Dranko works the crowd and discovers the source of their anxiety: at least twenty people throughout the city have been found dead this morning, and more bodies are still being discovered. It's an extremely random assortment of victims; there is no commonality of family, age, gender or profession.

While Morningstar stands in the doorway, watching her husband expertly sift the throng for details, an acolyte touches her arm. "Morningstar, I have been sent to bring you back inside."

As part of the investigation, clerics have cast *thought captures* in the room where Swan died. "We picked up two very specific thoughts," says the priestess who had cast those spells. "One was pure emotion, from Swan, as she experienced her own... suffocation." The priestess pauses for just a moment. "There was also a very distinct thought from someone else. It said, *Tonight, Morningstar. Tomorrow, everyone else.*"

Grey Wolf rubs his temples. "Oh, joy."

"I can't die!" exclaims Ernie. "Yondalla is going to kick me right out the door if I show up dead again."

"I haven't died yet," mutters Dranko.

"But you sold your soul to tentacular guys," Ernie points out. "Isn't that worse?"

"Not on purpose!" Dranko protests. "Besides which, they'll have to fight Tapheon for it."

Ernie rolls his eyes. "Oh, *that's* a recommendation!"

"At least when I died," says Aravis, "I made sure that souls weren't going up to Heaven, so I wouldn't have to meet my God."

Morningstar is still mulling over the dire words of Octesian when she receives yet another *sending*:

Morningstar, this is Previa. There have been a large number of murders in Tal Hae. Your name comes up in thought captures. Would rather speak to you in person. Please advise.

Morningstar answers wearily:

Yes, in Kallor as well. Met Octesian last night. Meet me in Ava Dormo, at the temple.

"He's flexing his muscles," says Grey Wolf.



"We're not sure of the numbers in Tal Hae," says Previa. "We think between fifty and a hundred last night. Our sisters have cast *thought captures* in a few of these places, and..."

"Let me guess," says Morningstar. "'Tonight, Morningstar. Tomorrow, everyone else.'"

"Ah, I see you've heard already."

The Company talk briefly with Previa about strategy, and there's a moment of revelation when they realize that if their waking bodies are resting in a Temple while they fight Octesian, other sisters can be constantly healing their wounds. It's the downside to dream wounds that also afflict physical bodies, and that could give them a huge edge.

After a few minutes Previa takes Morningstar to review her team, all of whom are now there assembled in *Ava Dormo* for a final afternoon of sparring and meditation. She spends a few minutes talking to each of them, giving them words of advice and encouragement. Her team is composed thusly:

- **Evenstar** is old and feeble, but fearless and a natural leader. Her spell-casting savvy has not suffered with age.
[14th-level cleric]
- **Scola** is Evenstar’s bodyguard, and an extremely accomplished dream-fighter. She has a great talent for altering terrain to her favor during battles. She is tall, wiry, with short hair and an utter disdain for church politics. She just wants to fight.
[12th-level fighter]
- **Fautish** is tall, lithe, fair and muscular – a stereotypical paladin, though with more of a sense of humor than one would think upon first meeting her. She’s Starbrook’s older sister.
[11th-level paladin]
- **Corinne** is a Shield from Kallor, and has always been suspicious of Morningstar and the Daywalker movement. She has angular eyebrows, close-cropped black hair, and she seldom smiles. She’s more of a battle-priest than a spell-caster, and prefers to cast spells on herself to improve her melee skills.
[10th-level cleric]
- **Obsidia**, one of Morningstar’s oldest and closest friends in the church, is short, stout, and extremely loyal.
[5th-level cleric/6th-level warrior]
- **Previa** is the plain-looking Chronicler who’s been with Morningstar since the beginning. Her fighting skills aren’t fantastic, but she’s the smartest Ellish priestess Morningstar has ever met. Since things started to get dangerous, she’s made herself into a tactical genius, and so is always good to have around. Morningstar has left the training of the Dream Team mostly in Previa’s capable hands.
[9th-level cleric]
- **Starbrook** is very short (4’ 11”) and powerfully built; it’s hard to believe she’s the sister of Fautish, but she has the same eyes and determined look. She’s near fanatical about this battle, as two of her closest friends were among those killed by Octesian during the Battle of Verdshane.
[9th-level paladin]
- **Sable**, the sister Morningstar recently met in Kallor, is aptly named, with dark skin, dark hair and a dark demeanor. She’s very fatalistic about the upcoming battle, but wants to die with Octesian’s blood on her mace.
[8th-level fighter]
- **Gyre** of Kynder Hold has red curly hair, freckles, pale skin, and is as feisty as a hungry weasel. She can’t wait for tonight’s showdown with Octesian.
[8th-level paladin]
- **Raven** of Minok is scrawny, but gets by on her cat-quick reflexes. She is very quiet and businesslike, and doesn’t socialize much with the other team members.
[8th-level fighter]
- **Belle** is from Hae Charagan, a good fighter with a cheerful disposition. She has dyed her hair white to honor Morningstar. Some of the others think she’s not taking the upcoming confrontation with Octesian seriously enough, but Previa assures Morningstar that this couldn’t be farther from the truth.
[8th-level paladin]
- **Leona** of Minok is huge – probably 6’ 3” and 270 lbs. She’s massively strong, but has always relied too much on her strength, and so her fighting skills are a bit lacking. She’s probably better off just casting spells, despite her desire to punch enemies in the face.
[7th-level cleric]
- Finally there is **Molly**, from Morningstar’s own temple in Tal Hae. Molly is the one taking Swan’s place on the team. She is short, mousy and shy, but was never cold to Morningstar growing up, unlike most of her peers. Molly doesn’t have tremendous natural talent or piety, but is a very hard worker. She tries, and mostly fails, not to gush with thanks about being chosen to be part of this endeavor.
[7th-level cleric]

That makes thirteen altogether, a number chosen because she can only bring nineteen people in with her to the battle, and six of those will be the rest of the Company. Morningstar smiles and approves and tries to project confidence, but can’t help but wonder how many of these brave sisters will be alive to see the next dawn.



The Company go with Morningstar to investigate the *Ava Dormo* version of Gohgan’s sub-basement; she casts *dream anchor* and brings them there directly. Here are the remains of the once-grand palace of the Warlord Pinfaro, servant of Emperor Naloric before the war against the Spire. All is as Morningstar remembers it: the torture chamber where a troll partially closed her in an iron maiden; the dining hall where bugmonkeys dropped from the ceiling; and the study where they found Pinfaro’s desk half buried in floam, along with the note about his impending flight through the portal to Volpos.

There is no sign of Octesian, though something bothers Morningstar for a couple of minutes before she realizes the problem: this place shouldn’t *be* here anymore! The Dreamscape was wiped clean of man-made places when the Black Circle attempted to merge Volpos and Abernia. So why is it still here?

She concentrates hard on the “terrain” of this bit of *Ava Dormo*, and comes to the sudden realization that the entire place has only existed for at most a day or two. It’s an extremely faithful recreation of Pinfaro’s ruined palace, but now she spies small errors: rotting furniture out of place, rooms slightly the wrong size, and sporadic inconsistencies in color.

“Are you saying it’s all a fake?” Dranko asks.

“Yes and no,” Morningstar answers. “It really is *Ava Dormo*.” She reaches out with her will and warps the nearest wall. Then she manifests a burning torch in her hand. “I seem to be able to use all of my dream powers.” Looking about with her innate *true seeing*, everything looks as it should.

“Fine,” Dranko concedes. “But you’re also saying Octesian built this place himself, just in the last day? Hold on a sec...” Dranko opens his mind just a crack, to the horror that lurks inside. He sniffs the air, testing it with his inner sense, and sure enough there is just the tiniest whiff of Cleaners in this place.

In the dining hall, this sense of wrongness is slightly stronger. Morningstar walks to the center of the room and casts *thought capture*, and picks up a very clear thought. *See you t... tonight, M... M... Morningstar.*

Morningstar frowns. Could there be hidden traps here? Dranko is already thinking that way. “Octesian could have laid traps behind the walls,” he says, “and then built the walls back up. Your *true seeing* wouldn’t detect them.”

So Morningstar erases one of the lengthwise walls with her will, and recreates it herself. It is quite easy – no different than in any other portion of *Ava Dormo* – and there are no traps hidden behind it. Dranko reports that his feeling of Cleaners has not lessened.

At Aravis’s suggestion, Morningstar (with what little assistance the others can offer) spends a couple of hours simply erasing the entire palace, leaving in its place a single, empty cube, some two hundred feet on a side. There’s no place left for Octesian to hide any traps, and Dranko’s sense of Cleaners has receded to only the tiniest wisp of nausea.

“Of course, nothing will stop Octesian from coming back here and rebuilding the place after we leave,” says Grey Wolf.

“Sure,” says Flicker. “But if he’s back here, building new walls and laying traps, he’s not out there killing more people.”

Satisfied, the Company return to their bodies in the Greenhouse, to get a final afternoon of rest and relaxation before their confrontation with Naradawk’s insane, red-armored, be-tentacled dream warrior.

There’s a knock on the door. It’s not anyone they could have possibly expected.

coyote6: I’m going with either Sagiro, or the Spanish Inquisition.

Piratecat: It’s utterly bothering me that I don’t remember who this is. I know who I *think* it is, but I don’t remember if the timing is right.

I hope Sagiro posts a photo of the battlemap for our upcoming fight. It was... impressive.

Everett: Second that – would love to see it.

carborundum: And an mp3 of some voices...

Sagiro: I don’t remember the Octesian-fight battlemap being particularly memorable. Piratecat, are you perhaps thinking of a different one that comes much later?

Piratecat: Hmm. Probably. I remembered the Octesian one being cool, too, but that’s probably me conflating it with a few other fights.

The person at the door is King Crunard telling Dranko he’s a long-lost prince, right? Right?

RangerWickett: Sagiro just used a knock-knock joke as a cliffhanger. I’m guessing it’s an interrupting cow.

Everett: And here we sit, without opposable thumbs...

Chronikoce: First off: woo, exciting. Can’t wait to see what happens.

Second: huge thanks, Sagiro! I just dropped four Greater Null Shadows against my group tonight. Group was composed of seven people ranging between levels 8 and 9. I am not going to lie, I got a shoe thrown at me tonight for this combat but it was so worth it. Of the people in the party only two were wielding nonmagical weapons and nobody figured out this was the link until after they had all been defeated. One of these two rolled 1s on his d20 three rounds in a row and ended up lit on fire and unconscious for his efforts.

One party member tried everything he could think of and then finally just fled the battle. Another grabbed a lantern off a pole on the street they were on and started beating the shadows with it and was overjoyed to be dealing 1-2 damage a round. Everyone had a great time and it was extremely funny to listen to them spending 30+ minutes after the combat trying to figure out why the guy dealing 6 damage a round with a nonmagical spiked chain killed all four shadows while the Skirmisher with an insane bow dealing 50+ damage a round caused nothing to happen.

My character in the campaign one of my players DMs is probably in mortal peril now.

Piratecat: Chronikoce, that’s the funniest thing I’ll read all day today. That’s awesome. I’m glad that our suffering lead to your players’ suffering, too.

Sagiro: Chronikoce, it warms the evil cockles of my heart to know that my legacy of Null Shadows lives on, and that you used them to such excellent effect. Thanks for sharing that story!



King of the Carch Din

Eddings moves to answer the door. Whoever is out there is extremely impatient, as the knocking gets louder and faster just during the five seconds it takes for the butler to cross the living room.

Outside on the street, a large crowd has gathered. At the head of the mob, standing just in front of the door, is a large humanoid creature with dark bluish-gray skin, and a face that while handsome is also a trifle fuzzy and indistinct, as if there's a sheet of gauze hanging in front of it. A wispy gold crown rests upon his head, and his clothes are rich and elegant. He reminds the Company a bit of Al Tarqoz, the genie that they occasionally summon.

Behind him is a crowd of... bakers? Yes, it appears that every baker and baker's apprentice on the street has joined this strange being. Even Turlissa is there. The bakers all stand deferentially behind the alien noble, except for one, the tallest of the bunch, who stands off to the side so as to cast his shadow across the noble's face.

Eddings, unflappable as always, nods perfunctorily and asks, "And who might I ask is calling?"

The crowned creature frowns. "Aravis?" he asks.

"I am Aravis," says the wizard from inside the house.

The creature relaxes a bit. "And is there a man named Ernest here?"

"Yup!" Ernie pipes up.

"And you are..." prompts Grey Wolf. All of them have moved into the foyer to look out the door.

The creature draws in a breath, and in a booming voice, says "*I command* that you produce... Farazil! I want him. Bring him to me this instant!"

For a heartbeat the entire Company are taken aback by this request. "We no longer have him," Ernie answers. "Although we would be happy to..."

"*Unacceptable!*" shouts the creature, glowering down at the halfling.

"Again," says Grey Wolf, "who *are* you exactly?"

"I am High King **Nebbizik!**" Despite the impressive physical presence of the King, some ill-concealed laughter comes from the back of the living room.

"Wait a minute," says Ernie. "You're Farazil's *boss*?"

"I am his sovereign ruler!" booms Nebbizik.

"In that case, we can tell you exactly where to find him!" says Ernie brightly.

"Can we offer you some tea?" adds Dranko.

"I do not wish to *find* him," says King Nebbizik. "I wish him brought to me. I have traveled enough for one day. But I accept your offer of tea. May my retinue accompany me?"

"My Lord," says Dranko. "You won't be hurting any of your retinue's... hosts, will you?"

"Hurting? Of course not! My court has discretion and a deft touch. What do you take me for?"

"Well, clearly not Farazil," says Dranko.

After a second or two of silence, one of the bakers whispers, "...'Your Majesty'."

"Oh," says Dranko. "You don't have to call me..." Ernie elbows him in the thigh.

"You will refer to His Majesty as 'High King' or 'His Majesty,' or 'Your Majesty' when you address him directly," says the baker.

"If I were in the High King's court, maybe I would," says Dranko.

Morningstar leans over and whispers harshly in her husband's ear. "He's going to make Farazil go away!"

Ernie fills the awkward silence. "Our home is not sufficient for one so great as His Majesty. But we have a magical tower that can be made however suits His Majesty's wishes."

That sounds more to King Nebbizik's liking. The Lucent Tower is erected in the back yard. As the group walk around behind the Greenhouse, Nebbizik's retinue arrange themselves so that His Majesty is cast in shadow as much as is possible.

Once they are all inside, Ernie asks, "Does your court or His Majesty require refreshment?"

"I doubt you have anything that we could eat on this benighted Prime," grumbles the King, looking around for a place to sit.

"You'd be surprised," says Ernie. "Name your pleasure, Your Majesty."

"You don't even have names for it," the King answers. "We don't eat *food*. However, I'm sure the court would appreciate an opportunity to sit, and while this tower is very impressive, it is also very *empty*."

Ernie grabs one of the "handles" of the Lucent Tower and wills into being two dozen fancy padded brocade chairs with large velvet cushions.

"Excellent," Nebbizik declares. "And for me, a throne!"

Ernie makes him an ornate throne with a canopy. The King sits down and closes his eyes for a second. "Acceptable," he says. "Now, as I have asked already, where is..."

"No," says Aravis. "You have not asked. You have demanded, Your Majesty."

Nebbizik stares for a second at Aravis, then says jovially, "Right you are! As I have already *demanded*, I wish Farazil brought to me this instant. My divinations indicated that you know his whereabouts and can produce him. Now do so!"

"Please explain *why* you wish him to be brought here, Your Majesty," says Aravis.

Nebbizik stares again, but doesn't smile this time. "I don't see how that's any of your business."

Aravis persists. "Except, Your Majesty, that without us, he won't be brought here."

"We have reached a limited truce with Farazil," Ernie adds. "If we hunt him down and turn him over to you, and if that action comes back to us, he might be inclined to renew his... annoying behaviors towards us."

Nebbizik chuckles. "Farazil is a scoundrel, isn't he?"

"Yes!" Ernie can't agree emphatically enough.

"Then you should be pleased that I will take him off your hands, and you will never see him again," says King Nebbizik. "In fact, I will have him executed!"

Most in the Company don't see a downside, but Dranko decides that this crosses the line. "Here's the problem with that, Your Majesty," he says. "Farazil is... that is, he may be in the process of reforming."

"I don't care!" says Nebbizik. "He is my subject!"

A thought comes suddenly to Dranko and Aravis. "If he were a citizen of Charagan," Dranko asks, "would he no longer be your subject?"

"He is *not* a citizen," Nebbizik grumbles, "so it is irrelevant."

"That's not what I asked, Your Majesty."

"I would need to see the laws of your Kingdom," Nebbizik concedes. "But he will always be my subject, as far as I'm concerned. Until he's dead, of course."

"Can you tell us *why* you want him dead, Your Majesty?" asks Dranko.

Ernie can answer that one. "'Cause he's a big jerk!"

King Nebbizik laughs. "I see he is no different here than he was back at the Umbral Court."

"Here, he's been a burr in my britches," says Ernie.

"That's not actually true," says Dranko. "Recently, he's been extremely useful and helpful."

"He seized my mother!" Ernie protests.

"Well that is his way," says Nebbizik. "He also seized my daughter! Thus, his pending execution."

Dranko can't help himself. "Is she cute?"

Nebbizik glowers, and his face seems to fall deeper into shadow. "You will apologize for the insinuation," he seethes.

"Your Majesty," says Dranko, "I apologize for insinuating that your daughter is cute."

"Enough!" thunders Nebbizik. The other members of the Company each take a step back.

"I have no doubts your daughter is gorgeous, Your Majesty," says Dranko hastily, "and would be desirable to anyone! I'm sorry if I offended you."

Grey Wolf intercedes. "Your Majesty, you'll have to forgive our friend. He's an idiot."

"Who's standing right here!" says Dranko.

"Yes, you are," says Grey Wolf.

"Unfortunately," adds Aravis.

Ernie drags the conversation back to Farazil. "The King has a legitimate claim to his subject," he opines.

"All I can think of," says Morningstar, "is the sound of the gates closing us into God's Thorn."

"But what about what he's done since!" says Dranko.

"What about it?" says Ernie. "Roaming around, causing trouble, taking over my mother..."

"...and riding around in my body!" adds Flicker.

"You just like him because he has a certain roguish aspect," says Ernie. "But he doesn't have your dignity or sense of honor."

King Nebbizik starts to show real signs of impatience. "Why are you discussing Farazil's character, instead of fetching him and bringing him to me?!"

Morningstar sighs. She has other things on her mind. "As much as we want to help you, we actually have more important things to do today."

"Then get him here quickly," Nebbizik suggests. "I will take him, and get off this disgusting Prime, and leave you alone."

"Your Majesty, how are we to do that?" Ernie asks. "If we grab the body he currently occupies, he'll just disappear."

Nebbizik sounds exasperated. "Find him when he is alone, grab him, and *teleport* him back here. I know you have the means to do that, do you not? Then he'll either be in the body he's in now, or one of *you*. Either way, bring him before me. I'll take care of the rest."

"Without harming the resident body?" asks Ernie.

"Yes, without harming the resident body. Though why you place such value in these revolting flesh bags, I cannot imagine."

Dranko has decided to take a stand on this one. "Your Majesty, do you wish to replace him with another ally for us? Because he's doing important work."

Nebbizik sighs. "You can hire another servant on your time."

"Dranko," hisses Ernie. "Farazil's not doing anything that we couldn't get someone else to do. Someone more reliable and more trustworthy, too."

"You should listen to your friends," Nebbizik says to Dranko. "They understand him better than you. He's a scoundrel, with no honor."

Dranko turns to Ernie and the others. "But we promised to ask about getting him citizenship. We haven't yet held up our part of the bargain."

The others admit, begrudgingly, that Dranko has a point. "I don't believe he's reformed, though," says Ernie. "If I honestly thought he was trying to go straight, I would give him a chance, you know that. But I don't think he has."

"But we've done divinations," Dranko presses. "We know Farazil is going to be loyal to us until he isn't anymore. Loyal to a point, right?"

"Then assume you and he have reached that point, and hand him over!" barks Nebbizik.

"Did he break any laws?" asks Aravis.

"Yes!" Nebbzik's temper is wearing more and more thin by the minute. "I *make* the laws!"

"Did he break any laws that were laws at the time he supposedly broke them?" continues Aravis.

"He was consorting with the daughter of the King, without the King's permission! So, yes!"

"Would Your Majesty ever grant such permission? To anyone?" asks Dranko.

"Yes," says Nebbzik. "But not Farazil!"

"Was it consensual?"

"It doesn't matter!"

"It probably did to her!"

Kibi pipes up in partial agreement with Dranko. "I don't like Farazil, but I don't want to see him executed for... this."

"Why don't you get him, and do all of this moralizing and equivocating later?" asks Nebbzik. The bakers are starting to mutter among themselves. They have never seen their High King put off for so long as this.

"I'll find him," says Aravis. "Then you can decide what to do about it." He turns his back on King Nebbzik and walks out of the Lucent Tower, so he can *scry* Farazil in private.

"Our hosts are rude, Your Majesty," says one of the bakers.

"You don't rule us, Your Majesty," Dranko points out.

"It doesn't matter if you are my subjects," says Nebbzik, glancing after Aravis out the door of the tower. "I am still a High King, and deserving of more deference than you are showing."

"Sir, we are personages worthy of deference," says Morningstar.

"For instance," says Ernie. "Aravis is a god." When Nebbzik looks down at Ernie askance, Grey Wolf adds, "It's true."

"Ah," says Nebbzik. "You're a collection of court jesters, then."

"No," says Ernie. "We're Knights of the Kingdom!"



Aravis successfully *scries* Farazil – or at least, the body they had lent him. In the scrying mirror he can see the prisoner standing in a street; behind him is a makeshift barricade. He has acquired a uniform bearing the insignia of the ruling house of Sentinel.

"No, I insist!" Farazil is saying to someone. "It's too dangerous. No one can approach the mine, at least for another couple of days, to give us time to complete our investigation. I'm sorry for the inconvenience." The person Aravis is looking at is much more well-spoken than the dullard whose body Farazil was given.

Aravis comes back out and beckons the others to the lawn outside the Lucent Tower, where he shares what he has seen. "See!" says Dranko. "He's reformed! My whole life, since I met you guys, is based on that if you trust someone to do what's right, they'll do the right thing."

"I don't trust him to do any right thing," says Ernie.

"I think we have to take the leap of faith."

"Maybe he should start doing the right thing by apologizing to his wronged King," Ernie suggests.

"I just want a simple problem for once," Grey Wolf groans.

They bicker for a few more minutes. Dranko has clearly decided to side with Farazil. Aravis is starting to lean that way, though mostly from a dislike of Nebbzik. Kibi feels like they should honor the agreement they had made with Farazil, to see about getting him citizenship. Ernie and Morningstar feel just the opposite; the sooner Nebbzik cuts off Farazil's annoying shadowy head, the better.

"What do you think, Flicker?" asks Ernie. "You're the one who suffered the most."

"Well, I'd say 'annoyed' more than 'suffered,' but I feel no great love for Farazil, I don't mind saying."

"We need to decide quickly," says Aravis, "because Tal Hae is entirely without bakers at the moment."

Nebbizik agrees with his desire for a speedier resolution; he appears in the doorway of the Lucent Tower and calls to the Company assembled on the lawn. "Well? I'm bored."

"We'll be with you in a moment, Your Majesty," calls Ernie.

Nebbizik beckons Grey Wolf over. "You seem like a sensible fellow. Is it true that you are all Lords and Ladies of the Realm?" Grey Wolf nods. "Then why don't you live in a castle? Why are you instead in a bakery?"

"We own multiple castles, Your Majesty," Grey Wolf explains. "But this house is more secure than they are."

Aravis, overhearing, adds, "It's protected by magics more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

Nebbizik looks dubious. "Oh, is that so? Because I can imagine quite a lot. You think this bakery is well protected? Then let me show you something." The King of the Carch Din walks to the nearest wall of the Greenhouse, and spends a few seconds manifesting a roiling ball of shadow around his hand. He reaches out to the wall, clearly expecting his hand to simply pass through it, but it meets unexpected resistance. He frowns, pushes harder, and is rewarded with a painful jolt to his arm.

"With all due respect, Your Majesty," says Grey Wolf dryly, "you might injure yourself if you keep doing that."

"Hmmm," says Nebbizik with a worried look. "Perhaps I have misunderstood your place in the social hierarchy." He turns to Aravis. "But look here. Are you really a god? And if so, of what? And then why are you here, on this malodorous Prime, looking like... like that?"

"I am a God of Cats," says Aravis.

"Cats? That's ridiculous! You look nothing like a..." He stops, perhaps concerned about causing offense. "Well, never mind. In the time you've been standing around, bickering with one another and with me, you could have brought back Farazil and his ten closest friends! You say you have better things to do, but if you're wasting time, you have only yourselves to blame."

"If we bring Farazil to you," asks Kibi, "will he get a trial?"

"A *trial*?" Nebbizik roars. "Of course not! He is a low-ranking member of my court, and my power over him is absolute."

"But he told us he was King Farazil," says Ernie.

Nebbizik blanches. "King Farazil? He has been passing himself off as a *king*? I'll have to execute him twice."

Ernie smiles innocently. "King of the Carch Din, he said."

Nebbizik's face practically vanishes into angry shadow. "He is most certainly *not*. He is minor nobility. I suppose in a kingdom like this, he'd be something like a viscount. I'm not certain how you flesh-bags' titles work. But if indiscretions with our royal daughter weren't already grounds for execution, passing one's self off as a King of the Carch Din... I'll execute him in pieces!"

Everett: Just have to say that I don't find it coincidental that the stuffy king's catch-phrase echoes HK-47's. KOTOR much, Sagiro?

Sagiro: Er... no, actually. I'm not familiar with HK-47, so whatever echoes you detect are in fact pure coincidence.

Everett: Enthusiastically articulate, highly opinionated assassin droid. Refers to organics as "meatbags." The comic highlight of both *Knights of the Old Republic* games.

The party have a final burst of discussion about what to do, and settle on a compromise. "Your Majesty," says Ernie, "We've agreed that we'll let you know where Farazil is, but you'll have to get there under your own power."

Normally Nebbizik would not stand for this, but he looks nervously over at the Greenhouse, and surreptitiously rubs his throbbing hand. "Fine, fine. I see I'm not going to get anything else out of you."

Aravis draws Nebbizik a picture of the body in which Farazil currently resides. "You can kill that body," says Ernie. "He was sentenced to execution anyway. But only if there's no other choice, and no one else!"

"And then I can take Farazil home and execute him," Nebbizik grumbles. "Fine."

Ernie bows. "I'm sure Your Majesty, in your infinite mercy, will make a proper judgment call as to the fate of Farazil."

Nebbizik shows a mouthful of teeth. "My mercy is not infinite. Infinitesimal, more like! Hah!"

"Your Majesty jests," says Ernie.

“You’d like to think so,” says Nebbizik.

Kibi produces a map of the Kingdom, and they show their guest where the city of Sentinel is located. “Umbral Court!” shouts Nebbizik. “It looks like we’re going elsewhere to nab our miscreant! Come along!” He turns to the Company. “Thank you, Lords and Ladies. You’ve been... well, less than helpful, but at least you told me where he was.”

And with that, High King Nebbizik of the Carch Din vanishes into a vortex of shadows. At once all the assembled bakers blink and start looking about in confusion. It’s clear that none of them remember coming here, or have any idea of where they are. Ernie mollifies them as best he is able, and faced with the prospect of burning bread and confused customers, the bakers quickly return to their places of employment.

“Boy,” says Ernie. “And I thought Farazil was a pompous jerk!”

“I know you don’t all agree with me,” says Dranko, “but thanks for listening to my point of view.”



Dranko decides to do Farazil one more favor. Though Morningstar and Ernie refuse to issue a *sending* on his behalf, Dranko nonetheless dashes through the streets of Tal Hae until he reaches the main Church of Delioch. Once there he commandeers a scroll of *sending* and gives warning to Farazil.

Farazil, King Nebbizik showed up, demanded we turn you over. He knows we refused, but knows your location. Before you flee, what did you learn?

The reply:

Nebbizik? He’s here? Crap! Crap, crap, crap! I learned you can help. I’ll make my way back to you. Don’t go anywhere!

That’s not likely to happen, since it will be days at best before Farazil can return to Tal Hae, even assuming he manages to evade Nebbizik and his court. But Dranko feels he has done all he can, and returns to the Greenhouse. Perhaps now, with that diversion out of the way, the Company can get on with the business of saving the Kingdom from Octesian.

Just a quick note: I have now transcribed exactly 239 of the game’s 266 sessions. So, only 27 more runs to go. They’re fairly well packed with action, plot, and some unexpected surprises, all of which I look forward to sharing with you!

Piratecat: Hard to believe it’s so few! Lots of action packed into those. Horrible, terrible action. And if Everett is waiting for Dranko to get what’s coming to him, well...

Everett: Yeeaaahhh... I’ll believe it when I see it.

Piratecat: Everett, in about 20 sessions there’s going to be a knock-down, drag-out argument about this very subject. When it occurs, I think we’ll preemptively put you on Team Ernie and *not* Team Dranko. No one is going to blame you. And if it makes you feel any better, a different session (not for a while) should be entitled “Dranko Learns a Horrible Lesson About Humility,” a.k.a. “Sagiro is a Very Large Rat Bastard.” Stay tuned.

For me, the interesting thing about the “do we turn over Farazil?” session is how strongly Dranko had an opinion about the matter. There was a time when he would have gladly thrown him to the dogs. Now, though? A reprehensible King Nebbizik may have rubbed him the wrong way, but Dranko wouldn’t have been able to live with himself if they’d betrayed their sorta-ally. I’d never have guessed when we started this game that loyalty would turn out to be his defining attribute.

Everett: Oh, looking back at the early chapters of the story, I can definitely see it coming. What greater journey is there for him to go on?

Cerebral Paladin: Yeah, I thought that was really interesting to read. In the write-up, I perceived Nebbizik as really strongly evil – stressing his lack of mercy, wanting to execute a noble for an apparently consensual interlude with his daughter (if it weren’t, he would not have denied that that mattered), kidnapping all of the bakers (“fleshbags”) as hosts, etc. As between helping a really annoying, formerly clearly bad but perhaps reforming sorta ally, or helping an evil spirit king – I’m surprised that so much of the party went with the evil spirit king. (I’m not surprised by some of the neutral-ish characters, like Morningstar, but I was surprised by Ernie’s attitude. Not criticism, of course, just expressing surprise.)

Piratecat: Nah, he wasn’t strongly evil from our perspective – more selfishly, obnoxiously neutral with evil tendencies. And remember, Ernie carries a grudge. When that grudge involves someone possessing his mother, he carries that grudge forever.

Also, you didn’t hear the sound of the gates of God’s Thorn clanging shut on us.

KidCthulhu: You do not mess with Ernie’s Mom.

Cervante: This Story Hour never ceases to amaze; I can’t believe the depth that all these characters have.

MorningstarofEll: Grey Wolf told me that Sagiro had been updating the Story Hour and was up to this battle... and I had to log in. I just caught up. Oh, boy.

Thank you for the recap on Swan, and yes she was all those things. To Morningstar, Swan was more than that. Swan was an ally in the early days when no one in her temple seemed to much like her or trust her. She risked her place with Rhiavonne to stand up for what she felt was right. She was calm and courteous and brave. And these days, she was one of the few people who trusted Morningstar but did not stand in awe of her. Octesian picked his target well.

And Octesian... Morningstar (and her player) had been looking forward to this combat for a long time... and this wasn’t what she had been looking forward to. I see why Sagiro set it up this way – it sets the tone for what is coming. Look here, this was one of your feared enemies and he is nothing to what is coming. It also gives us a different kind of fight than the last big showdown we had with him. But I wished that we made Octesian a priority on the list earlier. The person Morningstar had wanted to defeat was really already gone, this was a mad dog needing to be put down. And to make it worse, Dranko was infected by the same terrible madness.

And then Farazil came barging into our lives again. Lets just say I was with Team Ernie on this one. Those doors shutting in Gods Thorn, our loved ones made vulnerable, every darn time we opened our doors with stupid ploys to try to protect ourselves from Farazil and then having to hope we hadn't just let him into our one safe haven. Yep. No sympathy for poor Farazil here! Morningstar had detected no sense of 'reformation' from Farazil. Just an extremely powerful and exquisitely self-interested being who could not be trusted with any side but his own.

As Morningstar I went into this battle worried for Dranko, and wishing I hadn't gone through such trouble to train these dreamwalkers some of whom were certainly about to suffer Swan's fate. They had a right to stand up and fight, but I feared I might be better off with only my trusty Company by my side.

Everett: Anyone want to take odds on how many dreamwalkers the mad dog's gonna take down with him?

Tamlyn: I'm more concerned with how Octesian's tentacles affect Dranko's tentacles.

steeldragons: Oooo... yes. The effects of the dreaded Tentacle Envy. I hadn't considered that. S'gonna be a mess!



Far Gone

Dranko returns from his errand, and gratefully takes a bite of cheese offered by Eddings.

"You know what they're saying on the street?" he says to the others. "They're saying that the plague which wiped out the fish is starting to wipe out the people as well. That's how they're explaining Octesian's murders. There are crowds gathered outside every temple I went past, demanding protection."

Morningstar spends a nervous afternoon casting *sendings* and arranging for her "dream team" to be brought to the Greenhouse. Throughout the evening they arrive, most of them *teleported* from their home temples. Other Ellish priestesses show up as well – eighteen extras in all – whose job it will be to heal the bodies of the dreamers while they engage the enemy in *Ava Dormo*.

In addition to the Ellish women, one other warrior arrives, to Morningstar's great delight. It's Snokas, who has decided to join Scola in protecting Evenstar during the battle. He bows at the doorway of the Greenhouse. "As always, I am eager to serve."

When the full team is assembled, Morningstar spends a final hour dividing them into groups and giving them general instructions: to hang back and cast spells, but to avoid engaging Octesian directly if possible, and to focus on any minions their nemesis may bring to the fight. To bolster their effectiveness and confidence both, Morningstar distributes a pile of the party's spare magic weapons, rings and armor pieces to her troops. Soon after, the collected Sisters break into small knots, talking quietly of the coming encounter while Previa and Evenstar circulate with tactical advice.

As the midnight hour approaches, Morningstar is approached by Fautish. By dint of her natural charisma and talent, the tall and beautiful paladin has assumed a secondary leadership role. "Excuse me," she says. "Morningstar, we wanted... all wanted... to make sure you understood. It has occurred to every one of us that some, or perhaps all of us, will not survive tonight's encounter. And we are all very, very okay with that. We will do our best to help you, and whatever happens will happen. From what we know of Octesian, there is no finer way for any of us to leave this mortal life, than in bringing about his downfall."

Morningstar bows her head. "Thank you," she says earnestly.

"And along those lines," Fautish continues, "if you find that you need to... expend... one of us, in order to achieve victory, we all expect that you will." She looks hard at Morningstar, almost as if daring her to object.

"Thank you for that as well," says Morningstar. "I'm honored."

"The honor belongs to us," says Fautish. She looks down at her feet for a second – an uncharacteristic gesture – and then meets Morningstar's gaze again. "Though it is not much discussed, we all realize that our collective poor treatment of you these past several years has been shameful. We are all, collectively, trying to atone."

Morningstar shakes her head. "I think the omens around me were created in order to test us. And I think we've passed that test with flying colors."

"I would agree," says Fautish. "I suppose that makes tonight the final exam."

Morningstar smiles. "The only think I can think of that's better than standing with the Company against my foes, is to stand with them and my sisters as well. It has been an incredible honor."

"Very good," says Fautish with a grin. "And I think that's enough small talk for one evening. Let's go kick Octesian's butt!"

While the collected sisters cheer, Morningstar thinks silently to herself how relieved she is to have Fautish to energize the troops, sparing her the burden. Ernie leans towards her and whispers, "Kick Octesian's butt? That makes you the Mother Superior of Kicking Posterior."

Morningstar laughs. “We have to assume he’s set some wily trap.”

“Yes,” agrees Aravis. “Let’s go spring it.”



At one minute before midnight, Morningstar and her nineteen allies arrive in the *Ava Dormo* reflection of Gohgan’s basement. The single large chamber, into which Morningstar had earlier transfigured the subterranean ruins of Pinfaro’s palace, appears undisturbed. There are no obvious traps, and no sign whatsoever of Octesian. Morningstar scans the area with *true seeing* and all is as it seems.

The final minute ticks away in silence. Precisely at midnight there is a quivering disturbance in the center of the room, and a large black portal appears, round, ten feet across, and facing Morningstar at a direct perpendicular. The portal is a flat, shadowless black, and framed by a brown tentacle as thick as a man’s thigh. Smaller tentacles, three to four feet long apiece, sprout from the frame like the spokes of a wheel, or the rays of an obscene black sun.

Stuck onto the tapered tips of these tentacles are human heads. All but one of these is unfamiliar, but the tentacle at the keystone position of the portal skewers Swan’s head, her dead face’s expression fixed in utter horror. Finally, the entirety of the portal sits in the interior of an enormous partially-open (illusionary) iron maiden, its long spikes pointing inward. They will have to enter this huge torture device to go through the portal. Dranko mutters, “Let’s not do our bedroom like this.”

Morningstar shouts into the portal. “You are such a coward!” Her voice returns no echo.

Aravis takes a moment to study the portal, and guesses it’s nothing more than a simple gateway to a demiplane. No one makes a move to go through, but as the seconds spin away from the midnight hour, the iron maiden creaks a few inches shut. Octesian won’t wait for long.

Ernie decides this is a good time and place for a *miracle*, and steps forward. “If there are any negative environmental effects in the demiplane beyond this portal, or negative effects which result from passing through it, I pray that they will not affect any of us for the next hour.” He casts his spell, and power blows out of him in a golden wave, slamming into the flat black surface of the portal and vanishing inside it. The dark gateway ripples, and for a moment sparkles with flecks of green and golden light, before returning to its natural state, while the air smells sweet, and the vile aura of Cleaners is forgotten.

Morningstar grunts in satisfaction. “Let’s go.”

As a group, they move into the jaws of the iron maiden, and through the portal, to whatever waits beyond.



The Beginning of the End

The place in which they find themselves is extremely... strange. Morningstar immediately senses she's still in *Ava Dormo*, but in a demiplane inside the dreaming, and beyond that nothing seems familiar.

Beneath their feet the ground undulates gently, giving them the sensation of being on a ship at sea. It flexes slightly as well, as though they're standing on a taut rubber sheet. Scattered here and there, rising like trees in a forest of madness, enormous tentacles rise from the ground and vanish into the darkness above. They sway in time to the flexing of the floor. Distance is hard to gauge, but the gathered heroes get a sense of unbounded space all around them. Purplish, sourceless light bathes everything in a sickening glow.

Everyone here can feel a terrible fear, borne of Cleaners, beating at their psyche, and yet it doesn't deter them. Something is deflecting or absorbing the terror. The air itself feels sticky and humid, and while parts of their animal brains scream of poison, it is nonetheless perfectly breathable. It seems that Ernie's *miracle* has saved them from some grim consequences of this wretched place.

Though they entered the portal in a group, they have arrived scattered about, with Morningstar in the relative center. The thickest of the tentacle-trees rises up before her, and held to its flesh with a spike of bone is what looks like a giant-sized piece of parchment, ten feet high and five across. Across the top of the parchment is scrawled *The Book of Morningstar*, written in her own handwriting. Beneath that, rather than words, are a series of shifting images, scenes from various Ellish temples around Tal Hae. In each of these images there are priestesses talking, and their voices blend together into a cacophony, though each is distinctly audible.

“She's a freak; I don't know what she's doing here.”

“She's not really one of us, you know. She'll be out of the church in a month.”

“The sooner she gives up and goes home, the better.”

“Oh, dear Goddess!” exclaims Morningstar, her voice a-drip with sarcasm. “They don't like me! Whatever shall I do?”

The central image shifts to Amber, talking to someone outside the picture. “I don't have to like her,” Amber is saying. “I just have to use her.”

And it shifts one final time, to High Priestess Rhiavonne, addressing a council that includes Swan. “Thank the Goddess she's in such a dangerous business,” Rhiavonne says. “She's bound to die before she becomes a real problem.”

These images then blend in with the others, ever shifting, each one repeating the theme of Morningstar as outcast. And included in these are some spoken by the very priestesses in her team, many of whom are looking somewhat guilty as they stand scattered and confused.

High above them, and nearly directly over Morningstar, an illusion of Octesian's head appears. He wears a goatee and a wicked sneer, but his complexion is green and rubbery and riddled with protruding tentacles. “So... happy to s... s... see you, Morningstar!” it exclaims.

Morningstar gestures to the ‘Book of Morningstar.’ “These games might have worked, if I were still, oh, I don't know, fifteen years old.”

“Then how old are you?” asks Octesian. But before she can answer, he continues. “It doesn't m... matter. I'll taste your mind before we're done. I promised Him that I would.”

“Promised who?” Morningstar asks.

The eyes on the huge illusionary head sweep over the assemblage. “The Great and Terrible One,” he whispers reverently.

“I'm curious,” says Morningstar. “How did you go from serving the Emperor, to serving the Adversary?”

“What do you think the E... Emperor was doing?” Octesian shrieks. “We are all in His service. It's the whole point! To wake Him up. And He's waking, oh yes, He's waking. You can feel it, can't you? You can feel it in the ground. You can feel it coming up from the oceans. And when He's done waking, he'll eat... everything! He's much more mad than I am. He's been trapped there so long, He doesn't know where He begins, and where the madness ends. I think...” And here Octesian's facial tentacles squirm and curl. “...I think they may be one and the same.”

His head quickly swivels, and the huge eyes fix upon Dranko. “You have it... worse than I do, don’t you?” he whispers. “I’m appalled!” Octesian lets out a long, gurgling sigh. “And... I’m jealous.”

“You clearly have some personal issues,” says Ernie. “And I know a way we can make it all better for you.”

Octesian’s face splits into a huge grin, and they can see tentacles writhing inside his mouth. “Then let’s play!” he screams.

Everett: ROUND ONE: FIGHT!!!

Mathew Freeman: This cliffhanger is making me want to break the profanity rule on ENWorld. Love it!

Everett: I haven’t anticipated a fight in Sagiro’s Story Hour this much since Condor. Seriously.

Piratecat: Should be soon – we gamed tonight, and Sagiro mentioned he was halfway through the battle. It has a *lot* of participants. Although there ends up being fewer and fewer as the fight progresses...

steeldragons: Ain’t that always the way? You throw a perfectly lovely combat [open bar, nibbles, the works] and the guests start leaving [in body bags] early. So inconsiderate. See if they get invited to the next combat! Hmph!

Sagiro: More specifically, I’ve finished *transcribing* the first half of the battle, and now am in the process of writing it up. It’s a bit challenging to write it in a narratively interesting way, since it’s a battle with 36 entities participating at the start, but I should be done with part one in the next couple of days. I can’t promise specifically when I’ll post, but I *can* promise that it’ll end on another cliffhanger...



A Battle in the Madness

The enormous illusionary head vanishes, and Octesian appears, hovering a few feet off the ground in the center of the demiplane. He is clad in the familiar red plate mail, and the visor on his helmet is lowered, obscuring his face. Brown-green tentacles sprout from every gap and seam in his armor, including one that comes (impossibly, gruesomely) straight out of the helmet’s eye-slit. They surround him, a writhing nimbus of horror.

In Octesian’s hand is the familiar glowing black sword that seems to come standard-issue with the deadly armor. But there is something... wrong... with the blade. While on first glance it seems to be solid black metal, sharp and deadly, it also seems rubbery, bendable, swaying slowly on its hilt. In defiance of sense, it is both at once – a sword, and a tentacle.

In the split second after he appears, his whole body sucks inward, as though he’s taking an impossibly deep breath almost to the point of implosion. Then he balloons out like a puffer fish, and from somewhere inside his armor little masses of tentacles come flying out, landing around the battlefield with little squishy plops. They’re the size of small dogs, and they emit a mad-dening babble, an inhuman cacophony of burbling and squelching noises.

“I’ve got it worse than *him*?” Dranko mutters to himself. “I beg to differ.”

Finally, and worst of all, duplicates of Octesian appear scattered about the small demiplane. There are seven in total, all identical, all hovering, in addition to the nine tentacle blobs. There are now twenty members of the Forces of Good, facing off against seven Octesians and nine masses of tentacles, scattered among a dark forest of enormous tentacular trees, in poor light, while the air is filled with an insane babbling.

There’s no point in trying to talk, but Morningstar is connected to all of her allies via *telepathic bond*. *Sisters, I’ve known all along what everyone has thought of me, and I just don’t care. Let’s just kill the bastard, okay?*

Grey Wolf reacts first, and tries to *summon the pack*, but this is immediately foiled. It seems that creatures cannot be summoned into Octesian’s demiplane. While Flicker dashes into better striking position near Dranko, Ernie releases *Beryn Sur* and casts *spiritual weapon* at the closest Octesian. It bounces off harmlessly, foiled by spell resistance. (He’d rather have cast *flame strike* or even *fire storm*, but his allies are intermixed too thoroughly with his enemies.)

One of the Octesians steps up to Aravis and swings his black sword, scoring a hit, but it’s clear that this version has less speed and fighting prowess than they recall the true Octesian possessing. Even so, the sword blow sends a jolt straight to Aravis’s mind, which he barely manages to shrug off. A second Octesian steps to the paladin Fautish and delivers a similar blow, and a third delivers a damaging cut to Ernie. But while Ernie, like Aravis, resists the mental sting of the strike, Fautish feels her head grow muzzy, and for just a second loses her concentration.

With each sword blow, the target must make a Will save or take 1 point of Wisdom damage.

With Flicker providing a flanking buddy, Dranko moves and lashes at the nearest tentacle mass. Though his damage is high, he doesn’t kill the thing, and it responds by lashing out with a long pseudopod and grabbing Dranko’s shoulder. Its oozing, suckered tip latches on, and using this attachment it pulls itself up onto the back of Dranko’s neck, where its insane babbling

grows even louder. With the thing gibbering directly into his ear, he can hardly hear himself think. It's maddening. Other tentacular masses take similar actions, and soon Snokas, Aravis, Ernie and Fautish also sport "babblers" perched on the backs of their necks.

When a babbler latches on and pulls itself up, the victim suffers one point of Wisdom damage, no save. Also, as long as it's there, victims are at a -4 penalty on every d20 roll they make. With a standard action, anyone can remove their own babbler, or one attached to an adjacent ally.

Fautish and Snokas flail wildly, until they've grabbed their own babblers and flung them away from themselves. The paladin Gyre steps up and wrenches away Dranko's unwanted guest, while Sable removes Ernie's and the warrior Scola easily plucks away the babbler on Aravis. The cleric Corinne also casts a healing spell on Aravis.

The Octesian closest to Morningstar glides forward a step and strikes with the martial fluidity and grace of a seasoned warrior. ("There's our boy!" says Dranko.) In addition to the damage from the rubbery/sharp blade, the sword itself sprouts a tentacle that whips around and plunges a sharp tip into Morningstar's neck. She fights off waves of revulsion as she feels it squirming beneath her skin.

Morningstar shakes her head, concentrates, and uses what is arguably her most powerful ability in the Dreamscape. She bestows upon all of her allies the same set of dream powers she herself possesses: flight, *true seeing*, *freedom of movement*, and bonuses to attacks, armor and Reflex saves. This will only last a minute, but it bolsters her allies' confidence as well as their abilities. Having done so, she decides to spend the seconds necessary to focus her consciousness on her physical body, to see what's happening in the Greenhouse. She was hoping that the priestesses there would be healing their bodies (with corresponding restoration happening here), but so far that hasn't happened. It only takes her a second or two to realize why: the priestesses gathered around their physical bodies are moving in extreme slow motion. With a groan of dismay, she realizes that time is flowing much faster here in Octesian's twisted demiplane, and by the time any of her sisters in the Greenhouse will be able to react, the battle here will be long over. So much for that advantage!

With a sigh, she Quicks *divine power* on herself, and smashes Octesian with *Ell's Will*. The holy weapon shears through the front of his plate mail like it's smashing through soft cheese, and tentacles spill from the gash like twisting intestines. Octesian looks down, then wags a finger at Morningstar. "You... you naughty girl!"

Aravis endures another sword-swing from his own Octesian-copy and casts *cone of cold*, finding an angle that catches only enemies. Several babblers are damaged, as are two Octesians despite being somewhat resistant to cold. The babblers launch another wave of attacks, and soon Grey Wolf, Starbrook, Belle and Previa are burdened with yammering tentacle-masses.

Kibi sends Scree to Morningstar, and the little earth elemental pelts the sword-tentacle with rocks until it slides back out of Morningstar's neck. Kibi himself casts his own *cone of cold*, this one Maximized, followed by a Quickened *coldfire*. Some of the tentacle masses are destroyed outright by this barrage, and now a few of the Octesians are looking particularly battle-worn.

Octesian – the *real* Octesian – winces at Morningstar, and in a halting voice says, "Ex... cuse me for a moment." His shape shudders and bulges, and across the battlefield the least damaged Octesian-form does likewise. The new host body for the true Octesian stands next to Fautish, and with a series of brutal sword-slashes he strikes Fautish down. Morningstar immediately casts *delay death*, which temporarily prevents her ally from dying from hit point loss, though Fautish is still rendered unconscious and brutally wounded.

Two more lesser Octesians converge on Corrine; their sword-strokes sap away her Wisdom and leave her on the edge of consciousness. Previa and Starbrook take the time to divest themselves of babblers, while Belle and Leona cast spells upon Ernie to heal his wounds and restore his lost Wisdom. Grey Wolf Quicks *true strike* and uses Bostock to channel a Maximized *acid orb* into the Octesian closest to him. His target erupts in a gout of sizzling green goo, bits of burned armor and tentacle flesh sloughing off to fall onto the rubbery ground. A rancid smell wafts up, but Grey Wolf just smiles. The acid-burned Octesian wobbles on his feet, but doesn't fall.

Flicker runs another babbler through with his dagger, driving his blade through so powerfully that his arm comes out the far side of it. He has to jiggle his arm violently to get the corpse to fall off. Ernie nails the current "true" Octesian with *energy drain*, and the mad warrior's tentacles quiver in pain, but from beneath his helmet comes the sound of insane chuckling.

One of the lesser Octesians (dubbed "Mocktesians" by the heroes over the mind-link) cuts through Corinne's midsection, a deep and immediately fatal blow – but Previa reacts with *revivify* and Dranko follows up with *close wounds* to bring the Ellish sister back to consciousness. Two more Mocktesians attack; one misses Morningstar, but the other strikes Evenstar, draining away another point of the old cleric's Wisdom. She curses and shakes her head to clear it.

Dranko activates his *boots of haste* and gives the true Octesian a serious whipping, just as two of the remaining babblers hoist themselves onto the backs of Snokas and Gyre. Snokas reaches his arms up and immediately flings his unwanted guest away, while Gyre spins around in a panic before doing likewise.

Evenstar still has the wisdom to drop a *flame strike* on a pair of Mocktesians, and while one of these largely resists, the second (whose body the “real” Octesian has recently vacated) is turned to ash. Morningstar gives her a thumb up and an encouraging smile. Scola takes a full attack on the nearest Mocktesian, but cannot land even a single telling blow through its red armor. She screams in frustration, being unused to any sort of martial failure. Obsidia endures an attack from a babbler as she heals Fautish, though the paladin is so badly injured that she still lies senseless on the ground, and would still be dead if not for Morningstar’s *delay death*.

Aravis unleashes a Maximized *chain lightning* targeting the most conveniently situated Mocktesian. It barely survives the lightning stroke, and the secondary blasts scorch the remaining babblers and kill a second, more injured Mocktesian.

The battlefield is definitely becoming less chaotic as the enemies are whittled down. Morningstar takes advantage, seeing that she now has the possibility of shaping a *fire storm* properly. Here in *Ava Dormo*, even an aspect of it that’s been corrupted and twisted by Octesian, her ability to concentrate and comprehend is without equal. Cold flames rip through the demiplane, and when they die down, all of the remaining babblers have been silenced, and one more Mocktesian has been slain. She turns to the true Octesian and shows him *Ell’s Will*, but her foe just continues to laugh beneath his helm. His laughter is starting to become particularly unnerving, given that the tide of battle is clearly going against him.

Kibi takes a chance and casts *prismatic spray* at two of the remaining Mocktesians. One is ripped apart by electricity, while the other resists petrification. Then, because he’s learned his lesson before now, Kibi Quickens a *magic missile* on the true Octesian to test for *spell turning*, rather than lead with (for instance) *Otto’s irresistible dance*. It’s a wise precaution; the missiles are reflected and smack back into Kibi.

The true Octesian, laughing continuously now, jams a tentacle into the back of Dranko’s neck and lifts him bodily off the ground, holding the half-orc like a dangling piñata above his head. Dranko feels little pain, but there’s the sickening feeling of it writhing beneath his skin like a hot wire. “Stay!” Octesian cackles. Then he turns to Obsidia, standing nearby, and cuts her down with one devastating stroke. Morningstar expends her final *delay death* to keep her from dying.

One of the two remaining Mocktesians hacks at the injured and recently revived Corinne, killing her a second time. Grey Wolf responds by blasting it with a Twinned *sound lance*. Two thunderclaps resound through the demiplane, and bits of red armor are shivered off the villain’s body. Ernie targets the true Octesian with a *bolt of glory* followed by a Quickened *flame strike* (counting on Dranko being able to dodge it even while suspended by a tentacle), and this takes the current host body from perfect health to near death in a single painful moment. And yet, the laughter doesn’t cease.

Flicker continues his deadly dagger-play, this time running up his enemy’s chest and sticking his weapon into the visor-slit of one of the two remaining Mocktesians. As he kicks off and vaults backward, he takes his foe’s head with him; tentacles spill out onto the ground as the body topples. Now there remain only two Octesians, one of which is badly damaged.

Dranko can feel the tentacle questing beneath his skin, and is starting to experience seconds of blackout. Nonetheless he has the presence of mind to drop his whip and call his backup weapon – the whip *Alazar’s Tongue*, taken from the hoard of Azhant the Ancient. He manages to strike Octesian in the head with it, and while the damage isn’t significant, he inflicts an enervating effect that should make it harder for Octesian to resist further magics.

Evenstar casts her final *revivify* on Corinne, once more bringing her back from death.

Aravis Quickens a *dimension door*, and has Pewter deliver it to Dranko, the cat leaping bravely onto Octesian’s back and actually running up the tentacle that holds the half-orc aloft. Once his ally is safely away, Aravis targets Octesian with a *disintegrate*. Thanks to the effect of *Alazar’s Tongue*, Octesian cannot resist, and the body is flashed to dust.

The one remaining Octesian-body bulges and becomes the final vessel for the mad warrior. This is the one that stands toe-to-toe with Scola. His laughter grows louder as he hacks her to pieces, and no one close enough has any means of saving her. After many close calls, the first of Morningstar’s team – and their most accomplished fighter – has perished.

Seeing that Octesian has no more extra bodies into which he can retreat, Kibi captures him in a barred *forcecage*. His tentacles slap futilely at the invisible bars. Finally, to the echoing sound of Octesian’s ceaseless laughter, Morningstar mutters, “Time to see what’s next,” and blasts her nemesis with a *bolt of glory* of her own. The *forcecage* fills with darkness, and bands of shadow spill out from between the bars.

When the blackness fades, the cage is empty... and yet the laughter doesn't stop. The insane chuckling reverberates without source all around the demiplane, and the collected heroes look frantically around, wondering what additional difficulties Octesian might have planned for them. When nothing happens, the team hurry to heal the injured and those under the effects of *delay death*. Fautish, Obsidia and Corinne are all healed back to consciousness, and Fautish immediately sets to using a *wand of restoration* to restore lost Wisdom. Someone casts *revenance* on Scola, so that she can fight whatever's coming even after death.

While the post-battle healing is going on, Dranko uses his tentacular nature to cast *true seeing*. Though he sees nothing new or illusionary, casting the spell here brings him a sense of comfort, like he's found his true home after long travels. He also gains an innate sense that the tentacle "trees" are more like parts of a living creature, and that the demiplane exists on the skin of some monstrosity.

The pervasive laughter never lets up, and despite a lack of enemies there's a feeling of impending doom that's nearly palpable. Then the effects of Morningstar's *perfect awareness* run out on her allies, and they feel a heaviness of spirit as they no longer enjoy the attunement with *Ava Dormo*.

Only when all of the short-term beneficial magics have worn off Morningstar and her allies, do a number of the tentacle trees start to sway and slowly arch inward. "We're getting bored!" calls Morningstar into the darkness.

The laughter stops abruptly. "Don't worry," says Octesian, his voice coming from somewhere high above. "It will all be over soon. But I've enjoyed all of this... dancing."

"What's it like to lose your soul?" Ernie asks quietly.

"Oh, I still have a soul," Octesian answers. "It's just... different now."

"You were more intimidating when you were sane," says Morningstar defiantly. "Now you're just a rabid dog who needs to be put down."

"You can try!" Octesian screeches. "Anyway, as my Master would say if he were... sane... nothing sharpens the shock of inevitable defeat like a fleeting glimpse of tantalizing victory. You must be..." Octesian sniffs, and his voice for a second becomes a caricature of pity. "...so sad!" Then his voice distorts and takes on a choking, gurgling sound. "It almost seems a shame to put an end to you!"

A huge tentacle descends from the darkness above, like a smaller version of the Trunk from beyond the Black Door in Het Branoi. Its tip splits open, and it disgorges Octesian like a squeezing sphincter. He stands twenty feet tall, his armor glowing red and asprout with enormous tentacles. He's as much a Cleaner as he is a man.

Then, in all of their heads, Previa thinks to her allies as calmly as she can, *Morningstar, without your perfect awareness, the rest of us have no ability to inflict real damage upon him. If anyone other than you delivers even the slightest wound upon his body, then when he is killed, he'll simply wake up wherever his body is, very much alive.*

Morningstar frowns. *So, you're saying that...?*

I'm saying that if we mean to put an end to him here, once and for all, then only you can harm him.

Quartz: Was Octesian known to have Wisdom-draining powers? Or could the PCs have reasonably learned it? Because that seems a little too targeted to me.

Sagiro: Really? Because to me, the notion that a creature empowered by a brush with the Far Realms would acquire Wisdom-draining powers, seems almost too clichéd in its obviousness. But if it helps, look at it another way: Octesian was tasked by an insane God to kill a powerful priestess, and has had a long time now to work on a plan of attack. It's even possible that the imprisoned Adversary *bequeathed* powers upon Octesian for just that purpose.

No matter how you slice it, I think Wisdom drain was entirely fitting to the encounter, and not an unfair "gotcha" to a bunch of clerics. YMMV, of course.

coyote6: Yeah, in D&D, insanity is modeled by Wisdom damage and drain, and Far Realms critters are all about inducing madness. They're positively Cthulhu-esque about it.

MorningstarofEll: Yep, the Wisdom damage was frustrating. Not more frustrating than say, the fact that he had been able to reach out and just kill Swan with me standing there helpless. I had wanted him dead since he had taunted me by tormenting a dreaming child while I sat there helpless oh so many levels ago. Octesian knew me well enough to exploit that that and it was pretty scary.

The fact that he was able to just wait out my one spell that enabled the rest of the group to do damage felt more targeted at me than the Wisdom drains. But the thing is, he had plenty of time to target me while I was off saving the world.

There just isn't much fair about an oncoming apocalypse. I did some fairly heavy wishing that we had dealt with *my nemesis* a bit earlier in our list of things to do...

Memories from this part of the battle:

- Being really frustrated when Octesian left that first body when it was damaged to decimate poor Fautish.
- It seemed to me that Dranko was caught hanging like a piñata waaaayyy longer than he actually was. I was so grateful to Aravis for getting Dranko out of there. Using that *delay death* on Obsidia with Dranko hanging was a tough choice.
- I had spent a statistically improbable amount of time in this campaign rolling single digits whenever I tried to use a weapon. Things had gotten better since I had received *Ell's Will* but our cliffhanger was just a bit scary. Octesian was going to escape to kill goodness knows how many people if I didn't manage to hit the broad side of a tentacle in the next few rounds...

I sure do miss this game! Not this moment, perhaps... but this game!

Piratecat: Dranko's biggest weakness was avoiding a grapple. He was awful at it, and it was hands-down the fastest way to utterly neuter him in combat. I was not a big fan of being a Dranko piñata; my Wisdom and hit points were dropping, and the Wisdom wasn't too high to begin with.

I really love the fact that it was solely up to Morningstar for this second half of the battle. It made any victory or failure really in her hands, and it was great for the party members who were normally on the front lines to have to drop into a support role. Very enlightening and frustrating at the same time.



Shadow of Ell

As the ramifications of Previa's warning sink in, the entirety of the demiplane warbles, shifts and becomes less solid, sending the Sisters of Ell into a momentary panic. But Morningstar recognizes this for what it is; a vision, a memory, projected from Octesian's mind into his corrupted slice of *Ava Dormo*.

In this memory they are all traveling through the Dreamscape, and are very far afield. They are approaching *Ava Dormo*'s ragged borders, its misty, unknown edge. In front of them, still miles away, is... madness, a place of terrible insanity, whose ripples of psychic horror are just starting to impinge on their minds. Octesian is headed there, apprehensively, gleefully, on a mission of supreme import.

Grey Wolf swallows his fear and moves in toward Octesian's towering, tentacular form, knowing he mustn't attack. His goal is merely to serve as a distraction. Flicker does likewise, but is knocked aside by a tentacle for his troubles.

In a gurgling, raspy voice, barely human, Octesian croaks "Morningstar..." and brings down his sword. It becomes a tentacle as it strikes, bringing crushing pain and waves of nausea. Worse, Morningstar can feel Octesian's weapon trying to tear away pieces of her psyche. This she barely resists, and she blinks back tears. Around her, her sisters come running, intent on protecting their leader at any cost. Previa, Sable and Raven are swatted with tentacles as they approach, but are not deterred from trying to distract and interfere with Morningstar's great enemy.

"Why...?" gurgles Octesian. "Why do you surround yourself with... dreaming insects? Excuse me while I... swat them!"

"They have a right to resist you!" Morningstar retorts.

Tentacles burst out from new holes and creases in Octesian's armor, a dozen or more of them, longer and with more suckers, and many of these quickly wrap around Morningstar's allies. Previa, Aravis, Scola, Sable, Belle and Molly are all hoisted into the air, where they flail helplessly at the ends of Octesian's pseudopodia. All of these victims are heavily damaged as well, squeezed mercilessly in the tentacles' grasp, and drained of Wisdom by their touch.

Octesian looks down upon Morningstar and laughs. "You're all just so small," he croaks. "Look at you!"

"We've fought turtles larger than you!" says Morningstar, undaunted. She Quicken a *divine power* and swings *Ell's Will* with all of her might. The holy weapon is blacker even than Octesian's sword, and it shears away her enemy's red armor, gouging out huge rents in the plates. Where Octesian's flesh is exposed, there are nothing but thick clustered cables of writhing tentacles, and these boil out of every wound like maddened snakes.

"There's not much of you left in there," Morningstar observes.

"It's all me!" Octesian gurgles. "All that's left. And it is enough!" Morningstar can see that new tentacles are sliding into place to support Octesian's weight, where she had torn open his leg.

Aravis Quicken a *teleport* and easily escapes Octesian's suckered grip. He appears some distance away, but not too far to cast *energy drain*. This deals no damage to the villain, but the black energy plays over Octesian's entire body, even to the tips of his tentacles, all of which shudder and droop slightly. A howl of pain and dismay comes from beneath his helmet.

Snokas moves up to stand next to Morningstar; once he served as her Devoted Defender, and now he is prepared to do so again. Fautish moves up as well to protect her, while Evenstar and Dranko cast healing spells upon her. Ernie then targets Morningstar with *righteous wrath of the faithful*, making her martial prowess all the more formidable.

The vision around them changes. Octesian has come to the uneven border where dream and madness blend into one another. He is peering into a writhing gloom, and from that shadowy miasma comes a distant call. Octesian cannot make out the details of that cry, but he is drawn to it like a moth to a fire. Every sane part of his mind tells him to go back, but his body does not obey his sanity, and he crosses the border.

"So," says Morningstar. "You weren't strong enough to stop yourself."

"I was strong enough to continue!" Octesian retorts. "You misunderstand my strength of will. I fought back my own sanity, to do what I had to do. I stayed true to the end." He angles his head down to look at Morningstar directly; a dull purple light gleams from somewhere within his helm. "Speaking of the end... say goodbye to your friends."

Octesian bends his tentacles, and touches four of his entangled victims to his deadly red armor. The bodies of Sable, Molly and Belle are immediately blackened, their burnt corpses crumbling into lumps of congealed ash and melted bone. Previa screams as her flesh touches the armor, but though she is horribly burned and loses consciousness, she remains barely, barely alive, still gripped in a tentacle. As the bodies of his victims fall away, some of the gray miasma of the *energy drain* grows weaker, and Octesian's wounds grow lessened. "Delightful," he groans.

Kibi saps away some of his regained vigor with a *ray of enfeeblement*; Octesian turns briefly to regard him. "I'll get to you eventually," he groans. Scola, wrapped in a tentacle but not touched to the red armor, feels the strength of her bonds grow less and renews her struggles to escape. She fails, and screams in frustration. Corinne rushes in to Morningstar's side but is plucked up by a tentacle for her trouble and held high above Octesian's head. Morningstar barks a warning to her remaining sisters to hang back rather than move forward to be grabbed, though Grey Wolf and Flicker still move up to help shield Morningstar from attack. Grey Wolf also casts *mountain stance* on her, which will make it more difficult for Octesian to lift her up.

But Octesian is not interested in grappling Morningstar. He raises his black tentacle sword – and for a moment it is drawn, clearly against its wielder's will, towards Dranko. With a strangled grunt Octesian regains control of his weapon, and slashes at Morningstar. His first blow goes wide, as there are so many of her allies surrounding her and getting in the way that his concentration is spoiled. His second strike is better aimed, but Snokas jumps into its path at the last minute and absorbs a crushing blow from the sword. But having knocked Snokas out of the way, and finally clearing away the annoying rabble at his feet with a myriad of tentacles, he lines up a perfect blow on his true enemy. At his sword strikes, it turns fully into a thick, powerful tentacle and wraps around Morningstar's midsection. She can feel her armor buckle and bones crack in its crushing grip. Then the tentacle unwinds and hovers menacingly over her. "Soon!" cries Octesian.

Starbrook runs in, hoping to *lay hands* upon Previa, but at the last moment Octesian lifts the unconscious sister high out of reach. Octesian laughs, a hideous, choking sound. Then he plucks Snokas from the ground with a tentacle wrapped around his arms and body. "Don't stand between me and my prey, you imbecile!" he croaks. More tentacles descend, and soon Fautish, Starbrook, Grey Wolf and Raven are also wrapped up and bound, little bundles waving high above Octesian's head. All take severe damage and are drained of Wisdom.

"Soon I will have killed them all, Morningstar!" Octesian bellows. "Soon you will be alone!"

Morningstar's wrath surrounds her like a dark aura and flows into *Ell's Will*. Her holy weapon strikes once, twice, thrice, each time knocking away chunks of armor and tentacle-flesh like it's papier mâché. Her last strike takes off the bottom of Octesian's helmet, and where his chin should be a cluster of tentacles comes spilling out like an obscene beard. Dark ichor wells up from Octesian's many wounds, and his body slumps in odd ways, shored up by the quickly shifting tentacles that seem to make up his entire physical being. He shouts angry words, but Morningstar has destroyed his mouth and only garbled nonsense comes out.

Aravis has been watching Octesian's tentacle-bound victims, noting the patterns in which they sway high above them. With his superhuman intellect and unflappable concentration, he thinks he'll have a moment in which he can save two of them. He just has to wait until they're...

His moment comes. He Quicks a *teleport* and appears in the air, in the middle of the thick forest of Octesian's waving pseudopods. In the split second he starts to fall, he comes into contact with Snokas's shoulder and Fautish's foot. He *dimension doors* away, taking both of them with him, and before anyone can fully register what a crazy stunt it was, Aravis is standing back on the ground twenty feet back, Fautish and Snokas beside him.

"Go get him," says Aravis to Snokas, and Morningstar's defender rushes back to her side, enduring the slap of a tentacle as he approaches. Fautish is close on his heels; when she reaches Morningstar she *lays on hands*, emptying her reservoir of holy power into her leader. Dranko adds another healing spell of his own.

Ernie decides to risk trying *withering palm* on Octesian, even though it will involve touching the red armor. He ends up getting by far the worst of the exchange, as Octesian's spell resistance thwarts the magic, but Ernie is still badly burned by his contact with the armor. His hand smokes and terrible burns race up his arm. When he pulls away, large patches of his skin are left stuck to Octesian's plates, sizzling. Feeling dizzy, Ernie activates the final scroll of *heal* in his *quickscroll tube* and heals his own wounds.

Once more, the vision all around them changes. Now Octesian has moved beyond the border of the Dreamscape and plunged into a place of boiling lunacy. His sanity is burning off like velvet dipped in acid, but he perseveres, and has come at last to a Prison, a Prison entirely of madness made manifest. There are no bars, no physical walls, but the Prison is nonetheless more impenetrable than steel. There is something trapped in the Prison, but Octesian cannot look upon it, and just attempting to see the Prisoner rips away the last of Octesian's tattered sanity. Whatever is there, unimaginably powerful, overwhelmingly evil, cannot be seen by mortal eyes. All of the heroes experiencing this vision instinctively turn their heads from the Prisoner. They have no choice.

Except for Dranko. Dranko looks steadily into the Prison, and deep inside there is an indistinct humanoid figure, a being of divine stature whose nature is changing but has not yet changed, and who fights to retain His sense of identity. Dranko knows that even glimpsing the wavering silhouette of the Adversary should be scouring his mind of reason, but it does not. Instead, Dranko is able to retain his focus for several seconds, and during that time gains a terrifying insight into the Adversary's mind. For behind the madness and frustration of imprisonment, the Adversary is radiating the calm satisfaction of someone who knows He is playing a long game, a game which He has already won.

Octesian screams again, face erupting in fresh tentacles, and Dranko mutters to himself, "Delioch, I love You, but if You are ever trapped in the plane of madness, You're on Your own."

Once more, Octesian brings some of his bound victims down to touch his armor. Corinne and Raven are blown to charred dust. Previa, Morningstar's oldest and truest ally, and who never regained consciousness after her first contact with the armor, is incinerated so thoroughly that even her ashes flash to steam. Scola, still "living" on borrowed time thanks to a *revengeance* spell, cries out in pain but endures the red metal's burning touch.

"So... few remaining to you," says Octesian, his voice only barely comprehensible through the flapping tentacles that compose his mouth. "If you all... leave now... you'll spare those who are left."

Morningstar shakes her head. "What was it you said? 'Tonight, Morningstar, tomorrow everyone else?' If you're hoping we'll flee, you've already blown that chance."

Kibi has been keeping a final *wish* in reserve, in case anything happens to Morningstar, but realizing the terrible casualties Octesian is inflicting, decides to spend his most powerful spell. "I *wish* that all those tentacles just go limp, unable to move, or grab anyone, or do any bad thing to my friends!"

A ripple of power blasts outward from the dwarf, rocking the tentacle trees and sending a shudder through Octesian. All at once his many tentacles flop to the ground, including those still clutching Grey Wolf and Scola.

"Don't feel bad," says Dranko. "That happens to everyone sometimes."

Gyre runs up and frees Scola from her tentacle, dragging her ally away. Grey Wolf unwraps himself as he stands, throwing off what has become a wet, slimy rope.

Octesian jerks his shoulders, but none of his deadly tentacles do anything more than twitch. "What happened?" he gasps.

"I have friends," says Morningstar, looking up at him with a grim smile.

"I had friends, too, when I was sane," Octesian bubbles. "I don't... remember them." Filled with fury, Octesian gathers his remaining strength for a death blow. His sword comes down like a demon's hammer, and his malign will surges forth as he swings, transfixing Morningstar in preparation for this final mortal strike. As it approaches, the black blade uncoils into a thick tentacle, hideously strong. Morningstar knows she is going to die.

Then Snokas is standing in her place. He has shoved her out of the way at the last second, and Octesian's tentacle-sword wraps around him instead of her. It squeezes like an iron snake, and there is a sickening wet crunch. Blood bursts from his nose, his mouth, his eyes. The tentacle unwraps, dumping Snokas's lifeless body to the rubbery ground.

Morningstar stares, a cold rage filling her. She hears Ernie's voice sounding as if from far away. "I can *revivify* him! Morningstar, finish that monster once and for all."

With a terrible cry, Morningstar swings *Ell's Will* with a breathtaking fury. Her first blow takes a chunk from his chest. Her second removes his right leg at the thigh, and his body slumps as tentacles squirm from his wounds like a frenzy of squid. He prevents himself from falling prone by planting his hand on the ground, but this brings his head down to the same level as Morningstar's.

Her final swing removes Octesian's head from his shoulders, and his entire body collapses in a mass of writhing tentacles, rasping and squirming impotently. And then several things happen in quick succession.

Black wings, like those of an avenging angel, burst from Morningstar's back. Her entire body grows taller, and a halo appears above her head like a ring of churning smoke. Her left eye hardens to a glittering black, while her right eye blazes with fierce light. And in her mouth, though it's a small, subtle change, her teeth grow ever so longer and ever so sharper.

While Morningstar's friends gape at this transformation, the entire demiplane also undergoes a rapid change. The tentacle trees shake and fade and lose their substance, and somehow they are gone, and the rubbery ground is gone as well, replaced by springy turf. A fresh wind blows through, clearing the air of Octesian's stench, and high above a pale moon shines out in a clear sky filled with pinprick stars.

A half dozen robed figures appear before Morningstar, standing over Octesian's remains, except that every sign of him has been expunged in the demiplane's sudden rebirth. Morningstar once trained in *Ava Dormo* with a being like these – an Avatar of Ell. Now six such beings stand in front of her. One that is taller and darker than the others steps forward and places a hand upon her brow.

“Morningstar Brightmirror. You are now and forever Ell's Shadow, for you indeed are as the shadow cast by the Goddess into this world of Abernia. It has been centuries since Ell has declared a mortal champion. She does so now because Her need, and Abernia's need, is at its greatest. There is one final task set before you: to descend beneath the Barrier of Yulan, to prevent the awakening, the full awakening, of our great enemy. Already He stirs, and the earth groans, and the animals die, and the sky trembles. Should He arise, he will split Abernia asunder, and all living things upon it will be flung into death. Beneath the Barrier you will be dim in the sight of Ell, but know that She is always with you, for you are Her shadow, and ever will She be your source of being. And She gives you this place as a gift – a place of sanctuary during your trials to come. You need only dream of it.”

All of the avatars bow before Morningstar.

“Go forth, Shadow of Ell. Dream of victory, and it will be yours.”

Mathew Freeman: WOW. What a fantastic battle. Huge kudos to everyone involved for something that came out so well-balanced!

And particularly to Aravis, for that stunt! Can we get a behind-the-scenes mechanical description of how that played out?

Sagiro: It was pretty simple, really. Aravis told me his plan, and asked how many wrapped-up victims he could rescue. I asked him to make an Intelligence check, and that the result would dictate a number between 0 and 3. He said he wanted to make sure Snokas was rescued, and his roll was such that I let him rescue one other person as well. Aravis had a history of “extreme teleporting” during the campaign, so I figured it was the sort of thing he'd be naturally good at.

RangerWickett: “Like velvet dipped in acid.” Wonderful image.

Quartz: That wouldn't be the Saint template being applied or her first level of Divine Emissary, would it?

That was an awesome tale.

KidCthulhu: As I recall, this was one of our first big battles since Ernie changed over to full cleric. It was really gratifying to: (a) be able to lay down some spell smack; and (b) allow Morningstar to do what she needed to do without having to man the healing wagon the whole time. It was a brutal combat, but I think we all did some of our best work here. Even Señor Piñata.

Everett: Mmm, that's a battle for the ages. Did any of the sisters survive? Lost count.

Sagiro: About half of them did. There were six deaths among Morningstar's “Dream Team.”

Waylander the Slayer: Who is left in the Church of Ell?

Sagiro: I'm not sure I quite understand this question. The Church as a whole lost only a tiny percentage of its membership. There are hundreds of Ellish sisters all over Charagan, and only a handful perished at Octesian's tentacles.

Everett: Also... Snokas? Half-orc, swung picks for weapons? Didn't he die some years ago? What's he doing here? Bit lost.

Piratecat: That's him! He didn't die; Morningstar trained out of the henchman feat, so he went off to help someone else.

[from page 391] In addition to the Ellish women, one other warrior arrives, to Morningstar's great delight. It's Snokas, who has decided to join Scola in protecting Evenstar during the battle. He bows at the doorway of the Greenhouse. “As always, I am eager to serve.”

Everett: Makel Troutman died to bridge the Uncrossable Sea, but I thought I remembered Snokas dying as well...

MorningstarofEll: Snokas went off to study or something, didn't he? At some point we decided that we wanted to trim the number of NPCs in our battles... I always thought the devoted defender class was quite cool, and Snokas inspired me to play a bodyguard as my first character in Piratecat's campaign.

Thanks for the write-up, Sagiro... and for making Morningstar look so badass in it. Being named Ell's Champion was an extremely cool moment for me!

Thank goodness for all those spells that buffered me up and weakened Octesian. That final *wish* would be my second favorite of Kibi's *wishes*. My favorite one you won't read about till the very last battle of the campaign.

Sagiro: The write-up made Morningstar *look* like a badass because she *was* one. The tape doesn't lie.



Lions and Rhinos and Djinn

After a time her halo dims, and her wings fade, and her eyes and teeth return to normal, but the authority within Morningstar remains. The avatars fade gently away, leaving the surviving sisters to crowd around their leader, open-mouthed.

Morningstar speaks to them. "I said before that it didn't matter what has been said about me. But I misspoke. It mattered in that it hurt, but what is important is that you stood by me when the need was greatest. You have done that in a way I could never have imagined. Thank you. I could not have done this without you."

"Look over there," whispers Fautish. A short ways away, amidst a moonlit patch of purple flowers, are a half-dozen marble gravestones, each carved with the name of a fallen sister. Molly, Belle, Raven, Sable, Previa and Corinne have all found their final resting place in this Ellish sanctuary.

And there is one more miracle, that takes everyone a few more minutes to notice. Scola is still standing, and looking very much alive, though she had been animated only through the grace of a *revenance* spell for much of the battle against Octesian. Now she is at full health, though she is at a loss to explain how this came to be.

"Ell still has plans for you," Evenstar tells her with a smile. Morningstar approaches her and gives her a gift: the weapon, blessed by Ell, that Morningstar carried before receiving *Ell's Will*.

"Are you sure?" Scola breathes. "Shouldn't this be in a display case in the temple of Kallor?"

"No," says Morningstar. "It should continue to be used in Her service."

Scola takes it, swings it around a couple of times, and spots a small bush as a practice target. With a deft strike she uproots the shrub and sends it soaring away. "I'll clean it after every battle," she promises, picking out leaves from the weapon's spikes.

For what I think is the only place in the Story Hour, I've made up something that happened differently in the game. That's because we collectively made a mistake about Scola. In the first part of the big battle, Scola was killed and reanimated via the *revenance* spell. But in the second part, which was over a month later, we mistakenly thought that she had been saved via *revivify*. So she was left alive and well after Octesian was killed, even though by rights she should have keeled over dead when the *revenance* timed out. The bit about the "miracle of Ell" that left her alive was really a miracle of us forgetting what spell was used...

"Morningstar," says Evenstar, touching her on the shoulder. "What is Yulan's Barrier?"

"The next place we have to go," says Morningstar with a sigh.

"When we leave the world to go beneath," Dranko adds, "we will probably never return."

Evenstar laughs nervously. "I don't have to believe that, do I?"

"No," says Morningstar, "But that's what we've been told, and the source seemed extremely trustworthy."

"Hmph," says Evenstar. "It sounds like one of those overblown dire warnings that simply means that no one ever *has* come back. Not that no one ever *will*."



Morningstar returns the dreamers to the Greenhouse, and they are met with a grisly sight as they wake. There are many Ellish sisters there wide-eyed with shock, and some are sobbing. All are covered in blood, and indeed the entire Greenhouse living room looks like a slaughterhouse. One of the acolytes, who cannot be more than sixteen years old, looks at Morningstar helplessly. "They... just exploded. We had no time. They just... burst into pieces, and there's nothing left. We had no time..."

Morningstar does her best to explain what happened, and about how time passed differently in Octesian's demiplane. She assures her sisters there was nothing they could have done. The news that Octesian is dead fills them with a surge of emotion;

the young priestess breaks into fresh tears and throws her arms around Morningstar.

“What do we do now?” asks another of the healers.

“Honor the dead,” says Dranko. He looks around. “And clean the living room,” he adds.

“Your sisters died bravely,” Morningstar tells them. “We would not have been victorious without them. Octesian is dead, and no one else will die by his hand.”

Dranko wrinkles his nose. Even stronger than the iron tang of blood in the Greenhouse is the putrid stench of rotten fish wafting up from the harbor. “We’re running out of time,” he observes.

The young acolyte looks up at Morningstar. “Time until what?” she asks.

Morningstar lets out a long breath. “What is your name, child?”

“**Anna.**”

“Anna,” says Dranko. “You know all about religion, right? Well, the Adversary is trying to return, and we’re going to stop him. *Morningstar* is going to stop him.”

Anna looks confused. “What adversary are you talking about? I thought you said Octesian was dead.”

“Do you know how Ell came to Abernia?” Dranko asks her. He instinctively thinks about his peek at the Adversary in Octesian’s vision, and hot pain shoots through his head.

“Of course. She came here with the other Travelers when they fled from… from… oh.”

“Is that why the fish are dying?” asks another priestess. “Is the Adversary killing the fish?”

“Yes,” says Aravis. “That’s also why luck has been having wild swings recently.”

Over the mind-link, Aravis adds for his party’s benefit: *Though there’s a big difference between fish dying because the Adversary is coming near, and wimpy-ass Gods fleeing because they’re scared of him. I think if you ask Ell, she’d agree with me.*



As a group, the collected priestesses leave the Greenhouse, covering their noses with their sleeves to filter out the reek of dead fish. While the wizards use *clean* cantrips to fix up the Greenhouse, Morningstar issues a *sending* to her mother in Kynder Hold.

Dear Mom: Octesian dead, six sisters fell, bravely. I wanted you to hear from me: Ell made me Her Shadow, Her champion on Abernia. Yikes!

The reply:

Does being the Champion’s Mom give me powers? I’m so happy and proud of you, Morningstar. Visit soon!

Up next for Morningstar is a visit to High Priestess Rhiavonne in Kallor. Grey Wolf agrees to *teleport* her there. Dranko just wants to stay in the Greenhouse and get as drunk as possible, and the others think that sounds like an excellent idea. The death of Octesian seems like a fine occasion for a party. Scola and Evenstar decide to stay as well.

In the Twilight City, Morningstar is granted an immediate audience with the High Priestess, and the first words from Rhiavonne are, “I suppose it’s a good sign that I’m seeing you in person.”

Morningstar casts her eyes downward. “I lost six.”

“Six?” says Rhiavonne. “I feared it would be worse.”

“Including Previa,” Morningstar adds.

“I’m so sorry. I know she was close to you.”

Morningstar looks up again. “And… Ell made me her Shadow.”

Rhiavonne smiles wanly. “I know. And I’m very pleased for you. But I’m also extremely worried, that Ell *needs* a Shadow. I’m not surprised, though. I’ve heard about the fish, and the earthquakes, and… there have been disturbing rumors about the town of Sentinel recently, reports of a strange attack or something similar. Nothing solid. We have a small church in that city, but we cannot contact anyone there. I suspect it’s all related to the threat posed by the Great Enemy.”

Grey Wolf, standing respectfully at the back of the room, raises an eyebrow at the mention of Sentinel. That's where Farazil was investigating the strange murders committed by two of the deep miners.

"Ell also told me that we'd be leaving soon," says Morningstar.

"Yes, it's ironic," says Rhiavonne, "that we get the first Champion of Ell in centuries, and now you're going to leave, never to return. Though I hope that's apocryphal, of course."

For just a second, Morningstar considers confronting the High Priestess with the images she was shown by Octesian in his demiplane, but decides there's nothing to be gained by it. Instead she gives a little laugh. "I don't think it's a job with a long life expectancy."

"Perhaps," says Rhiavonne. "But if anyone was going to come through it alive, I'd put my money on you. You've survived... a lot of things that most would not have weathered, in just a few short years. But I'll sleep easier tonight, as will every priestess of Ell who's aware of what was at stake... not to mention every citizen of Charagan, whether they know it or not."

"My sisters were incredibly brave," says Morningstar. "They went in knowing they probably wouldn't survive, helping me attack Octesian. And half of them didn't."

"We will certainly afford them every honor the church can bestow," says Rhiavonne gravely. "Do you have the bodies? They should be interred here at Kallor."

Morningstar explains the odd circumstances of the sisters' deaths, and the unusual locale of their collective burial site. Hearing that Morningstar can take two hundred people there for a service, Rhiavonne promises to make arrangements.

"I don't know what else to say," says Rhiavonne, finally. "'Congratulations' seems insufficient."

"We saw a bit of what happened to Octesian when he went looking for the Adversary," says Morningstar. "He was projecting his memories into his demiplane. And the Adversary is feeling very... confident."

"You'll just have to prove that his confidence is misplaced."

"Indeed," says Morningstar. "Octesian was also confident of victory."

"Overconfidence is a common flaw in the villainous," says Rhiavonne. "Now go, rejoin your friends. You deserve to celebrate."

As Morningstar and Grey Wolf leave, the High Priestess calls out, "Oh, Morningstar, one more thing!"

Morningstar knows what Rhiavonne has remembered: her promised holy writings. "Yes," she calls back. "It'll be done before I leave."

"Good. Thank you." Just before they close the door, they hear Rhiavonne mutter to herself, "Well, thank Ell for that."

Does she refer to the writing? Or to Morningstar's ascension to Shadow? Or to the fact that the church will finally be rid of Morningstar's tumultuous political influence, as she leaves on her one-way journey? "Grey Wolf, let's go home."



Back at the Greenhouse, Morningstar and Grey Wolf find Dranko lounging on a sofa with a mug of beer in his hand. His feet are comfortably propped up on a recumbent rhinoceros. "His name is Pokey," Dranko explains. There's a chicken leg skewered on Pokey's horn, but the rhino, who's lapping at a large mixing bowl filled with Kibi's finest ale, doesn't seem to mind.

Flicker reaches up, grabs the chicken, takes a bite, and returns it to the horn. "These things are useful!"

"I dunno," says Aravis. "I think your chicken might be undercooked." He sears it with a jet of flame which, even inebriated, he's skillful enough to deliver without singeing the rhino.

"You'll be gone in less than ten minutes, little fellow," says Dranko, his speech ever-so-slightly slurred. "Always remember this. It'll be the best ten minutes of your life."

Eddings walks in, wearing a guardedly neutral expression and carrying a platter of cheese. "As you requested," he says. "Now, will you or the rhino need anything else? More beer?" He peers suspiciously at the huge beast. "A diaper?"

Kibi comes up from the basement and looks aghast at the drinking rhinoceros. "You've been feeding my hand-crafted brew to a rhino?"

Dranko looks incredulous. "You'd have had us feed it inferior beer?"

“Where did that even come from?” asks the dwarf.

The answer is Dranko’s *bag of tricks*, but Flicker waves his hand. “Ooh, ooh, I know! It comes from the Elemental Plane of Rhi... Rhinoc... Rhinoceroses.”

“Rhinos aren’t an element,” says Aravis.

“They’re like an elephant, though,” says Flicker. “Doesn’t that count?”

“So,” says Morningstar, and the revelers finally notice her at the door. Evenstar, Scola and Snokas are talking together in a corner, sipping drinks and laughing. Evenstar raises her mug in a silent toast, then looks over at Dranko and smiles.

Morningstar walks to where her sisters and Snokas are gathered. “Rhiavonne is taking care of the guest list for the funeral.”

“Better her than you,” says Scola. “You have more important things to do.” Morningstar agrees.

The rhino vanishes. Dranko pouts, pulls out the *bag of tricks* again, and produces a lion. He instructs his new pet to continue drinking from the bowl of beer.

“Hey, you know who would love this party?” exclaims Flicker. “Al Tarqoz!”

Aravis is reluctant at first, but between Dranko and Flicker’s cajoling, and the beer he has already consumed, the wizard is convinced to rub the ring on his fingers and summon the djinn. Al Tarqoz appears on the floor, dressed in purple silken pajamas, lying peacefully on his back, eyes closed. But quickly the eyes snap open, and he sits bolt upright. His nose crinkles. “Is that... dead fish?”

“Welcome to the Greenhouse!” exclaims Flicker.

“I was sleeping,” says Al Tarqoz.

“Well, you’re not sleeping now!” says Dranko. “So have a beer!”

Al Tarqoz turns to Aravis, then back to Dranko. “Are you *commanding* me to have a beer?”

“No, I’m *offering* it to you.”

The djinn turns again to Aravis, who nods. “I see that it would please you,” says Al Tarqoz, “and you are the master of the ring.” He accepts the proffered mug and takes a sip. “Unusually high quality,” he says, with the tiniest lift of a well-manicured eyebrow. “Who’s responsible for it? You, Master Dwarf? Well done.” To Aravis he then says, “Now, what else? Or did you simply summon me to drink a beer?”

“I summoned you to enjoy yourself!” says Aravis.

“I was sleeping. And I was enjoying sleeping. And I...” He finally notices the lion. “You prime material beings are crazy, you realize this, yes?”

Aravis grins. “The lion is technically one of my worshippers.”

Al Tarqoz blinks. “Your what?”

“I’m a God,” says Aravis.

“No, you’re not,” says Al Tarqoz.

“Yes, I am.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am.”

“No, you’re not.”

“He is, of a sort,” says Morningstar.

“Fine,” says Aravis. “I’m a Divine Being. I’m not entirely sure what the distinction is.”

“You can’t grant spells to your followers,” says Dranko.

“True,” Aravis admits. He looks crestfallen for a moment. “Though I haven’t really *tried* granting spells to cats. Only to Flicker, and that didn’t work out.”

"I stopped worshipping you months ago," says Flicker. He pauses to draw a long gulp of Kibi's finest. "No offense, Aravis, but you were kind of second-rate. You couldn't even grant me one measly orison!"

Aravis grins wickedly. "How about I turn you into a cat, and see what I can grant you then?"

"No thanks!"

"Then watch the blasphemy."

"What blasphemy? Did you grant me a spell and I missed it? Hey, Kibi, is there more beer?"

Al Tarqoz shakes his head, but does take another sip from his mug.

"Hey, hold on," says Dranko. "Flicker, come help me with something." The two of them bound down to the basement, and drag up a large, empty barrel. "Hey, Al Tarqoz," says Dranko. "You can create wine, right? Can you make it in this barrel?"

Aravis nods, so the djinn grants Dranko's request.

"The lion's going to love it!" says Dranko, and he decants some of the wine into the bowl, now empty of beer.

"So, Al Tarqoz," says Dranko, watching the lion sample the wine. "Tell us about your home life!"

The djinn keeps his answer brief. "I live in the City of Brass, and make my living as a silk merchant."

"Then how'd you end up in a ring?"

"It's a long story."

"Hey!" says Dranko. "Some time we'll travel to the City of Brass and we can all have dinner together. And buy silks!"

"Please," says Al Tarqoz, turning an odd shade of aquamarine. "Please never visit me in my home."

"We can go back to your place after dinner," continues Dranko, unmindful of the djinn's request. "We can summon you in your own house. You'll just go from one side of the room to the other!"

"He's not a toy," Aravis admonishes. "Nor a parlor trick."

"I've been summoned before," adds Kibi. "It's annoying."

Aravis becomes grave. "Al Tarqoz, in a few days, we'll be going on the last quest of our lives, to stop an enemy who's going to destroy the world."

"That's terrible," says Al Tarqoz, with the straightest face he can manage.

"We might summon you while on that quest," adds Aravis.

"Oh. Then I will be happy, as always, to serve my most benevolent master."

The party is interrupted by the whining summons of the crystal ball in the secret room. Dranko races to get there first, but Aravis *teleports* there ahead of him. Ozilinsh's face appears in the crystal sphere. "Sorry to wake you," he begins. (It's well after midnight, and a reasonable supposition.)

"No, no," Dranko assures him. "We were just feeding wine to the lion." In a roundabout fashion, they explain everything that's happened recently, along with some of the details of their post-victory festivities.

"I see," says Ozilinsh, when Aravis and Drano have finished explaining. "Can you have the place cleaned up by the day after tomorrow? The King wants a meeting of the Spire at the Greenhouse. He considers it an emergency."

"It's probably worse than he thinks," says Dranko. "The Adversary is coming. I've seen him."

Ozilinsh perks right up. "Oh? What does he look like?"

"Pretty horrible. It makes my brain burn to think about."

"Oh, that's okay," says Ozilinsh. "Describe him!"

"No, sorry, not tonight."

Morningstar has joined them by this time. "Octesian was made of tentacles," she offers.

"Really? All of him? What percent of his body mass would you say was tentacles?"

Eventually they mollify Ozilish enough that he lets them return to their merrymaking. They have promised to clean themselves and the Greenhouse in plenty of time for a Spire confab.

And in the wee hours they go to sleep, and all of their dreams are good ones.

Chronikoce: This Story Hour is so wonderful. Thank you for as always for continuing to write it! I especially enjoyed the Rhino and Lion bit, haha.

steeldragons: I make humbled supplication to Ell, Delioch, Yondalla... heck, even Aravis if it helps... PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE novelize this... yes, all of it! The action, the plots, the weaving of plots that all interact and come to fruition throughout, the characters themselves and their amazingly developed individuality, the FANTASTIC "down times" and their NPC interactions. Case in point: serving animals from Dranko's *bag of tricks* alcohol, summoning Al Tarqoz for a party (and Al Tarqoz's general attitude and character has always tickled me), the solemnity and reverence interactions over the years with Rhiavonne and other "superiors"... the "off screen" gold of the PCs' families and other loved ones (Previa, Snokas, etc....).

It's all just gold!! A trilogy [or more] is just BEGGING to take up room on my bookshelves.

Sagiro: I've thought about this a great deal over the years. As I'm sure I've mentioned in the past, there are many problems with novelizing a D&D campaign: the pacing is off, there are a ton of issues with intellectual property, there would have to be *many* fewer combats in a novelization, etc. However, I may do some exploration into the possibility *after I'm done with the Story Hour*. I don't think there's room in my head for two simultaneous Charagan-based writing projects. But sometimes I realize that I'll have written over a million words of story before this is over, and there must be some way I can turn them into halfway decent fantasy novels.

Everett: [After a time her halo dims, and her wings fade, and her eyes and teeth return to normal...] WHAT?? I thought she was gonna look like that forever!! Change her back! Or have Al Tarqoz do it!

MorningstarofEll: *LOL* I am not sure Dranko would agree with you... although who knows, maybe he would.

Sagiro added the pointy teeth and wings in for me. Waaay back when, when our biggest problems were pits of rats, someone (OK, probably Dranko...) had mocked Morningstar, saying that Ellish priestesses turned into vampire bats or something, didn't they? I had told Sagiro that it would be funny if there was some truth to that rumor after all.

KidCthulhu: Wasn't it a common rumor that Ellish priestesses were vampires? Because no one ever saw them in daylight?

Everett: Seriously though, does Ell's Shadow get any combat bonuses/abilities you can lay out for us, Sagiro?

Sagiro: Nope. There are no explicitly game-mechanistic benefits to being Ell's Shadow. I told Morningstar's player that she may manifest the physical signs when exerting her authority and power, either in combat or out, but that I was purposefully leaving the tangible benefits thereof vague.

On a related note, all the PCs hit 20th level immediately following Octesian's death.

Teflonknight: What is the gender make up of the players? It seems to me to be pretty even.

Sagiro, I just wanted to say that this is an excellent campaign and I am really enjoying reading it. The twists that you have thrown in have been really great.

Piratecat: We're split exactly 50/50. Dranko, Gray Wolf and Aravis (and Tor, many years ago) are played by men; Ernie, Morningstar and Kibi (and once upon a time, Kay and Mrs. Horn) are played by women. Flicker is an NPC.

Teflonknight, glad you're having as much fun reading it as we did playing it. And just wait. Mr. "Look, a plot twist that makes your mind break" Sagiro is far from done.

Chronikoce: Reading through some of the earlier stuff, and I am really impressed by the number of NPC characters that are part of the party. When I DM it usually gets hard to remember to have the NPCs in the party do anything (especially during combat).



Essences

The Company have a busy schedule. In the next two days they intend to investigate Sentinel, host a meeting of the Spire, and hold a funeral service for the sisters of Ell who fell in the battle with Octesian. They've decided not to delay their pursuit of Seven Dark Words any longer than that.

Eddings starts preparing the living room for the following night's big meeting, while the party wolf down the morning's *heroes' feast*. "We'd love to help clean up," says Aravis, "but we have a busy couple of days ahead of us."

"Nothing to worry about," the butler replies. "Cleaning up the Greenhouse is my job, after all, and this will not be the first time we've entertained dignitaries. Fortunately the rhino and lion did not... deposit any lasting remains upon the floor."

None in the party have been to Sentinel, a city of some five thousand people perched on the western coastal cliffs of Nahalm. But Sentinel is only a couple of hours' *wind walk* from Kallor, so they *teleport* to the Ellish city and fly in from there. Morningstar cannot imagine what could have caused a cessation of all contact with the sisters there, *sendings* included, but she's soon to find out.



About five miles out, just when they expect to see Sentinel on the horizon, the Company feel the first uneasy pangs. Two minutes later and the feeling is unmistakable – it's the hot, sickening feeling that emanates from Adversary blood. And they're already feeling it, from three miles away? Not good! They land and solidify long enough for Ernie to cast *magic circle vs. evil*, and then they speed the rest of the way to the city.

There is a short line of carts and wagons waiting outside the eastern city gate, but none are moving. The party land, and find a

body lying on the ground outside the wagon closest to the wall. A well-dressed middle-aged merchant lies in the dirt, a pool of sticky congealed blood beneath his corpse. He has died from a number of puncture wounds, as if someone has stabbed him to death with a small knife. It can't have been more than a day since his murder.

The other four wagons are abandoned, but Grey Wolf discovers a second body in the back of this one, a younger man dressed similarly to the first victim outside. A letter opener protrudes from his eye socket.

Dranko scratches his head. "They all went crazy and killed one another?"

"Seems likely," says Grey Wolf.

Hearts filled with apprehension, the Company walk through the open city gates. No watchmen challenge them, though a rancid smell wafts out from inside the walls. And inside – pure horror. Bodies litter the streets, most of them either beaten or stabbed to death. Some trail smeared tracks of blood, as they staggered about before dropping. A few corpses come in pairs, their hands tight around one another's throats. Smoke rises here and there around Sentinel, and the faint crackling of fires comes from several directions. There is no sign of life.

"This is pretty horrible," says Dranko.

Grey Wolf shakes his head. "The city annihilated itself. This is worse than Octesian."

Morningstar casts *brain spider*, the easiest way to detect anyone who may still live in this city-turned-abattoir. She immediately discovers two living minds within a hundred feet or so, and she focuses on the surface thoughts of the closest of these.

I want to find someone else to kill. I need to kill someone. Too many are dead already; I need to find someone else to kill. Ah... my leg... broken... no, it doesn't matter. What matters is finding someone else to kill. I need to kill...

Morningstar reports that it's a young woman thinking these thoughts. She severs the connection in disgust and focuses on the second mind, but it's much the same. This one is an older man, and there's some confusion mixed in with his homicidal litany, as well as regret... that he's too old, too feeble to kill anyone.

It's a grim thing, but the Company take the time to comb the city, letting Morningstar scan it for survivors. Altogether there are sixty-eight people still living within the walls of Sentinel, sixty-eight people who have all either done murder but were injured in the process, or who were too feeble, old or clumsy to have slain their fellows. Sixty-eight, out of a town of over five thousand citizens. Morningstar drops into *Ava Dormo* long enough to see that the local dreamscape is empty. All seven Ellish sisters here are among the dead.

"Whatever happened here, it spread through the whole city," Dranko observes. "We *really* don't want it to spread any further."

There is one other gap in the city's wall, a low, wide gate to the north from which a road leads to the nearby copper mines. Recalling the initial two murders – committed by copper miners – the party head that way to investigate the source of the city's horrific fate.

Morningstar frowns as they leave the shadow of the wall. "The Emperor was *digging* for something, wasn't he?" The others all nod.

The mining site is a large road that slopes downward into a man-made ravine. Down on the ravine floor, six mineshafts have been bored into the walls at even intervals. As they approach this ravine, the feeling of Adversary blood grows more potent, more *hot*, pressing against their circle of protection. They start to walk down the pitched road, but stop before they're even halfway there. The ravine floor is still in shadow this early in the morning, but they can see well enough that it's inches deep in black goo. "Guess what they struck?" says Grey Wolf with a bitter laugh.

They return to the gaseous aspect of their *wind walk* and waft down the long ramp to the ravine floor, some seventy-odd feet below ground level. Being careful not to touch the black liquid, and crowding around Ernie to stay inside the protective *magic circle*, they make a closer investigation of the mine. The ravine is a hundred yards long and thirty yards wide, and every inch of it is covered with Adversary blood to a depth of four inches. At least its level isn't rising at the moment, and there is no sign of a continued inpouring of the stuff. The most likely explanation is that the "Essence" bubbled up through one of the mine-shafts, from somewhere far beneath the surface.

The Company retreat from the ravine, and Morningstar issues warning *sendings* to Ozilinsh and Yale about what they've found. She suggests that Sentinel be quarantined. The replies are similar, boiling down to, "That's horrible. Be careful. Discover what you can."

They also send to Farazil:

Don't come back to Sentinel. Everyone's dead. What did you learn while you were here?

The reply:

No one had died. Had decided murderers had discovered mind-affecting artifact in deep copper mine. No sign of black goo. No plan to return.

"If those people are infected with something," says Morningstar, "we might not be able to let them out of the city. Is it the place, or the people?"

"And even if we *can* cure them," says Dranko soberly, "they'll know they killed their own friends and family."

All agree that there's no good outcome to this. "Why is this happening *now*?" Dranko asks out loud. "And why is the Adversary's blood making people kill each other? When Ernie and Aravis were infected, this didn't happen to them. Thank God."

Grey Wolf graces Dranko with a grim smile. "The God fell down, crashed into the center of the world, and now His blood is bubbling out."

"And if He's waking up," adds Morningstar, "His blood might have new, or different effects than it did before."

Dranko rubs his chin. "I'm uncomfortable leaving behind a town with seventy-five mass murderers in it."

After a short, unhappy discussion, the remainder of the Company agree. They know from experience that purging a single person from even the tiniest exposure to Essence requires *miracle* and *wish* cast concurrently. Weighed against the risk of the infection spreading beyond Sentinel, and considering the horrible internal thoughts of the infected, the extreme solution is unavoidable. With as much speed and mercy as they can muster, the Company find and execute every one of the sixty-eight survivors of Sentinel's disaster.

Before taking their leave of the city, the heroes visit the town prison. As they hoped, the two original murderers – the ones they had sent Farazil to investigate – are dead in their cells, having been stabbed through the bars, probably by the warden. Morningstar casts *speak with dead* on one of these. His body gurgles and coughs up blood as it animates.

"What were you doing right before you decided to kill your wife?"

"*Eating dinner.*"

"Was there anything unusual about that day?"

"*Something in the mine, maybe?*"

"Did you find something unusual in the mine?"

"*More like a smell?*"

"How would you describe the smell?"

"*Wrong.*"

"Did you see any unusual fluids leaking up into the mine?"

"*No.*"

"Did you feel strange after you left the mine?"

"*Yeah, little bit.*"

"Did you want to kill more people than just your wife?"

"*Not until later.*"

"Did the smell spread over time, or did it stay in the mine?"

"*Didn't smell it so much once I came back to my house. Smelled it more a little later, once I was here in prison.*"

"Did you receive any commands to kill people, or did it just seem like a good idea?"

"*Wife burned the bread. So I thought I'd kill her.*"

"Can you sense who else wants to kill people?"

"*No. Well, the warden, obviously. Heh. Heh, heh.*"

After casting some intra-party *detect evils* (to make sure they're not carriers of the infection), the party *wind walk* back to Tal Hae with heavy hearts. They try to take their minds off the day's cruel trials by helping Eddings prepare the Greenhouse for the next day's Spire meeting, but it's hard not to dwell upon the effective death of one of Charagan's coastal cities.



"I have an idea."

Morningstar gathers everyone around her. "If we're going to have to fight the Adversary in some form or another, I'd like to know how. And one way we can do that is to watch how he was fought the last time."

Everyone waits to hear where this is going. "When we were in Het Branoi, we passed through a part of *Ava Dormo* where battles were recreated in dreams by those who had fought in them. If we can watch the dream-version of the battle where the Adversary fought the Travelers, we might learn something."

Dranko stares at his wife. "Have I mentioned recently that you're totally brilliant?"



That evening, Morningstar dreams the party to that distant place in *Ava Dormo* where dream battles are fought. All around them there is a slow-moving fog, and through that mist they can hear the sounds of battles coming from many different directions.

"Hello?" calls Morningstar. "Dream Essence, are you here?"

Soon a bobbing sphere of light appears through the mist, and it coalesces into a humanoid shape in front of Morningstar. "Welcome back," it says.

"Thank you. It's good to see you again."

"You've changed," says the Dream Essence. "How can I be of help to you?"

"We're going to be fighting an important battle," Morningstar explains. "One that resonates with a battle that happened a long time in our past. I wondered if it was possible to find an echo of that battle here, so we could learn from it."

Dream Essence nods its glowing head. "Can you describe it? Perhaps we can find it for you."

Morningstar draws the *Watcher's Kiss*. "Some very unique weapons were used."

"Ah," says the golden bit of sentient dream. "That battle. Yes, it has a strong resonance here. You may have... difficulty observing it. It was fought between divine beings, and isn't meant for mortals to witness. But I'll take you there."

"We're afraid we're going to have to fight the Adversary, who was part of that battle," Morningstar explains.

"One of the divine beings?" asks Dream Essence, surprise evident in its inhuman voice. "But you are not divine."

"Yeah," says Dranko. "We're pretty much screwed."

The Dream Essence glides through the fog, and the party follow, nervously. "The dream you will see is fashioned somewhat out of the dreams of the divine, and somewhat out of the dreams of those mortals who were present while the battle was fought."

They cover dozens of miles in just couple of minutes, dreaming themselves along. Their guide stops in front of a patch of empty, hazy dream space, seemingly no different than the rest of this strange place.

To Morningstar, the Dream Essence says, "You will have to think hard about what you want to see."

"You've been super helpful," says Dranko. "Is there anything we can do for you, little ball of light?"

"Little ball of light?" The Dream Essence sounds amused. "No, but it's nice of you to offer."



The Essence of Dream parts the fog like a curtain, but what it reveals is not immediately clear. Battles between Gods are not like those of mortals; for the most part the Company do not see volleys of spells, or slashing blades, or divine blood spilled upon the ground. If not for Morningstar's status as Ell's Shadow, they would probably sense nothing at all.

They glimpse the battle between the Adversary and the Gods of Darvin as a series of impressions. The Adversary is not from this world; He has come from somewhere Outside, an invader, and his might is so great, it casts a pall over even the likes of Brechen, Ell and Werthis. He has devastated the world of Darvin; millions of mortals have already been killed, piled up around the metaphorical feet of the Gods as they strive against one another.

There is a sense of place – a stronghold the Adversary has made for Himself, and the battle rages in front of it. Below the towering presences of the Gods, lesser divine beings and powerful mortals fight to save (or kill) the remaining peoples of Darvin. Morningstar has a moment of clarity, or perhaps her mind chooses to translate the event into understandable terms, and she sees the demigod Aurelia dart into the fray and land a hit on the Adversary's body with *Elli's Will*. The Adversary roars, turns to smite her, but is engaged by Werthis before He can dispatch her.

The battle slowly turns in the Adversary's favor. One truth that pervades the battlefield is that for all the Gods' might, they *cannot kill* the Adversary. They lack either the knowledge how, or the strength to make it so, but either way this battle cannot be won. And the Adversary *knows* this. He has killed several of the Darvin Gods already – *He can certainly kill them*.

At last the Gods decide to flee, taking with them as many of their mortal flock as they can manage. They had hoped to lure the Adversary into a prison they had prepared, but there is no hope of that now. Werthis curses the name of Uthol Inga, who alone of the Darvin Gods has chosen to join the Adversary, as He shepherds the mortals toward a distant point of safety and escape. Ell cloaks the fleeing masses in protective shadows, while Delioch heals the wounds of untold thousands.

As the Adversary makes to follow his prey, a golden spike protrudes from His heart. Uthol Inga has stabbed the Adversary with a specially crafted blade, long forged in secret for just this purpose. She has placed her attack carefully – the Adversary's heart is not where a human's would be, but lower and to the left. The towering God falls to His knees, screaming in pain and betrayal, as the golden sword shatters in the Watcher's hand. And while even this is not enough to slay Her enemy, Uthol Inga now has the chance to shift the Adversary into the prison prepared for Him, a cage of thoughts and power and adamant and madness that protrudes into the Far Realms. Having done so, Uthol Inga flees after the rest, catching up to them as they prepare to leap across the multiverse to safety.

Behind them the Adversary recovers from His wound, but too late. The prison is fast closing, and already He is finding it difficult to move. But with a final effort of will, He thrusts his left hand through the last small opening of the prison, and as it closes and seals, His hand is sliced cleanly off. And it plummets, streaking through the cosmos, in pursuit of His enemies.

SolitonMan: Another great update! I'm going to have to go back and read this entire Story Hour once the final entry has been posted. Thanks, Sagiro!

Piratecat: I did recently, SolitonMan. It was great!

This was a weird and completely spooky game. We went expecting to have to fight something. We hadn't expected the town to have done it for us.

SolitonMan: I forgot how recent my last download of the PDFs was. I've read through them about four times over the last few years. Once the entire Story Hour is completed will be the time to do so once again.

It will be a day of some regret when this Story Hour is completed, though. While waiting for the next installment is always something I do with impatience, knowing there will be no more will be a wistful time I'm guessing... but damn it's been a wild ride! For me your adventures exemplify the type of game in which I'd like to play.



The Watcher's Daughter

Ernie rubs his temples. "So now the Adversary is giving us the finger? But at least we know not to stab Him in the heart... or where we think His heart is."

Quietly, Morningstar adds, "And now we know that even a God couldn't kill him."

"Say," asks Dranko. "Are there any battles here that *we're* in? 'Cause we've been in some pretty kick-ass battles."

"Not enough time has passed since you fought them," says the Dream Essence.

"But our battle with Condor was a thousand years in the past," Grey Wolf points out.

"Oh, yes!" says the Dream Essence. "I had forgotten. That one should certainly be here." She takes them to a place where the dream of their titanic battle against Naloric's Earth Mage is played out. They find that while it is an accurate retelling of their fight, it is also very impressionistic. Everyone in the Company has had dreams of this battle, dreams which reflect its realities and chaos, and the version they observe is formed from their collective dreams of it.

"You know what I think?" says Ernie. "I think we should talk to the Utholites."

Dranko snorts. "If we go talk to them, and say 'Hey, we have the weapon that your Goddess once held,' I wouldn't give us good odds of getting out with a fight."

Ernie shakes his head. "But they might know more than anyone else about how to hurt the Adversary."

At Morningstar's suggestion, they return once more to the battle of the Gods. This time they focus their attention mostly on Uthol Inga herself, and notice that as She plunges her golden blade through the heart of the Adversary, there is a clear expression

of doubt on Her divine features. But no one can tell whether this doubt stems from not knowing if Her betrayal will succeed, or from not knowing if She even wants to betray Him in the first place.



"I'm supposed to use that sword. And now we find out it won't actually work? How could it? It didn't work when the Goddess herself was using it. How are we going to use a little piece of it to kill the Adversary?" Kibi is disgusted. He takes a mug of beer from Eddings and drinks deeply.

"It'll hurt him," says Grey Wolf. "And make him mad. That'll have to be enough."

Dranko taps the side of his head with his finger. "I've been told by tentacular monstrosities that someday, someone will pluck my brain like a ripe peach, and be completely horrified by the nasty core inside of it. My hope, and my expectation, is that the Adversary is going to peel apart my brain, and be overcome by the damp canker deep in my soul. That's when Kibi should be sticking our golden sword into Him."

Kibi looks doubtful. "Maybe."

"So," says Ernie. "I still want to find the Utholites and learn more about the sword. They must know *something* that would help." The others agree, but there's a problem. No one knows where any of them are. Nowhere in the kingdom are there any public shrines, temples or churches to the Watcher. As far as the Company know, the followers of Uthol Inga have always been hidden, except for the time they emerged in the streets of Sand's Edge to (unsuccessfully) defend the Ventifact Colossus. The party have no leads.

So Aravis creates one. He casts *vision*, with the goal of learning how they can contact the highest levels of Uthol Inga's church. Into his head comes the image of a large city on the coast, almost certainly Hae Charagan. "Well, I've narrowed it down to the biggest city in the kingdom," he says.

The others look at Aravis, hoping to hear something more useful, but that's all the *vision* gave him. It's past midnight by now, and the Spire meeting is hours away. "Can we try *discern location*?" asks Ernie. "To find the high priest of Uthol Inga in Hae Charagan?"

"Not unless we have something he's touched," says Morningstar. But of course, no one does.

"We have this," says Kibi. He pulls out the *Watcher's Kiss*, and the colors of the Greenhouse interior are washed away. All eyes are drawn to the brilliant golden glow of the Goddess's blade.

"I doubt the Watcher high priest has ever held that," Flicker opines. But they try it anyway, since perhaps the holiest object ever known to the Watcher's religion might serve as a focus to find their leader. Morningstar casts the spell.

She doesn't learn the location of her target. She *does* learn the location of an altar, and that place is in Hae Charagan.

"Good enough for me," says Dranko. "Let's go." They *teleport*.



The street location in Morningstar's head is on a short block of artisans' shops. There are glassblowers, table-makers, several smithies and a chandlery. Morningstar stops in front of a clockmaker. "It's in here."

It being after midnight, the shop is closed. Grey Wolf knocks on the door. After a couple of minutes and a few more knocks, the Company hear the sound of feet thumping down some stairs from the second floor of the shop. This sound is followed by bolts being drawn, after which the door opens to reveal a slight old man in his pajamas. His hair is wispy and disheveled.

"We're closed," he says testily.

"We're sorry to disturb you at this hour," says Morningstar, "but this is a matter of great urgency."

The old man rubs sleep from his eyes. "Who are you? Do you have something on order?"

"We're the people who have to finish what the Watcher started," says Dranko.

The man rubs his scalp. "You're what now?"

Morningstar's not buying it. "There is an altar here, of great power." She fires off a Silent, Still *detect thoughts*, and is not terribly surprised to find that the old man's mind is shielded.

"We're looking for the Watcher's children," says Ernie.

"I'm just a shopkeeper," says the man.

Morningstar graces him with a look of skepticism. "Then why is your mind shielded?"

The man blinks. "So I don't get rooked! Pretty common practice. Who are you, anyway?"

"We're the Heroes of the Kalkas Peaks," says Ernie.

"The who of the what now? Look, if it'll make you go away, I'll sell you a clock right now."

Dranko steps forward. "You know how the Adversary is coming, and you know how the Emperor has done his best to enter the world three times? We're the people who stopped him. Now, we would like to stop the Adversary from coming, and we need your help. We've told no one else of this shop's existence, I promise."

The old man peers at Dranko, then sizes up the rest of the Company. Finally he says, "You don't want a clock."

"No," says Dranko.

"Then let me see if I can find you something more to your taste."

He closes the door. Ten seconds later he opens it again. "You're not going to come in armed, are you?"

"Not if you don't want us to," Dranko answers.

"I don't want you to."

"Some of us have weapons given to us directly by agents of our Gods, so that might not be possible," says Dranko. "How about if we swear that we won't attack anyone unless we ourselves are attacked?"

The old man nods. "Could you say that one more time? Slowly?"

"I swear on my God Delioch that we will not attack anyone unless we ourselves are attacked."

"Yeah, okay."

"By the way, I'm Dranko Blackhope. Heard of me?"

The man turns his back and beckons them to follow into the shop. "Yeah, I know who you are," he says over his shoulder.

Dranko laughs. "Someone knows me! In your face, evil tentacled monstrosity who stole my fame!"

"You're the torchbearer to the group of heroes you're with," says the old man. "Now, all of you, come on, follow me. Last one in, close the door."



The shop is stocked with dozens of beautifully made clocks, pendulums and gears swinging and turning, filling the place with a quiet percussive soundtrack. There's a door in the back of the shop which should, given the layout of the city block, lead to a narrow back alley. But by some dimensional trickery it opens instead into a large hall like a museum, with a variety of relics housed in glass cases.

"Don't touch anything," barks the old man.

Dranko calls up a cigar from his haversack and lights a match against Ernie's armor. "Want one?" he asks the old man.

"No."

Ernie nudges the half-orc. "They're nasty, Dranko."

"I know," says Dranko. "After all, I started smoking them just to annoy the people at the temple."

The old man wheels around. "Do you know what I might expect from you people? Gravitas."

Morningstar laughs at that. "If we tried to maintain gravitas, we'd long ago have been driven mad, given the things we've seen."

"Right." The man stops in front of a door at the opposite end of the museum hall. "She's in here."

Dranko inclines his head. "Thank you."

"But you can leave your *other* weapons at the door," the old man reminds them. "The ones that aren't gifts from divine beings."

“Are you gonna take ‘em?” Dranko asks.

“Nobody’s going to take them. You’ll need ‘em.”

He knocks on the door, and a woman’s voice comes from within. “Come in. Let’s see our visitors.”

The old man opens the door and stands back, not going in himself. They all enter, except for Pewter who stays behind to guard their weapons – just in case. Beyond the door is what looks like a small mess hall, its long tables and wooden benches empty at the moment, except for a woman sitting and drinking from a wooden cup. She is dressed in plain clothes, and projects nothing of power or spiritual might.

Morningstar leads the Company as they approach her table. “Good evening, Your Holiness. I’m sorry we woke you up. How should we address you?”

“My name is **Jahnda**,” says the woman. “You can address me as High Priestess or Your Holiness if you’d like, but Jahnda will do.”

“Pleased to meet you,” says Ernie. “I’m Ern...”

“Ernest Roundhill,” says Jahnda. “Yes, I know. I know who you are.”

“You’ve been watching?”

Jahnda chuckles. “Very good. Yes. I’ve been watching everything.”

“Sorry we opposed you in that turtle fight,” says Dranko.

“You did what you felt you had to, just as we did. So, what brings you here, at last?”

“We need to finish what Uthol Inga started,” says Ernie gravely. “And the more we know how She did what She did, the better prepared we’ll be to finally finish off the Adversary.”

Jahnda stares hard at Ernie. “You’re... going to finish off the Adversary.”

“That seems to be the ticket we’ve drawn,” says Ernie quietly.

“And what is your... plan of action?” asks Jahnda.

For a second or two no one answers. Dranko clears his throat. “I’d like to think we don’t want to lock ourselves down. To maintain flexibility, you know...”

“We don’t have a plan,” says Grey Wolf.

Jahnda takes another sip from her cup. “And you think that you can succeed where the Watcher failed?” She is not bothering to mask her skepticism.

“Can we trust one another?” Morningstar asks their host.

Jahnda throws her arms wide. “I trust you already. I let you in here, didn’t I? And I let you keep *Ell’s Will* on your person.”

“My Goddess gave me that blade. It’s one of the reasons we believe we are destined to be at the final battle with the Adversary.”

“Not necessarily,” says Jahnda. “There will be other battles, battles of great import.”

Dranko sighs. “We’ve spent a lot of years, and dealt with a whole lot of stupid prophecies, and they’ve all been pointing towards this. I’ve been told, directly, by hideous tentacled monstrosities, that this is coming.”

“Tentacled monstrosities?”

Ernie makes a face. “Dranko has an unfortunately strong familiarity with the Far Realms. And given that’s where the Adversary *is...*”

“I take your meaning,” says Jahnda. “So, you are intending to use your powers not toward protecting our escape, but to stop the Adversary from emerging altogether?”

“That is correct,” says Dranko. “We’re not here to help anyone flee. We’re going to make sure they don’t have to.”

Morningstar takes a step closer to the Watcher’s high priestess. “I didn’t know you *had* a plan to have everyone flee.”

“Oh, it’s not *my* plan. But I have faith that it is the Gods’ plan.”

"Well, except for the chicken ones who already ran," says Dranko.

Jahnda glowers. "Already ran? That's what you think?"

"Uh... yes?" answers Dranko. "I'd be more than happy to be proven wrong, though."

Jahnda narrows her eyes. "You're a priest, yes? I would expect that you'd have more faith."

"I'm not a very *good* priest," Dranko admits. "Are we wrong? Are they preparing a way out?"

"They have to be," says Jahnda wearily. "The Adversary is coming. The last time that happened, the Gods saved as many of their mortal flock as they could, and fled here. If the Adversary has finally found them, I expect they will do the same this time, saving whom they can and fleeing the Adversary's wrath. I would presume that even as we speak, Delioch is preparing to save as many people as possible."

"Sure," says Dranko. "But our job is make sure he doesn't have to save *anyone*."

"But it's possible," says Morningstar, turning to her husband, "that our job will be to hold the way open, so as many can flee as is possible. We don't know for sure."

"I hope that *is* your job," says Jahnda. "We could use more people here like you when the time comes."

"But we have seen signs that we'll have to confront the Adversary," says Morningtar.

Jahnda shakes her head. "He's going to destroy you, you know. You cannot defeat Him."

"I think maybe that's why Uthol Inga failed the first time," says Ernie. "Because She didn't believe that She could kill Him."

Jahnda starts, and almost looks as though she will rise from her chair. "You have... great gall, to say something like that in this place."

"We've seen the fight," says Dranko. "The one where she stabbed the Adversary."

Jahnda looks at him like he's gone completely mad. "It's true," says Ernie. "The moment before she struck, she felt a great doubt. We saw it on her face."

Real anger fills Jahnda's face. "And how do you know that, exactly?"

"We saw it," says Ernie. "We have been to a place where echoes of past battles still linger. We saw the Gods battle the Adversary." He sits in the chair opposite Jahnda and leans towards her. "What did Uthol Inga do? Where did that weapon come from?"

Jahnda leans back. "Weapon? You mean the Sword of the Watcher? It failed. It was meant to kill the Adversary, but it did not."

"What was it made of?" asks Ernie. "It was clearly forged with great power and magic..."

"It was filled with Her own Divine Essence, among other things," says Jahnda. "But it was destroyed. No weapon touches the Adversary and survives. Do you seek to forge another, similar weapon? You'll need to find a God or Goddess willing to give up their Essence. But I think you'll find that the Gods are saving themselves for the more practical contingency of flight."

Ernie stares evenly at Jahnda. "I'll cover the retreat if it comes to that, but personally, I don't like retreating."

When Jahnda glowers at this, Dranko says, "Uthol Inga made a great sacrifice, and her followers have been excoriated for it ever since, unjustly. We'd like to redeem the sacrifice which she made for all of us."

Jahnda smiles, but her eyes betray her bitterness. She sits back in her chair. "So you have the intention of confronting and defeating the Adversary himself, and you admit that at the moment, you have no plan for how to do that. Do you even know where He is? Where He'll show himself? What *His* plan of attack is?"

Ernie stands back up, disgusted. "Perhaps we made a mistake in coming here. If all we're going to hear are doubts, and words about how our quest cannot be done, then there's nothing to be gained by staying. I understand your disbelief, but if you can't help us, we need to go elsewhere. We don't have *time* for this. I'm sorry we wasted yours."

"It was useful to know your opinion that a way is being prepared for your escape," says Morningstar. "What is your intent, when the Adversary returns?"

Jahnda turns to Ell's Shadow. "My intent is to watch, for the moment that escape is made available to us. I have great faith

that Uthol Inga and the rest are working out ways to escape when the Adversary returns to this world. It is my job to make sure that my flock is ready, so that we may avail ourselves of the opportunity when the Gods present it. To watch for the signs, that the moment is coming.”

“And what are the signs?” asks Morningstar.

“They are all around us now,” says Jahnda. “The earthquakes. The fish...”

“And we just lost an entire city...” adds Dranko.

“Ah,” says Jahnda. “So you’ve heard about Forquelle, then?”

This brings everyone up short. “What?” says Grey Wolf.

“Oh God...” says Morningstar.

“No,” says Dranko. “I was talking about Sentinel. What happened to Forquelle?”

Jahnda’s face is grim. “My understanding is that it was... washed away.”

“Washed away?” says Dranko. “Tor’s going to be really unhappy once he’s back in his right mind.”

“What were *you* talking about, then?” asks Jahnda. “What happened to Sentinel?”

“Everyone killed each other,” says Dranko. The Company share their recent experience in Sentinel, and the bubbling-up of the Adversary’s blood from the copper mines.

“The world is awash in signs,” says Jahnda. “We are in Abernia’s final hours. Whatever you intend to do, you should do it soon.”

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” says Dranko.

“You’re leaving,” Jahnda repeats. “If you don’t mind me asking... for where?”

“We’re going to go beneath,” says Dranko. “To the part of the world that was blocked off.”

Jahnda cannot conceal her surprise. “Beneath Yulan’s Barrier?”

“That’s where the agents of the Adversary have gone, preceding us,” says Dranko.

“I see,” says Jahnda. “Ordinarily I would tell you that Yulan’s Barrier is impenetrable, but I imagine you hear that many things are impossible, which you go on to prove are not. Including things I’ve just told you about the Adversary, maybe?” She lets out a long breath. “Good luck to you, then. If something occurs to me that I can do to assist, some knowledge or advice, then you will have it. I cannot give you material support; what I have, I will retain, to assist in the escape of our people when... should you fail to kill the Adversary.”

“For what it’s worth,” says Morningstar, “I’m sorry.”

“As are all people who live to see such times,” says Jahnda. “Most people on Abernia... are going to die. As they did last time. The Travelers brought many mortals with them here, but most of them perished. I expect it will be the same this time around. I am sorry that you won’t be here to assist in the escape, but it seems the Gods have another plan for you. You are like an arrow launched at its target from a great distance... unlikely to hit its mark, but a chance worth taking.”

She stands. “I’ll give you one piece of advice, should you intend to physically kill the Adversary. You will need a weapon capable of piercing His divine flesh. I doubt even *Ell’s Will* is capable of that.”

“If we had such a weapon, do you have any idea how we might use it?” asks Morningstar.

“Uthol Inga stabbed the Adversary through the heart with such a blade, and that wounded him, but did not kill him. You’d also need some other weapon, or force, or source of power. The weapon will be necessary, but it will not be enough.” She looks intently at Morningstar, searching her face. “You have such a weapon, don’t you?” she says. “Good. That’s something.” She stretches, then says, “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m late for an appointment with my bed.” But as she turns to leave, she asks one more question. “How did you find me?”

This question brings about a flurry of discussion over the *telepathic bond*, about whether they should reveal the existence of the *Watcher’s Kiss* to the Watcher High Priestess. They decide to be forthright. “We have a piece of the sword that was used in the Gods’ battle with the Adversary,” says Morningstar.

Jahnda's eyes grow wide. "You have a piece of the Sword of the Watcher?"

"We found this place by using it."

"Do you have it here?"

Technically, it's in a *bag of holding*. Another mind-link conference leads to the conclusion that while telling Jahnda about the sword is one thing, showing it is quite another. "No," says Morningstar.

Jahnda stares daggers into Morningstar for several seconds. She clearly sees through the lie. "Fine," she shrugs. "But I would like to have seen it."

Morningstar folds her arms across her chest. "If you were in my position, what would you do?"

"If I were you, I suppose I would keep it hidden, because you can't trust me not to try to take it. Because I realize what a difference it might make, in the defense of our escape." Morningstar nods. "But also if I were you," continues Jahnda, "I would ask me to swear an oath on my Goddess's name, that I would *not* try to take it from you. And thus, being convinced of my good intentions, you could show it to me." Morningstar looks at the others, and nods again.

Jahnda takes a final sip from her cup. "I swear on the name of my Goddess Uthol Inga and, Goddess willing, my undying soul, that if you show me a fragment of the Sword of the Watcher, I will in no way attempt to remove it from your possession, or have it removed by someone else."

Satisfied, Ernie pulls the golden blade from the bag, and unsheathes it. "This is the *Watcher's Kiss*," he says.

All the color is washed out of the room, save for the sword itself, and a bright golden glint in Jahnda's eyes. "May I?" Jahnda reaches out for the sword. Nervously, Ernie hands it over. Everyone leans forward as Jahnda's hand grasps the hilt, not certain of what to expect. The High Priestess's eyes roll up into her head, and for a full minute her mouth trembles while the others look on anxiously.

Finally, Jahnda's eyes snap open. She looks around, and hands the blade to Kibi.

"Did you speak to your Goddess?" asks Grey Wolf.

Tears fall from her cheeks to the wooden table, some landing in her cup. "I didn't do any speaking," she whispers. "Go beneath the Barrier, and stop your enemies. Go with my blessing... and Hers."

Piratecat: This was one of my favorite games, and one of my favorite scenes. Fantastic roleplaying all around, especially from Sagiro who as far as I know had *none* of this planned out. It was tremendously satisfying. The sense of impending departure, the knowledge of likely loss and failure, was palpable. Grey Wolf actually stating "We have no plan" really hurt because it was so true.

steeldragons: It's just such a bittersweet joy to see each update and continue reading this most amazing of Story Hours, knowing with each installment, there's that one less update to go. It is a most curious sensation. But always worth it.

Everett: How many installments left? Around 20?

Sagiro: There are about 22 game sessions left before the end, but I've been averaging about 1.5 Story Hour posts per game session. So, I'd estimate about 35 more updates before I'm done telling the story.

Everett: Also, I completely missed wherever we learned that Kibi has to be the one to stab the Adversary, or didn't register the significance when it came up. Why Kibi? When did we learn that?

Sagiro: The Company don't know that Kibi has to be the one to stab the Adversary. What they do know is that in Leantha's Book – the one seemingly left by the dead Goddess of Knowledge as an answer to Aravis's question of "how do we defeat the Adversary" – one of the drawings shows Kibi holding up the *Watcher's Kiss* with a smile on his face. And now we've seen the priestess of Uthol Inga hand the blade to Kibi after communing with her Goddess. So, there's circumstantial evidence, but nothing solid.

Everett: Yes, I do remember that. Bit cryptic... were I Kibi's player, I'd probably be looking for something more solid...

Quartz: There's also the bit about surrendering divine essence to make another blade, and we all know who has divine essence, don't we?

Everett: Well, yeah, we do... Aravis. Plot-lines concerning Kibi: (1) Kibi as the "opener"; (2) Cranchus. Neither revealed any divinity in Kibi's background.

Quartz: And it was interesting to see Dranko speak so casually about sacrificing himself.

Piratecat: Yeah, well, he rather foolishly believes he'll survive the process. Call it innate optimism that stems from a sub-10 Intelligence score...

Also, there is massive, glorious foreshadowing in this conversation – the second time we've seen it now – about something that the entire party entirely missed until damn near the final sessions. My hat is off to you, Sagiro, you magnificent bastard. We never even came close to noticing despite the hints.

Sagiro: I don't know which is more applicable: what they say about the praise of the praiseworthy, or that it takes one to know one...



Farewell Party

Even with the windows and doors shut tight, the stink of a million dead fish finds its way into the living room. The Company eat a hurried breakfast, waiting for the meeting of the Spire to begin. The first to arrive is the adventurer Royce, only survivor of “Fortune’s Children” following the Battle of Verdshane. He smiles grimly as he’s invited in, shakes hands, and helps himself to some hors d’oeuvres.

Over the next half an hour, the rest of the Spire’s membership filters in. After Royce comes Anhaya Sunblossom, the High Priestess of Yondalla on Charagan. She has never been in the Greenhouse before, and is delighted to find that Ernie lives in a converted bakery.

Several former archmagi arrive in a group – Fylnius, the old elf from Ghant; Alykeen from Minok, and Salk, the Spire’s leader after the death of Grawly. Ozilish comes down the stairs separately, having teleported into the secret room directly from his tower. King Crunard is accompanied by his stalwart adviser Yale, and Duke Nigel of Harkran. A dozen royal guards remain outside, setting up a defensive position around the Greenhouse.

Also in attendance are the adventuring duo of Wellington, the child-prodigy wizard, and his protector and companion the paladin Glade, tall and beautiful. Cornelia, High Priestess of Pikon, and Dalesandro, leader of the Stormknights of Werthis, come in on the heels of the Generals Anabrook and Largent.

The only person the Company don’t recognize is introduced as Junaya, of whom they have heard often but never seen. Junaya is even taller than Glade, lithe, with a warrior’s bearing. She and her brother Jerzembeck lead the Spire’s secondary adventuring team. She greets the Company warmly. “Nice to see how the other half lives,” she laughs, looking around at the Greenhouse.

“What I want to know,” says Aravis, “is which one of us is the group that’s just sent off to mislead and distract the Spire’s enemies.”

“Hard to say,” says Junaya with a grin. “But I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, and assume you’ve been doing *something* useful with your time.”

Last to arrive is a newcomer to the Spire ranks – the diviner Belinda, who was recently instrumental in tracking down Mokad. She cannot hide the look of concern on her face, even as she is introduced to the others. In fact there is a gloomy pall over the entire gathering, and not only resulting from the odor of dead fish that now reaches into every street of Tal Hae. Though all assembled are exchanging handshakes and pleasantries, worry and sadness show on every face. The King himself looks pained, and rubs his temples with his fingertips. Though the Masking is nearly gone, a lifetime of defying its effects has taken a great toll on the old ruler.

When all are seated, Salk stands in the center of the Greenhouse living room. “A fine place we’ve come to,” he says, shaking his head. “I suppose we ought to start with the reports of current events. The death of all the deep-sea fish is quite evident. It is no doubt related to the death of the Ventifact Colossi in the Mouth of Nahalm. Something down below is affecting Abernia, in ways that are killing the things upon it. And it is not simply that. The worst news of all is about Forquelle. I know some of you had friends there. I am sad to say that it is unlikely that any of them got out in time. There are no reports of survivors, though it is possible that some were able to teleport away, before the sea rose up and swallowed the islands. The city of Oasis is under three feet of water, as are many of the east coast settlements of Lanei. The ocean has since receded, and we don’t think it’s likely to happen again soon. But we don’t doubt it will be something else.”

“Like the volcanoes,” says General Largent. “In Hae Kalkas.” This is news to many, and it sets the gathering to mumbling.

“There hasn’t been volcanic activity there in centuries,” says Largent, “until about a week ago. It’s all been high up in the mountains, no need to evacuate yet. The dwarves are handling it well, by all reports.” But Kibi looks plainly worried; his family lives in Eggemoggin, a small town high above Hae Kalkas.

“And there’s Sentinel,” says Dranko. Many heads turn to regard him, as this is news to most. “The miners hit a vein of the Adversary’s blood, which bubbled up, and everyone in Sentinel went insane and killed one another. It was not pretty.”

This pronouncement causes a great stir among the guests; the knowledge that Adversary blood is even a consideration is not known to several people, and for those privy to the fact, Dranko’s words are even more alarming. “We have the area locked off with a *forbiddance*,” Ernie assures them.

There are several ticks of silence, before Wellington asks, “What about Octesian? We heard that he was rampaging through the Dreaming, killing people.”

"Octesian is dead," says Morningstar.

"We got him just before he was going to kill everyone in the kingdom," Dranko adds.

"He had found the Adversary in the Far Realms," says Ernie, "and went completely mad."

"And very tentacular," says Dranko. "But we killed him. Morningstar killed him."

Anhaya Sunblossom sits up a bit straighter, a puzzled look on her face. "The Adversary is in the Far Realms? Then what exactly is causing the problems here on Abernia?"

"The Adversary is escaping," says Aravis.

"And His agents, and agents of the Emperor, have gone into the Underdark on some evil mission," says Dranko. "They're probably responsible."

"Unfortunately," says Belinda, "divinations seem vague and largely ineffectual on these topics. But I have news that I cannot decide if it's good or bad. Although we have been struck by this wave of natural – or as is more likely, unnatural – disasters, they seem to be over."

"What do you mean?" asks Dranko.

"I don't think we're going to have any more. It either means that whatever was causing them is over and failed, or it's over and succeeded."

"It's theoretically possible," says Wellington, "that the part of Him that landed here in Abernia, is regenerating into a whole... a whole new Adversary."

"I don't like that theory," says Ernie.

"Can you come up with something else?" asks Dranko.

Wellington blinks. "Yes. Perhaps the Adversary's blood infected something extremely powerful that was *already* in the Underdark, and now there is a new shadow-Adversary arising down there, and *that's* what's affecting the surface."

"That one's not much better," Ernie mutters.

Dranko picks up an hors d'oeuvre. "When I saw the Adversary, I was pretty sure that..."

"What?" Largent interrupts. "When you *saw* the Adversary? When was this?"

Dranko takes a minute to explain the vision he saw during the battle with Octesian. "The Adversary was in a cage, in the Far Realms, but He looked triumphant, like He had already won. But only I could see Him."

"And why is that?" Largent presses.

"It's a long story."

"We're all here to hear these stories, so we can figure out what to do next!" Largent exclaims.

Dranko sighs, and launches into the tale of Het Branoi, describing the starry void left behind when Cleaners ripped apart the Vree's slice of Chaos. "Those Cleaners lived in the Far Realms," he says in summary. "Where logic and sanity go to die. And, uh, accidentally, one of my personal belongings ended up in the, er..."

"Dranko has acquired something like an ally," Aravis cuts in. "It provided Dranko with something it thinks will help us."

"It wasn't an accident," says Kibi accusingly. "Dranko threw a bottle into the Far Realms, with his name inside it."

"You did?" Royce's eyes go wide, and he smiles broadly. "That's fantastic! And now you say you have a tentacular nature yourself?"

Dranko looks pained. "We made a deal. I gave up something important to me, and it put something in my brain. It said that without whatever's in there, we're going to lose. But now, when something rips open my brain to see what's in there, it will uncover this hideous nugget of madness, and suffer for it."

Yale looks at Dranko very intently. "Where exactly do you need to be, to make use of this... tentacular nature? And when will you need to be there?"

"I don't know," Dranko admits.

"I would say it's almost assuredly when we face the Adversary," says Aravis.

"So you're going to the Far Realms?" asks Yale.

"No," says Aravis. "We're going to the Underdark to chase the servants of the Adversary."

Yale looks confused. "So the Adversary is somehow going to leave his cage in the Far Realms, and appear in the Underdark?"

Dranko nods. "Yes, that's what we think. That his servants are going to find some way to make that happen."

"We're following the instructions we found in Leantha's Book," says Kibi. "It led us to this." He unsheathes the *Watcher's Kiss*, and all eyes are drawn to its golden glow. Color leeches away from everything but itself.

"This is a fragment of the blade that Uthol Inga used to stab the Adversary," says Dranko.

"It's all in this book," explains Aravis. "It was a gift from a Goddess."

Anhaya cannot mask her astonishment. "A Goddess? Which one?"

"A dead one," says Aravis.

"And how did you acquire a gift from a dead Goddess?"

"We went to the tombs of the Gods," says Dranko.

Ozilinsh turns to Fylnius, chuckling. "See? I told you I wasn't making any of it up."

Kibi frowns. "But Tarsos and Meledien and Seven Dark Words have gone down to the Underdark first."

At this point about half the assembly demands more explanation, and an entire summary of the Company's relevant adventures. When this is done, Junaya turns to Aravis with a little shake of her head. "I guess now we know which group was the diversion."

The general laughter at this is interrupted by a knock on the door. "Must be Parthol Runecarver," jokes Dranko.

Salk doesn't laugh. "Yes, I expect it is. I invited him."

The sounds of mirth die away at once. "He can't get in on his own anymore," says Salk to the Company. "One of you will need to invite him in." He turns to Belinda, who nods. "We are confident he will not try anything during this meeting."

Eddings opens the door, and Aravis stands at the threshold. Standing in the street is Parthol Runecarver, forked gray beard hanging from his chin, a serious expression etched into his old features, and the faintest shimmer of an Astral cord snaking away into the aether. "May I come in?" he asks politely.

"Yes," says Aravis. "But only for this one meeting."

"Fair enough," says Parthol with a shrug, and he takes a confident stride into the house. Everyone is quiet as he enters. Fylnius, who's become particularly lighthearted and jovial since his "retirement," stares daggers into the new arrival, his face a thundercloud.

Salk never takes his eyes off the new arrival. "I have invited Parthol to this meeting so that he can tell us what he knows. That's the only reason he's here, and when he's had his say, he will go."

"How true," says Parthol. He spreads his arms and addresses the Spire. "I don't expect any of you to like me. Have no fears on that count. I still maintain that Abernia would not be in these dire straits had it been governed properly by a magocracy these past thousand years, but since you Spire folks have managed to land your kingdom in this pickle, I should do what I can to help get it out. Because although I once harbored a great desire to rule Charagan, I have a much greater desire to see that it is not consumed by the Adversary." If he expects any reaction to this, he is disappointed. Cold hard stares are all he earns. "Also, I dare not leave my current abode, because you would all band together and kill me."

Under his breath, but loud enough for all to hear, Royce mutters, "Damned straight we'd kill you."

Some of the Archmagi cannot help but look a bit nervous at this statement. It's unlikely that Parthol knows that they have lost all of their magical powers, but anything is possible. Either way, Parthol continues with only a quick, sharp glance at Royce.

"I don't know how many of you know of Yulan's Barrier. It is an iron shell around the inner parts of the world, placed there by the father of all Kivian Gods to prevent the armies of the Underdark from conquering the surface world." He turns to Belinda. "Belinda, that's your name, isn't it? You at least have realized that divinations regarding the Adversary, or even the Black Circle,

are often futile. When you are beneath the Barrier, it will become even worse. Your divinations will suffer from... distance. You will be farther from your own Gods there. Divinations will be taxing, ineffectual to a degree you are not used to."

"What about divinations that are not divinely based?" asks Aravis.

Parthol shrugs. "I'm not sure. There may be additional difficulties simply because you will not be a native to those lands. You will find things very strange beneath Yulan's Barrier. It is both like and unlike the surface world. There will be things familiar to you... peoples, civilizations, politics, comings and goings of folk powerful and mundane; and also customs alien to you I'm sure, things that make no sense." He looks pointedly at Aravis as he says, "For instance, below the Barrier, there are Gods who walk the earth. I don't know where they came from, or if they were there even before the Barrier was set in place. But unlike all the Gods that we know, possible company excepted, they live on – or in – Abernia. And they make the rules. So, yes, your arcane divinations may be more efficacious than ones powered by your Gods, but I'd still be prepared to learn things the old-fashioned way."

"You mean beating people up until they tell us," says Dranko.

Parthol nods, perhaps missing the humor. "Another thing. As you may have learned in your underground journeys *above* the Barrier, long-distance teleportation is impossible. The nature of the Underdark prevents it. But..." Here he stops, and his face tightens, and he closes his eyes, like he's trying to recall a distant, painful memory. "But, there is a connected series of teleportation circles that can circumvent that restriction. Gaining access to that would be of great benefit to you."

"That's good to know," says Kibi. "But do you have any information about where they are specifically, or *how* to access them?"

"No," says Parthol. "Seeing beneath the Barrier is... very difficult. I'm the only one on the surface who can, and even my views are vague, foggy." For a startling moment, a small black lesion crawls up his neck from beneath the collar of his robe. He closes his eyes and concentrates until sweat beads on his brow, and then it fades away. When he opens his eyes again, all the collected members of the Spire are looking at him with revulsion. He laughs. "Yes. I can harness that power. That's how I learn things that no one else knows."

"You always think you can control it..." says Ernie, shaking his head.

"I *can* control it!" barks Parthol. "Where I currently reside, I can control it. It's a large part of the reason that for now, I am content that my physical body remains where it is."

"Good," spits Glade. "You can stay there and rot."

Parthol graces the paladin with a wan smile. "Don't be rude. I have presents for you." He holds out his hand, and *wills* something into his palm. Whatever it is flickers briefly, and then vanishes. He frowns, sighs, and walks to the front door. With some grumbling about Abernathy, he opens the door, sticks his hand out into the street, and tries again. This time a small leather pouch appears in his hand. Parthol returns to the center of the living room and empties out eight green glass stones onto the table. "These will let you speak and understand Undercommon. Whichever of you are going to go beneath the Barrier, you should take them."

"Should we swallow them?" asks Dranko.

Parthol glowers. "What? No! Just carry them on your person. Swallow them? What kind of demented magic would work in that fashion?"

"Earth Magic," Dranko deadpans.

"Oh. I didn't realize Earth Magic required you to *eat* rocks."

"Only sometimes," says Kibi defensively.

"Lastly," says Parthol, "something I have confirmed through my own divinations, though perhaps you already know it. Whichever of you goes, you cannot, and will not, be returning. It would violate the nature of the Barrier, and the laws laid down by the Old Gods. Even if there is a way through it in the downward direction, there is no coming back up through it."

"Yeah," says Dranko, "but lots of people tell us that, and we *always* come back."

Parthol smiles indulgently. "If it buoys your spirits during the long journey, to think that someday you might come back, then by all means go on thinking it." He bows his head. "That's all I have for you. I hope it helps. Now, I assume you have some questions?"

"Will the stones let us read Undercommon, too?" Dranko asks.

"Yes. They're extremely potent. Please don't lose them."

"What about Meledien and Tarsos?" asks Kibi. "Do you have any idea what they're up to down there?"

"No. Though I concur with Belinda, that they have completed some stage of their mission. Whether it concluded successfully for them or not, I don't know."

"I bet it did," says Dranko glumly. "Say, when you said Gods walked the earth, what did you mean?"

"I meant exactly what I said," says Parthol. "The Gods of the Underdark – real Gods, and not Godling pretenders – live among their mortal flocks."

Dranko sees Parthol looking at Aravis as he says this. "What was that about being polite?"

"Forgive me," says Parthol with a bow. "I meant Nature Demigods. Divine Sparks. I intended no offense. But actual Gods live in the Underdark, and walk among the people."

Kibi brightens. "If they're Gods, could they help us get back?"

"Highly doubtful. They are clearly nowhere near as powerful as Yulan and the Kivian Gods."

"If you're in the Underdark," Dranko asks, "can you *plane shift*, or go to the Astral?"

"No. Though you should be able to enter extra-dimensional spaces whose only egresses are back into the Underdark. But there is no *gating*, no *plane shifting*. Anything you summon will have to come from elsewhere in the Underdark." He looks at Kibi. "Don't worry, there will be earth elementals in great supply."

"I never thought I'd say this," says Kibi quietly, "but thank you."

"You're very welcome. I've only ever wanted what I thought was best for this world."

"Which is you being in charge of it, and with the Emperor's help," says Dranko.

Parthol looks annoyed. "The Emperor was only a means to an end. I wouldn't trust him any farther than I could throw him. And I don't personally need to be in charge. Aravis, you of all people, I'd think, would understand what I'm saying."

"I understand that wizards would not make good rulers," says Aravis.

With a look of profound disappointment, Parthol sighs. "Anything else?"

"Yes," says Ernie. "You can get out of my house."

Fylnius speaks up from the back of the room. "I don't trust you, Runecarver. You're still playing some game with us, aren't you?"

Parthol looks affronted. "I'm playing the game we should all be playing – saving the world from destruction. Anything else I wish to do can wait until after that."

Dranko points at Parthol. "If we come back, and find that you've taken advantage of our absence to cause trouble, it will not go well for you."

Parthol laughs. "I assure you I am in no position to do that, even if I wanted to."

"He's lying!" says Flicker.

Aravis stands and moves to the door. "He should remember that while no human agency can bring us back from below the Barrier, we are only pawns of the Gods, and they can make up their own minds."

"Harbor what false hope you wish." Parthol also steps toward the door. "But no divine agency can bring you back, either. I have learned as much."

"Even if we don't come back," says Kibi, "there are plenty of other people here to keep you in line."

Parthol looks slowly around the room. Does his gaze linger a little too long on the now-powerless Archmagi? No one can say for sure. "Yes," he says. "Yes, there are."

Dranko opens the door.

"Ah," says Parthol. "I see you're inviting me to go. I pray for all of your success. Salk, if you need to talk to me again... you'll have to wait." Parthol exits the house and vanishes from the street. The room collectively exhales.

Junaya looks at the small pile of stones at the table. "He only gave us eight? We're going to need at least twenty!"

"What do you mean?" asks Dranko.

"Well, you don't think you're going down there by yourselves, do you?"

"Well, yeah," says Dranko. "We kind of do."

"Why?"

"Someone has to stay behind, to cover the retreat if we fail," says Aravis. By way of explanation he summarizes their recent chat with High Priestess Jahnda.

The Stormknight Dalesandro scoffs. "Retreat? Wait a minute. You went and spoke to Jahnda the Watcher?"

"It was Uthol Inga who last did damage to the Adversary," says Ernie.

"Yeah," growls the Stormknight. "And a fat lot of good it did us."

"It got the Adversary imprisoned," Aravis notes, "and gave us thousands of years of peace."

"But it failed to *kill* the Adversary," says Dalesandro. "I have to agree with Jahnda that it won't work the second time, either. The Watcher didn't, and still doesn't, have the might within her to kill the Adversary."

Dranko looks Dalesandro in the eyes. "I know that your God and your religion have certain... theories and parables about Uthol Inga, but some of them just aren't true."

The Stormknight looks like he wants to spit on the floor. "You were shown the truth and didn't see it," he says bitterly. "From your description, Uthol Inga had sided with the Adversary. The others fled. Then, at the end, the Watcher realized that if she stayed, the first thing the Adversary would do would be to turn on her and kill her. So she panicked, and stabbed Him in the back to save her own skin, and then begged the others to let her come with them, lying about her motives for staying in the first place!"

"Does it matter?" asks Ernie. "She still stabbed him in the back!"

"Only after betraying the other Travelers. And only to save herself."

"Enough!" says Salk, and the old wizard's voice still has power, even if his magic is gone. "This is not the place for a religious feud."

To Junaya, Aravis says, "There may come a point when the Gods will have to flee again, and taking whomever they can. People capable of assisting them will have to remain here."

"That is absolutely true," says Cornelia, High Priestess of Pikon. She looks at Junaya, and Royce, and Glade and Wellington. "Only Abernathy's Company is going to make the journey. Pikon has granted me a vision that it must be so. The rest of you will be needed here, though whether that is to cover a retreat, I don't know. But in the Company's absence, there will still be great dangers besetting Abernia and our kingdom of Charagan, and we will need you here to stand against those dangers." She turns to the Company. "Because while you are thwarting the Adversary's designs, if all on the surface is destroyed in the meantime, it will all have been for naught."

Junaya sighs and laughs. "Well, you *are* the ones who went to the city of dead Gods, and you *are* the ones who traveled a thousand years into the past to rewrite history, and you *are* the ones who stopped Mokad from joining the planes together..."

"Yeah," says Ernie. "We get all the crappy jobs."

"I don't think so," says Junaya. "Harrying the supply lines of the Delfirian army for six months? *That* was a crappy job."

The boy Wellington steps forward, bows to Cornelia, and says gravely, "I will pledge to defend Charagan against any and all dangers, while Ozilinsh's Company is traveling." He elbows Glade, who stands and adds, "Me too."

Royce gestures to the table. "You have an eighth stone." He makes a show of counting the seven members of the Company.

"It would be an honor to fight by your side," says Dranko, "but it's not going to happen this time. I have great respect for you, Royce, but we'd feel better if we knew that Charagan was in your hands. Also, we're likely to get our asses kicked numerous times, and you'd probably end up..."

"Yes, yes, I understood the subtext, thanks," says Royce.

"If it makes you feel any better," says Kibi, gesturing to Dranko, "you're way more famous than he is."

That's too much for Dranko to take. "Oh... Gaaaaah!" He addresses the room, gesticulating wildly. "We're going to have this out right now. Do you know what I gave up for the tentacles? You know what I gave up for the thing in my head? Being famous! That's what I gave up! I used to be famous! I was in the frikkin' parade with the rest of you! I was knighted too!"

No one answers him, but everyone looks at him with pity. "Dranko," says Salk gently, "I understand that having a piece of the Far Realms lodged in your head must be a very strange and difficult way to live, but..."

"Then answer me!" Dranko demands. "How is it that the rest of my Company is famous, and I am not?"

"Because they have done the greater deeds, those worthy of fame," says Salk.

"Oh no they have not! That is not true! I was knighted!"

Salk regards Dranko kindly. "Don't think that the Spire doesn't value your contributions extremely highly, Dranko."

Dranko's shoulders slump. "Never mind." Over the mind-link, he hears Ernie's voice. *We know, Dranko. No one else knows, but we know. We'll always know.*

King Crunard IV stands, with difficulty. His body is hale, but his eyes show a mind that is losing itself, and casting about for an anchor. The Company are put in mind of the sage Richter, who lost all his sanity from the study of Masked subjects.

"You should... go soon, I think," says the King. Nigel and Yale nod, as if the King has said something profound. "I'm sorry I've let things come to this," Crunard continues. "I'm not sure what I could have done... but it's my... my responsibility. I just wanted to say that I am proud to have such a collection of fine... people... helping out with... things. Yes, you should go soon. They've had a long head start, haven't they. Could you go... tomorrow?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," says Dranko.

"Good. Good. Thank you," says the King. With effort, he focuses his eyes on the Company. "I'm sure it'll all work out for the best."



Goodbyes

The greatest and wisest personages of Charagan, members of the Spire all, stand and stretch as the meeting adjourns. General Anabrook rolls her head to work out a crick in her neck before walking over to where the High Priestess Cornelia of Pikon talks with the diviner Belinda. "You say you've had visions?" Anabrook asks Cornelia. "That everyone except for Ozilinsh's group needs to stay behind and protect the kingdom? From what, exactly?"

Cornelia is obviously frustrated by the question. "By indirect evidence, something related to the Black Circle, given that our attempts to divine the specifics all failed. Beyond that, I don't know."

Dranko attaches himself to the edge of the conversation. "And Rosetta isn't here, I can't help but notice."

"No," says Belinda. "I couldn't find her. She's too well concealed by her Silver Shell anti-divinatorys."

"Which is not surprising," adds Cornelia, "since we couldn't find her last time, either. But she was up to great good, and performing a vital task. I trust she is doing something similar right now."



One by one the guests file past the Company, shaking each of their hands, wishing them the best of luck, and assuring them that despite Parthol's dire warnings, they'll surely come back triumphant when all is said and done. But while the well-wishes are sincere enough, these assurances of a safe return ring a bit hollow.

As the teenaged Wellington offers his thanks and hopes for success, Dranko leans in and whispers, "Remember, girls don't dig wizards who spend all their time at home with their noses buried in books. Get out there and live a little too, right?" Wellington blushes and can't stop himself from glancing at Glade. Dranko smirks.

When Yale is saying her goodbyes, Kibi asks her quietly, "Is the King... Has he gotten worse recently?"

Yale clicks her tongue. "Long years of a constant need to know Masked subjects, have put an irreversible strain on his mind.

It's amazing that he's lasted so long with this level of cogency. But he'll be all right. It won't kill him, and I don't think he'll become demented. It will just be difficult for him. We'll keep him comfortable, and as sane as we can."

"He's lucky to have you," says Dranko. Yale bows her head in thanks. "And so are we," Dranko adds.

Yale smiles. "It's been an honor to work with you all these years. The kingdom is lucky to have you." She gives them one last searching look, an assessing look, perhaps wondering how great a challenge they'll be able to meet, then smiles and walks out the door.

When the last guest has departed, Dranko looks down at the little pouch of translation stones left by Parthol Runecarver on the living room table. "I bet these things will allow Parthol to spy on us." He scoops the pouch up anyway and puts it in his haversack. "So, the Underdark! Can you imagine all the loot down there that's waiting for us to find?"

"It's a whole world of things you haven't licked yet," says Ernie.

"What do they grow in the Underdark?" asks Flicker worriedly. "Do you think they grow tobacco?"

"It's probably all fungus," says Dranko. "Have you ever smoked a fungus cigar?"

Flicker makes a face. "Then we'll have to bring some with us. Do we have any extra *bags of holding*?"



The remainder of the afternoon sees the members of the Company teleporting about the kingdom, saying their goodbyes to friends and family. Kibi arrives in Eggemoggin and finds that his mother is at home, but his father is up in the high mountains looking to help those who need evacuating from earthquake- or lava-damaged regions. The seismic activity has ceased in the past day, but several mountain outposts have been damaged.

Kibi explains the nature of his errand as best he can to his mother. "...And we probably won't be coming back," he finishes sadly.

"I don't believe that," says Gela dun Bim. "But if it's true, we'll just have to wait a few more decades, and then we'll see each other in Moradin's halls and you can tell me all about it."

Dranko has a number of stops to make. He starts with his grandfather in Tal Korum, then goes to the Church in Tal Hae to say goodbye to Harmon, Califax and Praska. Finally he visits Lucas in the Manse of the Undermen. "Here's the deal," he says to Lucas. "This time I've been told we're really not coming back, so it looks like you're done with me."

Lucas just rolls his eyes. "No," says Dranko earnestly. "Seriously. But either way, it's been an honor and a pleasure working with you."

Lucas gives Dranko a searching look. "Just try to remember everything, the next time you come back. I'm sick of explaining your own life to you."

Aravis visits the Feline Conclave to warn them of what's coming. Most of the cats are alarmed, but don't seem to take in the true gravity of the situation. Only Inkspot, eldest of the Conclave, understands the enormity of what Aravis is telling them.

Curious, says Inkspot, that with all this going on, there's a movement among the Gods to prepare to flee. I have sensed none of it. Not from Quarrol, certainly. Perhaps the Gods don't want anyone to panic.

"Perhaps," Aravis agrees. "But two of the Gods have vanished from this world already, and we hope it's to prepare the way."

Inkspot swishes his tail. *Don't you think they would have told someone? Do the leaders of your human churches know?*

Aravis shakes his head. "None of them know for certain."

Human civilizations come and go, says Inkspot. A new set of humans may be moving in, but cats will always be here.

"I suspect Quarrol will let you know what you need to do, when the time is right," says Aravis.

We will abide. Good luck, Aravis.

"And to you. It's been an honor being one of your number."



After saying tearful goodbyes to his parents, Ernie *plane shifts* to Evergreen, to say his fond farewells to Yoba. He finds her relaxing in a field tent, but she leaps to her feet and runs to embrace him. He had planned to jump right in with breaking the

news of his upcoming journey, but can't quite muster the nerve. Instead he starts regaling her with the tales of his adventures since they had last spoken. She has loved listening to Ernie's stories since the day the first met in Het Branoi, but as he sets in with the tale of the Crimson Maw, her attentive smiling face grows cloudy. "Uh oh." Ernie stops his narrative. "What did I do?"

"You didn't tell me," she says flatly. "You held *Tava's Righteous Fury* in your hands, and you didn't tell me!"

"Uh, I guess I did," Ernie admits. "I... I gave it away to a great hero of Yondalla, in the burial place of the Gods."

"Well, of course you did," says Yoba, frowning. "When you're done with *Tava's Righteous Fury*, you give it away, and it shows up where it's needed next. That's how it works."

"So you've heard of it," says Ernie, feeling his heart sink. "If you want, I can, uh, go back and get it for you."

"No," says Yoba. "It's probably not there anymore, anyway. So you... no, it doesn't matter. It's fine."

Ernie's face crumbles. "It's not fine. Even I can tell it's not fine. You're upset, and you have every right to be."

"It's my fault," says Yoba. "I should have said something before it was too late." Ernie gives her a quizzical look. "Did you know that I was named after Yoba Greenwater? She was one of the most famous heroes of my people. Probably the most famous. She was the only one on my world that had ever held *Tava's Righteous Fury*. I had always wanted to hold it myself. Growing up, I secretly hoped I'd be the next one the sword chose to wield against the goblins."

Ernie's heart keeps sinking, right down to his toes. He has no words to express his remorse. Yoba smiles at him. "At least tell me all about it," she says.

And so Ernie finishes his tale, and by the end it seems that Yoba has forgiven him. "Ernie, promise me, if you ever need to fight goblins again, you'll *tell* me, and invite me along."

Now Ernie realizes he can't put it off any longer. "I'm not sure I'm ever going to fight goblins again," he says quietly. "They might not have them where we're going next."

"Oh." Yoba can sense there's more Ernie hasn't said.

"Yoba," he blurts, "I can't come back from where we're going. And you can't come with me. What kind of cleric to Yondalla would I be if I took away their greatest defender?"

Yoba's modesty is reflexive. "I'm not their greatest defender. A good military thinker, yes, but..."

"You understand what I'm saying," says Ernie, hoping fervently that she does.

"That's all right," Yoba says with a smile. "I can still come with you. I don't mind not coming back, as long as I'm not coming back with you."

Ernie remembers to breathe. "I just can't bear the thought that you would get killed because of me. We're not coming back from the Underdark, but we probably won't survive, either!"

"Oh, and it'll be easy for me to live with myself, knowing that you might get killed in the Underdark, when I could have protected you!"

"I'm not very good at this, am I?" says Ernie in a small voice.

"Fortunately, no," says Yoba. "I'd hate to think you've had practice."

They both laugh, and then look at each other for a long time, until they have reached a wordless understanding. Yoba holds his hands between her own. "Ernest, look at me. Look right in my eyes, and promise me you'll come back. I know you don't think you can. I know you've been told you can't. But I know you've been told things like this before, so look at me, and promise me you'll come back."

Ernie looks into Yoba's deep green eyes. "I promise. I promise I'll come back."

Yoba takes a step back and breathes a sigh of relief. "Then I will wait for you," she says. "And don't even *think* about telling me we need to break off our engagement."

"I, uh, already thought about it, but I'll unthink it. And here, I have something else to show you. It's not *Tava's Righteous Fury*, but..." He draws the *Honor of Nemmin*, and tells her more stories of his adventures.

When his narrative has caught up to the present, Yoba takes his hands again and squeezes them. "I'll think about you every

day. And so will Yondalla. Besides, something tells me I'll see you again before it's all over. It's just a feeling I have. So be of good faith, and get ready to kick the Adversary's ass."

Ernie lets go of her hands and fishes out the token that will let him *plane shift* back to Abernia. Yoba gives him a slightly mischievous smile and makes a simple request. "Can you stay the night?"

Ernie beats all existing records for fastest blush, turning a deep red all the way to the tips of his ears. Yoba laughs. "Think it over, then, and *plane shift* back if you decide you'd like to."

But Ernie brightens and exclaims, "Cayyat!"

"Excuse me?"

He tells her about the Company's plans to spend a couple of months in the timeless demiplane of Cayyat, crafting and studying one final time before their downward journey. "You could come with us," says Ernie. "From your point of view, no time will pass here at all!"

Yoba cannot suppress her delight. "So I get to spend an extra month with you, and they won't miss me here at all? I don't see the downside. Count me in!"



When all are reunited later that day, Aravis opens up the door to Cayyat, and in they go. As before, they are standing on the deck of a mountainside cabin, with a crystal blue lake down below reflecting sunshine in a dazzling shimmer. They go into the cabin and find that the little goblinoid caretaker Gibbil is there waiting for them. "Don't kill him," whispers Ernie to Yoba. "He's a good guy."

"Hello, masters," says Gibbil. "Nice to see you again."

"Say," says Ernie, "will Cayyat open into whatever plane it's activated upon, or is it tied to Abernia in some way?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir," says Gibbil. "I never leave Cayyat. If you don't mind my asking, where do you expect to be?"

"We're off to the Underdark to kill the Adversary," says Dranko modestly.

Gibbil blinks. "Could you say that one more time, sir? I must have misheard you."

"We're going to the Underdark," says Dranko, "which is an underground world sealed off by the Gods, and we're going to kill the Adversary."

"I see, sir," says Gibbil. "Utterdark."

And upon that pronouncement by the little goblin, the cabin is plunged into darkness so deep, even their daily *mass darkvision* is foiled.

Everett: Okay, a George R.R. Martin-style cliffhanger today. Just don't take six years writing the next update.

Piratecat: Oops. Where did we get Cayyat from, again? Oh, yeah. Black Circle. Apparently it has a security system.

This, it's fair to say, does not end well.

StevenAC: Looks like we're about to see what prompted this comment from nearly three years ago...

Piratecat: Sagiro's a great big jerk, and after what he pulled at the game last night we may throttle him before he has a chance to finish the story. We were *forcibly* reminded that if we like someone, they must be eeevil. It'd been just long enough that the rule had slipped our minds.

Rat. Bastard.

Well played, Sagiro.

Piratecat: Stop encouraging him!

Everett: Wow. And you never got any inkling of this from Gibbil previously? And isn't he a neutral party, anyway? Fascinating.

Piratecat: Gibbil is a construct and not a person, an invariably polite and likeable entity that comes as part of Cayyat. After interacting with him so well for so long, it's no surprise it slipped our minds.



The Beginning of the End

There's a moment of dismay over the mind-link at this sudden turn of events, and that dismay is amplified as those in Cayyat realize that Morningstar and Grey Wolf, through some unfair trick of trans-demiplane passage, haven't yet arrived. Dranko can clearly hear a horrible sound, a tearing and squelching, coming from where Gibbil was standing.

"I think he's getting bigger," he shouts. Unable to see, he nonetheless activates his *boots of haste* and lashes out toward the noise with his whip. Ernie draws the *Honor of Nemmin*, steps toward the gruesome sounds, and slashes. He feels the blade bite deep into something huge and... chitinous?

Whatever Gibbil is turning into, it lets out a horrid rasping roar. "Your accent has changed!" says Dranko.

So, it seems, have its teeth. Dranko feels huge sharp teeth bite down on his shoulder, and a powerful claw rakes across the side of his head. The creature's gurgling, raspy breath is now coming from up near where they think the ceiling is. Yoba swings her own sword upward but doesn't strike anything solid.

Aravis Quickens a *cone of cold*, blasting upward and outward, and using the *battlestone of St. Jenniver* to avoid damaging any allies in its area of effect. He follows this up with *greater dispel magic*, but this has no effect on the blanketing darkness.

Kibi Quickens a Maximized *ray of enfeeblement* and fires it upward toward the noise of the beast, but can't tell if it's struck true. Then he takes a chance with *Otto's irresistible dance* and waves his hand as high as he can reach, but he fails to make contact with his enemy's body. Dranko continues to lash with his whip, making occasional contact, while Ernie does likewise with his sword. After Ernie drops a Quickened *holy smite* on it, they all hear the sound of a great lumbering beast retreating to the far side of the cabin's huge main room. A sickening wave of negative energy washes over them, draining away their life-force. Dranko and Yoba get the worst of it, but all of them feel the sadly familiar gut-draining pull of CON loss.

The Company hear the sound of Yoba charging across the room. "I think he's up near the ceiling!" she yells.

Aravis Quickens a *true strike* and sends a Maximized *disintegrate* towards where he imagines the monster to be. He is rewarded only with a series of crashes as part of the roof, robbed of its structural integrity, comes tumbling down upon the furniture. Kibi foregoes the *dance* still on his fingertips to try his own *greater dispel magic*, and this manages to partially banish the inky blackness. In the twilight-gloom that remains, they can see the shape of their foe – it's a wingless dragon, its serpentine body over fifteen feet long, clinging to the ceiling with its legs splayed out. Between its claws is an enormous hole where Aravis's *disintegrate* went clean through two support beams and the thick wooden ceiling.

Now that Kibi can see his foe, he Quickens a *cone of cold* and blasts it, coating its scaly body with blue ice. Dranko runs over and whips it in the face. And Ernie finishes it off with a *flame strike* that reduces the monster to an unholy char. The corpse drops to the floor at Dranko's feet and then vanishes. Light returns. In less than twenty seconds, the majority of Cayyat's interior space has been utterly trashed.

Gibbil reappears in the center of the devastation. "Hello, sirs!" he announces brightly. "Hello, madam," he says specifically to Yoba. "Welcome to the demiplane of Cayyat. It's a pleasure to see you here. This place passes timelessly, making for very efficient use of your time. My name is Gibbil, and I am the caretaker of Cayyat. How may I serve you today?"

Don't mention our mission! urges Ernie over the mind-link.

"How are you at woodworking?" Dranko asks, gesturing to the complete devastation all around them.

"Oh. Oh dear," says Gibbil, surveying the destruction. "This doesn't seem right. Cayyat is meant to be intact and safe for visitors! I'd best get to work on it right away."



Two (relative) months fly by quickly. Many items are crafted, scrolls inked, and potions brewed. Ernie and Yoba spend plenty of quality time together, and Morningstar finishes writing her chapters of Ellish scripture promised to High Priestess Rhiavonne. She keeps her tone informal, and makes sure to provide context for everything she writes so as to leave as little as possible open to interpretation for future generations. She specifically notes the importance of the Daywalkers, but adds a warning. *They are a weapon, she writes, and like all weapons, they can be a danger to their wielder.*

Though two months have passed in Cayyat, it's still the afternoon before the big Ellish funeral when they return. The proceedings start at midnight, and while it's a somber affair (as all funerals are), it carries an edge of righteous joy, and of celebration, since the sisters died in the service of so successful a cause. Morningstar is happy to see both her parents in attendance, but is more surprised to see Ernie's parents, Hob and Rowan. As she looks around at the guests paying their respects, she notices that Dranko's grandfather is there, all the way from Tal Korum. And Grey Wolf's brother and sister. And Kibi's parents. It turns out that Yale has done the legwork necessary to get all the Company's families together in one place, so that a final round of goodbyes can be said before the party starts their final subterranean journey. Though she is not personally in attendance, Yale has sent several royal guardsmen to watch over the funeral, and one of these whispers to Morningstar that for many years now, Yale has arranged for all the Company's families to be guarded as well as possible.

When the public mourning and heartfelt speeches have concluded, the Company return to the Greenhouse for a final night's sleep before the big day.



Over breakfast, Eddings refuses to become emotional. Despite the Company's strong belief that they will not be coming back, Eddings remains supremely skeptical. "I've heard this sort of thing before," he says dryly. "You've come back from everything else – from the past, from a Gods' cemetery, from an inescapable mountain prison, from a demiplane full of goblins, from a maze in a madman's mind, just to name a few. I'll plan my future based on the evidence, and will see you upon your return."

And so, the party say goodbye to Eddings and the cats, and Kibi casts *greater teleport*, whisking the Company far across the sea to the beach of Ula's island. Soon they have squeezed through the cliff-side fissure and lowered themselves down into the ten-sided chamber, its walls adorned with the holy symbols of the Kivian pantheon.

There is no little girl waiting for them. Instead, an old woman offers her greetings. She sits wearily against one wall, her skin wrinkled and her eyes rheumy.

Dranko approaches her. "Are you the same girl that we met here before?"

"Yes."

"How is it that you've aged?"

Ula smiles. "I suppose that my time is almost up."

"Does that mean we're late?" Dranko asks. "Is everything doomed?"

"Oh, no," says Ula. "I imagine that your arrival is the reason I am nearly at my end." This causes a stir of consternation among the party, but Ula shakes her head. "You misunderstand. This was my purpose all along. Yulan created me so that when you found this place, it was my beginning. When you leave, it will be my end. I will have served the purpose for which I was created... which is a nice feeling."

"But..." says Ernie, "was your life fun?"

"I don't see what fun has to do with it," says Ula. "But I feel fulfilled, if that's what you mean."

She looks at all of their serious faces. "So, this is it. You're ready this time. You have that look about you." All seven heroes nod their heads.

"I should warn you: magic doesn't necessarily work the same way down below. Lots of things don't. You may find your most potent magics muted."

Dranko gestures to his *helm of brilliance*. "If this doesn't work after all the money I spent on it, I'm going to be very, very angry!"

Ula chuckles. "Abernia's going to miss you, Dranko. They broke the mold with you." She grows more serious. "I'm sure the world will miss you all in the weeks and months to come, but it will be best for you to take this course. Your enemies have a long head start, but I suspect they have much to keep them occupied down there."

"If you could give us one bit of advice, what would it be?" Dranko asks.

Ernie laughs. "Don't sass the demon?"

"Say," says Dranko, "once we go down there, the demon lord can't get my soul anymore. In your face, Tapheon!"

Ula looks at the group. "My advice would be: 'take nothing for granted.'"

"I'm going to miss the sky," says Dranko.

"I'll miss Ell!" says Morningstar.

"Oh, don't be too worried about that," says Ula. "The Gods will still keep their eyes on you. They'll just have to work a little harder to exert their influence, and they'll have more competition than they're used to."

"This whole thing about Gods walking around kind of freaks me out," says Dranko. Aravis clears his throat and grins.

"I guess it's time," says Kibi. Alone among the Company, he doesn't mind the prospect of living out his life in an underground environment, and is eager to get started.

"Right below here," says Ula, "is another room, just like this one, though it has no trapdoor." She points to the two large handles that protrude from the floor. "In that room you will see a green glowing circle in the center. It is a one-way *teleport* device, which Yulan put there soon after he made the Barrier. It will take you very, very far down. Hundreds of miles down. Better to say that the distance doesn't matter. It's prohibitively far.

"The *teleport circle* will take you to the one spot where the Barrier can, in theory, be breached. I don't know *how* it can be breached; you'll have to figure that out for yourselves. It is possible that those three miscreants, who forced their way past me when I was younger, are there right now, scratching their heads. They might not know how to get through the Barrier, either. You should be prepared to fight them, in case you find them waiting for you.

"After that, you're on your own. Are you ready?"

She struggles to her feet, refusing several offers to help her up. "This is probably my last hour on Abernia, so let me do what I'm meant to do."

Ula reaches down and grasps one of the handles. She looks like she couldn't pick up a dictionary, let alone the enormous marble trapdoor, but she lifts it effortlessly. "Down you go. Good luck!"

Dranko puts on a grave expression. "Ula, we'll remember you fondly after you're gone."

"Thank you, Dranko."

The party drop down into the lower room, and above them Ula closes the trapdoor. This chamber is lit only by the glowing green *teleportation circle*, a flickering column of light three feet across. By its ghostly luminosity they can see the symbols of the Kivian Gods and Goddesses etched into the walls.

There is no more discussion. One by one they move into the circle, and each in turn is transported deep into the heart of Abernia. It is, at last, the beginning of the end.



HERE ENDS PART THREE

OF

THE ADVENTURES OF ABERNATHY'S COMPANY



