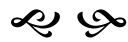


Sagiro's Story Hour

PART FOUR



CHAPTERS 31 TO 34

OF

THE ADVENTURES OF ABERNATHY'S COMPANY



Sagiro's Story Hour, Part Four

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CHAPTER 31: **A New World**

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Beneath the Iron Barrier, the Company find a world of wonders and creatures unlike anything they've previously experienced. They encounter new dangers and make new allies, even as they follow the trail of their enemies from the surface – Meledien, Tarsos and Seven Dark Words. With several months' head start, their opponents have left devastation and deadly traps behind them – as well as, apparently, some powerful creatures with an unhealthy fixation on Dranko...

CHAPTER 32: **Looking, and Leaping**

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The Company continue their quest for the particular Leaping Circles that will take them to where they need to be – a quest whose urgency is only increased by Aravis's visions of what is happening in the surface world they have left behind. Dranko is again specially targeted for attack, they draw unwelcome attention from the deities of this strange realm, and when they finally reach the first of the Leaping Circles they need, it deposits them into a very nasty situation indeed...

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On the surface, casualties mount as the Spire desperately fights against Naradawk and his allies, while the Company forge on through the Underdark. Dranko gains a nightmarish insight into the nugget of Far Realms insanity lodged in his head; later they find themselves intervening in a war taking place in the world of dreams. As the evil of the Adversary begins to shake the world, a reunion with someone they have not seen in a very long time leads them to the final challenge...

CHAPTER 34: **The Last Day**

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The day on which the fate of Abernia will be decided has at last arrived, as the Company, with some unexpected reinforcements, are brought face to face with the Adversary – the ultimate source of all the evils threatening their world. Dranko has a critical choice to make, as the final desperate battle against the dark god and the enemies from the surface who have awakened him begins. What will be the cost? And what will be the ultimate destiny of Abernathy's Company?



Welcoming Committee

There is no momentous feeling of having traveled hundreds of miles, or indeed of having traveled at all. Each member of the Company steps into the light, and steps out into darkness.

The horrid feeling of Essence bombards them, and Ernie hastily casts *magic circle of protection* before anyone passes out. The assault on their senses is blunted. After an initial fear that Seven Dark Words has laid a trap for them, they see with their darkvision that they are alone. The party stand upon a single iron slab that extends past the edge of their vision in all directions. There are no walls, and nothing holding up the vast rock ceiling that looms not more than twenty feet above their heads. The iron is unnaturally smooth, appearing almost polished over its entire surface, except for one blemish. Ten feet from where they stand, the party see a ragged-edged hole in the iron, as if some impossibly strong acid has burned its way through it. It is from that hole that the taint of Essence comes.

Kibi walks tentatively to the hole and looks down. He sees that an irregular shaft has been made, barely wide enough for a single person, extending downward at least sixty feet. The walls of the shaft are iron – Yulan’s Barrier is at least that thick. Kibi doesn’t see any of the Adversary’s blood remaining on the interior walls of the hole, which is good, because he thinks it would be impossible for anyone to descend through it without touching the sides. Grey Wolf casts *enhanced senses* and takes a look after Kibi has moved away. He thinks he can spot the end of the tunnel, far below, at least a hundred feet. A faint flicker of light shines from the depths.

Staying close to Ernie, they briefly explore the area around them, and find that if they walk a hundred feet in any direction, the ceiling slopes downward until it presses against the immense iron slab. They are in what is effectively a bubble, a solitary air pocket, countless miles below the surface.

Back at the foul shaft, Ernie murmurs a prayer to Yulan. “*You know why we are here, and what we are trying to do. Will you allow our passage?*”

Flicker drops a lit coin down into the hole, while Grey Wolf watches it fall to better gauge its depth. The coin’s light shines upon the walls, until it drops out the bottom of the tunnel, bounces off something even farther below, and rolls out of sight. Aravis casts *light* on the end of a torch, and they lower it down on a rope. After it exits out the bottom of the shaft, it goes another fifty feet before it touches the ground.

“I don’t think they’re waiting for us,” says Ernie. “They have a job to do, and I’m sure they’ve moved on to do it.”

Dranko goes first (after getting a personalized *protection from evil* from Ernie), shimmying down the rope through the narrow shaft – a shaft burned through Yulan’s world-spanning iron shell by Adversary blood. He can look up and see the others watching him, but when he reaches the mid-way point they start to fade, and his connection to them via the *telepathic bond* goes out. By the time he has reached the bottom, he can hear faint whispers around the edges of his mind – similar to the mental chatter over the mind-link, but as a background noise, indecipherable.

As he emerges from the shaft, Dranko finds that there is light here that is not coming from the party’s enchanted objects, a light that is brighter than twilight though not so bright as daytime sunlight. It is coming from dust. Tiny glowing specks float all around him, and though Dranko cannot focus on any single one of them, the little motes provide a constant glow.

In the light of these illuminated dust-specks, he sees that the Blood-bored shaft opens into an enormous cavern that stretches for hundreds of yards around him. Down below – not directly beneath the hole, but hundreds of feet off to his left – is a large stone building, a temple of some kind, with symbols etched onto its walls. The most prominent of these symbols is an open black hand, and with a shudder Dranko thinks of the Hand of the Adversary, which fell to Abernia and smashed its way down to the Underdark. Has it given rise to its own foul cult?

Two gigantic stalactites, easily a hundred feet tall and twenty across where they meet the ceiling, hang above the temple, pointed downward towards it like giants’ spears. A third stalactite, just as large, has already broken off and smashed through the temple’s roof. It’s impossible for Dranko to tell how long ago it fell.

There are no signs of people, no noises of animals, and no stirring of breeze. The coin they had dropped has come to rest half-way down a wide stone staircase that winds its way up from the temple along one wall of the cavern. The staircase ends directly beneath the hole, and otherwise leads nowhere at all.

Dranko tugs on the rope to indicate it's safe, and soon all seven of them are standing on a wide stone platform at the top of the staircase. They all have questions, obviously, but before anyone can speak, they each become aware of something... odd... in their minds. They can hear one another's thoughts, just barely, even outside the mind-link! Not enough to make out anything specific – it's more like an incoherent background whisper, the mental equivalent of the din of voices in a crowded plaza.

Morningstar is an expert at teasing out the thoughts of others; she tries to zero in on a single train of whispered thought, and finds Flicker's. As he talks out loud, he is also broadcasting his thoughts in a small way, and Morningstar hears thoughts and speech simultaneously. It's severely jarring, and makes it hard for any of them to talk to one another, as a natural residual telepathy occurs concurrently with their spoken words.

When they all stop talking, the telepathic echoes quiet, though Morningstar thinks she can still detect the faintest of mental reverberations at the edge of her perception. "Hello?" she calls. "We hear you out there. Are you trying to talk to us?"

Physical echoes bounce back from the temple below, but no one answers. She tries a *detect thoughts* and clutches her head in her hands. The thoughts of her friends, typically easy to ignore, are a raucous babbling in her mind. But with an effort she filters them out, and becomes satisfied that there are no other thinking minds close by.

The stairway down to the temple runs along the cavern wall on their right, and every minute or so there is a long flat section. Jutting from the wall at each of these platforms is a black hand carved from some sort of polished black stone. They're shiny, probably from being touched repeatedly. The stairs themselves are also well worn, as though hundreds of feet have climbed them over the years. It's all evidence that this staircase was built to allow a pilgrimage, from the temple up to the rocky dead-end where the Company happened to drop down into the cavern.

Finally they reach the ground, and walk to the huge double doors at the front of the temple. These are made of something similar to wood, but which is not wood – more like a petrified fungus coated with resin. Open black hands are carved into both, and they stand ajar. Grey Wolf, with his *enhanced senses* active, smells death coming from inside the temple. "Oh, joy," he says.

The party walk through a small antechamber and into a huge open space like the nave of a cathedral. In the back right they can see the bottom section of the great stalactite that has pierced the ceiling, its point gouged into the marble floor. All around it is smashed rubble, boulder-size chunks of worked stone from the walls and ceiling, along with broken off bits of the stalactite itself.

Morningstar casts *detect evil*, and the spell warns her of a very weak emanation that permeates the entire temple. And though there are no bodies in sight, Grey Wolf is certain that the smell of corpses is coming from the far end of the great hall. By the light of the glowing motes, he can see several doors leading out to other parts of the cathedral (where the stalactite has not clogged the exits with detritus). The motes bob and float in a slow dance, though there is no breeze here at all.

By the dust layer on the ground, Dranko guesses that the place has been abandoned for months. On a lark he casts *know age* on one intact wall of the temple, and learns that it is 810 years old. All of them are pleased that a divination spell worked, but Dranko is suspicious enough that he casts it a second time. It returns the same answer. This temple was built 810 years ago.

"Hey, look at this!" Ernie has noticed a series of intact murals set into the wall to their left. They are beautifully carved, and have avoided all damage from the stalactite, which fell into the opposite corner of the temple. The Company crowd around to look, as the six detailed panels tell a story.

The first panel shows a large cavern, empty but with three huge stalactites hanging from the ceiling.

The second panel shows that same cavern, but a huge black hand reaches out of one wall. A light shines from the palm of the hand, onto the floor of the cavern.

The third panel depicts the temple itself, half-built, on the very spot where they now stand. The creatures shown building it are humanoid, though not quite proportioned correctly.

The fourth panel shows the temple fully built, with a bright corona around it.

The fifth panel shows a crowd of humanoids on the left side of the frame, and a little black hand has been drawn over each of their heads. They are all bowing. In front of them, on the right side of the frame, are seven more humanoid figures, four of which are about the same size as those in the black-hand crowd, and three of which are noticeably shorter.

The sixth and final panel shows one of the figures with a black hand symbol, putting a circlet or crown on the head of one of the shorter members of the group of seven.

"So," says Dranko. "We should have worshippers. Where are they?"

Kibi frowns. “I have a feeling that the people who were supposed to give us that crown, are who we’re smelling in the back of this temple.”

As if his comment were a summons, a throng of creatures comes streaming in from various doorways leading out of the main temple chamber. They are between six and seven feet tall, and humanoid, though they are top-heavy, broad-shouldered, with slanted torsos and oddly jointed legs. They float a few inches from the ground, and dirty gray robes with hoods are draped over their bodies – robes bearing the symbol of an open black hand on the sides of the hoods. The faces of these creatures are pale, sallow, and in the middling stages of decomposition.

Each has a large, burned-out hole where its heart should be. The nausea of Essence accompanies them.

StevenAC: Wow, that’s a great way to get the party invested straight away in this new environment they’ve been dumped into – have a group of people who’ve been anticipating their arrival and ready to welcome them for who knows how long, except the bad guys got there first and killed them all off. Well played again, you RBDM...

Quartz: Awesome! And definitely a RBDM moment. Which I am so totally going to steal.

Everett: When did the party first get their permanent mental link? I’ve no idea, myself; seems like they’ve just always had it.

Middle Snu: I vaguely remember that they simply started casting it every day as a “standard practice” once they hit high level, and I assume they still do.



Onward and Downward

Dranko wastes no time. He activates his *boots of haste*, shifts to a better defensive position, and annihilates one of the floating robed creatures with a salvo of perfectly placed whip strikes. The thing drops into a mangled heap, its long wooden staff clattering to the floor.

Each of these things has such a staff which, like their faces, crawls with squidgy black lesions, the telltale mark of Adversary blood infection. One of the monsters glides forward and taps Aravis gently with his staff. Aravis vanishes. His voice, annoyed, still sounds over the *telepathic bond*. *Ah, crap. I’m in a tunnel somewhere. A long tunnel.*

I thought teleportation didn’t work down here, says Flicker.

That may be, says Aravis, *but that thing just managed it. But if I can be teleported to wherever I am, I should be able to get myself back.*

A second of the infected creatures stares at Dranko, who feels the horrid burning of sympathetic black lesions rising to his own skin. Then it touches its staff to his chest, and he can feel intelligence draining from his mind. Also, the interior of the temple disappears, and he finds himself transported high up on the path they had already traversed, not far from where they emerged from the hole through the Iron Barrier.

They did something to me! he complains over the mind-link. His brain doesn’t seem to be working correctly. *What’s that word? Tumbleport? I think they tumbleported me. Er, I’m having some trouble thinking about words.*

Yet another of the foul things taps Kibi with its staff, and the dwarf reappears directly outside the temple. His head feels muzzy, like he’s trying hard to come fully awake.

Ernie pulls out his holy symbol and holds it forward, invoking the name of Yondalla as he tries to turn the Essence-infused undead. They flinch, very slightly, but are otherwise unharmed. “Oh, crud,” Ernie mutters. “I think I was supposed to cross my fingers or something. I haven’t turned undead in a while!”

Grey Wolf decides he wants nothing to do with these robed menaces and their brain-sucking forced-teleportation staves. He changes into a dragon, flies upward, and circles, getting ready to breathe. Such a contingency doesn’t occur to Flicker; he stabs the closest foe repeatedly with a dagger, though with some misgivings about having lost Dranko as a flanking buddy. His target doesn’t drop, and he feels the wrongness of Essence flowing from it like a poison.

Kibi is still plenty smart. He casts *effulgent epuration*, surrounding himself with twenty silver discs. So girded, he runs back into the temple doorway and Quickens an Empowered *coldfire*. This strikes two of his enemies, but while they do suffer some damage, it’s not severe. These things have some resistance to fire. But there is a strange side-effect to his spell. Where the burst of magical energy detonated, the little light-motes that provide illumination here in the Underdark are completely wiped out. A strange black sphere of un-light now hangs in the temple interior, almost like a solid object itself, and only slowly do the light-motes along its edges start to drift inward to re-illuminate the gap.

Morningstar also tries turning, imploring Ell to smite her foes, but again the monsters resist. Sighing, she Quickens a *divine favor*. Aravis tries to *teleport* back, but it fails. *Wait*, he complains. *I can't teleport back, even though I was teleported here? Damn it!* He adds a few more curses about the injustice of the universe's inner workings, while Dranko dashes back down the stairs toward the temple below.

The corrupted priests press in upon the Company. Ernie resists their attempt to *teleport* him away, but suffers terrible damage from their pulsing black lesions. Morningstar and Flicker are sapped of intellect and sent elsewhere – Morningstar to an upper floor of the temple (where she can see Grey Wolf's draconic form wheeling around almost at eye-level), and Flicker to the wide cavern outside.

Ernie busts out his ultimate weapon against the undead – *mass heal* – and catches two of the enemy in its net. One is nearly blasted to pieces, leaving it with protruding bones and leaking sludgy black fluid. The second is badly damaged, though not so thoroughly as the first. And of course he himself is healed of his wounds. Seeing that one of his enemies could almost be felled with harsh language, he finishes it off with a Quickened *holy smite*.

Grey Wolf dive-bombs and breathes on the enemy, but they dodge nimbly away from the center of his acid cone, and worse, their energy resistance extends to acid as well. Bostock, subsumed into Grey Wolf's dragon form, is still able to communicate. *They're not resistant to steel*, he says, obviously frustrated. But like Kibi's spell before it, Grey Wolf's dragon breath has left a wide cone of darkness slashed through the ambient light of the temple interior.

Kibi foregoes the energy attacks this time around and casts *summon monster IX*, calling into being a pack of five greater earth elementals. Two of these immediately move to grapple Kibi's enemies, while the remaining ones pound them with boulder-fists. Dranko rushes into the room just in time to see this happen; he charges forward, whip cracking, and tears chunks of moribund flesh from one of the corrupted monsters' bones.

Morningstar downs a potion of *fly* and swoops from her high balcony to rejoin the fight, just as the two grappling elementals vanish, teleported to who-knows-where. The newly free undead stare at Dranko and Ernie, their black pustules squirming along their skin and causing similar lesions to form and burst on their victims' faces. Ernie fights down the horror and returns fire with *searing light*, but his target is nimble and dodges the ray. Grey Wolf retains his dragon form, but since his breath weapon has proved ineffectual, he goes for the bite instead. He is spared learning what a mouthful of Essence-infected undead tastes like, as the agile creature ducks under Grey Wolf's closing jaws.

Kibi still has three elementals left. He instructs two of them to grapple the undead, and once they have done so, the third punches one of their heads right off its shoulders. Only one enemy now remains, and it doesn't last much longer. Morningstar burns a hole through its stomach with a *darkbeam*, and Dranko rips it apart with a barrage of whip-cracks. Its infected staff clatters to the floor.

carborundum: Good grief – that sounded like a tough fight (for 20th level characters)! And I'm shaking my fist at Meledien in sympathy, guys...



Even before the Company can catch their collective breaths, a massive sound echoes all around the temple and the cavern surrounding it, a wrenching-metal sound, like a huge iron barrel is buckling beneath an indescribable weight. This grows louder over a handful of seconds, and then finishes with a thunderous slamming, as though a metal giant the size of a ship had pounded its fists together. Dranko rushes outside to look, expecting maybe that one of the remaining two stalactites has broken off, but they are both still hanging above the temple. He thinks the sound may have come from the stairs through which they descended, and runs off to investigate. The others follow.

There is no more hole, burned through Yulan's shell with Adversary blood. The sound they heard was the Iron Barrier resealing itself, leaving only a thin, ragged seam behind. If a return to the surface world seemed doubtful before, now all doubt has been erased.

Over the mind-link they hear Aravis's voice. *I've come to a door. I think it leads into the cavern with the welcome temple, the one you all are in. The door I'm looking at is locked, chained and barred from this side. And there are four glyphs carved into it, which I can read thanks to Parthol's translator beads. They mean DANGER, WARNING, STOP and DEATH.*

He casts *knock*, so that he can return to his friends, all the while grumbling that Adversary blood allowed the enemy creatures to teleport others, in apparent violation of the rules of the Underdark. Once all are gathered, Morningstar uses a *wand of restoration* to cure everyone of the intelligence drain inflicted by the dead priests.



Able to search the rest of the temple free of distraction, the Company discover a richly appointed room on the upper story. In the back of this chamber is a statue, a tall woman sculpted of black rock, her hands raised, palms up. She is humanoid, though not human, and the hands of the statue match closely the many hands they have seen ornamenting the lower temple and the walls outside.

In the center of the room is a table, on which rests a cushion. There is a round indentation in the pillow, where a heavy circlet must have rested for generations.

Next to the cushion is a severed head, of the same race as those creatures the party just fought. And stacked behind the statue in the back, in a reeking heap, are twenty more bodies. Most are wearing priestly robes, and all of their clothes are made of an odd, stiff cloth. Each has a hole burned into its chest.

The Company's hatred of Meledien at this moment is difficult to overstate.

Morningstar casts *speak with dead* on the head upon the cushion. Its answers are barely audible, coming in rasping groans. "I'm sorry we're late. We are the seven you were waiting for. What were you supposed to give to us?"

"*Circlet of Yavin.*"

"Who was Yavin?"

"*One of the Sister Gods.*"

"What was the Circlet of Yavin supposed to do for us?"

"*Guide you.*"

"Why were we the ones supposed to receive it?"

"*Prophecy of Yavin.*"

"Was there anything else you were supposed to give us?"

"*No.*"

"Is there anywhere else we can find the Prophecy of Yavin?"

"*It is well known... oral tradition.*"

"No one in your temple survived. How should we put your people to rest?"

"*Burn.*"

Thinking that perhaps this head was left by their enemies to convey some message, Morningstar grits her teeth and asks, "Is there anything else you were supposed to tell us?"

"*They said, 'It's already over.'*"

"Where was the Circlet supposed to guide us?"

"*The place where you will fulfill your destiny.*"

"If you were us, where would you head next?"

"*Kessedth.*"

The others, listening to the head speak, hear only a guttural gibberish, scattered sub-vocalizations and coughed-up snippets, but Morningstar can divine their meaning. That's because even the poor decapitated priest is speaking partly with sound and partly in thoughts, but only Morningstar hears the thought portions of the answers.

The answers only confirm the Company's fears; this Temple and everything in it was dedicated to *them*, and housed an artifact meant to guide them to where they would, presumably, save the world. But that has all been derailed by Meledien, Tarsos and Seven Dark Words, who now have the Circlet of Yavin to go along with their six-month head start.

Due diligence leads them to explore the remainder of the temple. In a desk drawer, along with a pen and pot of dried-up ink, Flicker discovers several high-quality diamonds and sapphires, along with four or five gray crystal fragments. A second drawer holds over twenty square mithril chits. The halfling guesses the total is worth at least ten thousand gold pieces, and Dranko rejoices that at least some good has come from their arrival.

Kibi strokes his beard. “We should have brought twigs and branches and normal cloth with us. Imagine how valuable they’d be to someone down here.”

Before leaving the temple, the Company make a pile of the slain priests, and burn them, uttering prayers to the Sister God Yavin. The dust-mote lights drift away from the flames.



They leave the Cavern of the Temple by the door Aravis has discovered, its chains and locks and bars now in a pile on the ground. Dranko crosses out the existing glyphs and adds his own: the symbol meaning SAFE.

The tunnel leading away from the cavern starts out wide and high, with a floor worn smooth, especially down its center. Soon enough, though, it becomes lower, narrower, and filled with twists and turns. Always it heads downward, usually gently but sometimes precipitously, though in the latter places, ladders or ropes or even stairs have been built in to make it easier to navigate the steep drops. Taking a page from Dranko’s book, Ernie licks one of the ‘wooden’ ladders and detects a faint taste of fungus.

An hour into their journey, the dust motes begin to grow dim. It’s not that they’re entering a darker area; even the lights behind them are darkening. Aravis makes the connection first; that somewhere miles above them, the sun is setting. Kibi *stone shapes* the ground flat, in an area large enough to support Aravis’s *secure shelter*. Soon enough the light-motes have winked out, leaving them in darkness. All of them can still hear faint whispers whenever it’s quiet, the murmur of thought-voices that could be just outside the shelter or a hundred miles distant.

They sleep, spending their first night beneath Yulan’s Barrier. It passes without incident.



They wake to find the light-motes are brightening once more. For hours the next day they follow the tunnel as it winds and bends downward and (Kibi thinks) eastward. At one stretch it widens out and the ground becomes flat; there are several barrels and bags here, and a large crate pushed against one tunnel wall.

PIRATECAT: “I click on them!”

SAGIRO: “They burst open, except for one barrel, which explodes!”

Flicker pries open a barrel and finds it full of musty water topped with a layer of scum. The crates contain moldy food, including something which looks suspiciously like an apple. After casting a purifying orison on it, Dranko takes a bite. It’s not an apple, though the taste is reminiscent. It’s tart, slightly bitter, and not wholly unpleasant.

Morningstar casts a *thought capture*. It’s difficult to translate what she finds, so alien are the thought processes of the Underdark natives, but she thinks she understands the sentiment well enough: it’s someone eager to see the temple where the saviors are prophesied to arrive.

“I hope there’ll still be someone alive to save,” says Dranko. The next living creature they see down here will be the first.



After another night in a *secure shelter*, Grey Wolf decides to speed up the journey by casting a *phantom steed* for everyone in the Company. Their progress improves markedly. Every ten miles or so is another flattened and widened length of tunnel stocked with food and drink; some of these have moldy straw pallets as well. By the time they arrive at a second door at this far end of the tunnel, Kibi thinks they’ve descended another mile and a half below where the temple waited.

Like the door far above, this one is locked. Kibi casts *knock*, and they hear the sounds of bars, chains and locks falling away. Flicker slowly pushes the door open, and they step out onto a high and wide ledge overlooking a large natural cavern which is home to a little town. There are eight buildings clustered below, through which runs a little stream. Several tunnels lead out from the cavern. The far wall is more vertical than the others, and is covered with something multicolored that glistens in the light of the motes.

There is no sign of movement down in the town, but as they fly their mounts downward they detect no stench of death, which is something of a relief. “Anyone here?” calls Dranko. His voice echoes, but is not answered.

The shimmering wall turns out to be a vertical garden, growing fungus in parti-colored varieties. A system of pumps and pipes brings water to the top of the wall, where it sheets down over the sprouting mushrooms. Even Ernie is not familiar with the types.

Three buildings stand out, larger than the rest. The one at the far end of the cavern is probably a temple, judging from the huge carved black hands that adorn its walls. A second is an old general store, its crumbling shelves stocked with moldy food, boots, ropes, water skins and climbing equipment. Kicked under the counter are two gray crystal chits and three mithril squares. There is no blood or other sign of violence, and no indications of a hasty evacuation. The Company speculate that this was a town that supplied pilgrims headed to the Cavern of Arrival. It's no wonder that it's been abandoned.

The third large building was once a two-story inn. The party wander through its rooms and halls; the beds are made of a wood-like hard fungus, and the mattresses stuffed with something similar to, but not exactly, feathers.

Grey Wolf, under the influence of *enhanced senses*, hears a sound coming from one of the rooms at the end of the second-floor hallway. It sounds like snoring.



Q & A

Slowly, Ernie opens the door from behind which the snoring is coming. There is (unsurprisingly) someone asleep in a bed, a creature of the same race as the doomed priests from the Temple. His skin is a mossy green, heavily wrinkled. He is eight feet tall and broad-shouldered, but the bed is sized for his kind. Grey Wolf pokes his head in and sees a staff leaning up against the wall next to the bed, but there is no sign of armor or weapons.

Grey Wolf casts *mage hand* and taps the sleeping figure on the shoulder. The tall man's eyes open; he blinks a few times and sits up slightly, looking confused.

"Hello," says Ernie from the doorway.

"We're the saviors," Dranko adds. "Sorry we're late."

"Not sure I would have opened with that," Grey Wolf grumbles.

"Sorry to wake you," says Kibi. "But you're the first living being we've seen down here."

The creature sits up fully, his body folding and unfolding in ways that are just slightly wrong due to his odd physiology. He speaks in a strange tongue that is translated into heavily accented common by Parthol's stones. "You are... late."

"We're not late," says Ernie. "Just those jerks were here first."

The creature looks at them askance and cocks his head. It's tricky for the members of the Company to make themselves understood; they are talking too much, and garbling the thought-parts of their speech. When the native creature had spoken, it was mostly subvocalizing, but he was also thinking what he was saying, directly, and employing a rudimentary form of telepathy to augment that. But Parthol's beads are up to the task of mimicking this odd half-thought communication.

"You are very late. But better late than never. So, you have come from the Temple, then?"

"Yeah," says Dranko. "We've put all your people to rest."

"Then you have dealt, I trust, with the creatures." He looks at them carefully with green, oversized eyes. "Seven from Outside," he intones, as if reciting something from memory. "And here you are, seven from the Outside."

"I'm Ernie."

"I am **Toq**." Toq stands up and stretches. His arms are freakishly long.

"Is this Kessedth?" asks Kibi.

"Yes. And what is your name?"

"I'm Kibilhathur Bimson."

"He's the Opener," says Dranko.

"Is that important?"

The Company have by now all moved into the room, and they introduce themselves to Toq one by one. They make sure to stress that the temple is now safe for visitors. Toq makes some odd clicking noises in his throat. "But now there is no reason to go, because you are here. I suppose the most devout may wish to see the place, but there is no longer the chance of meeting you coming down."

“Were you expecting us at a particular time?” asks Kibi.

“Everyone had a different guess,” Toq replies. “For 900 years people have been guessing.”

“What did the legends say we were going to do?” asks Ernie.

“Yavin’s Prophecy,” says Toq. “Yavin is the Sister God of...” Here he speaks a word that Parthol’s stones find difficult to translate, but more or less means ‘she who solves problems peacefully.’ “The Prophecy of Yavin is very simple,” Toq continues. “That deep in the heart of the Underdark is that which will mean the end of all things, all life. But seven from the outside will come to set things right. That is all there is.”

Kibi nods. “And the Circlet will take us?”

“It has been waiting there for you for almost a thousand years.”

“Well, it’s not there now,” says the dwarf.

“So,” says Dranko, “if you had a circlet like that, and someone stole it, and it was supposed to tell you where to go next... where would *you* go next?”

“I don’t know,” says Toq. “A group of many pilgrims went up; one came back, saying something horrible had happened, and everyone was dead, and the Circlet was gone. But no one ever attacked the town.”

“Wait a minute,” says Ernie. “If no one attacked, but the only way down from the temple is through Kessedth, where did Meledien and Tarsos go?”

“They must have disguised themselves, or snuck through at night,” says Dranko.

“Next we sent an armed force up to the temple,” says Toq. “None of them came back either, so we locked the doors, added the glyphs, and sent out warnings that people should stay far away from this place. After that, slowly, one by one, the inhabitants of Kessedth, many of whom have been my friends for a long time, left to go elsewhere. Mostly to Ementh. Now it is only me. I thought someone should stay behind. The danger did not seem so great, as the creatures in the temple did not seem interested in traveling all this way. The doors were locked and sealed, and I have plenty of food and water, thanks be to Yavin.”

“For your steadfastness, may you be blessed with long life and great riches and peace,” says Dranko.

“That is very nice,” says Toq.

“Are you a priest of your people?” asks Morningstar.

“I am a farmer-priest. I tend to my gardens.”

“Anything else you can tell us?” asks Dranko.

“Yes,” says Toq. “We did see one stranger, but she did not come from up, but from down. Not a Zeraphin like myself, and not one of the Stribe. She was of a race I had not seen, and she asked about the temple, and whether someone had come from there. She was... arrogant, I would say. Disrespectful.”

“Did she wear red armor?” asks Morningstar.

“No, but her skin was red, and horns curved out of her head like a macoot. She radiated power, and an unconcern for us. But when we told her no one had come from the temple, she lost interest, and she left, in the direction of the Crystal Wood.”

Dranko raises an eyebrow. “Crystal Wood?”

“That tunnel there goes to the Crystal Wood, but there are no riches left there to be harvested.”

“And she hasn’t come back?”

“No... that was two months ago.” Aravis draws pictures of Rosetta and of Meledien, but Toq shakes his head when he looks at them.

“Who are the Stribe?” asks Morningstar.

“They are... how do you say... bugs. But we do trade with them. They are not hostile. Not very communicative. They have thriving cities.”

“So we’ve got you, the Stribe, and red-skin lady. Anyone else?” asks Dranko.

“The Stribe and the Zeraphin are the only races who live in this region. There are others, I’m sure, far off in other directions, but we do not know them.”

“Are there any predators we should know about?”

“Ah, yes,” says Toq. “Living in the darkness and tunnels. You should be careful of the peshovar. They are very big. Hard shell. Tail with big ball on the end. Teeth in the front. They stay away from civilized areas, and I have not seen one in a long time, but they sometimes prowl the dark tunnels and caves.”

Dranko gestures to the shining dust motes in the air. “Do you know what the light is made out of?”

“It is light,” says Toq. “It is not *made* out of anything.”

“Our light comes from a huge ball of fire in the sky,” says Morningstar.

“Sky?”

“Imagine there was no ceiling,” says Dranko, “and open air just went up and up and up...”

“That sounds horrible!” Toq exclaims.

“I could show you...” says Morningstar.

“Show me what’s it like without a roof? No!”

“It’s wonderful,” says Morningstar.

“No! I think perhaps you are not yet speaking our language correctly.”

“We find having a roof always over our head to be... confining,” says Morningstar. “Constricting.”

“Speak for yourself!” Kibi grumbles.

“We find it comforting to know, to understand the boundary of the world,” says Toq.

They talk for a while longer about cultural and racial differences between the surface world and the Underdark, before the Company turn the conversation to the local Gods, purported to walk among mortals. “There are two Sister Gods,” Toq explains. “Yavin and Wlaqua. Do not have truck with Wlaqua. She is a Goddess of...” Again, the translation is spotty, but it comes across as ‘she who solves problems with violence.’

“*We* solve problems with violence,” Ernie points out.

“So you serve Yavin,” says Morningstar.

“Yes. Almost all of the Zeraphin and the Stribe do, though here and there you may find a bad seed who reveres Wlaqua.”

“Are there other Gods?” asks Dranko.

“The Sister Gods would not *allow* other Gods. I shudder to think what they would do if they found any.” Aravis tries not to look as nervous as this suggestion makes him feel.

“Have you ever seen Yavin walking around?” Dranko asks.

“Alas, it has never been my good fortune to see Yavin. But She will sometimes manifest in people, when she feels it appropriate. Here in the Outward North, Yavin is ascendant. But I understand that as you go south and down, you will reach places where Wlaqua is more influential.”

“So worship is not divided among races?” asks Ernie.

“No, it is personal, though I imagine most races are naturally inclined to worship one or the other.”

“Do you have a creation myth?” asks Morningstar. “How the Sisters came to be here?”

“They were once like us,” says Toq, “but they grew in strength, and then found a source of great power, and ascended to Godhood. At first there was great strife between them, but as neither could destroy the other, they reached an accord.”

“And where did they find a source of divine power?” asks Ernie.

“The legends do not say. But it is my belief that the earth itself... we call it Abernia... endowed them with the power.”

“Have you noticed anything strange happening in the past few months?” asks Kibi. “On the surface, our fish are dying.”

“That is happening in places here, too,” says Toq. “Strange deaths of sea creatures, that correspond with earthquakes, which are happening more frequently than usual.”

“What we are supposed to do, will stop that,” says Kibi.

There are several tunnels that lead out of the village of Kessedth, and the Company ask Toq about where they go. “If you go that way,” says Toq, pointing to the nearest tunnel, “you will have to duck under. The tunnel has only recently been built. It goes directly to the Stribe capital of Keshem, where I think there is a Leaping Circle.” That gets the party’s attention. He must be talking about the *teleportation circles* Parthol had mentioned.

“Where does it lead to?” asks Dranko.

Toq shrugs. “I don’t know. Probably another Stribe city. I do know that the Stribe restrict its use greatly.” He points to the next tunnel. “That way takes you to the Croaking Oracle. I have never actually seen it, and I don’t intend to. I have no questions I want answered badly enough.”

“Is there a price?” asks Ernie.

“I don’t think there is a price you *have* to pay, but if you want better answers, it prefers you bring a live Stribe to eat. It is a big toad. It likes to eat insects. It sits in the middle of the Pressing Lake. It is said to have perfect knowledge of all things in the Underdark.”

“Could we bring it a peshovar?” asks Dranko.

“That is not an insect. It is more of a reptile,” says Toq.

The Company are not happy about feeding the toad a sentient creature, but figure they might be able to feed it something else. Toq tells them the Croaking Oracle is not far, maybe a week’s walk to get to Pressing Lake. The oracular toad is said to live on an island in the middle of the lake.

Before conferring on which of these place to go next, Dranko asks about the gray crystal chits. “Ah, those are khet chips,” says Toq. Dranko then shows the mithril squares. “Those are bits,” says Toq. “Ten bits to a khet.”

“Wait,” says Ernie. “The crystal is more valuable than the mithril?”

“Of course,” says Toq. “Mithril is commonplace. Not quite as commonplace as those other gems...” here he points to the diamonds and sapphires in Dranko’s palm, the ones found at the Temple of Arrival. “The khet only come from crystal khet trees, that grow in groves around the Underdark, very slowly. If you own one and control the growing of them, it is good for your people, but they circulate about.”

Dranko looks crestfallen. “So, the emeralds and sapphires and diamonds...”

“They are pretty,” says Toq. He points to a sapphire in Dranko’s hand, one probably worth five hundred gold pieces on the surface. “That is probably worth half a khet, to someone who wants to use it for a craft of some kind.”

Dranko takes off his gem-studded *helm of brilliance*, for which he paid tens of thousands of gold pieces not long ago. “What would you say this is worth, then?”

Toq looks it over. “Not a great deal. But the craftsmanship is nice.”

Dranko tries not to cry.

carborundum: Beautiful. Every offhand reference says “this is a living world” and sets my curiosity bone a-jiggling. Hats off to Sagiro.

Piratecat: So we’re clear, Dranko did cry. Do you have *any idea* how much that friggin’ *helm of brilliance* cost him? 125,000 GP. And he mostly bought it to look rich and impressive. *sob*

Solarious: Now, instead of looking rich and impressive, you look shabby and uncultured. Pretty, gaudy, and terribly common. Ah, the perils of being on the leading edge of fashion; trends can change so quickly.

Neurotic: Well, you have to understand, someone might think Dranko is someone of consequence if he has that kind of money to spend or someone gave such a gift to him. After all, we all know he didn’t do anything important, right?

Solarious: Still, at least I can look forward to seeing you feed an elder air elemental *polymorphed* into a giant tarantula to a truly enormous oracular toad. Cheer up! You rip an abandoned divine abomination made entirely out of wings a new one in the process.



Anxe: I have finished! After half a year of reading through the archives I am done! And I'm happy the story is soon coming to a conclusion. I don't have to wait decades like some of the loyal fans.

And I might as well stir the pot while I'm here. When does Rosetta stab you in the back?

gerg 861: Ditto, just caught up after a 10 year break. Thanks for the story.

Everett: Decades? No. "Soon"? No. Just a solid year or so. Settle in.

Sagiro: To gerg and Anxe, thanks for coming back to the story! I appreciate what an undertaking it must be, reading the entire thing from its humble beginning. To Anxe: you'll be hearing about Rosetta in the next few updates.

A general note: after this update, there are 20 runs remaining to transcribe. (Which doesn't necessarily mean 20 updates; I average more than one update per run.)

The Croaking Oracle

From the possible places to go next, the Company decide to pay a visit to the Croaking Oracle. Toq has little more to offer, never having been to visit the prophesying toad. "I have heard he is very big... bigger than you, I think. Though as I have said, I find it unsavory that he prefers to eat a live Stribe."

"I want to thank you," says Dranko, as they prepare to depart Kessedth. "It took dedication and faith to wait here all this time for us. We really appreciate it."

"You're welcome," says Toq.

"I'd give you a diamond or an emerald, but... wait... I have an idea." Dranko spends a minute describing a tree. Toq says they have something similar in occasional large caverns, but that they are very rare. Dranko fishes around in his pack for an old wooden holy symbol of Delioch, which Toq accepts with great reverence. Wood is extremely valuable, and on top of that he considers its hand-shaped design to be a reference to Yavin.

"What are you going to tell people, now that we've arrived?" asks Dranko.

"I was hoping to go with you," says Toq, "to see what you will do. I have been waiting a long time; it seems a shame to abandon you so soon."

"You might die, and we'll feel terrible," says Dranko.

"Am I likely to die if I travel with you? That would... change things in my mind."

After the party assure him that their journey is bound to be filled with horrible perils of every sort, Toq opts to remain behind, and wishes them well. "Follow the main tunnel," he advises. "I believe it goes directly to Pressing Lake. The whole of the Underdark is riddled with tunnels and passages, old mineshafts, natural fissures, vertical shafts and abandoned burrows, but very few of them lead to anywhere interesting, let alone inhabited. The ones that *do* go somewhere interesting, you will know because they have been widened, and worn down by many feet, and there are often ropes and ladders to help travelers. Some have not been maintained well, and I suspect that your path will be rough. The Croaking Oracle, for all his supposed knowledge, does not get many visitors."

"Could we bring the Oracle some other insects?" asks Kibi.

"There are some tarantulas in the tunnels, but they are very small compared to the Croaking Oracle. I doubt it would be satisfied."



Though Toq estimated a week of travel to reach Pressing Lake, he was not taking into account that the party would be flying on *phantom steeds*. While the tunnel does wind up and down, back and forth, with bridges spanning crevasses, ropes snaking up nearly vertical shafts, and rough patches with tilted floors, the Company find it all easily navigated.

During the journey they see no other travelers, and the tunnel floors are not nearly as worn as those leading to and from the Temple of Arrival. After many hours have passed the light motes start to dim, indicating that night has fallen many miles above. They stop and make camp in a wide and (relatively) flat section of tunnel, and though Aravis casts *rope trick*, most choose to sleep 'old school' right on the floor of the passage. Some little blue ant-like creatures scurry about, but they're harmless and shy away into the corners.

Dranko lights a cigar and blows out a stream of smoke. It forms into the words **EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**. "I bet that's about the Croaking Oracle," says Ernie.

Dranko agrees. "Since they knew we'd immediately go to the Oracle, they've probably set a horrible trap for us." Everyone

understands that by ‘they,’ he means Meledien, Tarsos and Seven Dark Words.

“We could find out by asking the Croaking Oracle,” says Flicker.



Nothing extremely dangerous, or even mildly worrying, occurs overnight. They wake stiff the next morning as the light motes grow bright. All is silent, and no breeze stirs the gently wafting lights. Grey Wolf summons up their *phantom steeds*, and after a quick breakfast they’re off down the passage.

By mid-day, or what they assume is mid-day, the tunnel empties abruptly onto the narrow shore of Pressing Lake. It’s immediately evident from whence comes its name; the lake extends out away from them in all directions, but the flat ceiling above it is no more than eight feet above water level. There is a pier of hardened fungus jutting near at hand, and a little boat is tied up there. Next to the pier is a bucket with three khet chips. Visitors to the Croaking Oracle who don’t have *phantom steeds* at their disposal must use this little boat to reach it. Morningstar casts *thought capture* and finds it difficult, but thinks she detects a thought of someone having doubts, and wondering if the Stribe they have tied up is really a dangerous criminal.

Kibi casts *prying eyes* and sends them off to scout, with instructions to stay within a mile of him, and to report back if they see anything that’s not water or featureless shoreline. Grey Wolf, with *enhanced senses* cast, takes a whiff of the air and smells fish, but no salt. Kibi casts *veil* to make them look like rats (though they’ll be rats on flying horses), and Ernie casts *water walk* on everyone in case they become unseated while over the water. Finally, Dranko casts a *light* spell on the shore, so they’ll have a beacon to return to.

They ride out perpendicular from the shore, figuring that if Pressing Lake is more or less a circle, they’ll be heading towards its center. Though the hoofs of their *phantom steeds* skim the water, their heads come uncomfortably close to the low stone ceiling as they gallop along. It’s intensely claustrophobic. Ninety minutes into the journey one of Kibi’s *prying eyes* returns and reports. It had arrived at an island at the center of the lake, a small stony protrusion from the water, less than a hundred feet across. The ceiling above the island rises, forming a rough dome only thirty feet high at its apex. In the middle of the island, squatting in a damp indentation, is an enormous dark green toad. It’s about the size of a baby elephant, with heavy lidded eyes and warty skin. Every few seconds its vocal sac inflates and it lets out a resonant croak. Kibi is relieved to see it is alive, no hole burned in its chest.

Kibi adjusts the party’s course and before too long the island comes into their actual view. But no sooner do they reach the comfortably high ceiling of the Croaking Oracle’s dome, than something else comes streaking towards them from another direction. It’s a large spinning tornado, tipped sideways to fit betwixt sea and roof, with two glowing green eyes. Its entire form is outlined with an aquamarine aura. Water from Pressing Lake is being drawn up into its vortex and spewed out in all directions. It appears that the Evil Trio has left a trap for them after all.

Flicker leaps from his horse (not being much skilled at mounted combat) and sprints along the water’s surface to meet the charging elemental. Dranko does the same, activating his *boots of haste* and maneuvering into flanking position. (Thanks to Cranchus’s marble, he is able to land sneak attacks upon elementals.) He whips the creature as Flicker slashes at it. The elemental’s eyes rotate around the outer layer of its tornado body until they become fixed, unwavering, on Dranko. Then two more elementals come whooshing in from the darkness, also rimmed with blue-green light, and these too head straight for Dranko, ignoring several other members of the Company. The three elementals buffet him with powerful tendrils of coruscating air.

Grey Wolf fires off a *chain lightning* at the trio of elementals, but their preternatural reflexes allow them to avoid much of the damage. Inverted lightning bolts of darkness are left behind, as light motes are vaporized by the electricity. Morningstar casts *darkbeam* at one of the attackers, but it twists out of the way with minimal harm done.

Something new arrives, flying even faster than the elementals, and comes to a halt fifty feet away. It’s difficult to get a good look at it through the spray of churned up air and water, but it has several flapping wings, and glows with the same aquamarine aura as the elementals. It fires off a thin green beam that strikes Dranko in the chest, and Dranko feels the heavy enervating burden of negative levels.

Kibi entraps this new threat in a solid *forcecage* before Quickening a *rainbow pattern* that draws away one of the air elementals. Ernie Quickens *iron bones* on himself and rides closer to the melee, then tries to cast *searing light*, but he finds it too difficult to cast while riding; it’s all he can do not to topple from the phantom steed. Aravis discovers the same – it’s been too long since they’ve tried to cast from horseback.

Flicker continues to flank an elemental with Dranko, and so while his own sword strokes aren’t greatly damaging, he allows

Dranko to do massive harm with his whip (despite the negative levels). The elemental bursts into a cloud of quickly dissipating vapors, its blue-green outline fading to black.

The remaining non-fascinated elemental continues to harass Dranko, though it's unable to cause him any injury. Grey Wolf, the only one in the Company with tremendous riding skill, has no difficulty staying mounted while burning a hole in the elemental with an *acid orb*. The spell also leaves a round black spot in the air where the light motes have been dissolved.

The winged creature vanishes and reappears next to Dranko. Up close it seems to be nothing *but* wings, each a dirty beige, hundreds of them, clumped together with no body to explain them. A tail snakes out of the mass of matted feathers, and the whole thing stinks like a carcass left out too long in a hot sun. (The Company have never seen such a horror, and a good thing for them; this newcomer is a chichimec, one of the most fearsome denizens of the Elemental Plane of Air.) It lashes out with the tail, draining away some of Dranko's charisma.

Kibi lobes an Empowered, Maximized *coldfire* into the melee around Dranko, knowing his friend will evade its flames. The elemental and the chichimec are both burned, while another clump of light motes is wiped out. The battlefield has become twilight-dim with the death of so many. Kibi Quickens a *magic missile* and penetrates the chichimec's considerable spell resistance, wounding it further. Its wings flap and twist manically.

Morningstar casts *fire storm*, obliterating the remaining elemental and wiping out so many light-motes that the Company are forced to rely on their backup *mass darkvision* to see. The chichimec is badly seared but continues to flap around Dranko like a huge angry bird. Morningstar Quickens a *searing light* that is foiled by its spell resistance.

In all this time, the Croaking Oracle has not moved, nor reacted in any way to the raging battle going on all around it. The Company have been careful to avoid catching it in the area of their spells, and the hostile air creatures have been doggedly fixated on Dranko.

Ernie and Aravis hastily dismount. Ernie casts *lion's roar*, emboldening his allies, but the chichimec is unaffected. Aravis Quickens a *true strike* and casts a Maximized *disintegrate*, but the chichimec resists most of the damage. Flicker and Dranko again launch a barrage of sneak attacks, and while these are effective, the winged monstrosity is largely resistant to their weapons – even Dranko's +5 *whip*. Still, his aim is good enough to yank out two of its wings; these retain the aquamarine aura as they float to the ground, then vanish with a faint crackling sound.

Grey Wolf channels a Maximized *acid orb* through Bostock. The sword cannot penetrate the flapping wings, but the monster has no resistance to acid, and is horribly burned. More wings drop out of its mass.

Dranko hears a telepathic voice whisper in his mind. *Dranko... Blackhope...*

"Hey, who's that?" Dranko calls. "Are you the thing I'm killing?"

Either way, the chichimec erupts in a storm of whirling, bludgeoning wings. Dranko takes massive damage and suffers charisma drain so profound that he nearly loses his capacity for thought. "Hey... stop... stop it... bleaughhgh!" He spits and snorts, which is about all that's left to him in terms of speaking his mind.

Morningstar fires a *darkbolt*, and Ernie follows immediately with *bolt of glory*, a divine recourse perfectly suited for ripping apart evil outsiders. Both of these spells pierce the enemy's resistance, and Ernie's holy blast finishes it off. The chichimec explodes in a spray of ichor and smoking feathers, each one individually glowing. One by one the feathers flutter and vanish.

There is one elemental remaining, rendered harmless by Kibi's *rainbow pattern*. Kibi looks at it and scratches his beard. "I have an idea," he muses.

"Your ideas are stupid!" Dranko blurts. The half-orc is drooling a bit and chewing on his lips.

Kibi ignores him. "We should *polymorph* that elemental into a tasty insect snack for the toad."

"Hey Ernie," says Flicker. "Nice job finishing off the winged whatever-it-was!"

"Yeah," says Dranko. "You actually did damage for once! You must be so proud of..." Grey Wolf casts *restoration* on Dranko in mid-sentence, and Dranko's expression changes from slack-jawed contempt to one of red-faced embarrassment. "Ah... sorry about that."

Aravis casts *polymorph any object* and turns the air elemental into a dog-sized tarantula, after which Kibi lures it nearer to the Croaking Oracle with his sparkling magic lights. The toad still hasn't moved from its spot at the center of the island; only the occasional bulge of its chin indicates it's even alive. When the tarantula has crawled close enough, the Oracle's eyes snap open

and a long sticky tongue shoots from its mouth. The ensnared tarantula is jerked violently into the huge toad's mouth; its neck bulges as it swallows, and just like that the elemental-turned-arachnid is gone.

The Croaking Oracle gives a satisfied croak, and speaks telepathically into each of the Company's minds. **Questions?**

For a minute or two the party debate the best way to phrase their queries, but that proves too long. Somewhere in the toad's gut the summoned elemental dies and vanishes. The Oracle croaks, blinks its eyes, and burps. Its body seems to deflate slightly.

Unsatisfied. One question.

After more discussion, Ernie poses their query. "There was a crown, the Circlet of Yavin, that was going to lead us to a specific place. How do we get to that place?"

The toad closes its eyes and croaks complacently, and the party start to wonder if it's decided not to answer at all. But eventually its eyes open again, and it thinks its prophecy to them. **Hopping, hopping. Five, nine, two.** They wait for the rest, but that seems to be the entirety of what the Croaking Oracle is willing to share.

"That's it?" exclaims Dranko.

"It really didn't like our offering," says Kibi. "Maybe we should..." He stops. He feels something. A massive surge of Earth Magic is welling up from somewhere below them, from directly beneath the little island. It comes erupting out of the ground, a volcano of deep-stone power that only he can feel. Earth Magic suffuses everything around them, with the Croaking Oracle in the center of it. It croaks in alarm, looks around in confusion, croaks several more times, and then words of prophecy flood into the minds of the Company.

One brings many, flame's design.

One does also, all malign.

One trip started, one trip done.

One loves all, and one hates one.

Three are bringing, now in place.

Three have won the downward race.

Seven haste, and roll the dice,

Spun by fortune's sacrifice.

Four are needed, 'fore the end.

One to take the shell and rend.

One for what is in his head.

One to channel what makes dead.

One at last, but not yet known.

One forever dead as stone.

One to drive the spike clean through.

One to die, and hope renew.

One last journey then to make.

One last prison bar to break.

One last thread of fate to pull.

One last circle to come full.

Quartz: What levels and how well equipped are they now? Since a chichimec was only a little more than a speedbump, I'm guessing that they're in the lowish 20s and all have epic weapons.

Sagiro: I believe everyone in the party was exactly 20th level during this fight. There were several factors that made it an easy battle for the party:

- A chichimec is 'only' a CR 21 creature, and I took away its *wail of the banshee* power and replaced it with *energy drain*.
- The party has 7 people, and 7 PCs of level N vs. a single monster of CR N+1 doesn't rate to be that difficult.
- The party had two epic weapons - *Ell's Will* and *Honor of Nemmin* - but I don't think either of them were used in this battle.
- The players rolled absurdly well on their spell penetration rolls. The chichimec had SR 33, but the level 20 PCs met that about 75% of the time.
- Conversely, when the monster hit Dranko with *energy drain*, I rolled a 3 on 2d4.
- The chichimec and its summoned elementals doggedly focused on Dranko, who's the hardest of the PCs to kill.
- The chichimec was immune to electricity and resistant to fire and cold, but Grey Wolf did a ton of acid damage, and the poor beast had nothing it could do about that.

Quartz: Ah, rolling dice well helps a lot. I'm glad you let the Charisma drain be not permanent. That's one of the things I really dislike about a number of the monsters in the ELH.

Piratecat: [The chichimec and its summoned elementals doggedly focused on Dranko...] Seriously - what's up with that? Clearly, someone or something has a grudge against poor Dranko, and that grudge involves epic-level monsters. This bodes poorly.

Zelc: TAPHEON HAS FORGOTTEN ALL ABOUT HIS ENCOUNTER WITH DRANKO.

coyote6: I bet they were hoping for something more like "ready oil and open flame light the way to victory."

Piratecat: Yes. Yes we were.

Everett: This has been up for almost 24 hours and no one's yet begun to dissect the prophecy? Get cracking, folks!

So... the "three" and the "seven" are obvious. The needed *One for what is in his head* would be Dranko, of course.

coyote6: Or Aravis – the Crosser's Maze.

Everett: But he doesn't have it anymore. It's just an intuitive feeling, but I don't think the Crosser's Maze is going to play a role in the endgame. Aravis's "ghost" – the piece of himself he sent off – is still out there, and could show up, but it certainly isn't "in his head." I think that's got to be Dranko.

One to channel what makes dead. – Aravis? Something to do with necromancy?

coyote6: Gotta be negative energy. That's what makes things dead most directly. Maybe one of the three is needed – any of them a cleric? Or Morningstar or Ernie, to cast *inflict* or *harm* or the like.

Everett: I've long since forgotten what Morningstar's class actually is – Sagiro? – but she seems the most likely. None of the evil trio are clerics.

One to take the shell and rend. – My only guesses are Ernie (as in, being called to smite something) or Grey Wolf, only because "to take the shell and rend" seems suggestive of the way that Grey Wolf was meant to be sacrificed in the first part of the game.

And one of the party will have to die, before the end... But who are the one who loves all, and the one who hates one? The "hater" could be any of the three villains, but I don't know of anything to indicate which one. Likewise, the "lover" could be any of the party, or someone else.

coyote6: ...*drive the spike*... – If "spike" is a poetic way to say "sword," that could be Bostock or *Honor of Nemmin* (if I remember which weapons are swords correctly).

Everett: Bostock is the more likely suspect. *Honor of Nemmin* isn't a sentient weapon.

coyote6: Maybe the shell is the Barrier? Who can "rend" that?

Everett: Well, Kibi is the Opener...

Sagiro, can you give us a quick recap (or just point us to the relevant parts of StevenAC's collected Story Hour) of Tarsos and Seven Dark Words? I remember Meledien as one of Octesian's red-armored compatriots, but that's all.

Sagiro: Sure. Tarsos was a red-armored warrior who escaped from the Battle of Verdshane – the battle where the Emperor's invasion was foiled by Aravis's use of the Crosser's Maze. Tarsos later joined up with Meledien and the two of them stormed Naslund, Graveyard of the Gods, where they stole Wards necessary to survive in the presence of true divinity. (Ernie was given the last of these, by Naslund's single surviving caretaker.)

Seven Dark Words was the Black Circle mastermind and architect of Het Branoi. He was driven mad by Het Branoi's failure, and became the "mad sculptor" wandering the Slices, carving statuettes of Kibi.

After the dissolution of Het Branoi, Seven Dark Words regained his sanity and joined up with Tarsos and Meledien. Now the three of them are several months ahead of the Company, as they descend into the Underdark to (presumably) locate, and then do something bad with, the deeply buried Hand of the Adversary.

Zelc: Let's take another look at Leantha's book... [See page 334 of Part Three.]

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, Eil, 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.

Now, back to the Croaking Oracle's riddle...

Seven haste, and roll the dice, / Spun by fortune's sacrifice. – [from page 367 of Part Three:]

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.

Very interesting! It seems like Corilayna got killed or sacrificed herself for some purpose. Leantha's book also has the holy symbol of Laramon. Maybe that is related?

One to take the shell and rend. – The only shell I remember from this story is the Silver Shell. Isn't Rosetta making an appearance soon?

One for what is in his head. – This is probably Dranko.

One to channel what makes dead. – I wonder if the Ward of Drosh is related?

One at last, but not yet known. / One forever dead as stone. / One to drive the spike clean through. / One to die, and hope renew. – [from page 368 of Part Three:]

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.

Crazy theory: the dwarf with the rocks in Leantha's book is not Kibi, it's Cranchus. He somehow became "dead as stone."

One brings many, flame's design. – The only flame of significance I remember is the Burning God. Didn't Tor's father, Davarian Firemount, take over Thewana's body? Last I heard, this story arc was unresolved. Maybe they have something to do with this?

Everett: I wouldn't count on Tor having anything to do with the endgame. I mentioned his unresolved story arc some time ago and Piratecat indicated as much...

Piratecat: [It seems like Corilayna got killed or sacrificed herself for some purpose...] Where the heck were you years ago, when we NEVER PUT THIS TOGETHER? (To be more specific, we never gave much thought to Corilayna and what happened to her, kind of assuming she just buggered off to a place where Gods go. We should have given it more thought.)

Zelc: Not playing in this awesome campaign? But yay, 1 out of 6 isn't bad...

Does anyone have thoughts on *why* the Goddess of Luck would sacrifice herself? What would that accomplish? Set up her tomb in Naslund? Maybe to leave Laramon in charge since he has different abilities?

steeldragons: Alright. Let'sssseeee... CALL THE BOOKIES!

One brings many, flame's design. / One does also, all malign. / One trip started, one trip done. / One loves all, and one hates one. – The One that brings many would be the Adversary – he's the root of why everyone [good and bad guys] is racing down here, isn't he? "...all malign" could be another reference to the Adversary... or the first line is someone from the Evil Trio and this line is about the Adversary... or vice versa.

The trip seems evidently to be the party's ending of their journeys above ground and the start of their trip into the Underdark.

One who loves one... might be Ernie, I'm thinking. One who hates one... my money's going on Morningstar for Meledien – OR, both of these are referencing members of the Evil Trio [or new/added foes to come?...]... making the whole stanza refer to the Evil part of the equation.

Everett: You're misquoting. If the prophecy had been "one loves one," Ernie would work – he loves Yoba – but it was "one loves all." That ain't Ernie.

Anxe: This verse seems to define the villains and the party. The villains are "all malign" and the Company are "flame's design." The villains are done with their trip and the Company have started. The issue I have with this interpretation is the final line. Neither the Company nor the trio seem to fit that as a whole. Ernie might work for both halves of the final line, but it seems out of place to reference just one out of the ten previous people.

Zelc: I wonder if "One loves all, and one hates one" might refer to the goddesses Yavin and Wlaqua? I wonder how many different beings this stanza refers to. The third line doesn't seem to refer to any being, and it's weird to say that "one loves all" and "one hates one" are the same being.

Actually, I wonder what the message of this stanza even is. The other stanzas have a clear message. What is this stanza's purpose?

steeldragons: Three are bringing, now in place. / Three have won the downward race. / Seven haste, and roll the dice, / Spun by fortune's sacrifice. – Obvious. The Evil Trio and the seven party members.

Anxe: The info we get is that the trio are already where they wanted to be. That probably means they are now waiting for the Company. Maybe because they need the Company for something more as the Black Circle needed Grey Wolf in the past? Maybe they need Kibi to be the Opener and open up the prison that the Adversary is in.

Fortune's sacrifice is another important part of this. Probably referring to Corilayna's "death." Can't say how that's going to come up, though.

steeldragons: Four are needed, 'fore the end. / One to take the shell and rend. / One for what is in his head. / One to channel what makes dead. – Nowwwwww the prophecy ["NOW a warning?!"]... The one who's gotta take the shell and rend... ya got me. *That* could be Dranko... having to rip [rend] open his head [shell] for the power/tentacular goodness inside... needed to defeat whatever's to come. It could also be Aravis... ripping open the "shell" of the dimensional Crosser's Maze... something I figure it would take a "god" to do... I will defer to others' assertions about something to do with Grey Wolf's past, as that escapes me right now. My final conclusion: since others seem to fit other lines, I'll lay my odds on Aravis, here.

"...to channel what makes dead" – that's another crap shoot. What makes dead? Yes, necrotic energy, but in simpler terms... WOUNDS! Damage and wounds make you dead... who channels that? Yeeup, another Ernie or Morningstar toss up. As Morningstar had that big to-do of demonstrating her ability (more than once, I believe) to bring folks back from the dead, my money's on Morningstar.

Everett: She is the Slayer, after all, and she's the most no-nonsense of all the party when it comes to dispatching foes. I can go for this theory.

Anxe: The shell might mean the Silver Shell, or it might mean rending the protection around the Adversary's prison. Hell, those might be literally the same thing. Maybe the Company need to kill the Adversary to really deal with the problem the trio has set up.

One for what is in his head is Dranko. We already know that one.

One to channel certainly sounds like Grey Wolf to me. The "what makes dead" part confuses me. Perhaps Grey Wolf is the one who needs to wear the Ward of Drosh?

jmucchiello: So if "four are needed," why are only three participants listed? The next stanza talks about one last journey and not to one being participating. What is the fourth required action?

Everett: The last stanza tells us of the final journey. You seem to have missed entirely the stanza that tells us of the fourth: *One at last, but not yet known. / One forever dead as stone. / One to drive the spike clean through. / One to die, and hope renew.*

The problem is, we don't know if this stanza refers to one person, to four different people, or to some number in-between. We don't know if the one who is "not yet known" is also the one "forever dead as stone." We don't know if the one "forever dead" is also the one who must "die, and hope renew." We don't know if the one who dies for hope's renewal is the one who "drives the spike." It's completely open-ended.

jmucchiello: Well the last stanza is even worse since the "one" in it could always refer to the Adversary.

Everett: A direct reference to the Adversary seems too easy. That the party has to confront and banish him somehow goes without saying; it's hardly revelatory information.

jmucchiello: One at last, but not yet known: If this goes with the prior stanza it could mean someone new joins the "party." Or it could be the Adversary, which we can agree will never be a "known" entity.

One forever dead as stone: This line seems out of place if it is in reference to the four in the prior stanza. One could again hope this is the Adversary, dead as stone forever.

One to drive the spike clean through: Is this Dranko hitting with his chain or is this "one" who will have a spike put through him, such as the Adversary?

One to die, and hope renew: Well, renewed hope would certainly occur when the Adversary dies.

steeldragons: One at last but not yet known... I'm thinking this is a reference to Rosetta... dunno why, just do.

One forever dead as stone... this is either referring to Flicker (as the DMNPC, he can be killed off for good), OR there's a WAMPEER down here someplace! Forever dead as stone... someone has to drive a stake through? One to die and hope renew... I'm thinking, this is going to be a big "finale" scene of one of the heroes battling some grand-daddy of all vampires and dying in the process... Grey Wolf might do this also...

On the other hand - "dead as stone"... driving *spikes*... One of Kibi's favored spells/tactics far as I've read is casting *spike stones*... so maybe this is something to do with Kibi and some big Earth Magic throw down... but I'm leaning toward Flicker's gonna bite it.

Anxe: The whole verse references that one of the Company will have to make a sacrifice - already known from the earlier book prophecy. We see Kibi holding the *Watcher's Kiss*, then we see a Company member holding the *Watcher's Kiss*, dead. Kibi is also needed to remove the wound/spike in the Earth, that giant black hole in the east. Sounds like Kibi needs to open up the way for the Adversary to come to the world. Then they can kill the Adversary with the *Watcher's Kiss*, but Kibi dies in the process.

steeldragons: *One last journey then to make. / One last prison bar to break. / One last thread of fate to pull. / One last circle to come full.* - "This is the absolute last adventure these guys are going on." Be sad, be very very sad...

Anxe: This verse also supports the idea that the Adversary will be getting out of his prison. The part about the circle might be a double meaning as well. Either way, this is just an "end is coming soon" verse that could mean any number of things, but is probably just rounding out the prophecy.

Though, maybe "one hates one" is Tapheon as someone else already said?

Everett: Actually, the first two lines, I'm thinking, most likely refer to the Company (whoever's left) doing the supposedly undoable - leaving the core and returning to the surface.

Piratecat: Just now, I figured out something in that prophecy that we misinterpreted the entire time, but which didn't make sense until the last game - and which I didn't realize was prophesied here until this very moment. We were misreading it the entire time. (I won't say what, due to spoilers.)

EDIT: Sagiro disabuses me of my notion and tells me that I'm wrong, wrong, wrong. Never mind.

Quartz: How did you interpret it at the time? The whole prophecy, that is, not just the bit you got wrong!

Piratecat: Damned if I remember. Similarly to how it's been analyzed here, but we reviewed and updated our understanding every time we got a new clue. There were a lot of reviews!

KidCthulhu: The terrible thing is that I was THERE for the resolution of this prophecy, and I can only remember a few of these now.

Everett: Then you can find out along with the rest of us?

Just for the sake of some activity on the thread... I was re-reading just now the massive battle with the Cleaners, where Step fulfilled his prophecy and sacrificed himself. One thing that seems like an oversight - they spent the night in the cavern after the battle, but I don't see that anything replaced the light of Step's soul after it finally went out. How did they see anything, loot the place, not fall down into more pockets of insanity, etc?

KidCthulhu: As I recall, once the big bad guy was dead, the magically impenetrable darkness lifted and we used the usual enchantments against regular darkness. It became just a dark cave.



Angry Dreamers

The geyser of Earth Magic recedes into the ground, leaving the Croaking Oracle blinking rapidly in confusion. It clearly doesn't understand why it spoke, and none in the Company, Kibi included, has any idea how or why a blast of Earth Magic goosed the toad into spouting extra prophecy. "Thank you," says Kibi.

They spend a few minutes pondering the prophetic words of the amphibian. The "three" are obviously their antagonists: Meledien, Tarsos and Seven Dark Words. But the rest is largely a mystery. They decide that "One for what is in his head" is

likely Dranko, and that all four lines of the penultimate verse refer to the same person, but beyond that the telling is opaque. They consider staying and summoning another insect tomorrow, but the Oracle speaks, annoyed. **You are done. Leave.**

There's also the matter of the feathered monster and its attendant elementals which only attacked Dranko. The party form a working theory that Meledien and co. left them behind specifically to target the half-orc, because they have learned of, and greatly fear, the Far Realms whatever-it-is that lurks in his brain.

"I would be more than happy," says Dranko, "when it comes down to it, for Meledien to fight me. I hate that bitch."

"Hey, did you hear that?" Aravis looks around in alarm, but no one else has heard (or seen) anything unusual. Pewter didn't notice anything either, and they chalk it up to nerves or echoes.

"Before we leave," says Morningstar, "I want to check out what *Ava Dormo* is like down here." The others guard her body while she drops into a trance.

She's in a city. The dream-version of the Croaking Oracle's cave, and as far as she can tell the entirety of Pressing Lake, is packed with buildings. The low ceiling has been excavated upward to allow for taller structures, and there's no sign of the lake itself. All the ground she can see is solid. She is fortunate to find herself on a narrow street that threads its way through these buildings, which affords her a sense of both the immensity and density of this dream-metropolis.

There are also humanoid creatures here, many of them, heavily armed. They are short – between four and five feet tall – and look vaguely like kobolds. Most carry two-pronged spears and march in tight, well disciplined groups. The ones nearest stop, stare, point their weapons at her and begin a furious chittering.

She hastily drops out of the Dreamscape and reports. Morningstar has never seen such a densely populated section of *Ava Dormo*, and is keen to learn more. This time she casts *dream anchor* on Kibi and takes him with her, in case there are any Earth Magic-related phenomena for him to observe.

The little militant kobolds surround them in seconds, brandishing their spears and chittering madly. "We mean you no harm!" Kibi exclaims.

One of the creatures pokes him lightly with its spear. Kibi activates *tongues* just in time to hear one of them shouting "Disarm! Disarm!"

Every object on Kibi and Morningstar, save for their clothes, vanishes, which includes the *ioun stone* Kibi was using for *tongues*. The closest creature jabs his spear into Kibi's beard, curious as to why it too hasn't been unmade. "The beard stays!" he says crossly.

By now upward of fifty of these little humanoids – all of them wearing plate armor over their blue, knobby skin – have surrounded them, and prod them down the street with their spears. Their high-pitched and agitated voices fill the air. After a few blocks Kibi and Morningstar are herded into a building, down a flight of stairs, and into a small prison cell.

Morningstar creates her holy symbol and manifests *true seeing*. There are a few magical wards on the cell, though she cannot tell their precise function. She wakes, drawing herself and Kibi back to the waking world.

"Interesting!" she says. "They were using an entire army to manipulate reality."

Kibi strokes his beard, relieved to find it undamaged. "Maybe they're a race that lives *only* in dreams."

"Quiet!" says Aravis. "There it is again. Did you all really not hear that?"

The Company hush up, straining their ears, but not even Grey Wolf, with *enhanced senses* cast, hears anything unusual.

"I'm sure I..." Aravis begins, and then his eyes go wide. Lines of glowing tracery sprout from his forehead and race across his face, then down his neck – the visual effect that used to manifest when Aravis was in possession of the Crosser's Maze! Before he can speak another word, Aravis disappears. Pewter, who had been perched on his shoulder, drops to the ground.

Dranko looks down at the cat. "Are you panicking?" he asks. "One meow for yes, two for no."

Meow, meow.

"Is Aravis in the Maze?" asks Morningstar.

Meow, meow, meow.

"What does that mean?" asks Dranko.

“Probably ‘I don’t know,’” says Ernie.

Meow.

In all the time Aravis possessed the Crosser’s Maze, he had never gone bodily into it. Just like dreamers in *Ava Dormo*, people in the Maze left their bodies behind in the real world while their minds went voyaging. Aravis had given the Crosser’s Maze to Belshikun, the avatar of Drosh, the God of Death, with the expectation that Drosh was going to use it to flee or hide from the Adversary. Flicker looks thoughtful. “You know how everyone kept telling us there was no way out of the Underdark? Well, Aravis just went somewhere!”

“Will Aravis come back?” asks Ernie.

Meow.

“Do we know *where* he’ll be when he comes back?” asks Grey Wolf.

Pewter meows and points to himself with a fore-paw.

“He’ll come back wherever you are?”

Meow. Pewter nods.

Morningstar convinces the others to go back one last time, hoping she can forestall the creatures’ aggressive behavior long enough to have a bit of dialogue. She dons the *cloak of diplomacy*, and everyone in the party has either *tongues* or *comprehend languages* cast upon them. She brings the entire Company into the dreamscape, at the same location as before.

They are surrounded by a wide ring of fifty spear-wielding dream-kobolds, all staring at them, as if they had simply been waiting there for the party to appear. “Throw!”

Thought-quick, Morningstar draws everyone back to the waking world, a split-second before the spears converge. Dranko chuckles. “They’re all about to learn what happens when you throw projectiles while standing in a circle. Maybe we should go back with a *mass heal*?”

Morningstar brings them all back five seconds later, but the creatures had enough sense not to throw with enough force to impale their fellows on the far side of the circle. The party hear the tail end of the noise made by the spears’ clattering to the stone. With astonishing precision, the fifty throwers are stepping back, and a new ring of creatures steps forward to take their place, readying a second volley.

Morningstar shouts before they can throw. “I could do this all day, but all I’m here to do is communicate and see who you are. If you’d like to talk, great. If not, we’ll go away.”

“Hold fire!” shouts one of the creatures.

“We mean you no harm,” Morningstar assures them.

One of the dream-kobolds steps forward and shakes his spear at her. “Who are you?”

“My name is Morningstar.”

“Not what I mean,” says the creature angrily. “Who *are* you?”

Morningstar isn’t sure how to answer. “Morningstar, defender of the church of Ell? Humans?”

“I am not yet hearing something that will keep the hold on our fire,” says the kobold.

“We’re saving the world!” shouts Kibi.

“And we’re not with the red-armored guys!” adds Ernie, in case they find this relevant.

The *cloak of diplomacy* speaks into Morningstar’s mind. *The person to whom you speak is under extreme pressure to execute anyone who might be a spy for the Tegenti. He is convinced that is what you are.*

“We are from very far away,” says Morningstar, hoping this will allay their paranoia. “If we were here to attack, or be malicious to you in some way, would we be here to talk?”

“Yes!” shouts the kobold. “Treachery! That is exactly what you would say if you were attempting subterfuge or infiltration! Three! Two! One...!”

Morningstar hastily returns everyone to the waking world. “Do you think they know they’re in a dream?” asks Dranko.

Morningstar sighs in frustration. “I’d love to talk to them to find out.”

“Stupid pokey dream people,” Ernie mutters.

But Morningstar is still not willing to give up, and proposes one more avenue to pursue. They ride their *phantom steeds* across Pressing Lake to the mouth of the tunnel they used to get there from Kessedth. Once there, she takes them all into *Ava Dormo* again, and finds this part of it uninhabited. In the Dreamscape, the tunnel has been widened and well maintained; thick planks of hardened fungus reinforce the walls and ceiling. The party zip along the dream-tunnel until they see a guard post ahead, where six dream-kobolds stand guard at a pair of portcullises, but rather than stop to talk, Morningstar blinks the group far past the outpost. They pass three more similar posts before nearing the end of the tunnel, where it empties out into Kessedth. Kibi casts *veil* to make the entire Company look like dream-kobolds.

They guess that dream-Kessedth is as overdeveloped as dream-Pressing Lake, and are not disappointed. Morningstar blinks them past the gate and into the cavern beyond, and once again the Company find themselves in a teeming city, packed with buildings and marching dream-kobolds. Morningstar quickly scans their surroundings and blinks the party up to a rooftop, where they all drop flat to avoid detection. Morningstar peeks over the edge of the roof and casts *brain spider*, a high-level spell designed to learn detailed information from its targets. She chooses eight dream-kobolds and gains access to the minds of seven. The eighth begins to scream. “Attack! My mind has been attacked! It’s the Tegenti! To arms! To arms! Spread out and search!”

“I officially hate this place,” Ernie grumbles.

The creatures act with swift purpose, organizing into search groups which fan out to comb the town. It seems inevitable that they will be discovered before too long, but Morningstar doesn’t need much time. She chooses one of the minds caught in the web of her spell and chooses “the history and culture of these creatures” to learn.

The dream-kobolds are a race called the Keffet, and for years out of memory they have fought a war in the Dreaming against another race called the Tegenti. The Tegenti are intelligent bull-like quadrupeds who specialize in illusions and other mind-trickery; where the Keffet embrace physical military might, the Tegenti have refined their mentalist abilities (though the Keffet do have a basic form of group-mind coordination, finely honed to assist their physical warmongering). This region – the dream reflections of Pressing Lake, Kessedth, and the surrounding areas – are all very close to the current front lines of the ongoing conflict. The war has not been going well for the Keffet; in recent months the Tegenti have pushed the border back quite far. But this Keffet is not terribly worried, as the war has ebbed and flowed for a century or more, and it’s only a matter of time before the Keffet rally and turn the tide. She has seen it get more dire than this.

On less militaristic topics, Morningstar learns that as far as the Keffet are concerned, their world is the real one. The one whose mind she is picking does not think she is in a dream. As for the prophecy and possible end of the world, the Keffet do have a variant of that. Many think that the world is, in fact, fated to end. Before that happens, though, one side will win the war, and whichever side that is will transition to some heaven-like state, while the losing race will be damned for all eternity in a freezing hell. There are spiritual leaders who claim that the end times are approaching, though there are no Keffet gods as such. Every Keffet population center has something not quite a temple or place of worship, but thought of as “spiritual commons.” Some Keffet go there to pray – not to anything in particular – that the outcome of the war go in their favor.

That is all Morningstar is able to glean, before a searching party of Keffet can be heard climbing up to the rooftops near their hiding place. Morningstar drops them out of Dream for a final time and shares all that she has learned. She is astounded to learn of a race of beings native to *Ava Dormo*. “Two races, if you count the hyper-intelligent cows,” says Dranko.

But now the time has come for the Company to move forward in their pursuit of the Evil Trio. It takes them a day and a half to return *physically* to Kessedth, where they find that Toq has departed, but not before leaving them a note tacked to the door of the tunnel entrance:

I have gone ahead to Ementh, to see what I can learn about the evil ones who came before you. If you choose to go instead to Keshem or the Crystal Wood, heed the warning signs on the peshovar lairs. Do not go into them, or try to fight them. If I do not see you again, go swiftly by the Hand of Yavín.

Ementh, they recall, is a large city of Toq's people, the Zeraphin. And the Crystal Wood was where the red-skinned and curve-horned woman had headed two months earlier, the one whom Toq had described as arrogant and unpleasant. But the Company decide to go to Keshem, city of the insect-like Stribe, on account of the fact that there is a Leaping Circle there. They all agree that is the most likely way that Meledien, Tarsos and Seven Dark Words would have gone. Dranko leaves a reply note for Toq:

Thank you. Headed to Keshem and onward from there. May Yavin bless you and keep you safe.

Zelc: I love these updates. Thanks for sharing your story with us!

Quartz: Sheer awesomeness!

Piratecat: Hey Sagiro, did we ever find out what the deal was with that tiefling? I've been wondering about her for years!

EDIT: Sagiro reminded me offline. Ohhhhhh, I remember her. Oh yes. Good lord, yes. Yikes.

Zelc: Did Aravis get pulled into the Maze primarily due to a story reason, or was it because the player wasn't able to make that session?

Sagiro: Yes to both! A big Aravis-related plot point was coming, and Aravis's player had to miss that session, which (as you'll see in a later update), worked out quite well from a storytelling perspective.



The Stribe

The tunnel from Kessedth to the Stribe city of Keshem is far more twisty and vertical than the one to Pressing Lake. There are so many vertical shafts and sharp oddly-vectored turns that the *phantom steeds* don't much improve their speed, particularly as there are thoughtfully placed ladders and knotted ropes wherever the going is particularly tricky. Over the course of the day, as they steadily lose altitude, the party hear more frequently the sound of rushing water. One or more subterranean rivers thunder through this section of the Underdark, sometimes distant, and sometimes so close to the tunnel that they catch glimpses of glimmering torrents through crevices and gaps in the rock, their relentless thunder so loud they cannot hear one another speak.

Near "sundown" (when the light motes grow dim) they find that the tunnel has a clear branch, large and round, with a glyph for DANGER clearly visible. Next to that is a second glyph that looks like a crudely drawn lizard. There's no sense of scale, but the tunnel itself is large enough that if this is indeed a peshovar lair, the creature or creatures could be quite large. A nasty smell comes from that tunnel, sharp and slightly acidic. Dranko peers into the dim receding light of the tunnel branch. He cannot see or hear anything unusual from that direction. "Should we go in and kill it?"

The others vote unanimously against the idea, agreeing that they should heed the warnings about the peshovar. They put some extra distance between themselves and the peshovar tunnel, marching until the light motes have gone almost completely dark before making camp.



The next day begins with a hundred-foot vertical shaft, its descent made easy by a half dozen well-anchored ropes hanging down from its lip. At its bottom is a new tunnel, of a different style than those above. Its stone is pockmarked, almost like stucco, and rather than planks or ropes at the difficult places, handholds have been carved directly into the stone. The new tunnels are flatter, winding and dipping less crazily; the party guess they have passed some unmarked border into the territory of the mysterious Stribe.

An hour later, as they round a mild bend in a wide stretch of tunnel, Dranko spots something coming toward them, perhaps fifty yards ahead. Five seconds later he revises his report; a *swarm* of somethings is approaching, slowly, like a school of fish swimming lazily through the air. The party quickly discuss defensive measures they could take, including such overkill methods as *fire storm* or *prismatic sphere*.

Closer, closer comes the swarm, and now they can see it comprises several dozen creatures that resemble large manta rays, each with a four-foot wingspan, slowly flapping their "wings." Most oddly, they are leaving streaks of darkness behind them as they fly. They must be moving magically, since the gentle undulations of their bodies could not be producing a real physical lift.

The creatures show no signs of hostility, so the Company withhold their defensive measures and simply press against the tunnel walls to let them pass. Closer they come, closer... and then the party are among them. They don't change their trajectories, or evince any sign of noticing the humanoids in their midst. Their bodies are a deep luminous purple, and their small mouths

stretch wide to gulp down the light motes as they pass. These creatures are photovores, snapping up the floating bits of light as bats would eat insects out of the air.

Morningstar casts *detect thoughts*, but detects only an animal-level intelligence. One wing brushes against Morningstar's arm, feeling like silk, but the creature simply glides on, unconcerned. And soon enough the swarm has drifted past them, leaving streaks of darkness in their wake that are already refilling as the light motes seek their natural diffusion.

After two more hours have passed, the party find another branch in the tunnel, though this one bores straight up into the ceiling. Next to the hole, scratched into the ceiling, is the DANGER glyph next to the dinosaur-figure that they all assume indicates peshovar. The same acrid smell as before wafts downward. But while Dranko takes the opportunity to yell up "Hey, monster! This is your chance to come down and get killed!" the party don't explore, or wait around for a peshovar to emerge.

By this time the main tunnel is quite wide – almost thirty feet across – and growing wider by the mile. Eventually they find that the tunnel has expanded into something more akin to a cavern, with its walls beautifully carved with intricate abstract designs. Large stone spheres the size of sheep lay scattered here and there on the smooth floor. On the far side of the cavern, some two hundred feet distance, there is movement, and an enormous round door set in the wall. Slowly they approach.

"Who?" A voice sounds from ahead. "*Goes who? Who is go? Who goes?*" It's a voice that's almost entirely telepathic; its verbal component is nearly undetectable.

"We are travelers!" Dranko returns.

"Repeat please," says the voice. "*Say one time over. One time other please, repeat!*"

"Travelers," says Ernie.

After ten more seconds they can clearly see the speaker. It's a huge arachnid, bearing much similarity to the Vree encountered in Het Branoi. But unlike the Vree they have three-segmented insect bodies, only two bulbous fly-eyes, and eight normal-looking spider legs. There are several of these arachnids standing near the huge circular door.

"Are you the Stribe?" asks Morningstar.

"*Stribe yes we. Stribe we.*"

"Your stonework is incredible!" says Kibi. "I'm really very impressed."

"*You are perspicacity excellent. Good taste, you are very tasty.*" The Stribe doing the talking clacks its mandibles as it talks, its soft click and hiss the only truly audible part of its speech.

Dranko talks very slowly, as if to a child. "We come from very far away. And wish to travel into your city, if we may."

"*Speak more clearly!*" says the Stribe. "*Be clear! Clear speak!*"

"We come from far away travel," Ernie ventures. "We to city go."

"*I am not child,*" says the Stribe, sounding put out.

"Dammit!" Ernie grumbles.

"We come from the Temple of Arrival," says Dranko, hoping this carries some cachet.

"*Yes. Bipedal. Arrivalness.*" It raises one of its forelegs and counts them, stopping when it gets to six. Aravis has still not returned from the Maze, or wherever it is he has gone.

"One of our number is... away," says Morningstar.

"*Which number?*"

"Seven."

"We are the seven who were prophesied to come," says Dranko.

"*Yes. We know seven. You are Spected. Specexted. Expected.*" Parthol's translator disks are struggling to work on the strange Stribe language.

"Oh, for goodness' sake," says Morningstar. She casts *tongues*. But this doesn't make things any easier. The Stribe language is alien enough to defy, at least in part, all magical attempts at clear translations. Even *telepathic bond* fails to elucidate the

Stribe tongue; she hears only hisses and chittering clicks mixed with garbled speech. Just as happened when she tried *detect thoughts* on the Vree, she recalls.

“Did bipedals wearing red armor pass this way?” asks Dranko.

“*We have seen bipedal reds,*” says the Stribe. “*One, two, three. Not nice.*”

“Did they hurt you?” asks Morningstar.

“*Threats, many threats. Not nice. Seven. One two three four five six missing. Bipedal threats.*”

“Did they tell you to attack us when we arrived?” asks Dranko.

“*That instruction yes. A’aatra. A’aatra.*”

“An archer?”

“*A’aatra you speak. Yes. Come.*” When the creature says this name, it emphasizes and draws out the second syllable for a good half-second – Ah-AAAAAAAH-tra.

“We would really appreciate it if you wouldn’t attack us,” says Kibi.

“*Peaceful. Peaceful we. And you not. You are not peaceful.*” It gestures with a leg to the multitudinous weapons carried by the Company.

“Yes we are,” says Dranko.

“*No. Be good. Good little bipeds. Good little bipeds. Warning not try. Warning not try.*” Four of the nearby stone spheres rise up as the Stribe effect a casual telekinesis. “*Good little biped. No harm.*” The implication is clear, as each of the spheres must weigh about three tons.

A second Stribe scuttles to stand in front of Kibi, reaches out a hook-ended arachnid leg, and tugs on Kibi’s beard. “*Fungus! Cassew cassew yum yum.*”

“Not fungus!” cries Kibi in alarm. “Hair! It’s a beard!”

“Bipedal chitin,” explains Dranko.

“*Beard plates,*” says the Stribe. “*Hair plates. Soft chitin. Purpose?*”

“Some bipeds use beards to attract mates,” says Morningstar.

The Stribe bobs its head. To Morningstar it asks, “*Queen? One you queen? You have queen?*” Everyone can’t help but look at Morningstar. The Stribe clacks its mandibles. “*Bipedal queen! All you will speak with A’aatra, who speaks for queen. Who your A’aatra?*”

Kibi suggests Ernie, who’s happy to accept the role of party spokesman if it means Dranko doesn’t get the job. “I am,” he says.

The several assembled Stribe now turn to the huge stone disc behind them in the wall. The stone around its left edge ripples, and the entire thing rumbles and rolls leftward, sliding into a slot in the wall. The weight these creatures are able to move (in whatever non-physical manner that is) is truly staggering. On the far side is what could best be described as a settlement, a huge cavern filled with buildings and scurrying Stribe. It is not so densely packed as the Keffet dream-cities, but there is motion everywhere. The buildings sit upon the floor, but also jut from the walls and some protrude downward from the ceiling high above.

Most of the Stribe are tending vertical fungus gardens, much like Toq was doing in Kessedth. Many of these feature a type of fungus that resembles coarse hair, quite similar to Kibi’s beard. Stribe are massaging this fungus with their forelegs. Other Stribe are adding to the intricate carvings that are everywhere on the stone of the walls, floor and ceiling. They do this by some combination of mentalism and *stone shape*, which brings to mind the effortless way in which Cranchus could mold stone at his whim.

“*Follow follow, good little bipeds.*”

The farmers and sculptors among the Stribe pay little attention to the Company as they make their way through Keshem. Many large caverns are connected by short lengths of tunnels, and the architecture has a kind of drip-sandcastle look, with Stribe scuttling in and out of large holes. It’s like being in a huge termite mound.

After three hours of travel through the caves and tunnels of Keshem, the party come to the edge of a huge pit, whose walls are riddled with holes, its shadows and echoes hinting at a complex underground warren below them.

"This way. Bipeds into holes. A'aatra."

"Say," says Dranko. "Have you heard of a people called the Vree?"

"Vree? No Vree. No."

"We encountered them very far from here," explains Ernie.

"And you from where?" asks the Stribe.

"Charagan."

"Coreward? Anticoreward up down?"

"Up," says Morningstar. "Up, up, up. Beyond the... roof?"

"That is a place that is not," says the Stribe. *"Where are you from?"*

"We come from a place with no roof," answers Morningstar. "I can show you with magic what it looks like."

"You will show us. Lights and magic to see. Dangerous?"

"No, but very different, and maybe disturbing," warns Morningstar.

"Show please."

Morningstar creates her illusion of the night sky filled with stars. The Stribe crouch down and look up in wonder. *"Imaginary,"* says the lead Stribe. *"You are from imaginary."*

"Yes."

"Good little imaginary bipeds. Now... A'aatra."

Down they descend, into the damp, murky pit of the Stribe queen. As they pass through yet more spiraling tunnels, one of the Stribe turns to Ernie. *"You are hot dancers against the red? Against red chitin?"*

Ernie thinks for a second. Hot dancers? "Yes," he decides. "We are enemies of red chitin."

At last they are led into a large, moist cave. They can hear a steady patter of drips in the darkness, plunking out their rhythm on the stony ground. A dozen Stribe scuttle out from the darkness, surrounded by ten large stone spheres floating beside them. The leading Stribe is different from the rest; it has four body segments instead of three, and its chitin is brown, not black. It stands before the Company and counts them. *"Missing,"* it says. *"Sorry. Dead? Alive?"*

"Alive," says Ernie. "Just not here."

"Names?"

One by one the group name themselves.

"I am A'aatra, Speaker of the Queen."

"We're honored to meet you," says Dranko.

"Thank you," says A'aatra. Her speech is a bit more intelligible than that of the other Stribe. *"You are all travelers from undersky, yes? Above roof?"*

"Yes," says Dranko. "And enemies of those of the red chitin."

"And they are enemies of you," says A'aatra. *"And us. Threaten Queen, threaten eggs. We are set trap for you. They threaten us if we not set trap, so we set trap for you. Their description of you, very good."*

There follows an awkward moment of silence. Are the Stribe, blackmailed by Seven Dark Words, about to strike, to crush them with their massive stone spheres? A'aatra clicks her mandibles. *"We tell you about trap now!"* she says, which brings a sigh of relief to the Company.

"Do you know where the red chitin people went?" asks Kibi.

"Used circle. Leaping, leaping."

"May we use the circle?" asks Dranko.

“And is that the trap?” adds Kibi.

“No! No ritual, leaping leaping, red chitin. Just used circle, disappeared. Very strange, no rituals. You leap after them?”

“If we can,” says Dranko.

A’aatra’s phrase “leaping, leaping,” brings to mind the first words of the Croaking Oracle. Morningstar steps forward. “Do you know the meaning of the phrase ‘five nine two’?”

A’aatra considers. “*Ah!*” she says. “*No, Circle Eight. Circle Eight.*”

“The Croaking Oracle said five, nine, two,” says Kibi. “We’ll need to find some of the other Leaping Circles, eventually.”

At the mention of the Croaking Oracle, A’aatra clatters backward several paces and hisses through her mandibles. “*Toad! Consuming Toad! Did you kill Consuming Toad?*”

“We did not,” Kibi admits. “But we didn’t give it any of your people, we promise.”

A’aatra bobs her head. “*Filthy speaker! Turns life to truth. Filthy!*”

Morningstar nods gravely. “We had enemies above the sky who also turned life to truth. Those in the red chitin.”

“*They cause great blackness,*” says A’aatra. “*Great blackness coming, unless we let them through.*”

“We seek to stop that,” says Morningstar.

“*Then you must spring trap,*” says A’aatra.

“And what is the trap?” asks Ernie.

“*Monsters in temple. You kill them please. Temple of Sisters, we cannot fight. Contaminated.*”

“Did they burn anyone’s heart out?” asks Ernie.

“*Heart? Internal parts? No internal parts burned. What waits in temple are peshovar. Unfightable. Red chitin say, when you come, we tell you, ‘Go to Temple of Sisters and pray.’ Unfightable peshovar will kill you. But we offer leaping leaping you kill unfightable, yes?*”

Kibi frowns at that. “Why are they unkillable?”

“*Cannot move weapons.*” A’aatra gestures and several nearby stone spheres rise and whirl through the air. “*Usually we kill peshovar but these we cannot. Three of us dead.*”

“I’m sorry,” says Ernie.

“So these are special peshovar?” asks Morningstar.

“*They have been enchanted.*”

“How many are there?” asks Dranko.

“*Not sure. At least two.*”

“All right,” says Dranko. “We’ll spring your trap.”

A’aatra agitatedly waves her forelegs. “*Should warn you. Trap may include me telling you this.*”

It’s a possibility the Company cannot discount. The Evil Trio may have counted on A’aatra warning the party about the trap, and taken that into consideration somehow. At Morningstar’s request, A’aatra shows them a blueprint of the Temple of Sisters. The Stribe queen-speaker does this by magically rearranging the stone of the nearest wall, using some high-level variant of *stone shape* that molds the rock into a three-dimensional relief. The Temple is mostly a single chamber, tall and conical, with tunnels branching from it like spokes at a variety of heights. Next to the Temple she “draws” two figures, both Stribe, one a chalky white and the other a jet black. (Kibi marvels that her ability lets her alter the color of the stone.) The two are clearly Yavin and Wlaqua, the Sister Gods, depicted as belonging to the local race. Next to them she draws a peshovar, and it looks like a detailed version of the one the party have seen next to the DANGER glyphs. It’s a large lizard with a long tail, thick legs, sharp teeth and claws, and a belly that drags on the ground.

“How do they fight?” asks Ernie.

“Bite. Smash. Gravity. Great strength updown.”

Morningstar considers scouting the Temple in Dream. “When you sleep,” she asks A’aatra, “do you dream? And do you go places when you do?”

“Yes. Pictures in sleeping, but not go places.”

“There is a whole populated world in the dreams here,” says Morningstar.

“You are crazy people,” says A’aatra. *“Crazy people dreaming pictures of people in great war. We take care of crazy people, sleeping pictures of wars.”*

“They are traveling,” says Morningstar. “They’re not crazy.”

A’aatra waves her forelegs, but it’s understandably difficult to read her body language. *“Sleep now then?”* says the Stribe. *“Tomorrow spring trap? We defend you very well in sleep.”*

“Thank y...” begins Ernie, but something odd happens then. A small patch of fire appears in the air between him and A’aatra. It’s the size of an orange, and for five seconds it blazes away in midair, crackling softly and emanating heat. Then it vanishes.

A’aatra steps back. *“Do not bring fire!”*

“We thought it was you!” says Ernie.

“Truth! Truth of fire!”

Ernie swears up and down that they had nothing to do with the flame, and A’aatra is convinced. “Maybe our red-armored friends are scrying on us,” says Grey Wolf.

“They did loot something from a fire god’s tomb, didn’t they?” asks Flicker. “Maybe that’s one of its powers.”

“I bet that fire was something they left behind,” says Dranko. “Something that would trigger to let them know we’ve arrived.”

Morningstar cannot help but think of the Croaking Oracle’s prophecy. “One brings many, flame’s design...” But what does that *mean*? It’s just one more mystery, piled with all the rest.



And now, an update in which I commit rat-bastardy-ness of epic proportions...

Surface Tension

A’aatra adds detail to the stone map of the peshovar-infested temple. It has no doors; the only access is through a tunnel that comes up from below, angled to allow a gentle ingress that never places the visitor higher than the Sister Gods whose statues stand within. In various places are something akin to pillars or mounds, but A’aatra cannot translate these properly. Small alcoves in the walls, at varying heights, allow Stribe to meditate and worship. A’aatra begs the Company to cause as little damage to the Temple interior as possible when they fight the peshovar.

With no fanfare, Aravis appears in the floor next to Pewter, curled up and asleep. He opens his eyes and wonders where he is and why he’s on the floor. He doesn’t recall going to sleep. Pewter meows joyously at his master’s return, while the others crowd around, spending an obligatory few seconds making sure he’s physically okay before pressing him with questions as to what happened.

“I...” He tries to remember. His memories are fuzzy but becoming clearer by the second. “I had a... a vision from inside the Maze. I think I was inside it.”

“How did you do that?” asks Ernie.

“I didn’t. Belshikun did. The Avatar of Drosh to whom we gave the Crosser’s Maze.” Aravis stands up. The others can’t help but notice the grim expression on his face. “Belshikun said they may need to call on me for help from time to time,” he tells them. “But... the Maze can reach across the Barrier, in a sense. In repayment for my help, Belshikun is going to give me visions of the world above.”

“Excellent,” says Dranko. The disconnectedness from the surface world had been weighing on him – on all of them – so any news, he thinks, is welcome.

“It’s not as nice as you might think. He gave me a first vision.” And Aravis shares what he saw.

You are not in the inn. There is no stranger sitting across from you, wearing your face.

But there is someone, a dark being, familiar – it is Belshikun, the Avatar of Drosh whom you encountered in the Shrine of Dralla, the being to whom you gave over the Crosser's Maze. It is painful to look at him – painful just to be aware of someone here besides yourself. It suddenly becomes clear why your mysterious friend always appears to be you – it's the only way that your fragment can make sense of other beings in the Maze. It's just a tiny piece of you, after all. But Belshikun is breaking that rule – you're not sure how. His eyes glow hotly blue in his head, nearly impossible to look into.

"I am sorry not to have been free to offer you the help I promised," he says. "Though what we have been doing instead, I hope you will be thankful for some day. We may need to borrow you from time to time to further our work. But I also offer you something unheard of and unknown to those beneath the Iron Barrier. I will give you visions of the world above.

"You may find them a curse, a blessing, a distraction, or only a curiosity, but I give them to you nonetheless. This is the first; I'm sorry that you will not find it pleasant. Attend." Belshikun touches your forehead, and you have a vision-within-a-vision.

There are two cloaked figures, furtive, sneaking, in a dark forest. It is dusk, and a pallid light barely penetrates the high branches of the trees. Both of these figures are invisible, but not to you and the Maze. One of the figures is Etria, Duke Nigel's court wizardess, and confidante of Rosetta of the Silver Shell. The other is Rosetta herself, her hard face dark with worry.

"We should have seen something by now," Rosetta mutters. "Heard something, at least." They are speaking telepathically, but the Maze hears them. Otherwise they are perfectly silent, wrapped in enchantments of stealth.

Etria instinctively steps over a pile of dry leaves anyway. "Maybe your calculations are off."

"They are not," Rosetta asserts.

"I wish you would have had Ozilish check them before..."

Rosetta stops short, and turns to Etria with a look both tired and angry. "No. It could be him, for all we know! We've been over this before. If I was willing to turn to others in the Spire for help, I'd have brought Attrius and Portia along, and had the whole damn lot of the archmagi checking my math."

Etria lets out a long breath. "I still think you must be mistaken. It makes no sense that someone in the Spire is actually a Black Circle spy. It's not that I don't trust the Shell, but just about everyone in the Spire has been in a position to sabotage all our efforts a dozen times before now. Why didn't they do something when we stopped Mokad? Why didn't they sabotage Aravis at Verdshane? If there's a traitor, what the hell are they waiting for?"

Rosetta shrugs, turns, and keeps moving. "The Black Circle takes the long view," she says. "They're diviners, remember? Maybe they foresaw that trying anything before now would have ultimately failed them? Or that waiting would eventually serve their ends better? My personal theory is that whoever it is wanted to lay low until Ozilish's band was out of the picture; they did have a way of screwing up the Black Circle's best-laid plans. I think the Circle's timing for this is similarly motivated; they've been biding their time until our strongest pieces were no longer on the board."

"And now they're gone," says Etria.

"And now they're gone," Rosetta repeats. "Which is why, especially now, I'm not willing to trust the Spire. Anyway, given the nature of this mission, fewer is better. It's not like we can fight all of them. The only reason you're here is to escape with news if anything goes wrong. No, all we can do is hope our wards are strong enough, march into their midst, and read the scroll before they know we're here."

They walk in silence for another minute or two. Rosetta stops, concentrates upon the dead quiet in the forest, and swears. "We should be quite close now. We should be hearing the sound of a dozen dozen acolytes chanting."

Etria cocks an ear. "Then your calculations must be off, like I said. If you had only..."

"What's that?" Rosetta holds up a hand. With the other she points into the gloom of the darkening wood.

Slowly, slowly, they creep forward. What they find, staked out to the forest floor, is the body of a man wearing the robes of a Black Circle adherent. Rosetta frowns, and thinks, and...

"There's another one over there," whispers Etria. "And a third... and..."

"No!" Rosetta has nearly stopped breathing. Her eyes have gone wide. "No, no, no, no!" She breaks into a run, no longer trying to stay quiet.

"What is it?" Etria gasps, sprinting to keep up.

But Rosetta doesn't answer; she's dashing through the woods at top speed, following a row of staked bodies, one every ten yards. Suddenly the two of them burst into a clearing, where twelve rows of bodies converge, a starburst of mutilated corpses radiating out from a central point. At that convergence, a shimmering portal hangs in the air, twelve feet high and twelve across.

Rosetta swears again. "We've been assuming that all 144 would be performing their Astral Tunneling ritual right up until the last moment. All of my calculations were based on that. But they must have discovered a tipping point where sacrificing the casters and channeling their life energy was more efficient than keeping them alive and casting."

Etria looks down and notices that all of the bodies are staked five times, hands, feet and heart, except for one of the twelve next to the portal. That one has one hand still free... a hand holding a mallet. "Then the Astral tunnel could open sooner than you thought?"

"We probably don't have twelve hours, that's for sure. Just keep a sharp eye out. With luck, I still have time."

Rosetta stands before the portal, its surface opaque like rushing water. She fishes out a string of beads and hastily drapes it around her neck, then unrolls a long scroll that extends from her eye level all the way to the ground. She begins to murmur words of power, and small yellow lights begin to play along the surface of the portal. These become increasingly numerous as Rosetta invokes her potent magics.

She is maybe three-quarters of the way through the scroll when a massive arm reaches through the shimmer and a thick, gauntleted hand grabs her throat. Rosetta merely tenses her neck and continues reading, her face reddening as powerful fingers squeeze her gullet. Tears roll from her eyes, and desperation conquers her features as she realizes how much she still has to read. Etria flinches, takes a step back, horrified, before drawing a dagger and hacking fruitlessly at the arm. She dares not cast any spells, lest they disrupt Rosetta's own incantation.

It doesn't matter. Seconds later the hand clenches, there is a sickening snap, and Rosetta's body goes limp, the scroll dropping unfinished from her hands. Etria mumbles a quick spell and vanishes.

A towering, muscular figure, clad in steel mail, steps the rest of the way through the portal. You have seen this being before, as it looked helplessly through the Skysteel Hole in eastern Kivia, when you thwarted his previous attempt to make egress into Abernia.

The figure takes off his helmet, revealing a cruel dark-blue face pocked with crawling black lesions. Naradawk Skewn gazes at the bodies piled up around him, gives a satisfied grunt, and tosses Rosetta aside.

"It's about time."



There is a shell-shocked silence. After all their many efforts to prevent Naradawk Skewn from gaining access to Abernia, the Emperor has at last succeeded, and the Company are helpless to do anything about it.

"I can't believe Rosetta wasn't a spy!" blurts Dranko.

Morningstar shakes her head. "So there's an unknown traitor in the Spire, Rosetta is dead, and the Emperor is walking around on Charagan."

"I thought we killed all the Black Circle people up there!" says Ernie, his voice more shrill than he probably intends.

"Only those at the top of the hierarchy," says Grey Wolf. "They still had plenty of minions."

"He was scared of us!" says Dranko. "He waited until we were gone before crossing."

"Couldn't Belshikun have only sent us happy visions?" Ernie complains.

"He did say I might find them 'a curse, a blessing, a distraction or a curiosity'," says Aravis. "It's possible he doesn't even have control over the visions."

Dranko seethes. "Gods, that makes me want to kill bad guys *right now!*"

"Then let's go disrupt the Black Circle's plans," says Aravis.

A'atra scuttles over to regard Aravis. "*Are you a good number?*" she asks.

Aravis blinks. "Yes. A very good one."



The Temple of the Sisters is a day's journey from the Queen's Pit. A'aatra lends the Company an entourage of Stribe escorts and offers her sincere thanks.

"We are in your debt," says Grey Wolf, bowing to her.

En route, as the group wind through twisty tunnels and chambers that must be what the inside of a huge anthill would look like, they pass another flock of light-eating manta rays. The Stribe call them "vish," and as the party did before, they stand aside to let the strange creatures pass. "*They can be dangerous if provoked,*" warns one of the Stribe.

"Can they be cooked and eaten?" asks Ernie.

The Stribe stops and stares at Ernie for a moment. "*Maybe,*" it says. "*But the vish wouldn't like it. Are you hungry?*"

"Yes," says Ernie.

"*We are an hour from fungus. We will fungus you.*"

Sure enough, they soon arrive at a huge subterranean farm, a cavern in which the stone has been shaped into parallel walls, arranged like library shelves. Each wall has fungus growing upon it, and an irrigation system is channeling water from a nearby river to sheet down the patches of crops. Dozens of Stribe tend to the fungus walls, collecting ripe(?) fungus into stone baskets that they keep aloft with telekinesis. (The Stribe's TK ability seems keenly attuned to stone; they can lift it with an almost careless ease. On the way to the farm, at certain difficult vertical stretches, the Stribe TK-ed the party to help them progress, and that they found more difficult, even though the members of the Company were much lighter than, for instance, the stone spheres.)

"What is your fungus preference?" asks the Stribe.

"Surprise us," says Ernie. "Pick something you think we'd find pleasant."

"*We will fungus you pleasantly,*" says the Stribe. "*Come this way.*"

Soon the Company are munching on a tasty (if a bit chewy) purple fungus, served on stone platters. Water is served in stone cups they can barely lift. After refreshing themselves, the group continue, past more farms, through some sizeable settlements, and along countless stretches of tunnel.

Seven hours out from the Queen's Pit, they reach the wide tunnel that, according to the Stribe, leads to the Temple of the Sisters. The Stribe guides decline to go further, but convey the thanks of their people before retreating back the way they had come. The Company walk cautiously down the tunnel, and in a minute or two it ends at a wide opening onto an enormous cavern, easily a hundred feet on a side and two hundred high. They can't simply walk out, as the tunnel mouth is about half-way up the height of the cavern. Its walls, the party see, are covered in intricate abstract carvings, in such prodigious quantity and exquisite detail, it must have taken dozens of Stribe decades of labor.

In the middle of the vast, dimly lit space is the Temple of the Sisters, a tall conical structure, its surface mottled like a drip-sandcastle, with a four-chambered clover-leaf-shaped base. As A'aatra warned, the temple has no door, but some twenty feet out from it is a large hole which, they presume, leads to a tunnel that emerges up through the floor inside.

The air in the cavern carries the distinctively unpleasant tang of Adversary blood.

Siuus: Oh man, that was fun. Thanks for the read, Sagirol

StevenAC: [There is a shell-shocked silence.] Ouch. Too soon, Sagirol too soon. RIP, Rosetta...

That was indeed a true RBDM act. I take it this was the plot development that had you worried you'd pissed off your players when you dropped it on them? [See the discussion on page 230 and following of Part Three.]

As an aside, it's great fun to finally see the events mentioned in those posts from you and the players around that time, when you were playing through the sessions we're only now getting to read about. For instance, this is what should be coming up fairly soon:

Piratecat: We played tonight. Sagirol 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.

Can't wait...

carborundum: I am LOVING all these updates - thank you Sagirol sir!

KidCthulhu: Now that's true Rat Bastardy. Sagirol shows us one of our least favorite NPCs getting killed in a fashion caused by or at least aided by her own ego and paranoia, and we can't even gloat and say "We told you so" because of the nature of what killed her. There was a whole lot of cursing around the table that night. I'm kind of surprised Sagirol escaped with his life.

Siujs: Prophecy: spike to push through? Did no one think that they would heal the world by pushing the spike of Essence farther into the earth and removing it from the other side?

Fantastic, as always. Man. I am so excited for this; only, like, forty more updates!

Everett: What "Essence"? Essence of the Adversary, you mean? And how would such a thing be made possible?

Piratecat: Damned if we knew. We were making this up as we went along. My goal, at least, was to taunt things until they wanted to hit me, then hit them harder and earlier. Note to self: that's sometimes a really stupid goal.

Everett: Piratecat's need to mock things and then hit them aside, I guess that, since the Adversary is after all hundreds of feet tall, the Company might "drive the spike through" him, and through the world itself. But the *Watcher's Kiss* is just an ordinary-sized weapon (in fact it's a dagger, IIRC?), so I'm not sure where this theory can lead.

One at last, but not yet known. / One forever dead as stone. / One to drive the spike clean through. / One to die, and hope renew. – Here's my speculation, currently: this verse refers to two people. One in the first two lines, one in the last two lines. One of the party, the one who "drives the spike" will indeed die, and renew hope. The spike will be driven through the Adversary; as before, it will wound him, not kill him, and the campaign will end with him in a similar position to where he's always been; imprisoned or incapacitated for another age. "But in another time, in another place, his evil may rise again, and another band of heroes be called to meet him..." Ozilish intoned, somberly... Cue credits and endgame music.

The "one forever dead as stone" is not one of the party; it is not someone the party has ever met. It's someone they'll learn of down here in the core, someone who perhaps once challenged the Adversary or Emperor Skewn, was killed and made a gruesome example of. Somehow this being imparts information to the company (a book in its tomb, perhaps, or speaking with its shade, what have you) that proves crucial in the final confrontation.

Anxe: If it's someone down in the Underdark, that doesn't sound like someone the Adversary made an example of. No one can get down to the Underdark and leave! It sounds more like someone the Adversary is scared of, imprisoned under the earth so that the Adversary could return without interference. Have there been any other hints about such a person?

Everett: Maybe, but if they're only imprisoned, they're not "as dead as stone." Hmm.

"Dead as stone" can obviously be read two ways: literally or figuratively. Someone who is actually dead, or someone who only seems to be dead, or is dead in a sense – permanently imprisoned within a *time stop*, something like that. It could be the latter and if so, there haven't been any hints that I recall about such a person, but I don't think that discounts the theory, since until the descent into the Underdark nothing in the entire campaign had much if anything at all to do with the place.

Anxe: I've also gotta say that doesn't really jive with what the Emperor's done in the past. He was digging all over the place to try and reach something in the Underdark. Now he's sent his dream team down to do or get whatever he was looking for. I think they're looking for his hand that fell through. It plummeted down into the Underdark, leaving that bloody evil mess on top.

Everett: Again, maybe. The next update will probably tell us something about the Adversary, so we'll see what we'll see.

Anxe: Didn't Kibi have a way to talk to stones at some point? Maybe dead as stone isn't as dead as we think!

Everett: The simile "dead as stone" wouldn't be in the prophecy if it wasn't significant. Prophecies don't mince words.



A Killing Machine

Ernie casts *magic circle vs. evil* in case the Essence is stronger inside the temple. For a moment after that the Company just stand there at the precipice, gazing down upon the huge cone that is Temple of the Sisters.

Dranko jumps off. The others' hearts skip a beat before they remember he always *feather falls*. Ernie nearly shouts, but remembers they're all mind-linked. *What are you doing!?* he asks.

I was bored. I'm going to scout, to make sure all the peshovar are inside the temple. Dranko lands softly on the cavern floor, and sees it is carved similarly to the walls and ceiling, textured with finely crafted shapes and designs. The feeling of Essence has increased a small amount, but is still nothing tangibly dangerous. He hears low, rumbling grunts from inside the temple, muffled by the stone walls. The hole in the ground that leads down and then up again inside has been shaped to be quite narrow. He guesses the Stribe have done that to keep the peshovar trapped inside. Outside, he finds no tracks, no spoor, no sign of any lumbering beasts.

The rest of the party cast some personal long-term combat buffs, though they have to wait on party-wide enchantments now that Dranko is a hundred feet below them. Aravis transforms via *shapechange* into an enormous earth elemental, sinks into the ground, and sticks a giant stone hand out into the cavern. In this way he becomes a living elevator and shuttles his friends two at a time down to where Dranko waits. As he loads up Ernie and Grey Wolf, four Stribe return. "*We are to here to wait outward,*" one of them says. "*In case you are need rescue.*"

Now that the Company are again gathered together, they finish their battery of buffs, and then Kibi casts *prying eyes*, instructing them to go through the tunnel and explore the temple interior. A few minutes later they start to return, and provide Kibi a visual report. There are four peshovar inside, roaming around restlessly, black spots crawling over their rough gray lizardy hides. Each is about twelve feet long from nose to tail, seven feet high at the top of its ridged back, and true to the drawings of the Stribe, resembles a cross between a lizard and a dinosaur. The motes of light closest to them, within about a foot of their skins, swirl and dart with atypical energy. Kibi sighs at the predictably razor-sharp claws and teeth.

Ernie decides a *divination* is in order. As he casts, he becomes acutely aware of the spiritual separation from Yondalla that

comes from being on the wrong side of Yulan's Barrier. In order to receive his guidance he will need to expend life-force, and this he is willing to do. He finishes the spell and asks, "*Will we do well if we enter the Temple to battle the peshovar?*"

Stay grounded.

A'aatra had already hinted that the peshovar have some control over gravity, and this bit of divine wisdom puts any thought of flying out of their heads. Taking Yondalla's advice more literally, Kibi uses *wish* to effect a *mass xorn movement* on the entire party. "Ready?" asks Dranko.

Down they go, sinking into the stone and then moving beneath the temple floor. *This is weird*, thinks Ernie. *I can't see anything, but I can sense vibrations*. Except for Kibi, this is their first time under the effects of *xorn movement*. While blind, they have acute senses of movement and gravity, and the tactile sensations are bizarre. It feels like swimming through gelatin.

"I'll scout," says Dranko. He makes use of his *robe of blending* and pokes his head up through the floor, noting the positions of the four meandering peshovar. There are many large pillars in the temple, ten feet around and thirty feet high, and atop these are various oddly shaped sculptures. Two at the front end each support a statue of a Stribe, one white, one black – the representations of the Sister Gods, Yavin and Wlaqua.

Hastily they work out a plan of attack over the mind-link. Aravis rises up directly beneath one of the pillars and then continues to "swim" up the pillar until he emerges at its zenith. The others pop up in various places, staying out of "fireball formation" in case these creatures have any area attacks. The peshovar, none too bright in the best of circumstances, are taken entirely by surprise. Flicker immediately moves to stab one of the startled creatures, but his blade is turned by its knobbly hide. Dranko has better luck, carving chunks out of the closest peshovar with his whip.

Aravis plays a hunch and drops a *disjunction* on two of the peshovar far removed from any of his friends. A ripple of unstoppable abjuration spreads out and flows over the beasts, but it's hard to say what effect it has, if any, because the spell also wipes out all of the light motes in its area. The two peshovar are now hidden inside a hemisphere of blackness. Ernie figures that if they had any magical defenses, he should strike before they have a chance to reestablish them. He casts *ice flowers* into the darkness, and is rewarded by saurian bellows of pain.

Kibi bisects the temple interior with a *wall of force*, figuring that can only work to their tactical advantage since everyone can burrow beneath it. Grey Wolf lobes an *acid orb* at the nearest monster, while Flicker and Dranko flank and devastate another with their weapons. The peshovar isn't dead, but slumps to one side due to having one of its hind legs nearly removed. Morningstar casts *fire storm*. All of the peshovar are badly burned, and the one already brought close to death by Dranko and Flicker collapses in a heap of frozen flesh.

By now the lumbering beasties have worked out that something bad is happening. The one closest to Grey Wolf casts its dull-eyed gaze at the spellsword, and its black lesions start to jitter on its skin. Grey Wolf winces, knowing what's coming, and he's right: painful black pustules form on his own skin and burst in pocks of stinging fire. Then the remaining peshovar also look that way, and the light motes around them start to pulse and squirm. Each peshovar becomes encased in a shimmering aura. The closest opens its mouth, bellows, and sonic ribbons radiate out through the light motes, setting them to a frantic vibration. This quickly builds to a crescendo, before the light motes fall inward onto Grey Wolf with an astounding sonic boom. Grey Wolf is blasted from his feet, skin torn from his body, his bones bruised and teeth set to rattling in his mouth. Residual waves of sonic energy streak toward some of the others, but Flicker and Dranko dance out of the way, and Kibi is protected by one of the many silver discs of his *effulgent epuration*.

The second of the nearby peshovar looks balefully at Aravis, and he too feels the sickening pain of black pustules popping all over his face. Annoyed, Aravis responds with *maze*. The peshovar vanishes. Satisfied, Aravis sinks into the safety of the stone floor. Ernie follows with *flame strike* on the monster that instigated the sonic attack, but the peshovar are at least moderately resistant to magic and the spell has no effect. Kibi suffers a similar failure with *hold monster*, but has better luck with a Quickened *rainbow pattern*. The closest peshovar looks up at the sparkly lights, grunting with curiosity and snapping at them with its teeth. Morningstar moves to heal Grey Wolf, then Quickens *divine power* on herself. Grey Wolf shakes his head and struggles to his feet before blasting the closest peshovar with another *acid orb*.

Dranko realizes that if he goes invisible, he can lay waste to these things with sneak attacks. To buy himself more time, he reaches into the fragile recesses of madness deep within his mind and effects *time stop*. The battle freezes. Every light mote hangs suspended, grains of dust sheathed in tiny individual halos. The black spots of Essence stop squidging on the skins of the peshovar. And somewhere just out of view, tantalizingly close, lies the twinkling insanity of the Far Realms. He moves into attack position, casts *improved invisibility* on himself, and waits to reappear. Giggles of anticipation threaten to burst from his lips.

What the others see is this: Dranko *teleports* across the battlefield to stand behind a peshovar, flanking it with Flicker. Immediately all the light motes within six inches of his body flock to his skin, coating him in a glowing membrane. Though technically invisible, he shines like a bonfire. He's so startled that his whip strike goes wide.

"What did you do that for?" exclaims Flicker.

"Note to self," says Dranko. "Invisibility in the Underdark sucks."

Just like conversations, battles occasionally have tiny periods of incongruous silence, when every combatant's pauses align. Such a moment occurs, and everyone can hear a faint sound from somewhere outside the temple. It sounds familiar, though no one can place it exactly. Some sort of machine?

Dranko looks accusingly at Kibi. "Not working as expected!" he shouts. "Your invisibility sash is broken!" His voice has taken on the slur of Wisdom drain from the tentacle-powered *time stop*. Before Kibi can defend himself from this slander, the peshovar swivels to face Dranko, gives him the black pustule treatment, and then savages him with the pointy ends of its claws and teeth.

Though the peshovar are physically imposing, Aravis hopes to get lucky with a *disintegrate*, and hits the jackpot. His spell overcomes all its resistance and resilience. For a moment it appears that nothing has happened, before the peshovar collapses into a powdery swirl on the floor. That leaves two beasts dead, one trapped in a *maze*, and the last still playfully nipping at the *rainbow pattern*. The various patches of darkness left behind by area spells are filling in as the light motes seek their natural spatial equilibrium.

The mysterious sound is much louder now, right outside the temple. Everyone thinks it familiar but none can place it – a rhythmic chopping sound mixed with metallic clanks. Echoes of metal colliding with stone come from the tunnel entrance in the floor; whatever it is, it's on its way in! Kibi quickly casts a *wall of stone* covering the hole, a granite plug nearly two feet thick that should buy them a few minutes at least. They then rush to the hypnotized peshovar, surround it, and commence smashing and slicing it to pieces. Though Kibi inflicts serious damage with a pair of *earthbolts* and Aravis slams it with a *Bigby's clenched fist*, the lion's share of damage is done by Morningstar with *Ell's Will*, which deals terrible damage to spell-resistant creatures.

From the tunnel comes a rising sound, as of something hydraulic powering up, followed by a tremendous boom. Kibi's stone wall quivers and sprouts a latticework of small cracks. The dwarf exhorts his familiar Scree to investigate – carefully! – what's in the tunnel.

It's... I don't know what it is, Kibi. Some kind of machine is smashing through your wall, but it's also alive. I think. And it has an aquamarine glow, just like the...

A volcano of rock shards erupts from the floor, and the whole Company are now afforded a good look at the thing as it emerges. If a bored God had set out to make a war machine out of gleaming iron plates and assorted deadly weapons, and decided half-way through to just start bolting on any dangerous-looking object He could find, this is what his creation would look like. It's very roughly humanoid, seven feet tall and extremely bulky. Its surface bristles with jointed saws, hammers, spikes, spinning blades, bolted-on pipes, and dozens of little protuberances like insect antennae. Tiny arcs of electricity spark and pop all over it, while it emits a ceaseless cacophony of buzzes, whirrs, clicks, hisses and crackles. It smells of ozone and oil. From its very top a large propeller unfolds, and the creature – called an "anaxim," though none of the Company have heard that word – rises a few feet into the air. Now they all recognize the sound. It's the chop of propeller blades, which they have heard once in their lives, from the strange mechanical Scree in Het Branoi.

As Scree had reported, the anaxim is limned in aquamarine light, just as had been the many-winged horror that had assaulted them near the Croaking Oracle. In Dranko's mind he hears a monotone voice. **PRIMARY TARGET ACQUIRED. DRANKO BLACKHOPE. KILL, KILL, KILL.** "Meledien must *really* be angry that I have her arm," Dranko mutters.

Over the mind-link there's a brief burst of chatter. Is this the real trap? Weaken the party with the peshovar and then spring this clanking death-machine on them? Dranko dives into the ground, putting a few feet of earth between himself and the monster. Flicker and Grey Wolf quickly follow.

Aravis regards this new threat and wonders if its various electrical components can be short-circuited. He casts *lightning ring*, then Quickens a *cone of cold*. The anaxim is coated with frost, but isn't much slowed, and seems to have resisted much of the damage. Ernie slides through the stone beneath the *wall of force* and casts *radiant assault*, but as the light of the spell bursts outward, most of the anaxim's iron plates flip on hidden gimbals to reveal brightly-polished mirrors. The spell energy is deflected,

scattering harmlessly into the air, and the plates flip again to present their unyielding iron faces.

Kibi drops his *wall of force* (since the metal creature can fly over it) and casts his own *cone of cold*, but again the panels flip and deflect the spell. Frustrated, the dwarf commands his *Bigby's clenched fist* to punch the thing, and that actually works. A tiny antenna snaps off and skitters across the floor. Morningstar calls down a *fire storm* on the anaxim, but once more its mirror-plates protect it entirely. She glares at it before retreating into the rock.

A little dish pops out of a hidden panel on the anaxim's head and swivels about for a second or two. Scanning lights flicker to life and sweep an arc in front of it. With most of his allies hiding in the rock, only Ernie falls within the anaxim's scan. A little clawed hand pops out of yet another hidden compartment, holding what looks like a tiny wand. The wand flares, and four towering iron golems appear surrounding Ernie. They are ten feet tall, with featureless heads and enormous iron fists, and Ernie has a terrible flashback to his death by anvil, delivered by a golem not dissimilar to these. But he is a much more experienced combatant than he was all those years ago, and is almost smothered with defensive enchantments. He dodges, ducks, and lets his armor do its job. Though eight enormous fists come crashing down upon him, he weathers the storm entirely unscathed.

Flicker pops up next to the anaxim and lunges at it with his *ice dagger*, but the machine bats the blade away with a length of iron pipe dangling from a short length of chain. Dranko emerges as well and unleashes a full flurry of whip strikes, an assault of the sort that usually delivers horrific damage to his enemies. The anaxim deflects them all. All of its scanning lights swing to shine upon him. **DRANKO BLACKHOPE. KILL, KILL, KILL.** Aravis fires off two lightning bolts from his *lightning ring*, but both are deflected by the flipping mirrors. The same happens to a Quickened *disintegrate*.

Even surrounded by iron golems, Ernie manages to cast *lion's roar*, but none of the enemies even seem to notice. Dismayed, Ernie retreats into the floor. Kibi then gives the golems something to do, casting *summon monster IX* and bringing forth five greater earth elementals. These immediately move to grapple, thus instigating an epic golems-vs.-elementals melee the likes of which the world has likely never seen, though in current context it's relegated to the undercard.

While Kibi sinks into the floor, Morningstar moves to stand near Dranko, then Quickens a *searing darkness* which manages to strike a spot not protected by the mirrors. The damage is not great, but there's a small cracking sound and a handful of springs pop out from the anaxim's busy interior to bounce crazily on the ground.

While the iron golems and earth elementals continue their scrum, the anaxim rises swiftly into the air using its whirring propeller until it hovers forty feet above the ground. A panel on its underside flips around to reveal a metallic cone, and from this cone comes a deafening sonic boom. Dranko rolls out of its area, but Grey Wolf and Morningstar are caught full in the blast. Flicker avoids a portion of its nerve-crushing shock, but still feels his hair standing on end.

Dranko looks up. "Is that the best you can do? Who sent you, anyway?"

INFORMATION SHARING CRITERIA NOT MET. Some of the more damaged of its plates flip around, and from deep within the anaxim's body there comes a furnace roar and a red glow that shines out from between its seams. The plates flip back, and much of the damage has been repaired.

As Flicker fights down his fear and flies upward to engage the anaxim, Grey Wolf notices Dranko fishing out his *bag of endless rope*, to which he has tied a grappling hook onto the end. His "Dranko is about to do something foolish" alarm goes off, and he casts *indomitability* on his friend. Dranko swings the rope around a few times and hurls the grappling hook upward, hoping that the rope will tangle in the machine's propeller and bring it down. Miraculously the hook does get caught on one of the blades instead of ricocheting off, but the rope ends up winding rapidly around the propeller shaft, hissing out of its enchanted bag at an alarming rate. With only a few seconds before all the rope will be pulled up, Dranko runs twice around the nearest pillar and braces himself.

The rope runs out, and the force of the anaxim's propeller is tested against Dranko's ability to hold his ground. Dranko comes out of that contest rather badly. Unwilling to release the bag, he is whipped around the pillar until he has become unwound, before being flung outward and reeled in like a fish biting down on a hook. In under two seconds he has been brought right up against the anaxim's body, where he becomes impaled on several small spikes. This turns out to be a lucky break, as he is not pulled into the propeller itself, which would surely have sliced him to ribbons. The smell of fire and hot oil fills Dranko's nose, and the sounds of ratcheting hammers and whirring saw blades are loud in his ears. Wind from the propeller blows his hair.

Aravis thinks to Dranko over the mind-link: *I'm going to try more lightning bolts, in case electricity is its weakness and I get them past its spell resistance. Can you dodge them?*

I'm sure I can, replies Dranko, eager for anything that might solve his predicament. Aravis fires his bolts, but it doesn't work

out very well. While they do get past the creature's resistance this time, the electricity becomes diffuse and spreads into a crackling web around the anaxim's body, while dozens of tiny antennae jitter and wiggle like electrified cilia. Dranko gets burned, but the machine is unscarred. Aravis curses and Quickens an *antimagic ray*, but this has no effect at all.

Things are starting to look desperate. Weapons and spells are failing to have much effect, and now the thing has Dranko seemingly at its mercy. Ernie flings an *energy drain* at it, but discovers that the anaxim has no life energy to drain. Kibi, with an angle on the side of the creature where Dranko isn't, blasts the monster with an Empowered, Maximized *coldfire*, but between the thing's unnatural agility and natural resistance to elements, it's hardly scratched.

DRANKO. KILL. Two large saw blades swing downward on jointed arms and buzz toward Dranko's head. He manages to flip over to avoid the first (impaling himself on a new set of spikes) but the second slices deep into his arm, and then an iron trip hammer smashes him in the thigh. Finally, adding injury to injury, a small sparking arm scorches him with a jolt of electricity. Astoundingly, he's not dead, though his blood is now sheeting down both his body and the anaxim's and dripping onto the floor far below.

Morningstar looks up and comes to two conclusions. First, her reckless husband needs rescuing. Second, it's going to be up to her to take down this metallic horror. "Grey Wolf, can you make me fly?" Grey Wolf obliges with a wand, and up Morningstar soars. When she's close enough, she casts a *mass heal* that encompasses herself, Dranko and Flicker. Then she draws *Ell's Will*.

Dranko, meanwhile, has not stopped thinking about how he might foul up the flying apparatus of the anaxim. From his haversack he calls up his *immovable rod*. The metal beast is swaying slightly as it hovers, oscillations caused in part by his own weight pinned to its spikes. He takes a couple of seconds to time its movement, and cringing from the danger to his fingers, reaches up and presses the button that fixes the rod relative to the world.

With a sound like a hyperactive titan banging on an anvil with a metal rod, every one of the anaxim's propeller blades is sheared off; they spray around the temple like a fan of throwing knives, each quivering as it sinks into the stone wall. And the anaxim falls, though even bereft of flight it keeps focus on its goal, tipping its body so that it lands with Dranko underneath it. Dranko does his best to avoid the longest of the spikes, but is still somewhat crushed and impaled beneath the anaxim's metal bulk. Now that he's being pressed to the floor, he is able to slide from the spikes and sink into the ground, which he does. He swims away through the stone and pops up well away from the anaxim, his back to a wall.

Morningstar, recently arrived at the spot forty feet from the ground, looks downward and lets out an aggrieved sigh. "Goddess, I really am *trying* to use my weapon in Your name."

Aravis tries *polymorph any object*, but the anaxim will have none of it. It is a creature of a sort immune to a myriad of magical subtypes, including *polymorph*. Ernie, realizing his spells are doing little good, draws *Honor of Nemmin* even while swimming through the rock and uses its ability to transform himself into a pure fighter. His face glows gold and green, he seems to grow a few inches, and his armor takes on a faint pattern of green leaves. Kibi sets his *Bigby's fist* to keep punching the anaxim, and sends the silver disks of his *effulgent epuration* to protect Dranko. They streak across the battlefield like a swam of tiny gray meteors and form up around the beleaguered half-orc. Seeing that four of his elementals have effectively locked down the iron golems, Kibi sends the fifth one to harass the anaxim, though it cannot find an opening for its rocky fists. Having done as much as he can, the dwarf sinks into the stone.

DRANKO BLACKHOPE. KILL, KILL, KILL. The anaxim retracts the useless stub of its propeller and clanks swiftly to Dranko. Circular spinning blades and iron sledgehammers come at Dranko from multiple angles and he cannot dodge them all. The one hammer-blow he does manage to avoid knocks a chunk of stone out of the wall, a testament to its power. Once more Dranko's blood is splattered everywhere.

After Flicker swoops down and once more fails to damage his enemy, Grey Wolf Quickens an *acid orb* and hurls it at the anaxim. Its resistance doesn't extend to acid attacks, and small hissing holes appear on its iron plating. Threads of acrid smoke rise up, and Dranko is only barely able to contain his gorge. Morningstar lands and casts *heal* upon Dranko, who then sinks backward into the wall until only his face and knees protrude. Aravis, his spells continually foiled, changes into an enormous dragon and tries to grapple with the anaxim. But the creature is built to repel such assaults. Aravis finds it's like trying to grab a fistful of naked knife blades, and falls back, gashed for his efforts.

Ernie pops up from the ground and swings *Honor of Nemmin*. The anaxim's vaunted resistance to damage cannot stop such an exalted blade, and he slices off several spikes and a section of plating. His final swing severs a thick rubber tube which sprays hot oil in all directions. Lights and dishes swivel toward Ernie with a series of clicks. **SECONDARY TARGET ACQUIRED.**

“No!” shouts Dranko. “You’re not giving up on me, are you?”

The blades and hammers fall upon Ernie, making a wreck of his armor and leaving him battered and bloodied, near to death. Grey Wolf splashes the anaxim with another *acid orb*, and several of its pieces melt, some of them dropping off entirely into little puddles of slag. There are several buzzes as a series of circuits short. A thicker plume of black smoke rises from a vent near its shoulder. And yet the blades continue to spin, and its primary sledgehammer cocks back for another swing.

Flicker has given up on trying to damage the anaxim, but figures he can distract it while Morningstar makes her attacks. Kibi instructs his extra elemental to do likewise. Focused on Ernie and Dranko, the anaxim hardly notices that Morningstar has finally managed to close, *Ell’s Will* raised to strike. Down comes her weapon, once, twice, a third time. Infused with Ell’s power, her strikes fall like lightning blasts. The first hit knocks off its largest spinning blade. The second cracks the sledgehammer off at its base. And the third caves in its side completely. Several internal belts snap and fly loose, springs and gears explode in all directions, and the anaxim crumbles into a clanging heap of metal, grease and smoke.

As the anaxim’s remains vanish with a flash of aquamarine light, and the iron golems wink out a second later, Morningstar stands triumphant. Holy fire flashes in her eyes. She is a killing machine.

carborundum: Holy Cremoly! That was incredible! Incredibly awful for the PCs...

RangerWickett: This is a beastly little monster: <http://www.d20srd.org/srd/epic/monsters/abomination.htm> (scroll down just a bit).

Solarious: Morningstar is a killing machine? Nah, more like a machine killer. I’m actually a little shocked no-one’s made that pun yet.

So, how long is the bloody saga of Dranko the party tank going to last? It’s a little funny, but it sorta feels sadistic to keep anticipating how badly shredded he’s going to be by the next gribbly Sagiro sends out to have a butcher’s pass at him.

The Warlock: Someone with epic resources really, really, really doesn’t like Dranko. But why? It’s not like he’s famous or something...

Piratecat: This is a *fantastic* question. Dranko really, really should have spent more time asking himself the same thing. Clearly, it’s personal. Who, and why? Also, ouch.

The Warlock: And I apologize: Dranko is my favorite, but it was such low hanging fruit, I just couldn’t leave it unplucked. Mean and Funny is still Funny, as the saying goes.

Piratecat: No apology needed. Ribbing aside (and goodness knows that Dranko probably deserves it), the fact that he isn’t and never can be famous means that it’s possibly a personal grudge. But we’re in the Underdark, where the number of people with personal grudges against him is decidedly limited. One of the three red-armored enemies? They’re not summoners as far as we know, and who the hell can summon multiple epic-level monsters? Also, why target just Dranko, the only person in the Company who never got mentioned in any prophecy?

I wish you guys could have seen the look on Sagiro’s face when I told him I was trying the grappling hook trick, and then the look on my face when it backfired so spectacularly badly, and then the look on Sagiro’s face when I pulled out the *immovable rod*. If I could, I would frame that gaming session and bring it out whenever I needed to grin ear-to-ear.

coyote6: My guess is that it has something to do with the tentacles in his mind. Let’s see, a series of aquamarine-glowing abominations that seem to really want to kill Dranko. This one shows up shortly after Dranko draws on the squirming thing in his head to make time stop. Nothing says the Far Realms can’t have factions and rivalries – squamous, unknowable factions, and rugose, unspeakable rivalries, of course. So whatever is in Dranko’s head is either being judged a threat by something else that’s also spent some time in the Far Realms, or is being recognized and loathed; either way, it makes Dranko a threat.

That, or Dranko just holds the secret way to defeat the Adversary. Yes, it’s true – His one true weakness, His Achilles’ Heel, His Kryptonite, is being licked.

RangerWickett: If Dranko doesn’t lick the Adversary now, I’ll be terribly disappointed.

Zelc: I’ve made my bet on who’s sending these monsters earlier [see page 18]... I don’t think I’ll change it yet!

I just hope the party doesn’t end up facing the rest of the monsters on that d20srd page.

KidCthulhu: Spare a thought for poor Ernie. Surrounded by big metal fists again. It’s at least on his list of “Top 5 Nightmares.”

Anxe: It’s not obviously Tapheon to everyone? Who the Hell indeed, PirateKitty.

Enkhidu: That was my thought ever since the “well at least we won’t have to worry about Tapheon down here!” quote.

Anxe: Good. Glad I’m not going crazy.

Piratecat: I am being completely honest when I (the player) say that it was far from obvious to us at the time. I’d completely discounted Tapheon at this point. He hasn’t forgotten Dranko? Well, big whoopy doo. If we can’t get to our own Gods easily down here, I (and therefore Dranko) was fairly secure that Tapheon wasn’t ballsy and/or powerful enough to penetrate the Underdark and do any particular damage to Our Tusky Torchbearer Hero. Remember, I’d been asking Sagiro why we were trapped down here forever, and it was made clear that plane-shifting out wasn’t an option. If that was true, then as far as I was concerned Tapheon couldn’t do squat. Screw him and his rod of tongues. And anyways, Dranko is armored in self-righteousness and the ironclad belief that he acts (more or less) in his distant, paternal God’s name. If Lord Tapheon got all shirty because Dranko offered him a chance to repent, well, that wasn’t *Dranko’s* problem.

It remains to be seen whether this attitude (both my own and Dranko’s) was wise or really, truly, suicidally foolish. Any bets?

Tamlyn: I’m gonna go with the “not wise” option...

Everett: No bets on the attitude, but I feel pretty sure that Piratecat just confirmed that Tapheon’s behind it.

Piratecat: I do not confirm it. I stick by my guns: this place has its own deities, and Tapheon sure as heck isn’t one of them. Which is not to say he completely disappears from the campaign...



Leaping

After defeating the anaxim, annihilating the final peshovar when it finally emerges from Aravis's *maze* is practically an afterthought. Once the beast is dead, Morningstar flies Dranko up so he can retrieve his *immovable rod*.

"I was wrong," says Dranko. "I thought I couldn't possibly hate Meledien more than I already did, but I was wrong." Like the others, he still considers her the most likely candidate for being responsible for the Dranko-obsessed monsters.

"Gods, I hate her," says Ernie.

Dranko grunts, "And yes, I know it's probably Seven Dark Words doing the actual summoning, but still."

Before too long the temple is swarming with Stribe, examining and repairing the damage done during the melee. One of them approaches the Company. "*What is the occurrence?*"

"A powerful mechanical construct attacked us, in addition to the peshovar," says Ernie.

"*Are you in need of assistable heals?*" asks the Stribe.

"I need alcohol," says Dranko wearily.

The Stribe clacks its mandibles. "*Fungus! We will get you fungus!*"

Dranko smiles wanly. "Will it result in me getting inebriated?"

"Yes," says the Stribe. "*Fungus for killing the brain.*"

"That's what I need," says Dranko. "Brain-killing fungus."

"I hope there's no mistranslating going on here," says Aravis.

"*Do you still wish leaping? You have succeeded. The Temple is clean. We will tidy it up. You have tidied, now we will tidy.*"

The Company feel like they could do with a rest before Leaping, and it turns out they will have little choice, since the ritual to activate the Leaping Circle will take the Stribe shamans four days to complete. They give the Stribe the go-ahead to begin.

The Leaping Circle itself is a huge ring of pure adamant, fifty feet across, sunk into the bedrock of a wide cavern. A large flat stone just beyond its perimeter is etched with a large number "8." It's the party's guess that there are at least nine Leaping Circles, each numbered. They'd like to find number "5," after the Croaking Orcale's initial proclamation of "hopping, hopping, five, nine, two," but they have to start somewhere.

The Stribe do warn that Leaping Circle #8 does not take one to any other such Circle. Its terminus is the khet forest by which the Stribe harvest their wealth. There are ways to go beyond it, though each has its own dangers, and the Company will decide what to do next upon their arrival.



On the morning of the third day of the ritual, Aravis awakes having had another vision from the surface.

The Greenhouse living room is packed. Salk, Fylnius, Alykeen and Ozilnsh are talking animatedly in a corner. There is Cornelia, the High Priestess of Pikon, and Dalesandro, Stormknight of Werthis, sitting quietly across from King Crunard and his advisor Yale. Royce is there, with Glade and Wellington, examining a map with Anhaya Sunblossom of Yondalla. More come down the stairs from the secret room: the Generals Anabrook and Largent; Duke Nigel; the diviner Belinda. Alone in a corner sits Etria, Duke Nigel's court wizardess. Eddings hustles about, serving food and drinks. None of them are smiling.

Salk clears his throat, and the crowd gives him its attention. "Here is what we know," he begins without preamble. "Some of this will be redundant for many of you, but I'll start at the beginning. A little less than a week ago, Naradaw Skewn finally managed to make his escape from Volpos. He initiated something that was heretofore considered impossible – an Astral Tunnel connecting Volpos and Abernia. Prison Primes do not actually border the Astral, which is part of what makes it hard to escape them, but somehow Naradaw figured out a way to make it happen.

"Rosetta and the Silver Shell had some inkling of this plan, and had instigated countermeasures, but those ultimately failed. Rosetta was killed. Etria here was able to escape and warn Duke Nigel, and we immediately sent scouts to the Valding Forest in northern Nahalm. We found that an area of approximately fifty square miles surrounding Naradaw's entry point had already been enshrouded in an impenetrable fog – a fog shot through with what we've come to know as 'Essence' – the blood of the Adversary. Needless to say, we have as yet sent no scouting party inside to investigate."

There is a ripple of murmurs through the assemblage at this news. General Anabrook stands up, anger all over her face. “How is it that Rosetta didn’t see fit to tell us about this threat? Her ridiculous paranoia and bloated self-importance may have doomed the entire kingdom!”

Many heads turn to look at Etria, who holds up her hands, a gesture of frustrated helplessness. The old elf Fylnius stands up. “She had her reasons, and I’m sure they were sound,” he says, glancing at Etria. “But that is not what we are here to discuss. Members of the Spire, Charagan is under attack, or soon will be – an attack we may not be able to withstand. We are here to talk about our options.”

Royce leans forward in his chair. “What we need are your people, Ozilish. Is there no way to recall them?”

“None,” says Ozilish flatly. “Whatever defense we can manage, we have to do it without them. And even if I knew a way to call them back, I wouldn’t do it. If they don’t succeed, it won’t matter if Naradawk tomorrow turns into a snail and you step on him.”

“What kind of forces does he have?” asks General Largent. “Hundreds? Thousands? Are they all in the fog?”

“We don’t know,” Salk sighs. “But I can tell you this. An Astral tunnel is inherently unstable, and there are only so many people that can cross through it every second, every minute. It is our opinion that Naradawk would have been lucky to keep his door open more than several hours. But if he had an army staged to come through it, two soldiers every second would add up to thousands, even tens of thousands in that time. And he would have chosen his most elite units.”

“Tens of thousands?” Largent is aghast.

“A possibility,” answers Salk. “It’s also possible that his tunnel stayed open for only a few minutes, and it’s less than a thousand. We just don’t know.”

The halfling priestess Anyaha Sunblossom speaks. “Have we contacted allies in Kivia? If we make it known what’s at stake, they will send aid, surely? Maple Sunblade and I have already discussed what we might do for them if Appleseed was attacked by the Anlaki; I know they would commit troops if asked.”

“We have,” says Duke Nigel. “One Supreme Intellect is conferring with his court. Tev and Dir-Tolia have already made verbal commitments, but it will take time for them to muster troops. Bederen cannot commit, being tied up with the Delfirians. Anhaya, we have not yet contacted Appleseed; we were hoping you could do that.”

“They could teleport out of the fog, right?” Everyone turns to regard the young mage, Wellington. He continues, “Naradawk and his allies may simply be consolidating and getting organized in their fog, but they could also be teleporting agents anywhere on Abernia from in there. Is there any reason to think they haven’t?”

“No,” says Anabrook. “The plain fact is, we don’t know what they’re up to, only that in a week, they haven’t mounted any reported offensives.”

“And remember,” Salk adds, “it may not be a ‘they.’ It’s possible that Naradawk Skewn was the only being to make it through the Astral tunnel.”

“What about Parthol Runecarver?” asks Yale with distaste. “Any word from him?”

Fylnius sighs. “We’ve neither seen nor heard from him since our last meeting here. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I’m not relying on his help. Honestly, the best we can hope for there is that he stays in his little hidden bunker and doesn’t get any ideas about allying with Naradawk.”

“It seems to me,” says Largent, “that until we know more, we simply have to be as prepared as possible to send strike teams anywhere in the kingdom. That means lines of communication, teleports at the ready, and all of our best people mustered and ready at a moment’s notice. That means you...” He points at Royce, Glade and Wellington. “And where are Junaya and Jerzembeck? Why aren’t they here?”

“They’re already in the field,” says Nigel. “Scouting, mostly, in the vicinity of the Valding. And we have... other resources at our command. Some resources and personnel not generally known, even to most of you.”

“What?” The Pikonish Priestess Cornelia looks surprised. “Everyone here is a member of the Spire, and we’re in the most protected sanctuary in the world. How can it hurt to share all possible information about our defenses?”

Nigel flicks a look at Etria. “Remember what we’re dealing with,” he says. “Naradawk is an agent of the Black Circle, infused with the blood of a God whose portfolio focuses on divination. Our best protection against him is to keep specific information on a need-to-know basis. If you were captured, Cornelia, Naradawk could easily learn anything you know.”

“Fine,” she says, though she doesn’t like it one bit.

Salk speaks again. “The plain truth is this. Naradawk could strike anywhere, at any time. His personal power is an unknown, but we should assume he’s the single most dangerous being on Abernia at the moment. If he does have a large force, and plans a conventional military assault, he’ll have to march out of the Valding Forest in some direction, unless he has some way of teleporting thousands of soldiers at once. In the meantime, we simply have to be ready, nimble, and opportunistic.”

They continue to speak, but here the vision fades.

The Company have a brief discussion about this, but can only agree that the Spire will have to weather the storm without them. If nothing else, it makes it all the more imperative that they make haste in their pursuit of Seven Dark Words, Meledien and Tarsos. It will be of little comfort if the Company succeeds, but with a surface world already conquered or destroyed by Naradawk Skewn.

It also seems likely that Duke Nigel, at least, knows there’s a traitor in the Spire. The Company think perhaps it is Cornelia, but there’s really no way to know.



Leaping Circle #8 was already there when the first Stribe settled in the region, and the insect creatures do not know who built it. Instructions for the ritual were helpfully left behind, and for centuries now they have used it to reach their khet forest. Aravis studies the ritual, but it’s far beyond even his powers to puzzle through. Somehow it overcomes the Underdark’s inherent stifling of teleportation magic, but he doesn’t know how. It’s a miracle that it works at all.

At last the ritual is nearly complete. Twenty-four Stribe shamans are standing around the Leaping Circle’s perimeter, each levitating a heliotrope sphere above its head. The air above the circle is bright; it’s either attracting additional light motes, or causing the ones already there to glow more strongly.

A few minutes before departure, a Stribe named **Ki’ilgan**, a sort of foreman in charge of the casting shamans, approaches the waiting Company. “*The Circle goes to our vault*,” he says. “*Our source of money-khet*.”

“We’ve heard that,” says Dranko.

“*Yes, the Circle is full of cash*.”

“Aren’t you afraid we’ll steal it?” asks Dranko.

“*Should we be afraid of stealing?*”

Dranko smiles. “No, we won’t steal anything, we promise.”

“*You will not*,” Ki’ilgan agrees. “*There are always Stribe stationed there, harvesting, guarding. And we find you very trust*.”

“Tell us about khet,” says Ernie. “Where does it come from?”

“*Khet crystals grow on trees*.”

Ernie laughs. “Mom always said money didn’t grow on trees. She was wrong!”

“If there’s no Leaping Circle at the other end, how do you get back?” asks Morningstar.

“*It is a long and difficult journey*,” says Ki’ilgan. “*The next shipment back is not due for many months*.”

“If we wanted to find another Circle, where would we go?”

“*We do not know of any other Circle. This is the only Circle of known. Only ours is known*.”

“What is near your khet forest, then?”

“*Some ways lead to lava*,” says Ki’ilgan. “*Other ways lead to something dangerous. Not that lava is not also of danger*.”

“We don’t know where we’re going, so anywhere’s okay,” says Dranko.

“And we know that Meledien came through this way,” adds Kibi. It’s particularly galling that the Evil Trio activated the Leaping Circle in less than a minute, as opposed to the four days it’s taken the Stribe. Grey Wolf offers that it’s the Cirdet of Yavin that let them activate the Circle so quickly.

With only a minute remaining, a new Stribe walks up to them. “Greetings,” it says. “You are Loo’oofin.”

“I’m what?” asks Dranko.

“I am **Loo’oofin**.”

“Oh,” says Dranko. “You are Loo’oofin.”

“No, I am Loo’oofin.”

“Right.”

“Nice to meet you,” says Kibi.

“I will be accompanying me on the trip,” says the Stribe.

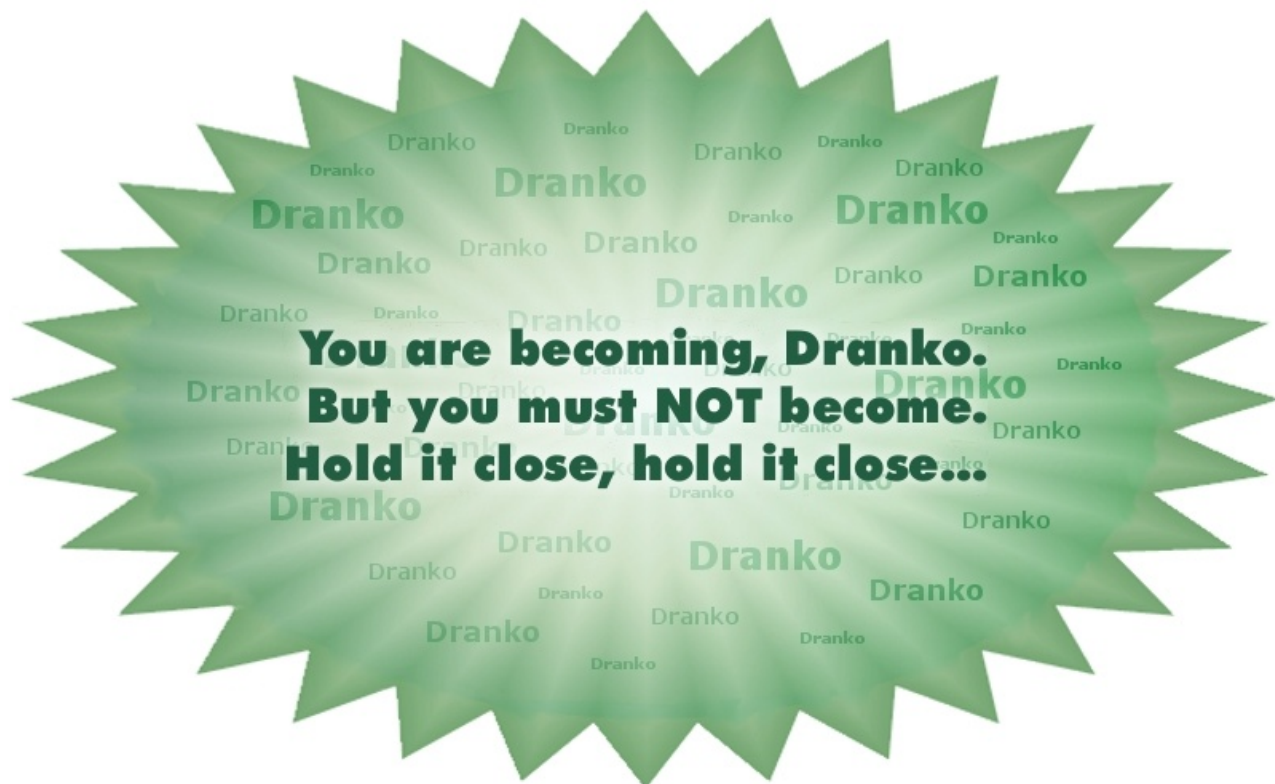
“Parthol needs to fix the pronouns on his translators,” Kibi grumbles.

With a little flash, all of the motes in the circle change from white to deep blue. “You may step into the middle now,” Ki’iilgan tells them. Loo’oofin goes with them.



One second they are there, and the next, all of them appear in a smallish nondescript cave. Dranko’s eyes are wide with fear and confusion. Because for him, the journey was not so instantaneous. Where the others went straight to the arrival cavern, Dranko found himself suspended in a great blackness dotted with unrecognizable stars. At the periphery, just beyond where he could see, was something horrible, waiting, watching.

It was the Far Realms, and it was permeated with the nauseating wrongness of Cleaners. His name was whispered by a thousand horrible voices, mixing in a jarring almost-unison of varied tones and timbres, speeds and volumes. One voice spoke louder than the others:



And the other voices whispered in agreement (**Close...**).

And then he was with the others, staggering in a small circle, clutching his head.

weiknarf: Poor What’s His Name. All sorts of unsavory blasphemous entities are interested in him. It seems he traded his fame on the Prime for fame in the Outer and Beyond.

Everett: Absolutely. On another note, who were the Cleaners talking to? I sort of lost interest at that part...

Piratecat: HA HA. I'll show you wise guys! I'm TOTALLY going to Become, just to teach you people a lesson! HA! THAT'LL SHOW YOU!

Of course, that might be very bad. And Dranko just needs to figure out what that means.

Anyways, Everett, showing that you are a person of breeding and taste, you never liked Dranko to begin with...

Everett: I take great umbrage at that! I appreciate ALL of the party members. Even the – um, the half-breed... the one who likes to do the... jumping... and, uh, is sort of, kind of, a little bit of a cleric... and... uhm... hmmm...

/goes to make a sandwich.

carborundum: You mean that ugly guy that moons around Morningstar? He's not a party member! He's just, I don't know, like the village idiot that everyone politely tolerates.

/looks away during the dribbling.

steeldragons: No no, guys. PC's talking about that one who's kinda tall... he helps out Flicker sometimes. Pff! Not like he needs it. That halfling's a frickin' badass genius legend! But the one that holds the torch for Flick when he's pickin' all the locks... ya know... with the... that hair that's kinda... like... you know?

Can I get anyone some more coffee? Flicker? Morningstar? Kibi, Aravis? 'Nuther scone, Ernie? Yes I know, Grey Wolf, two sugars. <wink> I remember. Back in a jiff.

/heads to the kitchen.

Piratecat: I'll turn this campaign around and Become RIGHT NOW, mister. See if I won't. Is that what you want? IS IT?

Neurotic: Of course you will. Heroes already became, one is a god, two are their gods' champions, others are almost there. You will be like them... eventually... you know... when you are more like them, do some heroic deeds, BECOME FAMOUS, make contacts among right people, get noticed, save the world couple of times... things like that.

It just takes patience...

Everett: I think it's Neil Gaiman who said that all heroes become gods if you keep them going long enough.

Piratecat: It struck me as interesting that Dranko is the only one without an intimate connection to his God. In fact, I don't think we have ever seen an adventuring champion or embodiment of Delioch, the Hand of Healing. Except for the ones seduced by the Black Circle, of course, but I'm not entirely sure that counts. Delioch always struck me as a distant God. I have no idea what my character would have been like if that weren't the case.

Probably excommunicated, honestly. Dranko's tendency to dislike people in authority never manifested against a faceless, serene deity. He has a much worse record against very powerful entities with strong personalities.

Everett: The only one? I don't recall that Grey Wolf has an intimate connection to any God. Nor Kibi, though he has the discipline of Earth Mage, which is something similar...

Dranko does say, at times, in his (rare) more serious moments, that he loves Delioch – either about Delioch or speaking to the God directly... but we have no conception at all of what the persona of Delioch is like. We have a very strong conception of what Eil is like, gleaned hither and thither throughout the campaign... We have some idea of what Yulan is like, or at least what Yulan represents, because of the character of Ula... We have some idea of the halfling god that Ernie and Yoba follow (though the God's name escapes me right now)... but we have no idea whatsoever about Delioch, and we certainly never saw a champion of Delioch; that, pardon the irony, I'm sure I would have remembered.

*Looking, and Leaping***Silhouettes**

“Are you okay?” Ernie rushes over to Dranko’s side.

The half-orc half sits and half falls to the stone floor. “No... no...” While the others crowd around in concern, Dranko relates his unusual experience.

“You understood the voices?” asks Kibi. “Doesn’t that mean you’re crazy?”

Morningstar glares at the dwarf. “What are you becoming?” she asks Dranko.

“I don’t know.” Dranko sounds miserable. “But I bet it’s something to do with tentacles.”

“Maybe you’re becoming famous!” Flicker offers brightly.

“They *were* all whispering my name,” says Dranko.

“Maybe that’s where all your fame went,” says Kibi.

Dranko shakes his head. “I’m thinking now that the person who plucks whatever-it-is out of my brain, is going to get transformed into a Far Realms entity himself.”

“And you’re not supposed to let it break out before it’s supposed to,” says Morningstar.

“I don’t know what’s happening!” Dranko bemoans. “So I don’t know how to stop it.”

“Maybe they’re warning you,” Ernie suggests. “In case you feel something... bubbling up inside you.”

Kibi walks to the cavern wall – the place they’re in is of modest size, roughly circular and twenty feet across – and concentrates. “I think we’re about a mile lower than the Stribe Leaping Circle,” he says. He also feels a faint but unmistakable thrumminess, the comforting feeling of ambient Earth Magic.

Speaking of the Stribe, a half dozen of the insectoid creatures approach rapidly from a tunnel mouth. The stone around the Company rises up and forms into a filigree of close-set bars, entrapping them quickly and efficiently. After all, the Stribe here at the Leaping Circle’s arrival point have never seen humans, and this place is the source of their people’s wealth. Fortunately Loo’oofin has accompanied them, and quickly explains to the other Stribe that the Company’s presence here is sanctioned.

The party are soon introduced to **Ta’aabin**, a Stribe in some position of authority. They ask him about Meledien, Tarsos and Seven Dark Words. “*They did come this way*,” says Ta’aabin. “*They fled into where the ... live*.” Here the translation becomes garbled; they think the ambiguous word is something between a shadow and a silhouette. (It’s an unusual concept for those living in the Underdark, where there generally are no shadows, due to the light being diffuse and even.)

“What are... they?” asks Ernie.

“*We do not have a name for them. We cannot see them clearly, but they are dangerous.*”

Dranko immediately suspects null shadows. “Do they leave black scars on your body when they touch you?”

“*They do not leave any marks. When we went that way, we were not harmed, but were attacked. They dulled us, but we recovered. They made the thinking hard.*”

That doesn’t sound like null shadows, but the Company recall that there were more than one variety of those cauldron-created monstrosities. Morningstar, remembering that null shadows prefer to target casters, asks if some of the Stribe are more proficient at stone shaping magic.

“*We are all shaping the stone. By practice one gets more shape. Practice, practice.*”

“Then the things target everyone equally?” asks Morningstar.

“*Everyone who has gone into their territory. Which we no longer.*” Ta’aabin clacks its mandibles. “*Perhaps you will find your three enemies... dulled.*”

“That would be very nice,” Ernie agrees.

“Could there be a Leaping Circle beyond... whatever it is?” asks Kibi.

“We do not know. We do not get that far. We become dulled by the silhouettes.”

“But you must get your khet chips back to the Stribe somehow,” says Kibi. “Are there other ways out?”

“Beyond the khet forest, there are hot ways. Hot ways to hotness. Bubbling rock lava. We create stone bridges to cross, then continue on to home. It is a long journey, three months, very dangerous, on schedule. Two hundred Stribe come through Circle, to guard khet shipment back to homeland.”

Dranko asks to see the khet forest. A hundred-yard tunnel from the arrival cave empties into what looks like a forest of purple crystal trees, which rise up into the sea of light motes. They are not trees in the conventional sense, but they do have a rough correspondence; trunks and branches, leaves and roots, all made of crystal. The leaves are tiny khet chips, which are being harvested by dozens of Stribe that swarm up and down the trunks.

There is little debate about which way to go. If Meledien and co. braved the mind-dulling silhouettes, so must the Company. While the party convey their thanks to Loo’oofin, a small orange flame appears in their midst, at head height. The Stribe all take hasty steps away from it.

“Do you know what that is?” asks Loo’oofin. Not waiting for an answer, the Stribe quickly cause a stone pillar to rise from the ground and surround the flame, but not before the party hear sounds coming from it, very faintly. Dranko thinks it might have been voices.

Ernie grumbles, “I bet anytime we go anywhere, they have some way to use that to know we’re here.”

“I wonder if we can do something about it,” Kibi muses. “Maybe dispelling it before it has time to send any information?”

After a few more seconds there is a soft whoosh, and when the Stribe retract the stone, the flame is gone. “How are they *doing* that?” asks Dranko angrily. If it was a glyph left behind by Seven Dark Words, Dranko didn’t see it beforehand with his always-on *detect magic*. The party do recall that Tarsos and Meledien stole the Spear of Caba from Naslund, an artifact of a God of Fire. It’s a weapon that can burn out the souls of those it kills; who knows what other abilities it could have?

The Stribe take the Company to the tunnel which leads to where the intelligence-draining silhouettes live. Morningstar suggests having non-magical weapons ready, in case these things really are a form of null shadow.

Loo’oofin bids them farewell. *“If you find those who preceded you, please dis-head them.”*

“We will dis-headen them,” Dranko agrees.

“Works for me,” adds Grey Wolf.

At the last minute Dranko produces a spool of thread from his pack and offers it to Loo’oofin in return for khet chips. Gems may be worth little down here, but true wooden objects may have inflated value.

“What type of fungus is it?” asks Loo’oofin.

“It’s not. It’s wood.”

“Ah, it is a surface world artifact. What does it do?”

“You, uh, you wind things around it.”

“Do you have enough to build something out of it? Like a house?”

Dranko admits that he does not. *“Then it is no more than a curiosity. But I am curious to give you ten khet chips.”*

Dranko autographs it before handing it over: *From the saviors...*

This little transaction is interrupted by a sizzling noise from Aravis. His skin quickly becomes overdrawn with glowing lines, his eyes flash to star-fields, and he vanishes. Pewter meows resignedly and jumps up onto Dranko’s shoulder. It seems that Belshikun has “borrowed” Aravis again.



Grey Wolf summons up a *mount* for everyone, and they head off. It’s slow going; the tunnel meanders in all three dimensions, requiring slow-motion aerobatics to negotiate. Within a few minutes the party notice that the light motes are growing dim even though it’s not evening, and are taking on a greenish cast. What’s particularly strange is that as their bodies (and those of their

steeds) move through the light-mote field, the motes turn back to white. Whatever has made them green, is undone by physical contact.

A shadow flickers on the wall, which is odd because there are no shadows down here. They see another a minute later.

“We’re just going to say this once!” Dranko calls out. “If you attack us unprovoked and try to eat our brains, we will completely and utterly destroy you!” Even the movement of his lips turns the light motes around his mouth from green to white.

A few minutes later, having seen several more wall-shadows dart past, as might be cast by fast-flying bats in more conventional light, the Company arrive at a fork in the tunnel. One way bends leftward and down, the other upward and right. Grey Wolf sniffs the air with his *enhanced senses*; it smells different than the tunnels elsewhere, rich and damp, though there’s no sight or sound of water.

Kibi tries to get a sense from the stone around him if one way is better than the other, but finds he’s having trouble concentrating. Dranko searches the openings of both branches in a more conventional method, and discovers that on one wall of the leftward tunnel, something has nicked the stone, disturbing a thin coat of lichen. Someone was here, and brushed the wall with an elbow or sword hilt.

They head that way, and soon the flickering silhouettes on the wall become faster and more numerous. Every person in the Company finds it harder and harder to stay mounted, as they forget the nuances of proper riding form. Grey Wolf, the best rider in the group, actually falls off his mount and can’t figure out how or why it happened.

Dranko looks down and can’t remember the name of the creature he’s riding. He hopes it’s friendly.

Kibi wonders if he could cast *repulsion* to repel the shadow-creatures, but when he thinks about it, it seems hopelessly complicated. Wouldn’t *create water* or *spiritual hammer* be better? But... are those even wizdrish spelgs?

“Morningstar,” says Dranko. “Can you cast pristastic circle?”

Morningstar can’t understand him. What’s-his-name is speaking gibberish.



They are in a khet forest, surrounded by... creatures? Oh, right, they’re called “Stribe.” Each member of the Company feels as though they’ve just woken up, having had an unpleasant dream in which they forgot everything they ever knew. Over the course of minutes they recover their lost intellect, and try to recall what happened. They remember going down that tunnel, and finding a mark on the wall, and the light motes being green but changing to white as they moved through them. And then... something? Silhouettes on the walls?

Dranko rubs his chin and finds an additional day’s growth of stubble. He hails the nearest Stribe. “What just happened?” he demands.

“*You were dulled.*”

“How did you find us?”

“*You wandered back here.*”

“How long ago did we leave?”

“*Yesterday. You wandered back, and you slept. Now you are unslept. How do you feel?*”

Ernie stands and stretches. “I don’t like things messing around with my thoughts and memories. We deal with the Black Circle often enough.”

“I’m guessing it has something to do with the light,” says Dranko. “If we can stop the light from changing for us, maybe they’ll leave us alone?”

“Maybe we could wipe out the lights with magic first,” suggests Kibi. “Maybe that will prevent the silhouettes from dulling us.” They discuss various options, ranging from *dimension door* to *mass xorn movement* to creating a *flaming sphere* and letting it roll ahead of them, wiping out the lights. They wonder out loud how Meledien and co. managed to get through.



The *flaming sphere* plan has a simple appeal. Back into the tunnel they go, and when the motes begin to turn green, Grey Wolf casts his spell, using a magic item to extend its duration. As expected, the ball of fire wipes out the motes as it rolls along, but

it's not big enough to erase them all. Within a few steps the shadows start to flicker on the walls, faster and in greater numbers than before. Bewilderment and befuddlement set in less than thirty seconds later, and then they're back in the khet forest, waking in confusion. Another day has passed.



Plan B is more involved, but much more successful. First, Morningstar takes the group into *Ava Dormo*, leaving Flicker behind to watch their bodies (and with a warning not to try stealing any of the Stribe's khet chips). Thankfully, this region of the Dreamscape is uninhabited, lacking both crazed militaristic dream-kobolds, and intelligence-sapping wall shadows. The light motes are here (dreaming themselves?), and are green as in the waking world, but nothing here drains their minds.

The downside here is that there are no marks from the Evil Trio to follow, but that turns out to be only a minor nuisance. Though it takes several hours, they are able to map out the entirety of the tunnel maze that contains off-color motes. There are many branches and odd subterranean topography, but ultimately the majority of the different routes double back on one another or join up later on. If the green-lit regions can be described as one extended complex, there turn out to be only three distinct tunnels leading out of it. Only one of these goes significantly downward, while the others are either level with the khet forest or at a slightly higher elevation.

Having scouted the entire area, Grey Wolf and Kibi apply their superhuman intellects and near-eidetic memories to creating a 3D model of the tunnels, instructing some helpful Stribe who stone-craft it to their specifications. With this model, they plot a vector that will take them from the khet forest straight through the rock to meet the lowest of the three egresses, without once intersecting any of the silhouette-infested tunnels.

When they're ready to go, Kibi casts *mass xorn movement* on the party, and uses his natural sense of subterranean location and direction to identify this vector in real life. The others will follow in his wake. If he goes 4100 feet downward at approximately six degrees, and rightward 21 degrees from a true northward facing, they should emerge into the lowermost tunnel beyond the off-colored light motes. Ernie casts a spell to increase their movement rate (thus minimizing the risk that the spell will run out too soon, which would be bad), and off they go, plunging into the stone, and wondering again how the Evil Trio bypassed this unusual obstacle.

The party's puzzlement at how the bad guys bypassed this challenge led to the following exchange at the table:

PIRATECAT: "I wonder how Meledien got past those things. Why didn't they turn stupid, wander out, and get killed by the Stribe?"
DM: "They're Black Circle. Maybe they used their vast divinatory powers to learn about the nature of the challenge before tackling it."
PIRATECAT: "I thought you said divinations don't work well down here."
DM: "Yours don't."
PIRATECAT: "Let the record show I'm flipping off the DM."



It's dark and warm, and the others find it disorienting, but Kibi burrows with confidence. Earth Magic surrounds him. Scree from time to time suggests tiny course corrections, as the elemental is particularly sensitive to his surroundings and can sense when they're near the open tunnels.

When Kibi thinks they should have arrived, they find they have missed their target after all, but Scree is not concerned. He goes on a quick scouting trip through the rock, and comes back a few minutes later announcing they're only off course by forty feet or so, which is astoundingly accurate given they've come almost a full mile in a straight line. Following Scree, the Company soon pop into a wide and open tunnel, through its ceiling. The light motes are white, and no silhouettes are in evidence.

Dranko immediately makes another search of the area, and with his finely honed sleuthing skills discovers more subtle signs that others have passed this way – tiny scuffs in the floor, and old scratches in the lichen at elbow or shoulder height. That's evidence enough for them that Meledien and her friends have come this way, albeit months ago.

They continue down the tunnel; it widens and narrows, dips and drops, sometimes taking them through small clusters of uneven caves or over precipitous plunges. Then, from somewhere ahead they hear... music? As they progress, the sound resolves into something like a woodwind instrument, still very faint, but playing a melody. After a final sharp bend in the tunnel the music grows louder, and some fifty feet down they see the tunnel opens into a wider space. Slowly they creep forward to investigate.

The tunnel ends, high in the wall of the largest cavern they've yet seen in the Underdark. Far below them stretches a vast and beautiful city of deep blue crystal, bristling with spires and minarets, dotted here and there with wide domes and rising towers. Even from hundreds of feet up they cannot see its entirety; it recedes into the distance, the whole of it illuminated by the motes.

In all that vastness, the only sign of life is the music, a beautiful, haunting melody from something akin to an oboe, drifting upward to their ears.

Zelc: Do they eventually figure out what those shadows are and how Meledien and co. got around them? If it's not a spoiler, can you tell us? I assume the effect goes through stuff like *mind blank* or *protection from evil*?

Anxe: So, the mystery from this update: why are there so many scuffs on the wall at elbow/shoulder height? Normally I'd think the markings were made to find their way back, but the Black Circle's divination probably means they don't need that. Something else then?

Everett: Random thought – when the party catches up to the evil trio, do you suppose we'll learn what the 7 words of Seven Dark Words actually are?

Sagiro: Regarding the silhouettes: I told the players about them after the fact, since they were unlikely to find out in-game. They were a peaceful race of semi-intelligent creatures who fed on the light motes, but needed to alter them somewhat to make them nutritionally viable (thus, turning them from white to green). But any physical creature moving through their territory would disrupt that chemical change, and effectively destroy the creatures' food source. Since the creatures needed to eat constantly, such disruption was deadly to them. But they didn't want to kill people who were only accidentally killing them, so they'd sap their intelligence and gently herd them back to where they came from. This was one of those challenges where I didn't have a specific solution in mind, and was quite pleased (though not surprised) by my players' ingenuity.

Regarding the scuffs on the wall: those scuffs were minuscule and left entirely unintentionally by the Evil Trio. That Dranko could spot them at all was because of his ludicrous Spot checks, which often hit the high 40s or low 50s.



... I'd like to mention that I hit a personal milestone that won't mean much to you, but here it is anyway: I've gotten to my last shoe-box of game tapes. I had accumulated so many tapes that I needed many, many boxes to house them, and for years now it has seemed I would never reach the last and smallest box. But now I have!

The events of this update were from run 251 out of 266. So close!

The Ghosts of Mehar-Bec

As the Company stand on the precipice, looking down upon the blue crystalline city, there is a whoosh, a pop, and Aravis appears directly next to Pewter.

“Aravis!” Dranko exclaims. “We fought, and we won! We finally killed them all! Meledien and Seven Dark Words and...”

“I don't believe you,” says Aravis.

“Yeah, I'm lying,” Dranko admits.

Aravis feels like he's just woken up from a restful night's sleep, but he's also had another vision from the Maze, and like the ones before it, it is grim indeed.

Naradawk Skewn stands at the edge of a crater, looking down. Below him lie the devastated remains of a large stone edifice, perhaps once a fortress or small castle. Twenty figures in red armor pick through the rubble; every so often, one of these bends down low and jams a sword blade into something.

The Emperor himself looks relaxed and unhurt, which cannot be said for the woman standing beside him. Her crimson armor is rent in places and some of her brown hair has been burned. Blood seeps through a bandage around her head. The red helmet at her feet has a large dent.

“My lord,” she says. “We lost four. Four of the ninety-nine, in a single engagement. Are you certain it was worth it?”

Naradawk nods and smiles. His voice is sharp and commanding, an icy wind over cold stone. “A small price. We have destroyed the largest remaining threat to us on Charagan. We had to make this our first and highest priority.”

Two of the warriors below struggle up the side of the crater, bearing a large wooden trunk retrieved from the ruin. They drop it at Naradawk's feet. The Emperor looks down at it, his lip curling in a sneer. Emblazoned on the lid of the trunk is a silver shell. After staring intently at the trunk for several seconds, Naradawk reaches down and, seemingly without effort, crushes the large steel padlock in his mailed fist, as easily as he snapped Rosetta's neck. One of the red-armored warriors opens it, revealing a stack of small books, four candlesticks, and dozens of candles wrapped in leather.

“Destroy it all,” says Naradawk. “Destroy it, and anything else like it you find in this place. The Silver Shell's counter-divinatorys have been my only real worry; with their adherents slain and their tools burned, we'll have a free hand to make our plans and gain control of this pitiful kingdom. “

The woman, standing almost six feet tall, looks up at the Emperor. “So you're not worried about Fylnius and the rest? The Spire, that drove out and later killed your father?”

“No,” says the Emperor. “Yasper has confirmed it five times over. All of the vaunted Archmagi of the Spire have lost their powers. I don't know how or why, but we know that their arcane abilities were not transferred or used for any

lasting purpose; they're just gone. Fylnius and Salk and the rest are just a cadre of old and brittle men. Alander's Chosen have vanished off-plane and cannot return. All that the Spire can boast are a rag-tag assembly of second-rate heroes and cast-offs. Let them hide in Abernathy's little sanctuary while we bring their world down around their ears."

"But we have only the ninety-nine. Ninety-five, now, plus yourself," says the woman.

"More than enough," laughs Naradawk. "Besides, we're not without allies. Some we sent ahead at Kinnet Vulthani. Others have been here long, waiting for us. Time is on our side, Pieriel. We need not hasten. We should not hasten. We have the might to do as we will, as long as we do not give in to impatience and overconfidence. Those things destroyed my father, but as the Circle is my witness, they will not destroy me."

So, more bad news from the surface. Aravis notes that the Spire still has Cranchus and Parthol Runecarver up their sleeve, but there's no denying that Naradawk's confidence is troubling. "It's good that there are only 95 of them," says Dranko, looking for the silver lining. "They don't have thousands of soldiers, at least." He leaves unsaid that from what they've experienced of Naradawk's red-armored champions, ninety-five of them are as potent as an army.

"What did I miss while I was gone?" asks Aravis.

"You missed the opportunity to become stupid multiple times," says Grey Wolf.

The oboe-like music drifts upward from the city. With more time to look, they can see that somewhere among the densely packed buildings is a light, changing colors and intensities, its source not in their direct line of sight. It cycles through blues, reds, yellows, greens, pulsing in time to the oboe music.

As seems to be his signature method of getting to the bottom of a cliff, Dranko jumps off and *feather falls*. He finds the others waiting at the bottom, having *dimension doored* down directly. At ground level they can only see the closest buildings, and there is no sign of the coruscating lights. The music is hauntingly beautiful but doesn't seem to be bewitching them in any way. Entirely of their own volition, they walk to find its source.

There are no people. The city could have housed tens of thousands, but aside from the source of the music, it feels like a sapphire graveyard. The buildings are all made of the same translucent blue crystal, though their shapes and sizes are organic and varied, as though it grew up from the ground like a forest. They are also enormously proportioned; whatever lived here were larger than humans. Some buildings have doors, and these are not locked. The Company venture into a few buildings, and decide they were homes. There is furniture, mostly of crystal but occasionally constructed of a hard woody fungus, along with odd tools that could be kitchenware, and swirling crystal shapes on pedestals that look like artwork. Above ground such objects might have long since disintegrated, but the Underdark lacks the weather and the microorganisms that propel aged things to ruin. The city is a museum to a vanished people. Dranko casts *know age* on a fork. Though more powerful divinations are difficult to effect beneath Yulan's Barrier, the small one works with little additional effort. The fork is nearly 3000 years old.

Morningstar casts *thought capture* at the threshold of one of the buildings. She absorbs a thought of someone who is very sad, knowing they would be dead in less than two days. She drops into *Ava Dormo* to see if anything interesting can be learned there, but finds the cavern infested with the warmongering Keffet, and returns almost immediately. Kibi casts *prying eyes* and sends them out into the city to investigate, but the Company decide to walk in on their own before waiting for the eyes to return. They don't get far before they are approached.

There's no way to know if the arrival was triggered by the *prying eyes* or their own physical presence, but when the party reach a large intersection of three wide streets, giantish ghosts come streaming around corners from three different directions. They are twelve feet tall, and their indistinct limbs are unnaturally long compared to their torsos. All are wearing red uniforms that blur to translucent pink, and about half have small helmets atop smooth, hairless heads. The chill of undeath rolls off them, though (thankfully) without the additional taint of Adversary blood. Each ghostly soldier holds a strange weapon made of dark blue crystal, a jagged multi-edged club with a sharpened point. There are thirty altogether in the regiment, and beyond the wind kicked up by their arrival, they are eerily silent. The wafting oboe music is an unlikely soundtrack to the encounter.

The Company pause, unsure if they should attack or hold for the moment. "We mean you no harm!" cries Ernie. "We don't intend to disturb your rest. We came here by Leaping Circle and will pass through quickly."

The ghost-soldiers glance at each other but do not halt their advance, and by some unspoken signal they surge to attack. Morningstar has to move quickly to deflect one of their crystal blades with *Ell's Will*. Ernie's armor absorbs one blow but another cuts his wrist. Where the weapon breaks his skin, tiny blue crystals sprout like a blooming azure flower, and Ernie feels his arm start to seize up. A chill floods his veins.

Flicker and Dranko are mobbed, and the ghost warriors were obviously well trained in life. Between their shimmering ghostly bodies, and the unnatural physics of their attacks (their bodies don't seem to account for the momentum of their swings), their blades are particularly difficult to avoid. And while their forms might be largely insubstantial, their weapons are plenty solid, landing numerous painful blows. Dranko and Flicker feel crystal growing on their skin like a freezing fungus, stiffening their muscles and hindering their movement.

Flicker tries a counterattack but misses all three times, even though Dranko has enchanted his weapon to ignore the insubstantial nature of his enemies. He still has the dexterity to tumble into the protected center of the group.

Ernie presents his holy symbol, and in a commanding voice implores, "Go away!" Two of the ghosts listen, turning and fleeing down the street. Then he steps back and casts *cure critical wounds* on Flicker. This repairs the damage, but has no effect on the crystal growth. Dranko lashes the closest ghost with his whip, but his damage is not impressive; there are crystals on his sword arm, hampering his effectiveness. At least his *helm of brilliance* is having some effect; it flares to life in the presence of undead, damaging them just by its proximity.

Enough fooling around. Aravis drops a *Mordenkainen's disjunction* in the center of one cluster of ghosts. There's a quick sucking sound as magical energies are drawn in and annihilated, and nine of the ghost warriors are instantly obliterated. The remaining ghosts are not daunted. Three slash Kibi with their crystal blades. The blotches of crystal that form on his skin feel like they're sending tendrils deep into his flesh, and he shivers. A half dozen soldiers close in around Dranko, but the crystals are only on his arms, not his legs, and he's able to weave, dodge, twirl and leap, over and under their attacks. Not one lands a hit. Morningstar isn't so skilled, and suffers several crystal-infected cuts.

Kibi casts *wish*, spoofing a spell called *ghost trap*. Waves of positive energy emanate from his body, and all the ghosts become more solid, losing the benefits of insubstantiality. Then he backs up a bit, putting the fighting types between him and his adversaries. Morningstar follows this with *undeath to death*; several more ghosts flash to vaporous ectoplasm.

Grey Wolf Quickens an *iron storm* and flings a *chain lightning* into it. One more ghost explodes, and many others are badly scorched. Wisps of white ghostly steam waft from their shoulders and crystal swords. "Consider them softened up," says Grey Wolf. But even so softened, the ghosts fight at full effectiveness. Three more land sword blows on Dranko, and now he seems half covered with crystal, a half-statue starting to blend in with the local architecture.

Ernie drops a *flame strike* on the enemies closest to Dranko; because of their height, he can avoid catching Dranko in its effect. Two of the four ghosts erupt into puffs of smoke. Then Ernie turns and casts *earth reaver* beneath the other cluster of ghosts. Fiery spikes thrust upward from the ground beneath them, ripping their legs.

From there it's just a matter of attrition. Though Dranko and Flicker are both reduced nearly to crystalline statues by the end of the melee, the wizards pile on the area-effect spells – *chain lightning*, *cone of cold*, a Maximized Empowered *coldfire* – and finally Grey Wolf dissolves the last ghost with an *acid orb*. Throughout the combat, the oboe music has not stopped or changed its beautiful melody.

Morningstar and Ernie heal their friends of their injuries, but the rocky growths still remain. "Very painful!" Flicker manages, though his mouth is nearly fused shut, his lips hard and jagged. On close examination, Ernie thinks the blue stuff actually is a kind of fungus, which gives Morningstar an idea. "Close your eyes," she warns. She casts *darkbeam*, a spell usually reserved for scorching and blinding bad guys, but in this case she makes use of one of its secondary properties, namely the efficient eradication of fungus. It mostly works beautifully; the crystal shrivels and flakes away, and after a couple of mass cures to soothe the burns, everyone is soon healed back to perfect health. (She makes sure no one notices that she accidentally blinded herself, and quickly heals herself with *cure blindness*.)

While the party are healing up, some of Kibi's *prying eyes* return. Most saw nothing but abandoned buildings and lifeless streets, but two were able to observe scenes of interest, and deposit those observations into Kibi's memory. One came across a large one-story building with a symbol like an upside-down "A" over its main door. The door was ajar, and so the eye had slipped inside and seen that the building was mostly all one large room, and it was full of skeletal remains. Giantish skeletons, their bones dusty but mostly intact, were stacked into neat piles so numerous that only a few narrow aisles were left through which one might navigate the room. A single ghost wafted up and down these aisles; she was wearing a blue robe with the same inverted "A" as appeared above the door. The eye watched as the ghost removed a bone from one of the hundreds of stacks, examined it, shook her head, returned it with painstaking care, and moved on.

The second eye came across an enormous pentagonal amphitheater, whose floor was natural rock but whose tiered seats were crystal. In the center of the stage was a pedestal, and standing there was a giantish ghost playing a large horned instrument.

This musician is the source of the oboe music; he plays with his eyes closed, his expression one of intense concentration. As the music spills from his instrument, lights flash colors above his head, then stream out to where an audience might have sat, dancing blobs of varied hue and brightness. The movement of the colors is perfectly synchronized to the rhythm of his melody.

The building with the bones is slightly closer than the amphitheater, so the Company investigate that first. As they walk the streets, Kibi takes the time to examine the crystalline buildings more closely. The stone itself is most curious, seeming more like a fusion of quartz and some mysterious organic substance. Many of the buildings are warped and bent, and by all accounts should be cracked, but instead they rise up in elegant twists and curves like lithic bonsai trees.

I cannot move through it, says Scree. It's not entirely rock.

The sounds of the horn music echo through the city, and the light motes float and sway like incandescent dust on a breath of breeze. The walk takes them half an hour, during which time the last of Kibi's divinatory scouts come back with nothing new to report. Ernie puts on the *cloak of diplomacy*, and they all go into the building. It smells dusty, but not rich or rotting. The skeletons, stacked with a startling attention to neatness and detail, are clean as fresh chalk. The ceiling is high, but the bone towers nearly reach it.

Ernie calls into the dry gloom: "Hello? Yondalla's blessings on this place! We are but travelers, here on a mission of no ill will."

There is a rustle, and the female ghost with the blue robe comes whispering around one of corners. She is nine feet tall. "Are you the keeper of this place?" asks Ernie.

"Yes." The ghost's voice is almost entirely telepathic; its vocal component is hardly audible. And even the mental aspect is quiet, serene. "Who are you?" asks the ghost.

"My name is Ernest Roundhill. I am a traveler from a very distant land."

The woman nods. "I am *Pettim*."

"What has happened here?" asks Ernie, his own voice somber. "All the people are... it must have been a terrible tragedy."

Pettim nods again. "I try so hard to understand," she says. "Sometimes I feel like I am close... but I don't understand. I have collected them all, and examined them all, and still I am baffled by the cause. And yet I will not rest, until I know."

"Was there a disease?" asks Ernie.

"We were never certain. Centuries ago, we lived and thrived here. Traded, danced, loved. And one day there was a tremor. We felt it with our minds, in our thoughts, our thoughts. It shook this place, and we started to die. In three days, only three days, there were none left alive. But I swore as I lay dying, that I would find out what happened. When all my brothers and sisters had passed, I remained to carry out my work."

"I think I know what caused it," says Dranko, and the others realize the same thing. The tremor was the hand of the Adversary smashing into Abernia.

"You do?" asks the ghost, her voice a bit louder than before.

"How much do you know about the Gods?" asks Dranko.

"I know them well. We revere Yavin, and do not agree with Wlaqua's philosophy."

"In the place that is beyond this place, where there is no ceiling overhead..." begins Dranko.

"There is no such place," Pettim interrupts.

"It's a faraway place," says Dranko. "We have traveled from there. At the time your people died so quickly, a piece of a god fell to the ground. Not a god you worship, but a very evil god."

"You mean Wlaqua."

"No," says Ernie. "More evil than Wlaqua."

"But there are no other gods," says Pettim. "The Sister Gods would not allow it."

"Where we come from, there are other gods," says Ernie.

"Part of that evil god struck all the world," says Dranko. "Imagine a ceiling collapsing, and a huge boulder smashing through it, and causing an earthquake rippling out from there. Only it was an evil boulder, and an evil earthquake."

Pettim considers. *"We... the Mehar... we are psychically sensitive, or were when we were alive. There was a tremor, and with it was... an earthquake of the spirit."*

"We are here to stop that god, the one that caused it," says Ernie.

"We're going to fix what is broken," adds Dranko.

"You can bring my people back to life?"

"We don't know," says Ernie. "But we can avenge them."

"I am not looking for vengeance. I was a physician in life. I am in death as well. You have given me... a new line of inquiry, though the psychic emanations will be weak after so many centuries. I don't disbelieve what you say, but I need proof. I need to understand from within myself."

Morningstar asks Pettim about the symptoms that had manifested. *"It was a slow descent into a torpor, a despondency,"* Pettim explains. *"We lacked the will to live, and so we perished."*

"In our world," says Morningstar, "there was a city where the people all went mad and killed one another, due to the effect of this evil god."

"So it sends out the evil of his psyche where you come from as well. Are all races destroyed as we were?"

"Not yet," says Ernie. "But if we don't stop this, they will be."

"I have collected and examined the bodies of everyone who lived in Mehar-Bec, looking for anything that might yield a clue. There was nothing. Nothing. Until now. You have brought me a line of inquiry. I thank you."

"Who is playing the music?" asks Ernie. "It's beautiful."

"That is Nellig, a musician. He was the greatest of our generation. He was rehearsing for a grand performance when we were... destroyed. Nellig never got to perform his Prism Symphony, but still he practices, and believes that one day he will have his concert. It breaks my heart, but I have my own duties to fulfill."

"Do you still?" asks Dranko. "Now that we've told you what happened?"

"When I am satisfied, I will move on, and be in Yavin's peace. You give me hope that that day is soon."

"What about the soldiers who attacked us?" asks Kibi. "Were they simply doing their last living duty?"

"You encountered the honor guard of Mehar-Bec, sworn to defend the city from all invaders, no matter the cost. They also endured, and remained to fulfill their function."

"We, uh, had to kill them, when they attacked us," says Dranko.

"You sent them on to Yavin's peace. It was their destiny. Their souls will thank you."

"Have you seen anyone else come through here?" asks Kibi.

"I have not."

"Is there a way to leave the city?" asks the dwarf.

"There are tunnels leading out in many ways, to many lands. And of course, there is the circle in the center."

The Company obviously ask more about that! *"It is next to the university,"* Pettim explains. *"I have not visited there in many centuries, as I collected those bodies among the earliest. But perhaps Corriv is still there. He was a scholar. He was the only other one of us to endure beyond the fall. He was working on some grand project, and works on it still if he has not completed it."*

"Do we have your permission to use the circle?" asks Ernie.

"I don't know that it can be used, but it is not for me to allow or deny it to you."

"Does it have a number?"

Pettim thinks for a moment. *"Yes, the Circle is inscribed with a '1.'"*

The Company try to hide their disappointment. They were hoping for a 5, 9 or 2. "Do you still feel any evil vibes around?" Kibi presses. "Anything more recently?" He desperately wants to know if the Evil Trio passed this way.

“There was a shadow, some months ago,” says Pettim. “It flitted across my mind, but passed in an instant. I did not know what to make of it, and it was soon gone. I did not let it interfere with my work.”

Kibi frowns. That certainly could have been Meledien and co. passing through Mehar-Bec, probably on the way to the Leaping Circle.

“I would like to visit the world you come from. Some day. But if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.” She turns back to one of the stacks of bones, and stares intently at it.

Ernie’s heart wells with pity for the poor medic, shackled to the mortal world by her own commitment. He has an idea, and receives the party’s blessing. “Pettim, we believe we can help you,” he says.

“You already have.”

“But not enough.” He and Morningstar jointly cast *miracle*. “By the power of our Goddesses,” Ernie murmurs, “we implore that this woman be given the knowledge she needs to find peace.”

There is a ripple in the air, and all the bones shift, sending up clouds of ancient dust. Pettim picks one of them up, and her ghostly eyes grow wide. “*The fall of an Adversary’s hand*,” she whispers. “*I know... I know...*” She closes her eyes, smiles, and gently fades away.

Ernie sighs his thanks to Yondalla, that he was able to give the dead medic the peace...

SHHHHHHHHHHH-ING! There is a sound like a fast rush of air, followed by a dull ringing sound like a heavy bronze bell. A tall humanoid being like a metallic statue has teleported, or somehow appeared, directly in front of Ernie and Morningstar. It is both black and white, with one hand open and one hand closed.

“YOU ARE NOT AUTHORIZED TO USE POWER OF THAT MAGNITUDE,” it intones. “YOU WILL DESIST, OR YOU WILL FACE PUNISHMENT.”

SHHHHHHHHHHHH-OOP. This time there is no bell-sound, just a staccato noise of a blast of air, and then silence. The figure vanishes.

Ernie’s jaw hangs open. “Uh, remember when they told us their Gods walk around down here, and we should tread carefully? Er... oops?”

carborundum: OOPS!

Everett: Anyone else picture some underworld Robocop when that guy appeared?

Mathew Freeman: I’m going to have to wait until the story is finished before I go back into the PDF version. I can’t face the idea of reading all through it again, knowing that I’ll finish it before it’s done. But I am going to have one *serious* binge read when we’re done. Terrific stuff as ever, and I’m looking forward to the idea that I’ll finally get to see the ending soon!

Any chance we’ll get a “What They Did Next?” post-credits scene?

Quartz: And now a powerful ally has appeared. If only they can persuade it.

Everett: How do you know the god is a potential ally?

Quartz: I’m guessing it’s an agent of a god rather than a god itself.

coyote6: From the description of the entity, I’d say your guess is probably inevitably correct.

KerlanRayne: (1) He didn’t immediately attack when he appeared. Always a good sign. (2) He talked about authorization so he’s at least lawful and that’s something they can work with. (3) He didn’t seem particularly nice, which in their world means that he’s probably a good guy.

carborundum: These guys will take help from anyone and anything. Even Flicker had some sort of cohort. I think. Maybe that was a while ago?

Piratecat: And yet, Dranko *still* doesn’t have a full-time torchbearer. How is that even fair?

carborundum: We still have a whole box of tapes to go. Maybe Sagiro will see sense...



The Musician and the Scholar

The general opinion among the Company is that the black-and-white being is an agent working on behalf of both the Sister Gods, who appears when someone uses power that neither of Them wish wielded by others. Dranko looks on the bright side. “Now if we want to get the Gods’ attention, we know how to do it!”

“Why would we want to...” begins Flicker, but he’s interrupted by a sizzling sound from Aravis. Crosser’s Maze tracery erupts and spreads across his skin, and he vanishes.

“Not again,” says Grey Wolf tiredly.

But Aravis’s absence is short this time. Less than two minutes later he reappears, lying peacefully on the floor of the Mehar-Bec morgue. He stands, yawns and stretches, feeling like he’s just woken from a sound night’s sleep. His memory holds another vision of the surface:

There are three of them – two women and a man, each bedecked in the gold and white of Heros, the Kivian Goddess of Healing and Mercy. They stand inside a vast room shaped like a pyramid, the man and one woman pouring flasks of herb-scented oils into an inset pool at the room’s center. The other woman reads aloud from a scroll, chanting unknown syllables, worry clear on her face. After some minutes of this they cease these activities, look at one another, and sit down on the stone floor of the chamber.

“They should be back any moment,” says one of the women. She is tall, bulky, with long blonde hair down to her waist.

“Assuming enough survived to bring him here, Pelory,” says the man. He scratches his white beard with an old and gnarled hand.

“Stone, we sent fifty,” says the second woman. Her face holds both the blush of youth and the careworn lines of many years, making her age a mystery.

The man, Stone, shifts his weight on the hard floor. “If our intelligence was wrong, and he wasn’t alone, fifty wouldn’t have been enough. Not nearly enough. I’m not so sure of things as it is. Kaddrial said this warlord is so powerful, he can change the course of the war in a single moment, and we’re supposed to subdue him and haul his butt all this way? Just to dunk him in a cleansing pool?”

Pelory laughs. “Kaddrial knows what he’s talking about. He won’t say outright – says the enemy can hear everything anyone says on Kivia and Charagan both – but I’m guessing this warlord is under a curse, and he’ll be grateful enough when we lift it to fight on our side.”

The smaller woman looks up, no smile on her face. “If Kaddrial is right, maybe you should keep your mouth shut.”

“Watch yourself, Iris. I still outrank you.”

“Ladies,” Stone says with a croaking laugh. “If this Naradawk fellow hears everything anyone says, he’d long ago have been driven mad by the endless chatter of womenfolk. So don’t worry yourselves.”

Pelory smiles. “Stone, if you weren’t eighty years old, I’d dunk your head in the cleansing pool until you begged for Heros’ mercy. If you can’t...

“Quiet!” Iris shouts. “I think they’re back.”

Nine men, armed and armored, walk into the room, carrying a large wooden box like a coffin. Their boots clatter loudly on the stone floor. All of the men are wounded, some badly. One has lost an eye; another, his left arm below the elbow. Pelory and Iris leap to their feet. Stone stands stiffly. “Where are the rest?” asks Iris, her face pale. She knows the answer already.

“Dead,” says one of the soldiers.

“Then he wasn’t alone?” says Pelory. “Our divinations were wrong?”

“They weren’t wrong. It was just him. And he killed forty of us, including the sergeant. I’ve never seen a warrior like him. We had him outnumbered fifty to one, and by the end I was sure we were still outclassed. Cassik got in a lucky shot before he died; otherwise the rest of us would be dead too.”

“Well, bring him over here,” says Stone. “Assuming that’s him in the box. We’ve been preparing the cleansing pool for three days now, and that’s after the months it took months for Kaddrial’s priests to find all the ingredients, or hire adventurers to find them. No point in wasting any more time.”

The men stagger forward and drop the box heavily next to the pool. The soldier grimaces and clutches his shoulder. “I hope he was worth it.”

The soldiers pry the lid from the box, and tilt the unconscious body of Darien Firemount into the cleansing pool.

The rest of the party cheer when they hear this news. Tor! Good old Tor, the boy warrior who long ago left to become a double agent to help the war against the Delfirians, but who was found out and magically converted into an *actual* Delfirian war chief. For years now Tor has been leading armies of Delfirians against their enemies in the neighboring kingdom of Bederen,

commanded by his ancestor Davarian Firemount inhabiting the body of Abernathy's former apprentice Thewana. At last something good is happening up on the surface, though they'd have preferred him to have been "cleansed" in time to join them in the Underdark.

So, where to next? The scholar (and the Leaping Circle near the university) are of more relevance to their quest, but they decide upon a short side-trip to the amphitheater. Kibi knows the way thanks to his earlier *prying eyes*. They march quickly through the abandoned streets of Mehar-Bec, crystal buildings growing up all around them.

Three blocks from the amphitheater, a small red ball of flame flares to life in the air before them. This elicits curses from all present. "I guess they knew we'd be coming through here," Kibi laments.

As before, Dranko saw no kind of sensor or magical effect ahead of time. He winces, thinking that some horrific aquamarine-tinged monster is about to come eat him.

The fiery ball is a little bit larger than last time, and from it comes a voice – tinny, distorted, muffled. The words are nearly impossible to make out, but the Company think they catch parts of a phrase. "*There! We've almost... dammit!*" With an air-sucking pop, the fire vanishes.

Parthol's translator beads had let them understand the language, even though it wasn't Undercommon. In fact, they have no idea what language it was. But it makes them reconsider. Maybe the little fireball is being conjured up by someone trying to help them? Or at least to communicate with them? Or it could just be Meledien and Seven Dark Words, trying to cast some terrible spell using the fire as a conduit. There's no way to know.

They continue on to the amphitheater, a wide five-sided bowl dug downward into the rock. At the bottom, in the center, is a tall ghostly figure, the musician **Nellig**, playing a long, dark instrument, like an oboe sized for a giant. Above his head is a miasma of pulsing lights, an umbrella-shaped aura of swirling hues that from time to time fires out a colored tendril that makes morphing abstract shapes over the heads of a purely theoretical audience.

Dranko starts clapping, and the music stops. The ghost lowers his instrument and stares at them. "We are here for the concert," says Dranko.

Nellig nods. "I suggest the seats directly across, five rows up. You'll get the best acoustic effect, as well as the visuals from the mote-phone." (That's not actually the name of the instrument, but it's the best translation Parthol's beads can come up with. It transmits both its lights and part of its sound through the ubiquitous light motes.)

The Company sit, and Nellig plays. The music is exquisite, a soaring melody, sometimes exuberant and other times heart-breaking. They are hearing a master of his musical craft, performing a complex piece which he's been practicing for centuries. The lights wash over them, pulsing in time to the music. Nellig is waving the end of his mote-phone at them, directing the lights specifically to them. He is literally playing to his audience.

The concert goes on for almost an hour and a half without pause. His music rises into the cavernous heights above Mehar-Bec. At the end he holds one final note for ten seconds, and as it does a final strand of blue light breaks into smaller bits and drifts away.

The Company stand and applaud. "That was the most incredible music I've ever heard," says Aravis, and the others murmur in agreement.

"I hope now you can move on to your eternal rest," says Dranko.

"I could," says Nellig. "I wonder if they have mote-phones in the beyond? There's so much repertoire still to explore." He peers at them, as if really seeing them for the first time. "Where did you come from? I've never seen your type of folk before. Are you here to avenge us?"

"Yes," says Dranko. "In fact we are. We know why you died, and we have come to avenge you." He explains the fall of the Adversary's hand.

"Interesting," he says. "Though it's too late now for anything to be done, too late by far." He hands his giant oboe to Morningstar. "Keep it," he says. "I won't need it where I'm going." He smiles, bows, and fades away.



Now, if the medic Pettim was right, there is only one more ghost, the scholar Corriv, still haunting Mehar-Bec. It's almost a half-hour from the amphitheater to the university, and the walk is stunningly quiet, bereft of its music. Dranko can't help but

think that somewhere in the city is the treasury, full of loot that the Mehar are no longer using, but the others discourage him from spending time on such a project.

The buildings thin out a bit as they approach the University Square. At one end of an open plaza is the largest building they've yet seen, a towering edifice of blue crystal topped with a rising tower of concentric domes, rising three hundred feet into the air. Above the huge front doors (which are open) is a symbol like an inverted trident. And now they hear a new sound, coming from inside the building. It sounds like a rhythmic ratcheting, and a clattering of gears.

The doors lead into an anteroom, attached to the main university building itself. Its walls are lined with empty trophy cases, and at the far end is a smaller set of double doors, also thrown open. From beyond comes the ratcheting sound again, along with a creaking like a ship straining at its ropes.

"Hello?" calls Morningstar. "We mean you no harm!"

"Corriv, are you there?" adds Kibi.

From beyond the door, and sounding like it's coming from very high up, someone shouts back. "Don't touch anything!"

Dranko slips forward and looks through the inner doors. The center of the university is one enormous room, and he's looking at ... a scaffolding? It takes up nearly the entire floor, a hundred feet on a side. It's very slightly reminiscent of the Vree's machine in Het Branoi, but only in that it's a latticework frame on an exaggerated scale. The others come forward too, and gape. With time to examine it, they see that the scaffolding is made of blue crystal and generally in the shape of a great cube, divided into twenty-seven smaller cubes. But the cube is not perfect; it's twisted, torqued, and were it made of ordinary rock, would have cracked in several places by now. Tied to various parts of the scaffolding are several dozen thick rope cables, snaking through the multi-cubed skeleton and terminating at an array of spools. The spools are enormous – six feet long and three feet around – and set into a niche about halfway up one of the walls, and so outside the scaffolding.

Floating up by the spools is a ghost. He grabs a large crank protruding from the end of one spool and turns it. There is a ratcheting sound as the spool turns and the ropes pull and the crystal groans. A section of cubes twists a few inches around.

The final detail of the bizarre tableau is that in ten different places, short lengths of rope dangle off the crystal scaffold, each suspending a two-foot-diameter crystal hoop.

"What are you doing?" calls Dranko.

"I said don't touch anything!" returns the ghost.

"We won't!" Aravis assures him. "But we are fascinated by all this."

"It *is* fascinating, isn't it?" the ghost agrees.

"What is it?" asks Kibi.

"Hold on, hold on, I'll be right down." The ghost – **Corriv**, they presume – turns the crank of another spool, stretching his cubes another inch or two. As he floats down to meet them, the party see that a number of papers are floating around his head, but in a controlled fashion, so that he can read any of them at need. Corriv lands, gathers up the papers, and sets them down.

"Aren't you a fascinating set of folk."

"We are visitors from very far away," says Aravis.

"Ah, you must be."

"Have you seen other visitors come through?" asks Kibi. "Others like us?"

"There'd have been three of them," adds Morningstar.

"Oh yes, I saw them," says Corriv.

"Were they mean to you?" asks Dranko.

"They ignored me," says the ghost. "Though I guess in some sense their actions mocked me, since I have no idea how they did what they did. They took the Leaping Circle in about ten seconds."

"That was rude," Dranko agrees.

"It was! I don't know if they understood where it was going to take them, since it's impossible to know, but I also would have

said it was impossible to activate it in less than 144 hours. There were three of them, yes, dressed in black. I did try to warn them. I told them it wasn't going to work. But then it did, so it shows you what *I* know."

"But you know how to activate the Leaping Circle in 144 hours?" asks Kibi.

"I could, if I had an assistant. I could do it. Couldn't tell you where it was going to take you, though."

"Does it always go to one place, or could it go to different places?" asks Kibi.

"This one has two possible destinations... either to Circle 5 or Circle 3, depending."

Ooooooh! Circle 5! That would get them on the path indicated by the Croaking Oracle! "Depending on what?" asks Kibi.

"Depending on..." Here he utters a word that has no meaning. "Quanta," it sounds like. "It's random," explains Corriv. "It will either send you near to Circle 3, or to Circle 5, but there's no way to know which until you've gone."

Aravis gestures to the huge cubic framework. "What is this you're working on?"

Corriv brightens. "Finally, someone who's interested in it! Pettim didn't care at all; she just wanted the bodies of all my assistants."

"We spoke to her, and to the musician," says Dranko. "We were his audience, and then he passed on."

"Really? He decided that you were enough?"

"His performance was amazing," says Kibi.

"Pettim has also passed on," says Aravis. "We assisted her in determining what happened to your people."

"I can guess well enough what happened," said Corriv. "There was a massive psychically resonant event. Must have occurred nearby."

"It was a piece of an Evil God falling to earth," says Aravis.

"Wlaqua?"

"No, another God. An outsider."

"There are no other Gods."

"We come from a place... beyond this world, where there are other Gods."

Corriv gives them a sly look. "You're from the surface, aren't you!"

That brings the party up short. Thus far, no one they've met understands the notion of the surface. "You know about it?" asks Aravis.

"I don't *know* about the surface, but I've developed theories. I've postulated that the surface must exist, but no one bought my theories."

"They're true," says Dranko.

"I knew it! Ha! Too bad there's no one left for me to gloat over."

"Everyone else we've met down here seems to think it's not possible," says Morningstar.

"It *has* to be possible," says Corriv. He starts pacing, in a floaty kind of way. "If you properly analyze magnetic shifts and tectonics and heat signatures, there's no other conclusion one can reach! What's it like up there? Tell me? Is there really no ceiling, as far you can see?"

"Would you like to see?" asks Morningstar.

"You can take me there?"

"No, but I can create an illusion of it." She shows him the night sky, and explains about the moon, and then the sun vis-à-vis the light motes.

Corriv just stares upward at the illusion, ghostly eyes wide, a huge smile on his face. "It must be very hot," he says, not looking away. "Your sun, I mean. It must be a source of moveable heat that rotates around and above the world."

“Very impressive,” says Aravis.

“You’re extremely smart,” adds Kibi.

“Yes I am. Thank you for noticing. I’m glad to know my guesses are correct, but I’ve long given up on surface theory, and devoted my time to a more interesting and potentially relevant study.” He motions to the scaffolding.

“Yeah, what is all that?” asks Dranko.

“That, my friends, is a map of the Leaping Circles!”

carborundum: So, the Underdark is... a giant Rubik’s cube?



Quantum Leap

A map of the Leaping Circles? The entire Company let out a long “Oooooooooohhhh” in unison, just as if they were still watching Nellig’s performance on the mote-phone.

Corriv gives a ghostly chuckle. “That sounds like you have some interest in the Leaping Circles.”

“Up on the surface,” says Dranko, “we have magics that let you jump all around in the world in the blink of an eye. You don’t have that down here.”

“You have your own Leaping Circles?”

“We can transport ourselves without Leaping Circles,” says Aravis.

“Not everyone,” adds Dranko. “Just very powerful wizards.”

Corriv looks thoughtful. “Ah, and if you get far enough anti-coreward, that would work, yes... It makes perfect sense. But down here you need to use the Circles.”

“A prophetic toad told us, ‘five, nine, two,’” says Morningstar.

“Well, if you want to go to Leaping Circle Five from here, you have a fifty-fifty shot,” says Corriv. “And Five does go to Nine, and Nine to Two... in a manner of speaking.”

“But there must be a way of influencing which one we go to from here,” says Aravis.

“I know better than anyone how this one works,” says Corriv. “Trust me, there isn’t.”

“Can’t you explain it to us?” asks Dranko. “We’re pretty smart.”

“I’m sure you are, and that you know much about those topics you’ve chosen to study. But tell me, for how many centuries have you been studying the Leaping Circles?”

“There is that,” murmurs Grey Wolf.

“It is possible that the Leaping Circles are similar to something we have studied,” says Aravis. He’s not used to the possibility of something arcane in nature being beyond his understanding.

“I am more than happy to discuss my work at great length,” says Corriv. “I’ve been working a long, long time with no one to talk to.”

Kibi gestures at the enormous cubic scaffold. “So, this map, how does it work exactly?”

Corriv is eager to explain. “Before my city died, I devoted myself to the project of mapping the Leaping Circles. They were created before any historic record of the Mehar, and their interconnections were byzantine, to say the least. Indecipherable. There was *some* way of getting from any Circle to any other, at any time, but where you went was a function of so many variables that no one to my knowledge had ever worked them all out. I decided that I would. I wanted to learn what rituals would get a traveler from where to where, what the temperature had to be at both locations, any local seismic activity that was either required or prohibited at the moment of translation, of Leaping... There are so many variables. Time of day, time of year, sometimes even what a traveler had recently eaten, could affect where one Leapt.

“I was about two-thirds of the way to figuring it all out, and that’s when... the Event occurred. The one that wiped out my

people. But it also, to my great frustration, displaced the Leaping Circles, and largely dissociated them from one other. And so I began my work again, posthumously, and it has been much more difficult. I may someday finish, and I've made great progress, but it's possible that I will never finish, because the connections are still changing, very slowly, as they have been for a thousand years. It is no longer the case that one can go from any Circle to any other Circle. It is now the case that every Circle takes one out of the center, which is where we are. There are three arms, going coreward only. Every Circle now goes only to one other Circle, which in turn will take you one Circle coreward from there. There are thus three branches, terminating at three points." Corriv flips through his papers. "There is a terminus at Seven, at Two and at Ten."

"What happens after you end up at one of those?" asks Kibi.

"You cannot take any Leaping Circles from there. You'd have to walk anywhere you wanted to go after that."

"What's between here and Number Ten?" asks Dranko.

"Circles Three and Six," says Corriv. "There are two chains out from Mehar. If you end up going to Circle Three, you can from there go to Circle Six, and from there to Circle Ten. Or you may end up at Five, from which you can go to Nine, and then on to Two. The third branch goes from Eight to Four to Seven, but Eight has been severed from One, the Circle here, and the hub of all the others. Though Circle Four is not far from here; only a week's journey, assuming there are still connecting tunnels."

Kibi exhales. "Hopping, hopping, Five, Nine, Two."

"Now understand," continues Corriv, "That because of the displacement, none of the Circles are *directly* connected. All of the arrival points are somewhat removed from their destination Circles. So, for example, if our Circle One here takes you to Circle Three, it will actually take you to a place *near* to Circle Three. You'll have to walk to it. And after you take it, you'll be somewhere near Circle Six. And so on."

Dranko ponders this. "So, if we end up at Circle Three, could we walk from Three to Five to get back on track?"

"Given enough time, and assuming there are sufficient tunnels, yes. But it would take you a very long time." Papers bloom around Corriv's head and he consults a chart of figures. "You would have to travel anti-coreward 14.3 miles, and a lateral distance of... 873 miles, according to my calculations."

"That's a long way to *xorn move*," says Kibi. "And there's really no way to know, just before jumping, which one we'll be going to?"

"No, there is not."

"I wish we could use a *miracle*," Morningstar sighs.

"Oh, that wouldn't work," says Corriv. "The magics inherent in even the most potent spells are trivial compared to the forces at work on the Leaping Circles."

"It's just a *teleportation circle*!" Dranko objects.

"You do not understand quantum effects."

"Sure I do," says Dranko. "One effect, two effects, three effects... I can quantum all day long."

Aravis gives Corriv a sympathetic look. "Don't get into these conversations with him. They're very frustrating."



Corriv shows the party to the Leaping Circle, which is behind the university building in a large courtyard. Like Circle Eight at the Stribe city, this one is fifty feet in diameter, an adamant ring sunk into the stone floor. Runes are scrawled on it around its entire circumference, and on a nearby stone slab has been carved a large numeral "1."

Morningstar walks to the center (where according to Corriv, the Evil Trio enacted their ten-second ritual to activate it) and blankets the area with *thought captures*. Most of them reveal thoughts of someone concentrating very hard on getting a short but complex ritual correct. One thought is of someone hoping that the local ghost guard won't catch up to them until they're done. The final thought is, *Damn, but that music is making it hard to concentrate. If this doesn't work the first time, we should go back and annihilate that thing.*

Corriv and the party wizards talk well into the night on a number of arcane topics. The old ghost is pleased as punch to have intellectual peers for company. Kibi can't help but ask him about Earth Magic, and how it's stronger as one goes coreward.

“Well, of course it is,” says Corriv. “Earth Magic *is* magic. It comes from the core. I imagine any magic you have up on the surface is just runoff.”

Kibi feels indisputably smug about that! “It’s harder to use, though,” he admits.

“Interesting,” says Corriv. “I would imagine that trying to make use of the magic dissipating into the air would be more difficult. Abernia is Abernia! You tap directly in! Not that I’m an accomplished wizard. I’m more of a scholar, I only dabble.”

Morningstar asks if Corriv knows about the local Dreamscape. “Ah, yes,” says Corriv. “But no one in their right minds ever went there. It’s crawling with those... creatures. They’re all around us right now, probably eating lunch and practicing killing one another.”

On the topic of the Sister Gods, Corriv confirms Morningstar’s suspicion that as they travel coreward, they will be heading into Wlaqua’s territory. “Yes. The Sister Gods have divided creation between them, and coreward you find a greater concentration of those who venerate Wlaqua. The Sister Gods don’t take much interest in scholarly pursuits, and so I don’t much care about them. I don’t like talking about them, though; you never know when they might be listening.”

When the wizards’ talk grows more esoteric and technical, the others grow bored. Morningstar, Flicker, Dranko and Ernie take a quick trip into *Ava Dormo* to see if it’s still infested with Keffet, and to see if the Leaping Circle exists there. Not only are there Keffet, but Corriv’s words turn out to be unintentionally prophetic. There is no Leaping Circle – if it ever was there, it’s been paved over – and the four of them arrive in a huge mess hall. Three hundred Keffet are eating at long tables. At the intruders’ arrival, most of the nearest ones jump to their feet and start scrambling for weapons. Dranko yanks one of their mugs with a deft snap of his whip, and it flies to his waiting hand. He takes a drink, and finds it both sweet and alcoholic.

“Drop your weapons!” shouts one of the Keffet. Twenty more have spears pointed at them.

“We just came by to say ‘hi’,” says Dranko affably.

“Take them prisoners, you foo...” But they don’t hear the end of that, as Morningstar returns them to the waking world. Dranko is sad that his Keffet beer doesn’t come with them.

The wizards converse for hours. Corriv manages to convey a basic groundwork of the magical theory behind the “quantum” Leaping Circle, and by the time the party mages go to bed, they are convinced that there’s truly no way to predict or influence where the Leaping Circle will take them. Kibi looks for the silver lining. “Maybe the Croaking Oracle said ‘five, nine, two’ because it *knew* this Circle would take us to number five.”

Corriv shrugs, not putting much stock in oracular amphibians. “If you’re going to take Leaping Circle One,” the ghostly scholar tells them, “you’re just going to have to roll the dice.”



Nothing attacks them overnight, which is a pleasant surprise. The next morning, before they get started on the six-day-long ritual, Corriv gives them all the figures for the distances and locations of the Leaping Circles and their destinations. He also confirms that the Evil Trio went through themselves 143 days ago, meaning the bad guys are still about five months ahead of them.

They begin the ritual, which is time-consuming but not difficult. It’s just a long recitation involving a typical combination of gestures and syllables, in which the three living wizards take turns participating. The days go by. Dranko wanders Mehar-Bec looking for the elusive treasury, and manages to stumble across an old shop containing about 1200 khet chips in a back room. Flicker scavenges another 800. Khet chips don’t stack neatly like coins, but are much lighter on a per-unit basis.

One morning, Aravis wakes up to find Flicker standing over him. “You vanished again, while I was on watch,” the halfling tells him. “You were gone about four hours.” And indeed, Aravis has been given another vision of what’s transpiring on the surface:

Two beings in matching blood-red armor sit facing one another. The taller of the two is a man, heavily muscled, bald-headed, his face crosshatched with scars. The other is an orc, fat and familiar. It is the Bloodseer, wearing Restimar’s old armor.

They are sitting in the Bloodseer’s den, at ease. They have been talking for some time. “Naradawk Skewn will grant you any lands in Nahalm that you can take and hold,” says the human. “Kallor, Hae Kalkas, Kynder Hold. Dimres. Sand’s Edge. I advise you stay away from Sentinel, but otherwise you may choose your own objectives. All Naradawk asks is that you act aggressively, give no quarter, choose high-population targets, and kill as many of your enemy as possible. How soon will your armies be ready?”

The Bloodseer takes a long sip of wine from an ornate cup before answering. “Two days,” he says, his smile growing wider and showing sharpened teeth.

“Two days?” The man is unable to hide his surprise. “How many orcs can you possibly muster in two days?”

“Fifty thousand at least,” says the Bloodseer, obviously enjoying this.

The man splutters. “Fifty... With all due respect, I don’t see how you could...”

“I knew this day was coming,” says the Bloodseer. “And I knew it would be today.” He casually reaches over to a table with dwarf-bones for legs, picks up a copy of *Prophecies of the Orcish Crusades*, and quotes from its pages. “And from a prison that is all the world, a great warrior will fall upon this land, and your conquests will be as his sword of fury. His messenger comes in crimson, on Grolsh’ ninth day in the Year of Vermin. Be ready in your thousands; you are the storm.”

The man blinks, but quickly gains his composure. “Naradawk has brought formidable strength into this world, but you will be his soldiers on the ground. And you are confident that you can not only lead your orcs, but control them?”

“Control orcs?” the Bloodseer snorts. “As well as anyone, for what that’s worth. But I am the Chun Aggrat reborn, whom any orc would follow to the ends of Abernia and be thankful for the honor. Give me two days, and your massacre will begin.”

Ugh. Dranko spits. “I hate that guy!”

The vision certainly fills the party with regret at not having killed the Bloodseer during their previous encounter, and reminds them that they never did get their hands on a copy of *Prophecies of the Orcish Crusades*. “It will make me so happy if Tor kills him,” says Grey Wolf.

“Fifty thousand orcs!” Dranko is aghast. “They’re going to devastate the kingdom!”

“I guess we shouldn’t have hoped you were going to have happy visions from now on,” says Grey Wolf to Aravis.

At last the final minute of the ritual arrives, and they all hold their breaths, waiting to see if they’ll be put on the Toad-ordained path to stop the Evil Trio, or be sent hundreds of miles in the wrong direction. In the final seconds, Morningstar becomes aware of something warm in her pocket, quickly growing hot. It’s *Laramon’s jade clover*, a magic item they found in the hoard of the dragon Azhant the Ancient. It’s a minor luck item, and heretofore she hasn’t thought much about it, but now she can feel it heating her skin through the fabric of her pocket.

They Leap.



As before, most of the Company experience an instant translation, but Dranko does not. He finds himself hanging in a nauseating nothingness, stars of madness twinkling just beyond his peripheral vision. There are things, regarding him. He should not exist here, but he does, having something in common with the denizens of the Far Realms.

The voice sounds from the darkling depths:

**You are called, Dranko, and you are as you are called.
Let not your delusions be of grandeur. DO NOT BECOME!**

And then they are all there, standing in a low-ceilinged storeroom that smells of fungus, dried fruit and spices. The *jade clover* is rapidly cooling now, and Morningstar holds it in her palm. “Impossible to affect, indeed,” she says with a smile, and returns it to her pocket.

Everett: [“Sure I do,” says Dranko. “One effect, two effects, three effects... I can quantum all day long.”] That was so dumb I had to stare at it a minute before I got it.

Who is the Bloodseer? Don’t remember him. Something to do with the orc-champion who switched bodies when the party killed him?

Sagiro: The Bloodseer was an orcsish leader who helped the party kill Restimar – a red-armored servant of the Emperor who was impersonating various humanoid figures of legend. After Restimar (masquerading as the Chun Aggrat, a legendary orcsish war leader) was killed, the Bloodseer turned on the Company and had his orcs chase them away. It seems that the Bloodseer kept Restimar’s red armor, and now *he* is pretending to be the Chun Aggrat.

Everett: And what’s with the *jade clover*, and Morningstar’s comment on it?

Sagiro: Morningstar was guessing that after all of Corriv’s insistence that the random nature of Leaping Circle One couldn’t be influenced, the luck magic inherent in *Laramon’s jade clover* must have done exactly that, presumably to make sure they ended up nearer to Leaping Circle Five than to Leaping Circle Three.

Anxe: Well that answers part of the previous prophecy. Seven haste, and roll the dice, / Spun by fortune's sacrifice.

Everett: Nice catch.

Anxe: One brings many, flame's design. – That might have something to do with those flames popping up everywhere for the party too.

Everett: So, it seems that if Dranko has delusions of grandeur – tries to gain fame in some way – then he will Become, which presumably means that he'll grow lots of eyes where he shouldn't have eyes, and a giant tongue, and become radioactive, and anyone who looks at him drops dead of fright? That's my guess.

Sagiro: No comment...

Piratecat: Jerk.

steeldragons: I'm just thinking, or starting to think "Hopping, hopping. Five, nine, two" is supposed to mean, "DON'T GO TO FIVE NINE TWO!! Hop somewhere else! Hop somewhere else! Five-Nine-Two is utter and complete death and destruction! You can't win that way! Don't go to FIVE! Five is in the Far Realms! Tapheon and a hundred tentacled and hundred-eyed 'things' waiting for you at five!"

Everett: Um, no...

steeldragons: All that said, the whole "minor magic item 'luck charm' from some former adventure" playing a decisive role in the current adventure is yet one more example of the DMing GENIUS [GENIUS, I say!] on Sagiro's part. Just gorgeous. I can only hope that some day I might achieve the same level of brilliance in DM story-telling as you. I cannot tell you how many campaigns I've had or been a part of that have really cool magic items that are simply forgotten (by us all!). Not in Sagiro's campaign. No sirree.

Well done, sir. Well done. A thing of pure DMing beauty. Hat's off.



Scuttle

The storeroom in which the Company have arrived is uninteresting, but the same cannot be said for their location in general. From outside the room come shouts, screams, and other familiar sounds of battle. Weapons clank, men grunt, and in the background, ceaseless, is a clicking sound as though thousands of tiny feet are scurrying along stone floors. Parthol's beads translate some of the shouting:

"There's another seven of them, north hall, go!"

"Huge wave of Scuttle reported from the southeast corner breach. No Spotties!"

"Get them off me! Get them off me!"

There is a door leading out of this glorified closet, halfway open. Something scampers past the doorway, something like a dog-sized scorpion, but it moves too quickly for the party to get a decent look. In close pursuit are two short humanoids, stocky, with beards and hammers. Dwarves!

"What do we do?" asks Dranko.

Kibi is affronted that he even asked the question. "We go out and help them!"

"Who? The dwarves or the scorpions?"

"The dwarves!"

Dranko holds up his hands. "Well, we don't *know* that the dwarves are good and the scorpions are evil." Kibi glares at him, and Dranko shrinks back a bit. "Uh, let's find out."

They move out into the hallway, which has a low seven-foot ceiling but is very wide. It stretches off in both directions for twenty feet or more before bending out of sight. The architecture is reminiscent of dwarven buildings from the surface, which enforces the notion that it is the dwarves who are under attack. Sounds of scuttling feet and rattling chitin echo all around.

Another dwarf comes racing around the nearer corner, looking worriedly over his shoulder. He's fully armored in a chain suit, and his beard is impressively voluminous. He practically runs into the Company before he notices them and pulls up short.

"Do you need help?" asks Ernie. "We came through a Leaping Circle."

The dwarf blinks. "Help? Yes! Please!"

Six huge scorpions come crashing around the corner in pursuit of the dwarf. They pile up almost comically as they make the turn but immediately gain their footing and charge forward. Dranko steps in front of the dwarf and fires off a *prismatic spray* from his *helm of brilliance*, damaging five of the monsters and exploding the sixth. But the survivors swarm upon Dranko, crawling up his legs and onto his back, looking for openings and whipping their barbed tails to and fro. They're very conventional-looking scorpions, save for their size, and that they have short prehensile tentacles surrounding their mouths. Ew. Dranko flails about and manages to avoid any damage from them, but he's still a grim sight.

Aravis's *prismatic spray* is more effective, and he uses the *battlestone of St. Jenniver* to avoid affecting Dranko. Three of the five scorpions die immediately, fried or baked or dissolved. One of the remaining two would normally be sent to another plane by the ray with which it's struck, but in the Underdark the spell has a different effect; the scorpion is flung backward with great force. It crunches into the wall and is still. Only one of the half-dozen scorpions survives, and that one but briefly; Flicker runs up and stabs it to death.

Dranko turns to the slack-jawed dwarf. "You got any more of these?"

The dwarf looks pointedly over Dranko's shoulder. "Uh... yes?"

Those six had been a small advance party. Dranko turns in time to see a veritable flood of the creatures spill around the corner, dozens of them climbing over one another in a nightmare heap of pincer claws and stinger tails.

Ernie drops a *blade barrier* across the hallway, then calls down a *flame strike* on the far side. Grey Wolf follows up with his *iron storm* and *chain lightning* combination. The scorpions shriek as they explode in the deadly electrical storm, and half the bits are propelled into the *blade barrier* to be smashed up into even finer pieces.

The dwarf's eyes bug out of his head. "Are there many more?" asks Dranko casually.

"Y... yes," stammers the dwarf. "Many more on the right side where the wall was breached. At least a hundred Scuttle, plus a handful of Spotties."

"What are Spotties?" asks Morningstar. "Something worse than these?" She gestures to the chitinous fragments now scattered along the stone floor.

"Much worse," says the dwarf. "They're like these ones, but there's somethin' wrong with 'em."

Ernie guesses first. "Black spots?"

"Yeah, black spots. The Spotties can kill ya from a distance, just by lookin' atcha."

"Damn," says Dranko. "How did the Blood of the Adversary get down here?"

Ernie asks the dwarf, "Did three really nasty people in red armor come through here in the past few months?"

The dwarf nods. "You're not with 'em, are ya?"

"No!"

"Good."

"Had you ever seen Spotties before they arrived?" asks Morningstar.

"No," says the dwarf. "We suspected they may have had somethin' t' do with 'em."

"Great," says Grey Wolf. "They left us another gift." Even worse, it means the Evil Trio was not sent off to Leaping Circle Three as the Company had hoped.

"Are the Spotties mixed in with the other ones?" asks Dranko.

"Yep. They're out with the rest assaulting the wall, but them black-spotted buggers can tunnel like nobody's business. They managed a breach on the south bulwark and a bunch poured in before we could seal 'em out again."

"You should lead us to the wall," says Aravis.

"And who are ya, if ya don't mind me askin'?"

"We are the ones prophesied," says Dranko gravely.

"Abernathy's Company," adds Morningstar.

"Who's that?"

"Long story," says Ernie.

"Then you can tell me later, when we're not in the midst of battle."

Dranko hops through the *blade barrier* to peek around the corner, in case any scorpions survived their magical battering. There's only one, and it's nearly dead. He slays it with its whip. But from around yet another bend he can hear another wave

approaching. For the moment he stays on the far side of the *blade barrier*, as bait. “Help!” he cries in his best imitation of the dwarf. “I’m injured! Someone help!”

The next wave of Scuttle surges around the far corner and boils toward Dranko. This group brings with it the barest whiff of Essence; two Spotties are in with the rank-and-file scorpions. Their carapaces are a mottled bronze and black; their eyes and tentacles are entirely black.

Just as Dranko takes this in, the others hear a tearing sound from the wall not far down the hall in the other direction. A hole appears in the wall, bored through from the other side, and four more Spotties drop down to the floor. Now there are six of the Essence-tainted Scuttle, and these make the same attack that similar creatures have been making since the party first encountered them. Dranko, Ernie and Morningstar all feel the horrid burn of black pustules appearing and then bursting out of their faces. The two Spotties on the far side of the *blade barrier*, with Dranko, have stopped short of the area filled with Grey Wolf’s iron filings, but the rest of the Scuttle push forward, filling the hall and swarming over Dranko. Though he avoids their attacks, they are numerous enough to bear him to the ground. For every one he knocks aside, a new one climbs onto him. Soon only one hand is sticking out of a nearly solid mass of scorpions.

Pewter, I have a job for you.

The cat thinks back to his master, *Boss, you can’t be serious.* But Aravis is not joking. He *shapechanges* into a xorn to skirt the wall of blades, then releases Pewter to dart in among the scorpions to deliver a *teleport* to Dranko’s thrashing hand. *You owe me big time for this, Boss!* But Pewter evades the clacking claws and barbed stingers, leaps onto Dranko’s arm, and teleports the two of them back to the more populated side of the *blade barrier*.

Aravis isn’t finished yet. He steps up to the *blade barrier* and casts another *prismatic spray* through it. It’s mass carnage, as the amassed Scuttle are variously petrified, crisped, poisoned, or (if they’re lucky) only heavily damaged. A few are flung hard away from Aravis, again those being the ones that would ordinarily have been sent plane-hopping. Of the two Spotties caught in the cone, one resists being turned to stone, but the second goes insane.

Even as the energies of his spell still crackle, Aravis feels Crosser’s Maze lines draw themselves across his forehead. “No, not now! Not...” He vanishes. The others curse the ill-timing.

There are still four Spotties on the near side of the blades. Morningstar Quickens *divine power*, moves to one of the black-spotted scorpions, and brings down *Ell’s Will* hard upon it. As she hoped, the creature is spell resistant, making it highly vulnerable to her Epic weapon. The morningstar cracks the thing’s chitin like it was eggshell, but it survives the attack.

Ernie casts *destruction* on the closest Spotty, crying out “Yondalla does not want you here!” His Goddess would seem to concur; the Blood-touched scorpion glows brightly and puffs into dust, leaving no trace of Essence behind. Grey Wolf steps up to another one, Quickens a *true strike*, and channels a Maximized *acid orb* through a hard swing with Bostock. The sword cleaves it down to its center, and the acid dissolves the creature into a foul puddle of liquefied organs.

There are still two Spotties and a number of injured Scuttle on the other side of the *blade barrier*; Kibi, seeing that *prismatic sprays* are the order of the day, casts the spell upon the cluster of enemies. His magic item the *Pulse of Abernia* Empowers the spell, and both the Spotties take tremendous damage despite evading the direct beams of light. The remaining Scuttle are killed in the typical variety of ways. He then Quickens a *rainbow pattern* and mesmerizes the not-insane Spotty, hoping to entice it into the wall of whirling knives.

The remaining two Spotties on the near side go after Dranko and Morningstar. They are faster and stronger than their untainted brethren, and in addition to the horrible Blood attack, they tear into their targets with razor-sharp claws. Both also deliver perfectly placed tail-snaps, sinking their poisoned barbs precisely into the necks of their victims. The pain and damage are intense, but not fatal, largely because both Morningstar and Dranko are still under the poison-nullifying effects of the morning’s regular *heroes’ feast*.

None of the remaining four Spotties survive to attack again. Morningstar crushes one with *Ell’s Will*. Flicker lops off the tail of a second. And Kibi smashes a third with an Empowered, Maximized *earthbolt* before luring the final one, still insane, into the *blade barrier*. Ernie caps off the melee with a *mass heal*.

Dranko turns to the dwarf. “You have any *tough* monsters?”

The dwarf laughs. “That was amazin’! There are thousands more Scuttle, but nothin’ tougher than Spotties, thank Yavin.” His speech is refreshingly vocal. Unlike that of the Stribe and the Mehar, the telepathic component of the dwarf’s language is almost vestigial, providing the tiniest extra nuance of meaning.

“What’s your name?” asks Dranko.

“**Gehentas**,” says the dwarf. “And let me welcome you to Kehentohantas, though what yer seein’ is only the border outpost nearest the region controlled by the Scuttle. Somethin’ has driven them things into a frenzy!”

“When did it start?” asks Kibi.

Gehentas looks closely at Kibi while he answers. “They’ve been assaultin’ the wall for nine days now.”

“So the Scuttle don’t usually attack like this?” asks Morningstar.

“No, the cavern is typically a neutral buffer zone, which they’ve not violated in decades.”

“Are they intelligent?”

“Yes. Well, sort of. They have a kind of hive mind. They build things, you know...” He’s interrupted by a distant boom. “...and that includes siege towers, sorry to say.” He stares at Kibi again. “You look somethin’ like a Drevin, but not exactly,” he says.

Kibi returns the stare. “And you look something like a dwarf.”

Gehentas looks shocked. “A dwarb? You’re a dwarb?!”

“It’s ‘dwarf’,” says Kibi.

“Are you... are you from the *surface*?” He drops to one knee in front of Kibi, head bowed.

But before Kibi can properly appreciate this, Aravis reappears next to him with a faint sizzling sound. As with his previous returns from the Crosser’s Maze, he appears to be just waking up from a sound sleep. This time there is a smile on his lips, and he has a very satisfying vision to share.

Shreen the Fair, hunchbacked and snarling, paces back and forth in front of a line of monsters. There are a dozen of the things, sinuous and malign, acidic drool oozing from mouths full of fangs. Behind them, in the vast courtyard of the Shrine of Dralla, hundreds of other abominations of every stripe stand restlessly at attention, filling the air with soft, unnatural sounds.

“This is our moment,” cackles Shreen. “Long have we suffered, and let others dictate our fate. We have been robbed, and tricked, and stepped upon, but no longer! The time of our revenge is at hand. Even now, our new allies are mounting an assault against the worms of Charagan, laying waste to their lands and slaughtering their people. We have been invited to join in the fun.”

Shreen stops pacing for a moment, and inclines his misshapen head toward a figure standing nearby – a stocky, bearded man in blood-red plate mail. “Carren here is an emissary from Emperor Naradawk, the new ruler of Charagan. His people have prepared a *teleportation circle* for us, and within the hour, Strug will complete the ritual that will allow us easy passage across the sea. Do not fear that the sun is rising here in Djaw; it is the middle of the night in the land of our enemies, and we go to be their nightmares. Once there, we have but one mission: to kill. And my friends, we are so good at killing.”

Shreen raises his arms, and a cacophony of hoots and screeches fills every archway and shadow inside the Shrine. It takes a full minute for the din to subside.

“Before we leave,” shouts Shreen, “there are some final preparations. We need to...”

He is interrupted by a sound even louder than the roars and barks of his menagerie. It is an awful sound to Shreen’s ears, like the blaring of hundreds of golden trumpets, their notes clear and piercing. But worse, the sound is followed immediately by another – the grinding crash of stone walls collapsing. The entire east wall of the Shrine falls into rubble, sending up plumes of thick dust. Shreen and his monsters fall silent, confused. Then a magical wind banishes the dust, and reveals a terrible sight.

Thousands of brightly-armored soldiers stand in rows behind the ruined wall, filling the courtyard with the cracked angel statue and every street and alleyway beyond. Their polished mail glitters in the rising sun. They are Knights of Kemma, mingled with hundreds of city guard Falcons. But four figures stand at the head of the army, who are more familiar. One is the diviner Belinda. Another is the High Priest of Kemma, One Shining Mirror. The other two are the Ellish Daywalkers, Evenstar and Scola.

“Got it in one,” mutters Belinda with a smile.

Someone shouts a command in the back of the soldiers' ranks, and a thick hail of arrows rises into the sky, gleaming in the sun. The ranks of monsters in the courtyard squint upward as death rains down upon them. A dozen derics cast *daylight* as the soldiers then stream past and around Evenstar and Scola, swords shining, advancing into the Shrine of Dralla and bringing with them a cleansing light that is long overdue. With Drosh's influence gone, the divine politics of Kivia have shifted, and some things will no longer be tolerated.

The battle lasts the morning, and hundreds of Knights fall to tooth and claw, but in the end the monsters are scoured out of every hole and crevice. Paladins root out dozens of horrid creatures from the myriad small chambers beneath the Shrine. Shreen the Fair is found cringing in the bottom-most pit, and dragged up and out to stand, face twisted with bitterness, before Evenstar on a field littered with hacked-apart monsters.

"Lady Evenstar," says One Shining Mirror, "here is the one you wanted. But we cannot remove him from this place, physically or by magic. And while he's here, he cannot be killed. Dralla still protects him."

Evenstar looks down upon Shreen, who seems shrunken and pathetic in the light shining down over the smashed wall. "Drosh has departed the world," she says, "and Dralla is thereby diminished. I can put an end to this one, and for Morningstar and for Ell, I will. Shreen!" she barks. "For your crimes and treachery, and for all that you are an affront to Ell's darkness, I condemn you to death."

"You cannot," spits Shreen. "You may have defiled this place with your sunlight, but I will endure. I will always endure. And when Naradawk has chewed you up and spat out your bones, I will be at his side, laughing at your pitiful memory."

"I don't think so," says Evenstar. She sits down before Shreen, concentrates, and drops into *Ava Dormo*. And she takes Shreen with her.

Shreen looks around, terrified. This place looks like his shrine, but it is empty, save for himself, Evenstar and Scola. The two Ellish sisters are fulminant with a hot, dark energy. "We have stood with Morningstar against a greater threat than you," Evenstar says, her voice echoing in the Dreamscape. "And for her, and her kingdom, and for Ell, we now deliver you from this world."

Scola steps forward, and with a mace like a black star, she sends Shreen the Fair to oblivion.

SolitonMan: That was so awesome!

Everett: Great way to dispose of Shreen.

Piratecat: We cheered. Not killing Shreen before we left was our biggest regret.

carborundum: Fantastic! The party get to have a blast (literally) and generally be all heroic after a few rough epic encounters. Plus Shreen gets his. Did Sagiro do the Shreen voice for this Maze vision? (Any chance of an mp3?)

Quartz: Concentrated awesomeness!

Everett: Scola was the one who should've died in the battle against Octesian, but didn't due to oversight and took Morningstar's old blade, didn't she? Also, I'm wondering – when Aravis had visions from the Maze, did Sagiro just write them up beforehand and read them aloud at the table?

Piratecat: Printed them out and handed them to Aravis's player, who read them to himself and then aloud.



The Attention of Higher Powers

Kibi looks down with pride mingled with embarrassment – though mostly the former – at Gehentas kneeling at his feet. "You're right, I *am* a dwarf... dwarf, actually. You're one of the first people we've met down here who believes in the world above!"

Gehentas nods. "Course I do." He stands and gestures at the huge piles of remains. "You just annihilated the Scuttle, and even the Spotties. Can you do that to the rest?"

"Maybe," answers Kibi. "Where are they?"

"All over the place. And there are a lot of them!"

"I could kill a lot at once," says Kibi, stroking his beard, "but it would require collapsing part of the cavern where they are. Is that okay?"

"Part of the cavern? We don't go in that direction, so sure, as long as you can guarantee the ceiling doesn't collapse on the fort."

"I'll have to take a look."

“We can help, with our magic,” says Gehentas. “A little bit. Reshaping stone, helping build buildings. That sort of thing.”

Kibi finds the notion delightful. “Where I come from, very few dwarves can cast magic.”

“We all do Earth Magic here,” says Gehentas. “You know, the magic that just comes up out of the ground.”

“We’ll talk more about that after we’ve dealt with the Scuttle.”

Gehentas leads them through the hallways of the fort, and up to the top of the wall. “Weapons out, and look sharp,” he warns the Company. “They primarily use their catapults to fire themselves over the wall, but they also hurl rocks.”

They are challenged in places by other Drevin, but all of them are awed by Gehentas’s brief pronouncements about Kibi.

“He’s a dwarb! A dwarb has come to rescue us!”

“What about his friends?” asks one of the guards.

“We’re companions of Kibi,” says Ernie. “We’re here to take care of your Scuttle problem.”

“It’s true!” Gehentas exclaims. “I’ve seen it! They just blasted the Scuttle into ashes!”

“Great! Send ’em up!”

Gehentas keeps talking as they ascend a twisting staircase. “We haven’t worried about the Scuttle in decades. We’ve had an uneven truce, and had agreed that the cavern out there would stay empty. We weren’t prepared for this; nine days ago they came out of the nowhere. And those Spotties... I’m sure it’s related to how Yavin has been diminished these past few months.”

“What does that mean?” asks Kibi, alarmed.

“Yavin helps us with our diplomacy,” says Gehentas. “Have you heard of the Sister Gods? Yavin is the peacemaker, and Wlaqua is the warmonger. There’s a border on the far side of our kingdom, about a hundred miles from here, with the fungus people, the Myconids. We’ve had our issues with them, sure, but our shared veneration of Yavin has helped us keep the peace. But even over there, things are starting to break down. Like her influence is waning, and Wlaqua’s is waxing. We thought that might have something to do with why the Scuttle have decided to attack.”

Ernie winces. “I think something deeper and darker is waking up, and is making all deep and dark things stronger.”

“It’s possible that Wlaqua has been infected with Black Goo,” says Kibi.

The Company are brought out to the top of a wide wall. On one side of this wall is the settlement of Kehentohantas, built both above and below the “ground.” On the other side is a cavern so large it may as well be out of doors, illuminated by millions of light motes. The Wall rises eighty feet above the cavern floor and extends laterally several hundred feet in both directions. The ceiling is another hundred feet above the top of the wall. The back wall of the cavern is out of sight.

“There’s no door in the wall,” says Gehentas. “As part of the truce, we took it out. The Spotties can burrow to get in, but their tunnels collapse behind them, so the Scuttle can’t follow, thank Yavin.”

The cavern floor is a seething sea of Scuttle, climbing over one another, milling about, swarming over boulders. There are Essence-infused Spotties mixed in with the rank-and-file scorpions. A few Scuttle are trying to scale the wall, but the Drevin are employing standard siege-breaking tactics: crossbows, boiling oil, boulders dropped downward. The wall itself has been coated with something slick, making it difficult for the Scuttle to find purchase.

Three Scuttle go flying overhead and land *behind* the wall. Several Drevin go rushing over with weapons drawn. In the haze of distant light motes, the Company see that a couple dozen tall catapults loom behind the Scuttle ranks, some of which are flinging boulders, but most of which are firing the Scuttle themselves over the wall.

The Company form a quick plan. Since Dranko and Flicker aren’t part of it, they head down into the city to help the Drevin fight the Scuttle hand-to-hand. Kibi, he’s a big part of the plan. He can feel the Earth Magic here, seeping into his bones, suffusing him. He points at the cavern ceiling high above the masses of Scuttle and casts *earthquake*. The *Pulse of Abernia* empowers it further. The Drevin lower their crossbows and stand amazed, as far out above the line of catapults a huge chunk of ceiling collapses. Carriage-sized boulders rain down upon the Scuttle and their siege engines; at least two catapults are smashed to splinters. The Scuttle screech and flee the epicenter, but hundreds are crushed by a rain of stony death. “That was incredible,” breathes Gehentas.

Stage two of the plan: Morningstar and Ernie each cast *fire storm*, blanketing huge swaths of the cavern floor. Terrible conflagrations of flames, golden and black, sweep across the stone. Five thousand square feet of Scuttle are crisped, and after a

terrible shrieking sound, the sound of the scorpions is clearly lessened. Smoke rises from the scorched bodies. Between the *earthquake* and *fire storms*, the party estimate that between fifteen and twenty percent of the Scuttle have been annihilated, along with over half their catapults.

Flicker comes running up, his arm nearly severed. Ernie heals him and sends him back into the fray. “Flicker!” Dranko calls. “Hurry up! I need my flanking buddy back!”

Grey Wolf changes into his draconic form, grabs a couple of boulders in his claws, and flies out above the cavern, figuring he can help clean up the Scuttle near the wall that survived the *fire storms*. But as he launches himself outward, Gehentas becomes panicked. “No, you have to stop him! Don’t let him...” Grey Wolf is slammed hard to the ground by an invisible force, eighty feet down to the cavern floor. He is immediately swarmed by Scuttle. “The Scuttle can control gravity around flyers,” says Gehentas.

“So can I,” says Aravis. He leans out and casts *reverse gravity* around Grey Wolf, and his friend starts to rise, quickly at first, then more slowly, until he comes to a stop twenty feet off the ground, caught in a gravitational tug-of-war. Several Scuttle still cling to him, gouging his scales with their claws and stingers.

Grey Wolf *teleports* himself to the top of the wall, leaving the Scuttle to drop back down to the ground. Gehentas is distraught. “If I’d known you’d try flyin’ I’d a warned you! Just didn’t occur to me it was a thing you could do.”

“We know now,” groans Grey Wolf. Morningstar heals him, while Ernie casts another *fire storm* down by the base of the wall. There is more screaming and the Scuttle are roasted, but by clearing them out, Ernie has revealed two of the Essence-infused Spotties starting to dig through the wall. Dozens of bowmen lean out over the wall and fire, but their bolts clank off the creatures’ plates. Aravis Quickens and Maximizes a *fireball*. One Spotty is roasted on the spot but the other keeps digging.

“We’ve spent time hardening the very outer layer,” says Gehentas. “Takes ’em a bit longer to get through than it might. But once it gets deeper in, it’ll chew through the stone like it’s bread.” Aravis doesn’t let it get that far; he blasts it with a *lightning bolt*, and the Spotty explodes with the faintest whiff of Essence.

Kibi still feels the resonance of his *earthquake* humming in his bones. He casts a second, spoofing it with *wish*. This time he feels an even larger surge of Earth Magic welling up, similar to what erupted beneath the Croaking Oracle. The entire cavern shakes, and the Drevin shrink back. Out over the masses of Scuttle comes another hailstorm of boulders, some as large as houses. Siege engines are snapped like matchsticks. For a moment it seems as though the force of the spell might be too great, might extend the destruction to the ceiling above Kehentohantas. But the earthshaking fades, and the city is spared. Not so for the Scuttle, who are crushed by the hundreds.

Kibi smiles and tries to look like this is normal. “I didn’t know you could cast ‘*armageddon*,’” says Grey Wolf appreciatively. “Good thing you targeted it so far out!”

As the rumbling fades, it is replaced by a new, strange sound. It’s the Scuttle, but their collective sound has changed. They are screeching at the same precise pitch. Then, at once, they become silent and seethe away from the wall like a receding tide. Even the few remaining Spotties are fleeing. In less than a minute only a few stragglers are visible, the wounded, crawling over the rubble.

An eerie quiet settles over the cavern. Because of its size and the sheer numbers of light motes, the dark patches left by the *fire storms* have already filled back in. It seems they have repelled the attack. A ragged cheer goes up among the Drevin, but this peters out as something new appears, a white glow far back in the cavern, hundreds of yards away but moving forward, closer.

A figure comes into view. It is a white marble statue, standing with its arms extended, hands balled into fists. It has no features on its face; its head is a smooth white ovoid on its shoulders. It floats five feet above the ground, and none of its limbs move. White light shines out from it. The Drevin all shield their eyes. “What *is* that?” breathes Kibi.

A voice sounds in all their heads at once – pure telepathy. The Drevin look around as if they hear it too. *I am Ylerba, servant of the Goddess Wlaqua. Wlaqua has sent me to turn you back. Swear upon my Holy visage that you will abandon your quest, and I will not hinder you. Otherwise, I will destroy you, and any who attempt to shield you. Do you acquiesce?* The voice is unnaturally calm and even.

“No,” answer both Aravis and Ernie.

Will you come out to face me then, or must I come in after you?

“We will come out to face you,” says Aravis.

“We seek something foreign to your Underdark,” says Morningstar. “It does not belong here.”

I know what you seek, says the statue. There is a new power beneath the Barrier, and we have come to an understanding with that power. Yavin has become irrelevant in the new order. You are making an unwise decision. I am unlike anything you have ever faced. Come down now, or I will take apart this wall.

“Do not harm these people,” warns Ernie. “We will come down. But Yavin is not irrelevant, and never will be.”

“I think your new friend won’t prove to be the ally you think,” says Kibi.

I have a deeper understanding of these things than you. Turn back, or come down and face your destruction.

Kibi shrugs and turns to his friends. “I guess the local gods are already mad at us, so what’s the harm in killing their emissary? Ready?” He *teleports* the party down to the cavern floor below the wall, twenty feet in front of the white marble statue. Up close they see it is much larger than they, nearly fifteen feet from its feet to the top of its head. It holds no weapon and presents no obvious threat.

Flicker moves around to the far side of the creature, waiting to strike until Dranko is also in position. He watches it carefully, but it has no eyes to read. He can’t even be sure if he’s looking at its front or back.

A blade extends from the end of one marble arm, a blade coruscating with rainbow hues. The statue shifts toward Flicker with preternatural speed and hacks at him, and though he tries to dodge, the rainbow blade is too quick. Twice it strikes him, and a flash of white light bursts from the last point of impact. Flicker is hurled up and away as if thrown by a giant; the others hear his scream recede into the darkness.

Without turning, she extends her other hand toward the rest of the Company and casts *prismatic spray*. Morningstar is burned badly by acid, and Kibi is scorched even worse with electricity. Ernie and Aravis are flung backward into the wall with a pair of painful crunches. Grey Wolf suffers no damage, but is affected as if by *dispel magic*. He loses the effects of both *heroes’ feast* and *righteous wraith of the faithful*. Only Dranko is unharmed by the statue’s spell, leaping and evading a blast of lightning. Ernie gets to his feet and casts *energy drain* on Ylerba, but the marble statue is immune.

Ylerba speaks into their minds. *If at any time you would like to surrender, and swear to me that you will abandon your quest, no further harm will come to you.*

“If at any time you’d like to stop serving evil,” says Ernie, “that would be fine too.”

Aravis stands up, dusts himself off, and drops a *Mordenkainen’s disjunction* on Ylerba. There is a ripple of power from the spell, and the statue is engulfed in darkness as the motes around her are annihilated (though the Company can still see her thanks to Aravis’s *mass darkvision*). Morningstar casts *mass heal*, then Quickens *divine power* before moving into melee range with Dranko. Dranko takes a crack with his whip, and his attack knocks a tiny chip of marble from Ylerba’s shoulder. *That was most unwise*, Ylerba admonishes.

Kibi summons up an elder earth elemental to keep Ylerba occupied. Ylerba slashes at it as it grapples her, but the elemental grabs Ylerba in a huge stony fist and holds her up. **I AM HONORED TO SERVE, AND TO SACRIFICE MYSELF FOR YOU**, rumbles the elemental.

AND I AM HONORED TO FIGHT BY YOUR SIDE, says Kibi.

Ylerba, whose arms are still free, slashes three times at the elemental holding her, knocking loose bits of its rocky bulk. The sword flashes blue with the last hit, but nothing untoward happens to the elemental. Kibi recognizes that blue is the color of petrification in a *prismatic spray*, and smiles to think how little that would bother an elder earth elemental.

With her other hand Ylerba again flashes the entire party with *prismatic spray*, but the Company fare much better this time around. Morningstar resists petrification and Aravis is immune to its poison thanks to the morning’s *heroes’ feast*. Ernie and Grey Wolf suffer only minor damage, and neither Dranko nor Flicker are in the area of the spell. Flicker appears next to Ernie in a puff of smoke; he looks terrible. “Medic!” Ernie casts *heal* on Flicker, then moves himself out of easy cone-formation.

Aravis Quickens *true strike* and strikes Ylerba with *disintegrate*. He expects that it will resist, but luck is with him. The beam punches a hole right through where a normal humanoid’s kidney would be, though he can see now that Ylerba is solid marble all the way through.

Morningstar stands tall before the statue and hacks at it with *Ell’s Will*, striking its legs which dangle below the elemental’s enclosing fist. Where it connects, cracks appear in the marble of Ylerba’s body like lines in a broken windowpane. “I am

Morningstar, Champion of Ell,” she intones. “I am instructed by my Goddess to defeat your ally. You may stand aside, or you will be destroyed.”

Your God is absent, says Ylerba. My God is extremely present. In some sense, you are looking at Her now. I will not stand aside, Morningstar, Champion of Ell. But I will continue to extend my offer that you may surrender.

Ylerba finishes smashing the elemental into rubble and floats free, shrugging off attacks as it positions itself for another *prismatic spray*. Lights flash. Kibi takes massive electrical damage, while Ernie is flung backward and smashed into the ground a hundred feet away. But both Grey Wolf and Dranko resist being driven insane, Aravis is not poisoned, and Morningstar is not petrified. Flicker leaps out of harm’s way entirely. Dranko makes another whip-strike and knocks free another small chunk of marble. Kibi strikes Ylerba with *ray of enfeeblement* but his spell is thwarted by her resistance. Grey Wolf summons an enormous wolf, providing another speed bump.

Ernie activates his armor and flies back to the battle (a safe maneuver, now that the gravity-manipulating Scuttle have fled). He casts *lion’s roar*, bolstering the courage of his allies and knocking the top of one ear from Ylerba’s increasingly damaged body. Aravis casts *polymorph any object*, but Ylerba is not affected.

Dranko! thinks Kibi over the mind-link. I’m going to cast cone of cold but you’re in the way.

Don’t worry, replies Dranko. I’ll dodge it.

Those will be your last words, says Grey Wolf.

No, says Dranko. That’ll be something like ‘Ouch!’

Kibi casts his spell Maximized, and Dranko does manage to evade the damage. Frost coats Ylerba’s white marble, and the pinky of one hand snaps off. Grey Wolf follows up with an *acid orb* that leaves her skin steaming and pitted with holes. “You can surrender any time, if you want,” says Dranko.

Morningstar again charges Ylerba, and knocks away a fist-sized chunk of the statue’s shoulder. Ylerba floats away from her and blasts yet another *prismatic spray*. Morningstar is flung up and away, smashing into the base of the city wall. Aravis takes a massive amount of electricity damage. And Kibi is turned to stone on the spot. But the others all resist the spell’s various effects, and this is the final discouraging straw for Ylerba. She flees into the darkness, back in the direction from which she arrived, accompanied by loud clucking noises from Dranko.

Ernie lines up his shot, and drops a *flame strike* on Ylerba. The Champion of Wlaqua stops as the column of flames roars down upon her. Has she decided to return and press the attack?

No. Her marble body collapses into a hundred different pieces, clattering to the stone ground.

Piratecat: Sagiro, did I miss part of this fight? I think I did.

And I am so glad I made clucking noises as Ylerba fled.

Sagiro: You missed the first 90% of the fight, but we finished it up in a second run for which you were present. You made the clucking noises yourself!



Kibi feels quite comfortable. Ylerba’s spell has merely changed him from one natural form to another. True, he can’t move, and he feels his consciousness slowly fading, but there is something *right* about him being made of nothing but pure rock.

I AM ABERNIA. The world is speaking to him. He recognizes its voice from his dreams.

What can I do to help you? he offers. *I’ve been dreaming that you are in pain, from a thorn in your side.*

IT IS TRUE. I NEED YOUR HELP.

Is our quest going to help you?

IT IS THE ONLY THING THAT CAN. I AM INJURED. I AM FESTERING INSIDE.

The black goo?

THE SOURCE OF ALL ESSENCE. THE ADVERSARY AWAKENS WITHIN ME. DO NOT ALLOW IT. IT MUST BE YOU WHO BREAKS ITS SHELL. THE SPLINTER... THE SPLINTER...

And the voice fades.

Zelc: Well, we now know who has to take the shell and rend. We know who has the thing in his head. We're still not quite sure who channels what makes dead. The last one is also still unknown – I'm not sure we've even met that one.

One at last, but not yet known. / One forever dead as stone. / One to drive the spike clean through. / One to die, and hope renew. – I still think this might be Cranchus, but that might contradict the "not yet known."

Sagiyo, was there a reason why Corilayna had to sacrifice herself so Laramon could take over as the god of luck? I understand the charm's effect on the Leaping Circle, but why couldn't Corilayna have done something for that?

Sagiyo: All of those questions will be answered, but not yet!



Rock Star

Dranko retrieves one of the fragments of Ylerba's head as a souvenir, but there's nothing else to loot unless one wants to start a collection of Scuttle chitin. The Drevin on the walls let out a whoop and cheer.

Kibi is soon restored from his petrified state via *break enchantment*, and he shares the dire warnings that the earth spoke. "You talked to the *planet*?" asks Grey Wolf.

"Well, *it* talked to *me*, but yeah, I guess you could say I chatted with Abernia." Kibi can't keep a smug look from his face.

"You are such a name-dropper!" says Dranko.

Some of the Drevin throw rope ladders over the wall and come to the cavern floor, collecting the remaining bits of Ylerba. Ernie thinks they shouldn't be so overtly gleeful about the demise of a Goddess's avatar, but Aravis disagrees. "Wlaqua has declared war on Yavin," he says. "It's good for the Drevin to pick a side."

The Drevin invite the Company to stay as long as they wish, and insist that they take part in a celebratory victory feast that evening. Tired and spent, the party happily agree. The Drevin crowd around them, paying particular attention to Kibi, the 'Dwarb' from the surface.

Dranko sniffs. "Maybe someday we'll find a race of 'half-erks' down here, and they'll want to hang around *me*."

Flicker grins. "I doubt it. They won't know who you are."

Dranko glares. "I hate you so very, very much."

"Don't feel badly," says Aravis. "I'm happy to hang around with you."



The Drevin don't have a formal clergy, but Gehentas introduces the Company to a cleric named **Folant** at the celebration feast. Dozens of Drevin are packed into a low-ceilinged banquet hall, drinking, laughing and gorging themselves.

Folant, like all the Drevin, recognizes that the Sister Gods, Yavin and Wlaqua, are the most powerful beings in the world, but he doesn't hold them in quite the same regard as surface dwellers do with their Gods. He refers to Wlaqua as the "White Witch," and that's when he's being polite. Someone has set the largest chunk of Ylerba as a centerpiece. Folant gestures to it. "So what did you do to get *that* thing on your bad side?"

"Wlaqua has allied herself with our enemy," says Aravis.

Folant tugs his beard. "Huh. She's a God. I'd expect that other beings would ally with *her*."

Morningstar gives a short laugh. "Our enemy is a 'destroy the world' type enemy."

"Literally," adds Dranko. "Like killing every being on the planet and starting over."

"Huh," says Folant again. "You'd think the Sisters would put aside their differences and try to put a stop to that."

"The Adversary is violent, like Wlaqua," says Morningstar. "And has a very corrupting power."

Most of the Drevin are drawn to Kibi, and want to hear about how his devastating *earthquakes* laid waste to the Scuttle, but all of the Company are treated as celebrities. Only Dranko is left mostly alone; his abdication of fame to the Cleaners seems to extend even into the Underdark. He broods a bit, hanging on to the edge of conversations, but perks up when cigars are passed around. He pulls out a Blacktallow, lights it on Ernie's armor, and blows out a stream of smoke. It forms into words that everyone can see. **ONE MORE BEFORE SHE COMES HERSELF**. His table grows quiet as Dranko explains how his cigars sometimes produce prophecy. Everyone is thinking the same thing. Wlaqua will send one more avatar to stop the Company's

quest, and if it fails, Wlaqua Herself will make an appearance. It's a disturbing notion. One of the Drevin looks sidelong at Dranko. "Er, is there any chance you could, uh, move onward with your quest before that happens?"

The Company assure the collected Drevin that yes, they won't be staying long enough for an eventual showdown with Wlaqua to occur in Drevin territory. This restores the feast to its previous levels of merriment, and the party continues uninterrupted for another hour or more. The Drevin tell Kibi about the ancient stone tablets that speak of Dwarbs and the surface world; Kibi talks in hushed tones of the horrors of oceans ("Like subterranean lakes that take weeks to cross!"); and Morningstar uses an Ellish power to show them what the night sky looks like, the demonstration of which causing some Drevin to stare in amazement, and others to run fleeing in terror from the feast hall.

In the center of the table at which the Company are seated, a being appears – *POP!* – and falls into a large pudding. It sits up, splutters, and shakes itself off. It's one of the militant kobold-ish creatures from the Dreamscape. A Keffet!

The Drevin have weapons out in seconds, pointed at the confused-looking creature. Morningstar motions them not to attack; unlike every other Keffet they've seen this one isn't armed, and it has a manic look in its eyes. "Are you looking for me?" asks Morningstar.

"And are you insane, or asleep?" adds Dranko.

"I'm awake... mostly," says the Keffet. The Drevin look at it without comprehension, but the Company can understand it, thanks to the translator beads.

The creature looks at Morningstar. "Yes, I'm awake! My name is **Checkle**. It's nice to see you in the... the waking sleep? Or the sleeping world? I... I can't tell... anymore."

"This is the waking world," Morningstar assures him.

"For you, yes!" Checkle agrees. "But I have fallen asleep at last, and woken up here. I'm trying hard not to fall asleep again."

"Do you need help?" asks Morningstar.

"No, not yet, but you need mine! Or you will. Soon. I think. Does it work that way in dreams, when you can't tell?"

"You are one crazy little monkey," says Dranko.

"No! I'm a Keffet! You'll need my help. And I'll make you a bargain, because I will be awake and you will be asleep, but you will be awake and I will be asleep. Then we all will be awake and they will all be asleep. Don't you see?"

Morningstar doesn't see, but nods politely. "Interesting. I'll have to think on that."

"I think I'm waking up!" says Checkle in a panic. "No! I have to stay asleep! No, I have to stay awake! What's the difference? Will you tell me the difference?" He looks pleadingly at Morningstar.

"They are both states of mind," says Morningstar calmly.

"But they're the *same*."

"Not really," says Dranko.

Checkle gives Dranko a sly look. "No? I am awake, but soon I will fall back asleep. But when I wake again, I will give you something that you need, and you will do something for me. For all of us! Then we will all be asleep, and *all be awake*. Or maybe the other way around. And then it will all be over."

"Uh, very well," says Morningstar, unsure of the point of all this.

"Because you will want to fly!" says Checkle. "Though the rock, I mean. And I'm almost there. I've almost learned it all. And when I do, I will have what you want, and then you can give me what I want, what we all want. You will fly through the rock."

Now *that* is intriguing. "To reach the surface, or the core?" she asks.

"The what? What was that first one? I don't know that one. It must be the other one."

"And what do *you* want?" asks Dranko.

"An end to it all! And victory!"

"For whom?" asks Morningstar.

“For us! For the Keffet! Wait. I’m waking asleep. Or am I falling awake? I am...” Checkle vanishes, and after a heartbeat pause the Drevin all start babbling, demanding to know what that exchange had been about, and what sort of creature Checkle was. Morningstar takes a few minutes to explain about *Ava Dormo* and the Keffet civilization that’s taken up residence there.

“Are they all batshit crazy?” asks Gehentas.

“No, but they’re at war.”

Once the excitement from Checkle’s unexpected visit has died down, the party turn the conversation to their pursuit of the Evil Trio. It turns out that Seven Dark Words and his friends *had* appeared in Kehentohantas several months earlier, and had fled over the wall before anyone could stop or challenge them. They were headed toward the back of the buffer cavern which this morning had been swarming with Scuttle.

Morningstar explains the Leaping Circles to the Drevin, and while most of the dwarfish people aren’t familiar with them, one fellow with a long beard pipes up. “I heard of ’em!” he says. “One of the Myconids told me ’bout ’em once. Said there were magic circles here and there, that let people travel all around in the world in an instant.”

He doesn’t have specific knowledge of Leaping Circle Five, but the party has coordinates from the Mehar scholar Corriv. “0.7 miles anti-coreward, 6 miles lateral, 37% east 63% north,” says Aravis. He explains that as best he can to the Drevin, who figure that’s on the far side of Scuttle territory.

“We’ll just have to...” begins Dranko, when a little ball of orange flame appears hovering over the table, not far from where Checkle had appeared.

“Oh, hello!” says Dranko. “We see you! Can you hear me?”

The Drevin are starting to take this sort of thing in stride; they watch, calmly. “Someone’s trying to contact us,” Dranko explains. “We don’t know if they’re trying to kill us or not.”

Unlike the previous time the ball of flame appeared, no voices emerge from it, and it’s short-lived, guttering a bit like someone was pouring water over it. It winks out in less than ten seconds.



The party spend the night in a *Mordenkainen’s mansion*. (And many of the Drevin come in for a tour, amazed at the spacious rooms and the table heaped with exotic surface food. One enterprising Drevin takes a bite from an apple, warns his fellows off of them by loudly proclaiming it disgusting, and is caught a short while later piling them into his shirt.) The next morning the Company make final preparations for departure. The Drevin give them plenty of fresh supplies, and hundreds of them stand on the Wall to see them off.

“Stop back after saving the world,” says Gehentas, speaking gravely to Kibi. Kibi bows low to his hosts, and then the party are off, flying on their *phantom steeds* toward the far side of the great cavern. The Scuttle have not come back to clear their dead, and the ground below them is still littered with bodies crushed and burned, and the shattered remnants of siege towers.

In a few minutes they reach the back wall of the cavern, and find it riddled with dozens... no, hundreds of holes. Each is the mouth of a tunnel, just wide enough for a Scuttle to pass, and the tunnels worm their way off into the darkness. Meledien and co. must have traveled through one of them, but which one? Flicker reluctantly crawls into a few closest to ground level; each spirals away in a different direction.

Morningstar peers into one. “How are we going to fight Wlaqua?” she asks nervously.

“Same way we fight everything else,” says Dranko.

Morningstar thinks she might learn something from some *thought captures*, but only picks up the vague and alien thoughts of the Scuttle. She senses from these thoughts that the scorpions were being driven to wage war, driven against their will.

“Should we just pick one at random?” asks Flicker.

“No,” says Kibi. “I have an idea.” He casts *stone tell*, and approaches the stone around the mouth of the closest tunnel opening.

HELLO, KIBILHATHUR, says the stone.

YOU KNOW MY NAME.

ALL THE STONES KNOW YOUR NAME.

EVEN DOWN HERE? I'M A LONG WAY FROM HOME. I AM TRYING TO SAVE ABERNIA, AND WE NEED TO FIND OUR ENEMIES, WHO ARE TRYING TO DESTROY IT. THEY WENT THROUGH ONE OF THESE TUNNELS, BUT WE DON'T KNOW WHICH ONE.

AH, says the stone. YOU ARE ASKING ABOUT CREATURES MORE LIKE YOU, AND LESS LIKE THE LARGE INSECTS?

YES! HAVE YOU SEEN THEM?

NO. BUT THERE ARE MANY STONES HERE. WAS IT YOU? This last question is not directed at Kibi, but at some of the rocks in the wall farther up.

NO! comes the voice of a different section stone, from higher up on the wall. WAS IT YOU? Twenty or thirty lugubrious stony voices call out from around the various tunnel mouths, each repeating the question to the nearby rock. Kibi grins at the sound. They're so helpful!

I THINK IT WAS ME! calls the stone from near one of the highest tunnels. WERE THERE THREE OF THEM?

Kibi flies his *phantom steed* up to where the stone had spoken. HELLO, KIBILHATHUR. I SAW THE THREE YOU'RE LOOKING FOR. BUT THEY WERE IN AN AWFUL, AWFUL STATE, LIKE THEY HARDLY EXISTED!

OH, WERE THEY MISTY?

YES. I DON'T KNOW HOW THEY SURVIVED! BUT THEY TRAVELED THIS WAY, A LONG WAY, OUT OF THE RANGE OF MY CONSCIOUSNESS. I DON'T KNOW WHERE THE TUNNEL ENDS.

THANK YOU! says Kibi.

I'M VERY HAPPY TO HAVE BEEN OF SERVICE.

I'M GOING TO HAVE TO GO MISTY TOO, TO FOLLOW THEM.

The stone is horrified. NO! KIBILHATHUR, DON'T! IS THERE NO OTHER WAY? I WOULDN'T DO IT.

NEITHER WOULD I! shouts a nearby piece of granite jutting from the wall. ME NEITHER! cries another.

But the Company have little choice. Ernie casts *wind walk*, they leave their *phantom steeds* behind, and into the tunnel they go. It's slow going; the serpentine nature of the tunnel precludes the "fast travel" mode of the spell. Hours go by. There are no signs of living Scuttle, but here and there are little sections of snapped-off chitin, and the insect smell is dismayingly strong.

Eventually the tunnel opens into a large cave, though one not nearly so large as the Drevin buffer cavern. Only six smaller tunnels exit from this one, and of these, only one is headed in the right direction. With no better options, they take it, enduring several more hours of slow, misty, claustrophobic creeping. Though the smell only gets worse, there are no sounds of Scuttle. It's eerily quiet.

After nearly a day of this gaseous travel, the party pour out the end of the tunnel and into another enormous cavern, this one nearly as big as the one in which they fought the Scuttle. The ceiling is barely in sight, and like the walls, is riddled with holes. There are hundreds of Scuttle-sized tunnels leading out of the cavern, and it occurs to each member of the Company that this is a pretty obvious place for an ambush. "Better here than in the tunnels, though," says Aravis.

The cavern has one significant curiosity: a collection of siege towers, maybe eight or nine, in various stages of construction. Boulders are piled up next to them. At first this is a head-scratcher, as none of the machines would come close to fitting through the tunnels. But as the party waft slowly out to investigate, they see that each engine is of a different design, and that the more primitive ones are more incompletely built. The only fully intact catapult is identical to the model the Scuttle were using to assault Kehentohantas. "It's a catapult laboratory," says Grey Wolf.

Kibi looks around nervously. At least, if this *is* a Scuttle ambush, they'll hear the clattering of scorpion feet well in advance. The smell is musty and foul, like the inside of a cage of snakes. The only sounds are those of their own footsteps, their own breath. "I guess it's not an ambush," says Flicker.

He's wrong. It's an ambush.

Mostly from the ceiling, but somewhat from the holes high on the walls, comes... something strange. They look like thin blankets, some three feet on a side, flapping in an unseen wind as though loosed from a drying line. They make no sound as they emerge, but as they get closer the noise of their fluttering grows louder. They easily number in the hundreds. Each one is glowing aquamarine, and heading in a mostly straight line for Dranko.

“See?” says Kibi to Dranko. “You get attention too!”

Piratecat: Oh, lord. This fight. THIS FIGHT. This terrible, terrible fight.
I wonder if it's as messy as I remember it being?

coyote6: Swarms of cloaklers?

jmucchiello: Did the Drevin read the smoke from Dranko's cigar or did they react only after he read it aloud? What language is the pipe smoke written in?

Sagiro: The party had to translate for the Drevin, since the smoke writes itself in Common.

Quartz: More!



The Thousandfold

The Company have a few seconds to react before the swarm of flapping aquamarine sheets – a legendary creature called the Thousandfold – will reach Dranko, and they make the most of them. Dranko himself tosses out the Lucent Tower and activates it, though it will be a full round before it finishes unfolding. Ernie casts a mass buff spell of his own design (*mass doughy folk* that gives everyone a morale bonus to AC and saves). Grey Wolf casts *indomitability* on Dranko as a precautionary measure. Flicker prepares the *flask of body pouring* for Dranko, just in case.

The other three unleash destruction. It's as target-rich an environment as the party have ever seen; the air above them is filled with hundreds upon hundreds of living blankets, making the sound of the world's largest flock of pigeons. Kibi fires off a *prismatic spray* into the air, and about ten sheets turn to stone and plummet out of the sky. More are turned to ash from flame or electricity. Then he turns his body and Quickens *cone of cold* up into a different sector, and a few dozen sheets are flash-frozen, dropping to the stone floor with their edges curled and rimed with blue-white crystals. Morningstar fills the air with the roaring black flames of a *fire storm*, roasting dozens more. Aravis follows Kibi's lead, casting his own *prismatic spray* followed by a Quickened *cone of cold* that goes off as the closest sheets are almost near enough to touch.

And then the swarm, diminished but still filling the air in every direction, converges on Dranko. In an instant he's wrapped up by dozens of the sheets, plastering themselves over him. Within a second there is no part of him visible; he's an aquamarine sort-of-human-shaped mannequin. Dranko feels stinging pains all over his body, like little sharp shocks of electricity. Each one leaves him weakened in a way he has not felt before. The damage he takes is enormous, but fortunately he's extremely hard to kill. The others can hear him over the telepathic bond. *Not good! They're sucking the life out of me!*

The remaining hundreds are still flapping around Dranko in a frenzy, a flock of deadly creatures waiting for their turn to enfold their pray. They buffet the others as an incidental consequence of their frenzied proximity, but they do not attack anyone but Dranko. Dranko himself can't see, is bewildered and in terrible pain, and has been knocked to the ground. Over the mind-link the Company form a desperate plan.

The Lucent Tower finishes its unfolding, and thank the Gods, Dranko's muffled voice and panicked intent are enough to open its door. Morningstar dashes inside and casts *prismatic sphere*, which takes up about two-thirds of the tower's interior. Flicker and Grey Wolf wrestle Dranko to his feet, and he stumbles into the tower... and right through the curving wall of Morningstar's shimmering sphere. He can see its brightness even through his closed eyelids and the dozen or more horrible creatures draped over his head.

Almost every blanket attached to him is peeled away, destroyed by fire, electricity, or other magical energies. A few still cling, mostly around his head. He activates his *helm of brilliance* and fires off a *prismatic spray* straight up, and this clears off all but one of attacking sheets. The only one left is wrapped around his thigh; it delivers a relatively small “sting,” then turns gray and falls off, dead. Its withered husk vanishes. Now that Morningstar can see her husband, she sees that he is much the same gray color. But whether the blankets ended up protecting him, or his own natural toughness saw him through, he has personally suffered no ill effects from passing through the *prismatic sphere*.

Outside, Ernie casts another *fire storm*, Kibi another *prismatic spray*, and Grey Wolf an *iron storm*. Then Kibi and Grey Wolf nip inside the tower, avoiding the nearby hemisphere of colored death. Dranko orders the tower door to close. Aravis then casts *lightning ring*, and the electricity is drawn into the cloud of iron filings, filling the air with crackling heat. They have killed hundreds of the blankets, and still they swarm, though now the density of blankets, along with the sound of their flapping, has diminished.

It seems for a moment that Dranko is out of the woods. He's inside a *prismatic sphere* which is itself inside a closed *Daern's instant fortress*, while outside his allies are systematically eradicating this strange collective with area-of-effect spells. But the

party have forgotten that the tower has arrow slits up near its ceiling! The swarming sheets start to pour in through the slits, as surely and quickly as water. Over a hundred get through before Kibi grabs one of the reconfiguration knobs and seals the tower up. These hundred come cascading down from above, but stop short of the top of the *prismatic sphere*. It's clear they sense their prey hiding inside it. They start to swirl around in an odd formation, that of a tall cylindrical tube spinning rapidly around its long axis, its bottom hovering inches above the top of the *sphere*.

Meanwhile the remaining parts of the Thousandfold, shut out of the tower, form into their own rigid circular shape, spinning around the tower-top. Those inside the Lucent Tower can feel the whole thing shudder. Ernie, still outside, unleashes yet another *fire storm*, engulfing the sheets up by the roof. The flames clear out dozens more, but still there are many, continuing to swirl around like a rigid whirlpool. Morningstar steps out of the *prismatic sphere* and casts her own second *fire storm* – the fourth of the battle – and crisps about half of the ones forming the tube above the sphere. But the tube maintains its integrity, and then two things happen almost simultaneously.

One of those is that the spinning funnel of the Thousandfold drops down about two feet, and its lower edge *punctures the top of the prismatic sphere*! Dranko and Morningstar can now look straight up to the tower's ceiling thirty feet away, through the whirling aquamarine sheets. Somehow the blankets have penetrated Morningstar's spell, and the topmost of them start to fall away and inward, heading downward through the new ingress. Dranko looks up, eyes wide with fear.

The second thing is that Grey Wolf flies downward into the tube from above. He has cast *flight of the dragon* to acquire wings, and lowered himself down inside the wide pipe formed by the bodies of the Thousandfold just as they were breaking through. Even as the first of the sheets drops to the level of the *prismatic sphere*, Grey Wolf casts *greater fireburst*. Fire rips through the Thousandfold, incinerating every single remaining sheet inside the tower. Some of their ashes drift down to settle on Dranko and Morningstar's shoulders, before the *prismatic sphere* reasserts itself.

Outside the tower, Aravis fires off a couple of ineffective *lightning bolts* at the circular swarm of Thousandfold spinning around the roof. He follows this up with a *fireball* that dusts about three dozen, but still over a hundred remain. And those hundred contract their circle, tearing the roof of the Lucent Tower clean off. Then they pour into the tower, find their prey protected by the *prismatic sphere*, and take up the same narrow-cylinder formation as the previous set. Ernie flies up to the top of the tower and casts *lion's roar* down into it, blasting about half the remaining Thousandfold to shreds. He follows it up with a Quickened *flame strike* (as the Thousandfold, now reduced to something more like the Fiftyfold, have arranged themselves conveniently into the shape of a column). All of the sheets are consumed in Yondalla's holy fire. Grey Wolf is also caught in the flames, but is apt not to complain.

And so passes the legendary Thousandfold, killed off by a mere four *fire storms*, four *prismatic sprays*, two *cones of cold*, a *flame strike*, a *prismatic sphere*, an *iron storm*, a *lightning ring*, a *greater fireburst*, a *fireball* and a *lion's roar*. The Lucent Tower isn't permanently damaged; it's made of a pseudo-illusionary substance that regenerates its ceiling over the next ten minutes. Dranko, on the other hand, has suffered permanent hit point loss – not much, thanks to the party's efforts to protect him, but the Thousandfold leached away a small portion of his vitality.

Dranko lost seven hit points off his maximum, and was lucky to get away with so little!

As the last ashes of the Thousandfold scatter and vanish with little puffs of aquamarine light, Kibi feels a surge of Earth Magic coming up from the stone beneath his feet, like he's standing above a volcano that's itching to erupt. "Do you feel that?" he asks the others.

"No... no, wait, yes!" says Flicker. "It feels like my whole body's been plucked like a guitar string." The others feel it too, emanating from the ground like the subsonic vibrations of an earthquake.

"Kibi?" asks Grey Wolf. "Is this a good thing?"

"Of course it's a good thing!" says the dwarf.

There is an upwelling of power, and each member of the Company feels as though they stand in a geyser, shaking them, infusing them. Pebbles on the ground rattle and dance. For a full minute this continues, and as it dies down, Kibi hears a voice in his head, the Voice of the World.

REALITY WILL BEND FOR YOU.

And then all is quiet.



The practical upshot of this was that the Company achieved 21st level. I didn't go full Epic Handbook for this; the benefits were:

- +1 to B.A.B.
- +1 to all saves.
- 1 new feat.
- Hit points as though they had rolled maximally for their current class.
- Skill points as normal.
- Arcane casters got to add 2 new spells as if they had leveled normally.
- Ernie and Morningstar each added a 6th and a 10th level spell slot, the latter useful for use with metamagic feats.
- Aravis added a new 10th level spell slot.
- Kibi added a new 8th and 9th level spell slot.

As for the earth's promise to Kibi, he was granted the ability, three times, to nudge reality, to tweak the state of the world or to "rewind" events in some way. He was not sure of exactly how this ability would work, but knew that it was similar to *wish*, and that in order to use it he would have to be in close proximity to all of his companions.

Dranko feels a bit better after this outpouring of Earth Magic, but has trouble shaking the horror of being wrapped up in the Thousandfold. "Someone down here really doesn't want me using my tentacular power, whatever it is."

Once more, Kibi uses *stone tell* to query the local stone about which tunnel the Evil Trio took, and off they go for the final hour before the motes will fade. They leave the Scuttle tunnels behind, and enter a network of natural caves, full of small pools, blind fish, and dripping stalactites. Kibi has an innate sense of their direction and location, and so keeps them on a course toward the promised coordinates of Leaping Circle Five. Once during this stretch the little ball of orange flame pops up in front of them, but it persists only a second before vanishing.



They sleep in a *magnificent mansion* that night, and Aravis is granted another vision of the surface.

King Crunard IV, accompanied by Yale and two stoic bodyguards, strides down a richly appointed hallway in the palace in Hae Charagan.

"My mind is all but gone," says Crunard sadly, "and the irony is bitter. So many years of fighting the Masking, struggling to rule and understand, while ancient magics destroyed my brain bit by bit. And now that the Masking is ending, and everything should be clear, I don't have the wit left to absorb what I see and hear. These moments of clarity I still have are almost through; I have decided to open the Vault of Scrolls while I still remember how."

"Your Highness," says Yale, pity showing in her eyes, "we value every minute that you give us, and honor your sacrifice every day. The Kingdom has been stronger for your efforts, difficult though they have been."

"And without you," says the King, "those days would have been over long ago. Your wisdom and strength have sustained me for so long. Ah, here we are."

Crunard stops before a portrait of a different King – King Daltric II, who ruled Charagan some 350 years earlier. He pushes inward against the old king's face, and the entire section of wall swings in effortlessly. "It's this way." He takes an ever-burning torch from the wall and leads Yale and his bodyguards down a narrow, winding stair. At the bottom is a door, which he opens using a silver key strung around his neck.

"I was never certain that the Vault of Scrolls was a real place," Yale admits.

"It is indeed... and known only to the Kings. It's one of the few things I never shared with you, and for that I'm sorry, but by law and custom only the Kings know of it."

"There are other things?" asks Yale, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, yes, of course," says Crunard, smirking. "I've also never told you that I can't stand the smell of that black tea you always drink. What would have been the point?"

Yale laughs. The bodyguards manage not to, but barely. "I'll have you know, Your Highness," says Yale archly, "that bitterbark tea is excellent for the constitution. And being your advisor for so long, Pikon knows I've needed it!"

The four of them walk through a long underground passage, lit only by Crunard's torch. He's the first person to have walked this hall in centuries, though for a moment he thinks he catches a whiff of something... odd. He stops, and peers forward. "Sire?" Yale also looks around, confused. Besides herself and the King, there are only the two bodyguards, standing alert and silent in their armor.

The King sniffs the air. "I thought I... well, no matter. My mind is apt to play tricks."

Yale frowns. “Perhaps we should go back, your Highness.”

“No. It was nothing. Let us keep on.”

They walk for another minute before King Crunard speaks again. “The Vault of Scrolls was created by the first of the Archmagi, a store of powerful spells left for just this sort of emergency. There are none left who could scribe them, but it is said that they were specially inked such that anyone with the basest knowledge of the arcane can make use of them. If we are to mount a defense against Naradawk and his agents, we’ll likely need them all.”

“This would be a good time, then,” agrees Yale. “How many scrolls are in there?”

“I don’t know,” Crunard admits. “I’ve never been inside. But look ahead, there’s the door.”

They reach a small iron door, and one more time Crunard uses his silver key. “There are enchantments on this door such that only the true King can open it,” he says, turning the key. “And the Vault itself will annihilate any evil creature who steps across the threshold. That’s what I was told by my father, and he by his father. Now, would you like to see what’s inside?”

Crunard pushes open the door, then turns around to see that his two bodyguards are slumped on the ground, unconscious, one on either side of Yale. “There’s a problem,” says Yale.

Crunard blinks, confused. “What...?”

Yale reaches out and grabs Crunard around the face with a huge claw. The king becomes enveloped in a green glow. “I’m afraid I have some regrettable news, Your Highness. Yale was killed almost a year ago and replaced by something else. Fortunately for me, the Greenhouse has always considered your polite “after you’s” to be a formal invitation. And your meetings have been so interesting! A shame your heroes will find everyone dead when they return from the Abyss. Really, you people should have been more thorough after the battle at Verdshane; all sorts of nasty things slipped through that weren’t subsequently killed in the fighting. You were so caught up with Naradawk and his dragon!”

Crunard kicks futilely at the scaly monstrosity that, moments ago, was Yale. His flailing hand reaches for his pocket.

“Don’t bother,” says the creature. “Your *refuge* token won’t work. I’ve got you anchored. But there’s good news, too. Wherever the real Yale is now, you get to join her.”

The monster squeezes, and the King’s face crumples like tin. The thing that was Yale tosses Crunard’s body into the Vault, a small stone room lined with shelves of ancient scrolls. Then, methodically, it sends *fireball* after *fireball* into the room until the Vault blazes like a furnace, papers crackling and falling into ash. When nothing inside is left intact, the scaly horror throws in the unconscious bodyguards, closes the door with *telekinesis*, and snaps the silver key off in the lock before teleporting away.

Zelc: Sagi, thanks for the update, but you are such a rat bastard...

P.S.: Please update again soon, you can't leave us hanging with this!!

carborundum: I don't know what to say.

steeldragons: I concur. “Wow” is all that comes to my mind... and my mind is usually fairly good with words... It is utterly inadequate for this magnitude of awesomeness but, just, “wow.”

One question. So... from the permanent loss of 7 hit points, but then receiving the “wishy earth magic” auto-max for his class(es) which I am assuming was averaged for his thief and cleric classes [or is he considered some other special/paragon/epic class now or since his interactions with the Cleaners?] did Dranko actually lose *any* hit points?

Sagi: I think the result was a net gain of hit points.

Going into that battle, I was guessing Dranko would lose somewhere in the 30-40 hp range (assuming he survived), but I underestimated the party's cleverness; obviously I should have designed the Tenthousandfold instead!

Piratecat: Surviving the Thousandfold was Step 1 in “Dranko learns about humility.”

I was of mixed mind about the mechanics involved with permanent hit point loss. On one side, it's so far from common that it's virtually unheard of, permanent CON loss aside. Nuking Dranko's hit points stabs into the heart of his character. On the other side, Dranko had a high CON and better than average rolls, and I enjoy character optimization so long as the character is personality-driven as well. I know that Sagi was finding it trickier to balance encounters when Dranko's hp and defenses were high; I trust him, and if he thought the game would be more fun with a less durable Dranko, I'm not the one to gainsay him. I did, however, pretty much crap a brick in surprise and post-dated fear when I found out about the permanent loss and what could have happened.

EDIT: Dranko at 20th level had a 20 CON and 202 hp. That's from 5d8, 11d6 and 4d10, which averages out (including max hp for 1st level) to 187.

Quartz: Wow. Just wow. And 202 hp wasn't that far above average – only 15 hp.

Piratecat: I seem to remember offering to lower his hit points or CON voluntarily after the fact, and Sagi graciously declining. I may be imagining this. Considering the rest of this campaign, I'm even more grateful in retrospect.

Leaping Circle Five

Everyone is disturbed by Aravis's latest vision.

"Does this mean the bad guys know about the Archmagi having no powers?" asks Morningstar. They can't exactly recall the timing of when that revelation was made, but it seems likely.

"And now that... thing... can impersonate the king!" says Ernie.

"On the plus side, Rosetta was right about there being a traitor," says Dranko. (Though that is not technically true, it's not a very meaningful distinction.)

Aravis doesn't bother to hide his priorities. "And the ancient scrolls are destroyed! I feel badly about the king, but he was on his way out, and there'll be another king after him. But the scrolls were irreplaceable!"

They note one interesting detail about the vision. The monster said, "A shame your heroes will find everyone dead when they return from the Abyss." So, the monster, at least, expects the Company will return to the surface one day. And the Abyss? That could be a metaphor for the Underdark, or an indication that the party is destined to wind up in the actual Abyss somehow. Dranko is terrified by the thought of meeting Tapheon again, even though it carries the implication of escape from beneath Yulan's Barrier. "I don't want to die by being turned into an inside-out fish!" he wails.

They march on in the direction of the next Leaping Circle, but the caves and tunnels don't cooperate, and eventually Kibi can find no passage that's heading the way they need to go. "Time to make a shortcut," says Aravis. He casts *shapechange*, turns into a void-mouthed Digger, and starts eating a tunnel in the direction Kibi indicates. (There's a bit of worry beforehand; where does the stone go when a Digger eats it? If it gets teleported away somewhere, and that teleportation is prevented by the nature of the Underdark...? He takes a bite, and the rock goes... somewhere, at least. Maybe it's simply annihilated, a possibility Kibi finds quite disturbing. In the future, when they have some time, they should have Aravis eat some specific piece of rock and then cast *discern location* to see where it went.)

Aravis can only move at a slow walking speed while he digs, but the distance is not great, perhaps two miles in a straight line, albeit at an upward angle. For a time the party are quiet, listening to the sound of Aravis tearing a path for them. Sometime after an hour has passed, Aravis realizes he had tuned out of the party's *telepathic bond* for a good thirty seconds, and only regained his focus because Pewter has been batting the side of his head and thinking, *Boss, come on, snap out of it!*

Kibi corrects their course; Aravis is coming in low. After twenty more minutes he breaks into a huge cave, and it's clear right away they've come to the right place. The cave is filled with long-abandoned ruins, old crumbled facades built right into the walls, and in its center is an enormous circle of adamant set into the floor. The Leaping Circle!

Aravis stops, then starts to dig another tunnel through the floor for no apparent reason. *Aravis, stop!* Kibi shouts mentally at him. It takes all of the others shouting into his mind to bring Aravis back. This time he had zoned out for over five minutes, thinking of nothing but the satisfaction of eating the stone and clearing a path. He changes back to human form. "Perhaps that's not something I should do for long periods of time."

The gentle sound of running water sounds from all around, dripping down the walls and into small pools. Most of the natural stone is blooming with brightly-colored fungus, and the place has a rich, damp, earthy smell. Unfortunately, that smell is mingled with the rank odor of corpses. Staked to the walls in twenty different places are dead lizardman bodies. From the state of their decay, the party estimate they've been there at least a month or two. Each one has a huge incinerated hole where their heart once was.

"I hate them so much!" Ernie shrieks. "Now they're just doing this for fun."

It gets worse. On the ground at the feet of one of them, scrawled in the creatures' own blood, are the words: **MORNINGSTAR. THINK HERE.**

"Soooo much!" says Ernie, in case anyone missed the sentiment the first time. As a final kick in the teeth, a stone tablet at the north-facing point of the Leaping Circle, a tablet that once held the instructions for activating it, has mostly been pulverized. Little piles of dust lay around it.

Dranko walks to one of the creatures pinned to the wall. "You probably don't have souls anymore, but if you do, I commend them to whatever Gods you worship. And, uh, sorry about all this."

Morningstar casts multiple *thought captures*, but none in the place indicated by the blood. Many come up blank, but she does

get three distinct thoughts. The first is: *I hope Yavin is wrong.*

The second is: *Stop! What are you... augh!* It's the thought of someone being killed, and not understanding why.

The third is: *Don't bother with that; you know they'll figure out something.* She guesses that's Meledien, referring to the destruction of the tablet.

So... should Morningstar take the bait, and cast *thought capture* where the Evil Trio wants? It's certainly a trap. There's a faint aura of magic around the bloody words. Aravis looks at the area with *greater arcane sight*. There's a spell effect there, but something is masking exactly what it is. He believes it to be a combination of transmutation and necromancy, but not evil *per se*. Morningstar remembers the null shadow trap that was triggered by her casting *thought capture*, and remains highly skeptical.

Ernie is dead-set against it. "What could they possibly have to tell us? This is either a neener-neener, or a trap, or both. They think our curiosity is so great, we can't resist, but what could we possibly gain?"

Aravis disagrees. "I can't deny, I'm keen to find out. Maybe they'll be giving something away without realizing or intending it."

Ernie shakes his head, but offers up an idea. Morningstar could use *miracle* to spoof a *thought capture* cast at range, so she could hear the thoughts there without standing on top of the magical trap. She's not sure this would work, but decides it's worth a try. They buff Morningstar with protective spells first: *fortune's fate* in case she takes physical damage, and *protection from evil* in case something assaults her mind. Dranko holds on to *Ell's Will* for her while she casts her spell from thirty feet away.

The thought is from Meledien: *You're so predictable, you pathetic Ellish witch.* Aravis watches the spot intently with his *greater arcane sight*. The strengths of the necromancy and transmutation magics grow a hundredfold, filling the area, and then dissipate. "Can we take a moment to think about what we just learned?" says Ernie, voice a-drip with "I told you so."

"Sure," says Aravis. "We learned they can leave *thought capture* traps." He's staring intently at where the trap went off, mentally sifting through the dispersing magical energies. "I think I know what it would have done," he says. "If Morningstar had been standing there, she'd have been permanently afflicted with a condition that would have caused damaging backlash to her whenever she healed someone. I've never seen anything like it before. Probably something Seven Dark Words cooked up."

Dranko takes out a cigar and lights it on Ernie's armor. He blows out a stream of smoke that forms into the words **KIBI REIGNS SUPREME**. The dwarf grins. "Ooh, do it again!"

Dranko obliges, but this time the prophetic smoke spells out **HE WILL SEND YOU BACK**. Hmm. That's mysterious. He tries one more time, and gets **KIBI IS A GENIUS**.

Dranko looks thoughtful. "Maybe someone will send us back to the surface! I hope it's after we finish our quest. That means we have hope!"

"I've always had hope," says Aravis.

"We *have* to get back," says Morningstar. "Yoba and Ernie have to get married, and she'll never forgive him if he doesn't show up. She'll smite us all."

"And you don't want to miss a halfling wedding!" says Ernie.

Dranko gives a lascivious grin and adds, "And you haven't been to a bachelor party until you've..."

Flicker interrupts, uncharacteristically surly. "Can we talk about something else, please?"

Dranko gives Flicker a look of mock pity. "I'm sorry, are you lonely?"

Flicker's not laughing. "I'm sorry, did you misunderstand what I asked?" He looks pointedly at the Leaping Circle. "How about the tablet? Why don't we get to work on that?"

"You okay, Flick?" asks Ernie.

"Yes, I'm fine!"

"You don't sound fine," says Dranko.

"I'm fine!" Flicker is practically shouting. "Stop it! Argh!"

The others drop it for the time being, and talk does in fact turn to how they're going to learn the activation ritual now that the Evil Trio have destroyed the instructions. They decide that some of the deceased lizardfolk may know, and by their robes

identify the two who seemed most senior. Ernie starts with one of these. The lizardman priest, despite having had his soul burned out, can still answer the call of *Speak with Dead*, which uses an imprint left on the body when it was last alive.

“How do you operate the Leaping Circle?” Ernie asks the corpse.

“*Cast the ritual on the tablet.*” The dead lizardman sucks in a raspy mockery of breath.

“Given the tablet is broken,” says Ernie, “what would you do to activate the Leaping Circle?”

“*Find someone who had memorized it.*”

“Have you memorized it?”

“*I could recite some of it.*”

“What is the part of the ritual that you know?”

“*Stand... equilateral... facing north point...*” The lizardman starts to recite all the details he can remember, and it’s quite a bit, but not everything. “*That’s all I know,*” it finishes.

“What portion of the ritual was that, and where did it fall chronologically?” asks Ernie.

“*First part. More than half, less than three-quarters.*”

“Who among you might have known the rest?”

“*Gemigiss. Tall, with prominent eye ridges. The other shaman.*”

At Dranko’s urging, Ernie asks a few more questions. “What would you like done with your remains?”

“*Fertilizer. For the fungus gardens.*”

“What’s the funniest joke you know?”

“*What’s the difference between gray fungus and riven fungus? Riven fungus hangs upside down all day long!*” The lizardman wheezes out something like a laugh.

They locate the second shaman and ask the same questions about the ritual. **Gemigiss** knows the back half, and explains it in detail, but they’re still missing about a tenth of the ritual, the part right after an eight-hour pause in the middle. Aravis and Kibi think they could figure out the missing bit themselves, given what they’ve witnessed in the preceding two rituals, and what they now know of this one.

Morningstar casts a *Speak with Dead* on a third lizardman. “One of your number hoped that Yavin wasn’t right about something,” she tells it. “Do you know what that was?”

“Yes,” groans the corpse. “*Yavin prophesied our deaths. We would die by the sharp fire, to our enemies’ gain, but we should have faith in the greater arc of time. She told us our souls would also die.*”

“Is there anything that can be done for your souls?”

“*I don’t know.*”

“The woman who wielded the spear that burned out your hearts. Did she have one arm or two?”

“*Two. One of flesh, one of silver.*”

So, Meledien has acquired a prosthesis. “Thank you,” bows Morningstar.

Dranko gets Flicker roaring drunk and tries to draw the little halfling out, but Flicker refuses to talk about what’s bothering him. He has unusually solid defenses on the subject of Ernie’s wedding. Dranko assures him that if they get back to the surface, he’ll be so famous, he’ll be fighting off halfling women with a stick. And if they’re stuck down here, he’s bound to find some cute lizardfolk woman or something.

“Dranko,” slurs Flicker. “You know I love you like a brother, but shut up before I stab you to death.”

“You couldn’t hit me right now. You’re drunk.”

“I’ll wait ’til I’m sober, and kill you then.”



The ritual is fairly simple, but long. It will last for almost three full days – 25 continuous hours casting by three ritualists, then an eight-hour pause, then 25 more hours. Kibi, Grey Wolf and Aravis first have a heated discussion about the details of the missing section. They agree on almost all of it, but there is some dissent about the somatic component for a particular twenty-second stretch. Aravis is certain that component needs two hands; one hand alone would not be capable of the complex gestures necessary. Kibi, on the other hand, is certain that a second hand would disturb the built-up aetheric substance, and that there must be a one-handed solution. It's Grey Wolf who realizes that they are both right in a sense; two of them have to perform that section in perfect mirrored synchronicity, each with one hand only, and standing at least ten feet apart.

Morningstar asks the wizards about failure cases; what if they're wrong? There isn't one answer to that; all sorts of different things could happen, depending on the precise nature of the failure. Most likely the whole thing would fizzle harmlessly (save for the time lost), but there are worse possibilities. They could be sent somewhere else entirely from their intended destination. Or they could all be sent to different places. Even worse, they could be sent to someplace occupied by solid rock and killed instantly. Similarly, their bodies could be broken apart and the pieces teleported severally to any number of locations.

"I'm sure we'll be fine," says Kibi, right before donning his *helm of water breathing*.

The first half of the ritual goes off without a hitch. The three wizards then go immediately to sleep, having exactly eight hours before the next stage of the procedure must be performed. They sleep for seven, and Aravis reports he had another dream of the surface from the Crosser's Maze.

Upon the vast fields outside the city of Djaw, armies are massing. Formations of armored soldiers march in crisp rows, reacting to the barked orders of their commanders. Almost a third of them are mounted cavalry. The soldiers' insignia are varied, as is their armament, but they all move with well-ordered purpose into an enormous square, five hundred feet on a side, marked upon the grass with stone pylons at the corners and ropes upon the ground. Over the course of an hour these regiments shift into place, until almost the entire square is full. Mingled with the warriors are dozens of supply wagons, and here and there are clerics of Kemma, Goddess of the Sun.

Standing at each corner of the square, and at the center of each edge, are eight figures in wizard garb. One of these is Five Silent Crow, his golden head in perfect synchronicity with his illusionary body. At some pre-arranged signal, the eight wizards begin to cast a complex spell; their chanting goes on for almost half an hour, while the several thousand soldiers stand silent. Only the occasional whicker from a warhorse intrudes upon the rhythmic intonations of the casters.

Then, with a whoosh and a pop, every animal and object within the square vanishes at once, as do the wizards themselves.

They are glad of the good news; it seems help is being sent to Charagan from allies in Kivia, to combat the Emperor and his forces. But will it be enough?

Ernie spends an hour mixing various herbal brews meant to keep the wizards awake and alert by their scents. During the next phase of the ritual he keeps a close eye on Kibi, Aravis and Grey Wolf, looking for signs of fatigue. Sure enough, with about an hour remaining, he notices that Aravis's left arm isn't going up as high as it had been on some oft-repeated gestures. He doesn't want to interrupt, but he slides a jar of an invigorating concoction close to the edge of the circle, and the vapors cause Aravis to perk up.

At the conclusion of the ritual, they have two minutes before it powers down. The Company crowd into the center of the Leaping Circle. Kibi, ever cautious, casts *mass xorn movement* on the party, and then speaks the final word of the ritual.

They Leap.

Everett: You know, the Evil Trio probably had a trigger on their *thought capture* trap that let them know when it was sprung. So, they'll now think that Morningstar has been booby-trapped as a healer. Which the party could use to their advantage.



"What Happens If You Cast *Knock* on a Sphincter?"

Dranko's detour into the Far Realms is shorter this time, and his memory of it is sparse – lurking madness, shimmering stars, *things*. Then that is replaced by a nostril-puckering fume of acid and a stinging prickle on his skin. He and the others are standing knee-deep in some kind of cloudy liquid, in a dark, damp space surrounded by organic-looking walls. There are no light motes; the Company can only see because Aravis has been diligently casting *mass darkvision* every morning.

The water-walking function of Dranko's *ring of elemental command* kicks in; he rises to the surface. Everyone else is starting,

slowly, to dissolve. The acrid odor is strong enough to bring tears to their eyes. Floating in the water with them are hundreds of fish bones, the flesh dissolved from them. The “roof” above them is glistening, a thick liquid dripping from it. Some forty feet away, in that ceiling, a tunnel leads up and out. Another tunnel, off in the other direction, snakes away and downward.

“We’re in something’s stomach,” Ernie observes.

Flicker’s eyes grow wide. “Even a Ventifact Colossus wouldn’t have a stomach this big... uh, would it?”

He’s right; a creature with a stomach this size would dwarf one of the Great Sand Turtles from the Mouth of Nahalm. Dranko shakes his head in disbelief, then uses his ring to cast *control water*, lowering the level of the acid so that his friends are no longer melting.

The room shakes, and there’s a sudden sound like thunder. A huge slurry-fall comes gushing out of the tunnel above, disgorging a pungent effluvia mixed with rocks, fishbones, clumps of something organic but unidentifiable, and half an old rowboat. “Yup,” says Dranko. “We’re in a giant monster.”

On their clothes and skin, a film of something like dust is accreting. Whorls of it are drifting around them, settling on them, pulled in as though each member of the Company is exerting a local gravity. “We should get out of here,” says Aravis. Ernie casts *wind walk* on them, and they float up toward the ceiling tunnel, figuring it’s better to try exiting the monster’s mouth than its nether regions. As they float, the dust tries to mix in with their airy forms. It stings.

The tube – which they assume is the esophagus – bends this way and that but goes more or less straight upward, its walls covered with undulating cilia the size of human forearms. Dranko takes the time to resolidify, since he can climb as fast as the others can waft, and now he can spray away the stinging dust with his *decanter of endless water*. The only trouble comes when something plummets down the shaft toward him – it’s the half-digested body of a huge shark. He squeezes himself into the repulsively slimy wall of the tube as it falls past him.

Wait... it was already half-digested? “We arrived in its *second* stomach,” he says. “There must be another one up there.”

Sure enough, they emerge into a second stomach-like chamber, larger than the first, filled knee-deep with sludgy acid. An extruded fleshy lip prevents the liquid from draining constantly into the lower stomach. This place is full of chum, mostly sharks and other large fish in various stages of digestion. These remains are pushed gently along by cilia poking up from the acid, and when enough stuff is ready to make the journey, the lip retracts and a gout of material gets flushed.

Then more stuff comes down from yet another tube in the ceiling. Eight or nine grayish green blobs, roughly man-sized, drop to the floor with loud plopping sounds. They rise up amorphously, and fire off blobs of goo at Dranko, who is the only physically solid member of the Company. He is entirely enveloped in a thick jelly-like substance. He feels his flesh start to dissolve, and his muscles freeze up. His *decanter* is gummed up and won’t activate. Dranko fights down a flashback to the time he was similarly paralyzed in the center of a gelatinous cube. *I can’t move, and I’m being digested*, he thinks to the others over the mind-link.

Ernie dismisses the *wind walk* so they can free Dranko. Grey Wolf Quickens a *sound lance*, firing it at Dranko’s gelatinous cocoon. It bursts in a splattery explosion, and (as a bonus) buffers Dranko from the damage. Dranko topples onto his side, but doesn’t sink into the acid because he’s still *water walking*. Grey Wolf follows up with a *chain lightning*, fired into the cluster of huge antibodies. All are damaged, but none are destroyed. Kibi follows with a Maximized *cone of cold*, but the antibodies seem immune to cold. His spell does precipitate a rumbling shake of the entire stomach. Kibi follows up with a Quickened *wall of force*, the placement of which is calculated to give them partial cover from the jelly-blasting blobs.

Dranko reminds the others over the mind-link that even paralyzed he can activate the *prismatic spray* function of his *helm of brilliance*. The only problem is, he’s lying down with his back to the enemy. Flicker runs up and flips Dranko around, the half-orc’s body rolling slickly on the surface of the acid. Dranko fires his spell. Most of the antibodies are struck with beams of either acid or fire, both of which they are immune to. They cannot be sent to another plane, nor can they be poisoned. As such, only two of the things are neutralized, one turned to stone and sinking beneath the surface, and another blasted to bits by electricity. Seven still remain.

Ernie activates the flight power of his shield, flies up and out of the acid, and casts a Quickened *mass cure moderate wounds*. Then Aravis finishes the fight with a Maximized *chain lightning* that rips through all seven remaining antibodies. The threat taken care of, Morningstar wades to Dranko, takes off one of the magic rings he wears, and replaces it with a *ring of freedom of movement*.

Ernie recasts *wind walk* on the party, though Dranko stays solid so he can continue spraying the acid-dust off the others before

it can do its damage. Morningstar casts *water breathing* on everyone, figuring that eventually, if all goes well, they'll be emerging into a body of water.

Up they waft, though yet another organic tube. The smell continues to be nearly overpowering, a potent reek of acid and rotting fish. Sixty feet up, and the tunnel narrows and ends abruptly. The Company have reached a fleshy ceiling with spiraling creases arranged in an iris. "It's a sphincter," says Dranko. He activates his *immovable rod*, perches, and examines the obstruction, prodding and poking it to see if it will open. It does not. "On the other side of the sphincter is a magical land of sunshine and honey," he says. "No, just kidding, it's probably seawater."

"Should we be worried about getting chewed up once we reach its mouth?" asks Flicker, worried.

"I doubt it," says Ernie. "All the sharks here are whole, just dissolving. This creature probably just swallows its food whole."

Without warning the sphincter irises open and a powerful gush of liquid, fish and detritus comes blasting downward like a water-cannon. Dranko just barely manages to hold on to the *immovable rod*, which prevents him from getting knocked back down to the upper stomach, though some large chunk of soggy fungus-wood bruises his shoulder. The others, in gaseous form, are buffeted downward somewhat but manage to stay in the general vicinity. After ten seconds of this, the sphincter slams shut, leaving only a gurgling sound beneath them.

"Hmm," muses Aravis. "What happens if you cast *knock* on a sphincter?" He solidifies long enough to try it, but it doesn't work. In fact, this proves to be an extremely difficult puzzle to solve. The nature of the Underdark precludes casting *dimension door* or *teleport* to any location you cannot currently see. But while the sphincter is open, the tunnel is filled entirely with liquid, and there's no line of effect to the far side of it. And the sheer power of the water blasting downward prevents them from swimming upward during the ten-second windows while the sphincter is open.

Dranko tries casting a *wall of ice* in the opening, and manages the split-second timing to get it set, but the sphincter merely seals around it, eventually crushing and dissolving it. During the next flushing of stuff Dranko is nearly knocked away from the *immovable rod* by, of all things, a large fungus-wood door that accompanies the fish and seawater. "I officially hate this place more than the Mouth of Nahalm," he says.

"We're expected to fight a God," says Morningstar. "And yet we can't get out of the stomach of a giant monster."

The sphincter is opening like clockwork, spiraling open every seventy-one seconds, and staying open for nine. Dranko is protected from acid, but soon grows weary of being sprayed with a sludge of dead fish and sundry debris. The Company wrack their collective brains, wondering how they'll get past this obstruction. (They have considered simply hacking their way out, but there is some worry about drawing more of the creature's natural defenses toward them.)

When the lightbulb goes off, it's over Aravis's head. He explains his plan, and the others agree to try it. Kibi comes out of gaseous form and clings to the *immovable rod*. Dranko helps to brace him. With timing that only someone with a superhuman intelligence could muster, Kibi casts a solid-walled *forcecage* as the sphincter opens, such that half of its interior is below the sphincter and half above. He gets his spell off just as the blasting inverted geyser smashes him downward. He tumbles, but like Dranko he is saved from a plunge to the stomach by the bottom of the *forcecage*. One small difficulty: when the spell went off, almost all of its area was filled with liquid. As such, the entire Company is now encased in a *forcecage* filled almost completely with acid. Breaths are held.

The good news is, the sphincter cannot close around the middle of the box of force, and they can swim to the top of the enclosure, which is on the far side of the sphincter. Partial success! Aravis enacts stage two, casting *rope trick* in the six-inch sliver of air at the top of the *forcecage*. One by one they rise up into it, until everyone is safe in the extradimensional pocket space. Finally, Kibi sticks his head back out into the box of acid, long enough to dismiss the *forcecage*. Now, when they depart the *rope trick*, they'll be in the space above the sphincter. Kibi reports that wherever they are now, it's (unsurprisingly) underwater.

Dranko wants to scout, but needs to time things so he doesn't end up getting sucked back down through the sphincter. He ties a long length of thick rope around his waist and dives out. The liquid is still acidic enough to prevent water-breathing, so he holds his breath. He goes shooting upward through opaque liquid and pops out on its surface some forty feet higher. He's in a cavernous space, so wide he cannot see any walls, but above him, near the outer range of his darkvision, is the ceiling of yet *another* stomach, with a wide tube snaking away upward. *How many stomachs does this thing have?*

Around him, the surface of the "water" is clogged with remains. Dozens of shark carcasses float with him, bobbing in a surface layer of dead fish, wads of fungus, and shells of giant tortoises. Dranko thinks he sees a skeletal humanoid leg poking up fifteen feet to his left. The place stinks like a devil's bait-house.

The water level drops a bit as far below him the sphincter opens and sucks down a few thousand gallons of flotsam. Concurrently, a hail of objects comes from above – it’s a hail of sharks, many of which are thrashing in the air. Surprisingly little water comes with them. The sharks are alive! (At least, before the acid kills them.) The Company must be close to escaping.

Dranko dives and swims back down, returning to the *rope trick*. “This is the best dungeon ever! How many places have we ever been where sharks rain from the sky?”

Everyone returns to mist-form, leaves the pocket dimension, and bubbles up to the latest “surface.” In the first ten seconds after they emerge, three discrete loads of stuff get dumped in with them. One consists only of small grey fish, over a thousand of them. Another is tons of crumbly fungus. The final load looks like a combination of green moss and pebbly rocks.

“It has three mouths?” guesses Morningstar. “Two land mouths and a sea mouth?”

“Maybe it’s an extradimensional monster?” adds Dranko.

Onward and upward! They race through one last esophageal tube, and finally, high above them, they can see light motes. All at once they emerge into the bowl of a two-hundred-yard-wide mouth. Something like a fine-meshed fishing net, thirty yards across, looms over them. Is it trying to catch them? No, they can see the net is full of fish of varying sizes. A fleshy tentacle serves as the handle of the net, a tentacle that snakes off into the darkness where, one presumes, it’s connected to the body somewhere. The net flips over and dumps tons of fish into the impossibly wide mouth. Thirty long tongues slither through the bottom of the mouth, shoveling the masses of fish, fungus, and everything else the nets have scooped, toward dozens of gaping esophagi. More of the organic nets are coming in from every direction, each unloading its cargo of foodstuffs into the world’s largest mouth.

The Company rise high above the Underdark Leviathan, the single largest creature on Abernia, the scourge of the Hidden Sea and all the surrounding regions. Its head rises from the sea, but its enormous body, which must stretch for miles, is hidden beneath the dark waters.

Dranko can’t help himself. He comes out of wind form and activates the *immovable rod*. Perched there near the ceiling above the Hidden Sea, he calls pen and parchment from his haversack and scribbles out a note: **Dranko was here**. He pops the note into a vial and lets it fall into the Leviathan’s mouth.

Now that Kibi is near to the solid stone of the Underdark, he regains his perfect sense of where they are. They are almost four miles deeper than Leaping Circle Five, but to reach the location of Leaping Circle Nine, they’ll need to go down even further, another four miles, and sixteen miles generally southwest.

Dranko frowns. “We should have gone out its butt.”

carborundum: Yuck-o! That sounded like fun.

Piratecat: It was horrifyingly epic. I can’t believe we were nearly defeated by a sphincter. SO EMBARRASSING.

Solarious: Hey, don’t knock yourselves. You were nearly defeated by the sphincter of an unguessable and spatially indeterminate tentacle monster that is at least large enough to be its own geographical feature. It counts for something.

I would only shame you if the Underdark Leviathan came after the Company looking for Dranko lined in aquamarine light.

carborundum: Sounds like one of Sagi’s situations where he had NO IDEA how to get out and left it up to you guys. *Forcecage* and *rope trick* in the sphincter – genius!

Neurotic: [“We should have gone out its butt.”] This way, there wouldn’t be any problem with stuff coming in preventing them from going out...

Everett: Sagi, how many more posts from here till the finale? Around a dozen, perhaps?

Sagi: Something in that range, yes. The run where the Company teleported into the Leviathan was #257, and there were 266 runs altogether. On average, my posts cover a bit less than one full run, but it varies significantly depending on the length and content of that run, so with nine runs left to write up, a dozen posts is a pretty good guess.

Piratecat: Oh, great. I’m mourning the impending end of the campaign again!



*Dreams, Visions... and Nightmares***He Will Send You Back**

They fly south-southwest, and it feels like it could be outdoors. The ceiling rises up and out of sight, no walls are visible, and beneath them stretches the calm waters of a vast underground ocean. The motes begin to dim soon after they head away from the Leviathan's mouth, and as they're moving at the fast *wind walk* speed of a mile per minute, it takes less than five minutes before Kibi thinks they're directly above Leaping Circle Nine. The trouble, of course, is that directly beneath them is water, and the Leaping Circle is miles beneath the surface. (And almost certainly below the ocean floor.)

They're fairly well exhausted after completing the Leaping Ritual and then escaping the innards of the Leviathan, and as the motes are fading anyway, they decide to rest for the night. Aravis creates the door to a *magnificent mansion* high above the water. They stink like fish and acid, so everyone has a bath. They dine on most of the mansion's conjured delicacies but leave the fish untouched. When everyone is full and clean and contented, they go to sleep, intending to solve their navigational problems the next day.



Even in the depths of slumber, Dranko's senses are keen. He senses a tiny whisper out of place, a stirring of the air, a presence nearby that is not Morningstar. Part of his brain, the sleepy part, tells him he's just on edge, that the *magnificent mansion* cannot be breached. But the paranoid part takes control; Dranko rolls off the bed in a smooth motion and he grabs his whip even as he surges to his feet.

There is a woman standing in the room, who is not Morningstar. She is short, just above five feet tall, wearing scarlet robes and clutching a tall wooden staff. Small curving horns peek out from her short red hair, and a strange brand or tattoo covers her left cheek. She is staring at Dranko, tears rolling down her face.

"Uh... hi," says Dranko.

The woman rushes him, clumsily raising her staff. "Just die!" she wails. "Dranko, please, why won't you die?" She tries to strike him, but he easily sidesteps her inept attacks.

"Who are you, exactly?" he asks, as the woman flails around. Morningstar's eyes are fluttering open.

The woman swings again, missing badly. "I beg you, please, just die!"

"Look," says Dranko, still a bit confused. "I don't know who you are, but I'm really good at not dying. Should I know who you are?"

Morningstar comes fully awake, senses that Dranko is no immediate danger, and casts *mind read* on the woman. It fails.

"I'm not entirely sure you're real," Dranko says to the horned woman. "But if you *are* real, you're being really stupid about this. I've been hit with a lot worse things than the end of a stick. Who are you, and why do you want me to die?"

The woman is hysterical, and her tears continue to flow. "Want a hankie?" Dranko offers.

This only renews her fury. She swings wildly again, several times, but Dranko ducks or dodges each one. Her spirit breaks and she slumps to the ground, weeping. Her staff clatters beside her.

Morningstar frowns. "Do you need anyone else to die, or just Dranko?"

The woman answers between sobs. "Just... Dranko... Please, I need him to die..."

Morningstar tries to pry out some context. "Are your people in danger?"

"Is the world in danger?" adds Dranko.

"N... no. It's nothing like that."

"Are *you* in danger?" asks Dranko. The woman nods. "From what?"

"You can't imagine..." she says, then pauses before continuing in a hoarse whisper. "He said it would be worse. Worse than thirteen hundred years impaled on a stake."

"Did you spend thirteen hundred years impaled on a stake?" asks Dranko.

The woman shudders and nods again. Truth dawns. “You’re from Lord Tapheon!” he exclaims. “Gods, I hate that bastard. He’s such a dink!”

“He let me go,” says the woman. “He sent me to kill you. He said I *had* to kill you, even though I atoned. I atoned! Centuries ago!” She looks at Dranko accusingly. “And yet you are not dead. He said if I did not kill you, I would return to him and soon I would be begging for my stake.” She is panting now, her tenuous sanity slipping. “I can’t go back there! I can’t go back, Dranko, I can’t! So you... have... to die!”

“There’s another option,” says Dranko. “Morningstar, can you hit her with a *dimensional anchor*?” His wife obliges.

“That’s not going to work,” says the woman. “It’s my soul that will return.”

Dranko considers, then decides he’s going to need more input on this one. At his behest, Morningstar wakes the others. When everyone is gathered around, staring at the woman like an unusual specimen at a zoo, Dranko speaks again. “You are woefully incapable of killing me, and Tapheon must have known that. I think sending you was just another part of your punishment. What’s your name?”

“I am **Galdifain**,” she says. “And you do not understand! I... was... an assassin.”

Dranko finds this hard to believe. “Really?”

“I was the greatest assassin of my age. That’s why I ended up where I did. My crimes were countless.”

Dranko guffaws. “With respect, Galdifain, if you’re a really good assassin, what happened? ‘Cause I’m still here.”

“I was a summoner. When Tapheon brought me back, there were... conditions. I could only take with me what I had when I was dead. I only had three scrolls, but any one of them should have been able to kill anyone, easily. A chichimec! An anaxim! I, Galdifain, tracked and found and bound the Thousandfold, *and you’re not dead!*”

That draws a collective “*Ooooooooooh*” from the Company. “Ah,” says Dranko. “Well, that explains it.”

“Tapheon said your name was a changing thing. You’ve been Mellendiel, you’ve been Brightmirror, you’ve been the Oracle, but now you are Dranko Brightshield. Dranko Brightshield. I could not go back and suffer another eternity of that!”

Aravis asks the next obvious question. “How did Tapheon get you down here?”

Galdifain brings her fingers to the tattoo on her cheek. “Tapheon granted me the *Mark of Pursuit*. I can find you anywhere, Dranko. I always know where you are, and I can appear as close or far from you as I wish.”

“And how is Tapheon going to get you back?” asks Dranko.

“If I die here, or if he senses I have not succeeded, or have given up, my soul will return to his domain, there to suffer endless torments.”

Dranko feels little pity for the assassin. “You know that anaxim you sent? I pretty much defeated that thing with a magic item I found in my first month of adventuring.”

Ernie is appalled. “Dranko! The poor woman is suffering.”

“I’m aware of that,” says Dranko dryly. “But she did try to kill us horribly, several times.”

Galdifain regards him with a hungry, haunted look. “And if I succeed, if I kill you, I won’t go back. He’ll keep your soul instead of mine. He said you were one fish he would never throw back.”

“Yeah, well, he’s a big dork. We got him out of prison, and this is the thanks we get.”

“What choice did I have?”

Dranko turns to Morningstar, whose eyes have gone wide. “The smoke,” she whispers. “The smoke from your cigar. It said, ‘He will send you back.’”

Dranko opens his mouth to speak, says nothing, considers. “Huh,” he says at last. “Well. Okay.”

“I don’t have very long,” Galdifain presses. “When Tapheon senses I have failed, he will reclaim my soul. It could happen at any moment.”

“They were good monsters,” says Dranko, trying to sound appreciative.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m going to suffer forever. I have been impaled on a stake for 800 years, but he has promised me worse. I have atoned! I know in my heart I have done wrong. I feel guilt and regret in such measures I wonder my soul has not burst. I know I deserve my punishment. I have apologized to everyone I have ever killed, every child, every man and woman. A thousand times I have begged their forgiveness. And yet, when Tapheon brought me before him, and I told him I could not kill again, that I would not, that I had atoned... he just laughed at me. He didn’t care for my atonement. He didn’t care.”

I could shift reality for her, thinks Kibi over the mind-link. I could make it so that her soul was protected.

Dranko looks at Morningstar. “We have another choice. I could return to Tapheon.” He takes out a cigar and waves it through the air. “He’s going to send me back.”

“That’s a lot to risk on cigar smoke,” says Ernie.

“I have faith in Delioch, and in Cranchus. Also, I’m worried that if I don’t go, he’ll just send someone else after me. And, I would really like to flip off Tapheon.”

He’s becoming more and more certain of this decision by the second. He lights the cigar on Ernie’s armor and blows out puffs of smoke. The first three show nothing, but the fourth spells out, once again, **HE WILL SEND YOU BACK**. “See?”

“We don’t know who ‘he’ is,” says Aravis. “It could be anyone. And if Tapheon wants you so badly, *why* would he send you back?”

Dranko knows at once. “The thing in my head! I have a sneaking suspicion that Tapheon is going to peel me from the inside out...”

“And he’s going to get halfway down, and decide he doesn’t want it?” Ernie sounds supremely skeptical.

“Exactly,” says Dranko. “He won’t want anything to do with me.”

The others just stare at him, mostly in disbelief that he’s contemplating this at all.

“Look,” he says. “Here are our options. Option one: we do nothing, Galdifain gets sucked back to Hell, suffers forever, and Tapheon sends another assassin after me. Option two: I let her kill me, Tapheon takes me, I’m wrong about all of this, and Kibi alters reality to get me back. Option three: like option two, but when I go to Tapheon and he does his song and dance, then glorious things happen, and I get sent back.”

Ernie’s eyebrow practically rises off his face. “Glorious things?”

“Involving the thing in my head,” says Dranko.

“I have a better idea,” says Ernie, his voice rising. “What about, we hide Galdifain from Tapheon long enough for us to finish our quest, and *then* you take this kind of stupid risk.”

But Dranko will not be swayed. “Did you ever feel like something was just absolutely the right thing to do?”

“Yeeeeeah?” answers Ernie, slowly.

“I kind of have that feeling right now.”

“I think it’s a great idea!” says Flicker. “You get to flip Tapheon off!”

Kibi also sides with Dranko. “I have faith in Cranchus, too.”

“We’re betting Dranko’s life on a smoky pronoun!” Ernie shrieks.

“But if it goes wrong, I can change reality to get him back again,” says Kibi.

Dranko smiles and turns to Morningstar. “I may not be the best cleric in the world, but I have been true to my God all of these years, and I love Him more than anything... except you. There’s no power that will be able to keep me there, away from you.”

“No!” Ernie stamps his foot. “Dranko, you’re being selfish! You want to mock Tapheon to his face, so you’re willing to take a stupid risk! Just... stop it! Think about the rest of us here, trying to save the world. This is not the time for your personal ‘I really want to give Taphon the finger one more time’ quest.”

“Ernie, I wouldn’t be considering this if I didn’t know I’d be sent back.”

“You don’t *know*,” says Grey Wolf. “You don’t know *who* is going you send you back, or from *where*.”

Dranko turns to Galdifain. “What happens to you if you kill me, and my soul goes to Tapheon?”

“He forgets about me. My soul stays with me, and I live out my life here.”

“OK. If I let you kill me, are you willing to help us afterward?”

Galdifain raises her hands. “I am useless. I have no more scrolls. I don’t have my equipment or my laboratory, and I don’t have time.”

“We can fix a lot of those things,” says Dranko. “If she’s willing to help against Meledien and Tarsos and Seven Dark Words, that could be quite valuable. Galdifain, this is a raw deal for you. We’re on a quest to stop an evil God from coming, and he’ll destroy the world if we fail. That’s why you’re inconvenient right now.”

Galdifain looks back at him. “Sorry I didn’t time this better for you. But… I might be able to do something, if I had the time and resources, and knowledge of the creatures who live in this place.”

“How much time would you need?”

“Depends on the circumstances. I need time. Time to feel the ambient space, for miles around me. I need to be taken to where my subject is, so I can perform the rituals that bind the creature into a scroll. When all of that is done, it is mine, and when I release it, it will kill whomever I name. Or try to.”

“And we can name Seven Dark Words,” says Aravis. “I doubt they can succeed without him.”

In the end, it’s Kibi’s reality-altering failsafe that sways Aravis and Morningstar. Ernie and Grey Wolf think it’s utter madness, but they leave it up to Dranko, and the half-orc’s mind is made up. “I’m sorry, Ernie,” says Dranko. “I always value your advice. It matters. It has always mattered.”

Ernie glowers. “I’m not resurrecting you.”

Morningstar gives her husband a long kiss. “Whatever happens, I have faith that you are following your path.”

Dranko smiles at her. “I’ll see you soon.” He hands Galdifain his knife, and lifts his chin. “It’s your lucky day.”

Eagerly, she slits Dranko’s throat.



The pain is terrible, and afflicts every nerve. Dranko is standing on the serrated metal grating that serves as the floor to Lord Tapheon’s throne room. The evil reek of the Abyss settles on Dranko like an iron cloak. Memories, terrible ones, come flooding back. He cannot move. He is aware of his own body, but isn’t sure if he has been transported corporeally to the Abyss, or if only his soul has traveled. He’s not entirely sure how this works.

Lord Tapheon is there, on his metal throne, talking quietly to a cadre of demons. He notices Dranko’s arrival and quickly shoos his servants away. The demon lord is just as Dranko remembers: bronze skin; a smooth face with four symmetrically-placed eyes and no other features; four curved horns rising from his head.

The demon’s voice sounds in his mind. **Ah. So she finally did the job. Well done, assassin.** The voice is deep and commanding, rich with wisdom and malice. **Galdifain, wherever you are, you can stay there as long as you wish. You are no longer relevant.** He locks all four eyes on Dranko, and the fiery pain increases. **Now, I have what I want. My little fish.**

Dranko cannot move his lips to speak, but he can speak telepathically to this creature. *That’s what you want?* he says, keeping his own voice level despite his agony. *I thought for sure it would be some medicine for your hemorrhoids.*

At their last meeting, Tapheon would have been enraged at the insult, but now he only laughs. **Go ahead, Dranko. Make all the jokes at my expense that you want. Because after a few centuries of torment, you will have forgotten that you ever had a sense of humor.**

I know a lot of jokes, says Dranko.

You don’t know enough. Lord Tapheon rises from his throne and walks towards his catch. **I have made all the preparations,** he says. **Your stake is prepared. I hope you don’t mind that I didn’t bother sharpening it.**

As he walks, the human tongues on his rod *Despoiler of Flesh* start to flap and wiggle obscenely. Beneath the fiery pain, Dranko feels a worse sensation, as though his body is starting to pull itself apart.

Tapheon stops a few feet short of Dranko. **Your mind will invent new ways of measuring pain,** he says, glee seeping into his voice. **I will enjoy every...**

He stops, and tilts his head. Dranko can feel a wave of sudden discomfiture from Tapheon. **What...?**

I've brought you a little present, says Dranko.

Tapheon takes a step back. **No...** Dranko could swear all four of the demon's eyes grow wide.

Get out! Tapheon's voice is suddenly not so measured.

Are you sure? I thought you said you have a stake ready for me.

Tapheon takes another step back. **Dranko Brightshield, I make you the following offer. Promise that you will never come back here, or attempt to meddle in my affairs in any way, and I will return you to where you were. Promise me!**

Dranko cannot help himself. *I'm not quite sure I want to,* he says. *I think I'd like an apology first. An apology for turning me inside-out would be good. That's all I want. Or, I can stay.*

Dranko can feel Tapheon's rage like the heat from an open furnace. **Maybe,** says Tapheon. **Tell me what it is, specifically, and perhaps I will apologize.**

Can't you see for yourself what it is?

Tapheon takes a tentative step forward, and Dranko feels him prodding at his mind, poking, searching. Dranko is still paralyzed, which only bothers him because it prevents him from presenting Tapheon with a *digitus impudicus*, but then he realizes he has a solution. He wills his mind to embrace the madness, and a tentacle pops from his forehead. Slowly, deliberately, he bends the tip of the tentacle upward in an unmistakable gesture of rudeness. Tapheon flinches, then peers just a bit deeper into Dranko's mind...

I apologize! Tapheon's voice is nearly frantic. **I apologize for every slight I have visited upon you. Now agree to my terms and depart!**

Dranko feels his paralysis lift, allowing him a smug smile. "Your apology is accepted, and I agree to your terms."



Dranko is dead. He has been dead for some minutes now.

His chest rises. A raspy, bubbling breath escapes his lips. Morningstar, who has not left his side, immediately heals him.

"See!" says Kibi. "My grandfather was right!"

Grey Wolf shakes his head. "Madness. I still say this is madness."

Dranko sits up and embraces his wife. Then, to Galdifain, he says, "You're free. Do whatever you want. And I got an apology out of him, which was nice. If you have someone where you want them, never take the first offer."

Galdifain collapses, sobbing, at Dranko's feet, while he tells the tale of his visit to Tapheon's throne room.

"So," says Morningstar. "He wanted so badly for what is in your head to be out of his proximity, he sent you back here after all the trouble he went through to get you."

And a thought comes to Dranko, a troubling one. If he dies before he's done his job, if he dies with his head still polluted with whatever Far Realms horror has been placed there, Heaven may not accept him either.

carborundum: Mother of pancakes, that was just the the best thing ever!

Everett: I would've sided with Ernie and Grey Wolf. I didn't understand how Dranko could know that the cigar smoke referred to Tapheon – my first thought was that "He will send you back" referred to someone sending all of them back to the surface – nor, for that matter, do I really get why Tapheon couldn't bear to have creatures from the Far Realms in his presence. It doesn't bother anyone else; why does it disturb a near-omnipotent demon?

Piratecat: That is a fabulous question. The likely answer is that what's inside Dranko isn't a Far Realms creature. It's some swollen, putrescent nugget of information too horrible to touch with his brain. Even brushing up against it erodes his sanity. The fact that it's too horrible for a demon lord is... troubling.

Everett: While that *is* fascinating, it also begs the question of how and why this infinitely horrible nugget of information never affects Dranko adversely in any way (I've never seen it erode his sanity somehow in the Story Hour). The tentacles never manifest unless he wants them to. I hope the last eleven posts will reveal more about it...

Piratecat: I think it's just the nature of serial storytelling. I can remember more than a half dozen mentions here in the Story Hour of his sanity (Wisdom) taking a hit, nearly every time he draws on the power, but there's no reason to remember it unless you were looking for it.

Mechanically, his Wisdom dropped every time he called on its power. Starting at a 13 Wisdom or so, one or two uses meant no more clerical spellcasting for a day. I was careful not to use it too often. I guarantee we learn more about it, even if I wish we didn't. But no spoilers from me!

Everett: Right – I'm aware that he took a Wisdom hit every time he drew on the power. That's clear in the Story Hour. But to have this unspeakable knowledge of... something... in his brain all the time, and for it not to affect him at intervals even if he doesn't draw on *time stop* or the other powers granted by it – I'd think it would be sort of like having some magical brain disease, unless the Far Realms creatures were extra-careful to package magical bubble-wrap around it inside Dranko's brain. That's what's bugging me. I have no idea if the Cleaners put the Horrible Nugget there for a purpose, or if it's just a totally impartial thing on their part due to the nature of the deal that was struck.

steeldragons: My understanding of the "what's in Dranko's head" *is* a Far Realms being... but isn't it what was referred to in previous adventures as a "Cleaner"?

Everett: Same thing. But what's in his head is not a Cleaner. It's some piece of knowledge or information.

steeldragons: Tapheon is near-omnipotent... on his home plane... but the "what's in Dranko's head" can erase that plane (and everything/one in it) from existence. I would have been right on Tapheon's side, namely, "Get that *thing* the FRAG OUTTA HERE! Go back to your plane – or ANY other plane, for that matter!" I think it was brilliantly done/played (by both Sagi and PC. Not surprising, in the least, for any of us loyal readers, I'm sure). But I didn't question Tapheon's reaction in the slightest. That said, my entire interpretation could be wrong...

Everett: I find it very unlikely that something like the erasure of a plane of existence would or could come into play here. This is a campaign in which the gods, their spheres and their portfolios are clearly delineated. (When the god of death was no longer taking souls, people couldn't move on; when Aravis died, cats mourned for him; if we erase a hell dimension, completely irrelevant strands of story would have to be mentioned or dealt with, i.e. Abernia becomes overcrowded with evil souls who now can't go to hell – it's nothing to do with the endgame of the campaign.) Paradoxes would quickly multiply, leaving you with only a poor storytelling device. Nor do we know that the thing in Dranko's brain could effect such a thing. We don't know *what* it does; nor did Tapheon. He was terrified of something he couldn't comprehend. That's the point.

Piratecat: And how did I know [*that the cigar smoke referred to Tapheon*]? I dunno. But I knew it with utter certainty, the same way that I once realized beyond doubt that we were stuck in a city inside a bottle, even if we had no particular proof. I'd have felt pretty stupid if I was wrong, but I was literally willing to bet my character's life on it. Sometimes you have to have faith, in the story and the DM as much as in your character's convictions.

This was, I think, my favorite session (out of so many amazing games) in the entire campaign. Incredibly satisfying, and asking as many questions as it answered. It also brought up some really emotional discussion with the group at the meta-level as to what was appropriate and what wasn't. I value that even more than the game itself.

Everett: Interesting. Perhaps we need to see, if not that OOC discussion, some facsimile of it in the Story Hour. Reading this update, I felt that I needed more context the entire time.

Also... How did this summoner, who's out of scrolls, get inside an MMM cast by Aravis, an epic-level wizard? Forced entry is outside of her forte.

Piratecat: She tells us how, although I missed it at the time: the *Mark of Pursuit* on her face.

Kaodi: I must admit I am a bit wary of where all this is going in the home stretch. Twelve sessions does not seem like a lot to cover the remaining ground unless everything sort of happens all at once or something unfortunate happens...

Sagi: This comment makes me curious. What remaining ground do you think there is still to cover? I mean, beyond the obvious "race to stop Seven Dark Words & co. from causing the Adversary to arrive/wake up/whatever it is they have planned?"

Everett: Yeah, thanks to the narrative device of Crosser's Maze visions, everything on the surface takes care of itself.

Kaodi: I am not as good at keeping track of all the details as some of the others, so maybe I am just overestimating. I might have mixed up too that catching SDW & co. was the same as stopping the Adversary. I kind of thought we still had chase + interludes + fight with SDW & co. + fight with Adversary left. And this campaign has not lacked for interludes...

Everett: I'm not at all sure that the Company can fight the Adversary, if it comes to that. They'd have to ascend to Godhood status, wouldn't they? The finale may be about stopping the Adversary from gaining freedom.

Kaodi: Well, not necessarily the whole Adversary. But the chunk of him that fell into the earth, or the power contained therein. I mean, it does not necessarily have to be a fight in the usual D&D sense of the term. Just some kind of confrontation separate from that with his servants.

Enkhidu: I think it's deeper than that – the thing in Dranko's head may very well be the key here. I think that will happen is that the Adversary will basically "win" and when it does it will tap into Dranko's noggin, whereupon the Cleaners will get the piece of the Adversary that got away in the first place. I don't expect the bulk of the party to live through it, though.

Everett: *One to take the shell and rend. / One for what is in his head. / One to channel what makes dead.* It's eluding me at the moment – the difficulty of reading a story in serial form; I do envy those who'll read Sagi's story in the future – but who is to take the shell and rend? We've learned that much; it's Kibi, right?

Having as yet no idea what the Horrible Nugget is, except that it's knowledge of *something*, I guess we could say that the Nugget will reveal something about how to destroy the piece of the Adversary that was left behind ages ago, and then the channeler of "what makes dead" will take the action of destroying it. But, you know, there's a larger issue here. Why would the Cleaners care who prevails in an epic battle between good and evil?

Sagi: I'll tell you this for free: they don't. But some of them do like making deals with mortals who contact them, and this one gave Dranko the thing-in-his-head, in exchange for Dranko's fame.

Everett: And the thing-in-his-head will prove crucial... somehow... Sagi, pondering the unrevealed twists of your story is very much like waiting for the last two *Game of Thrones* books. Though you do update more frequently than Martin does.



A timely write-up, given some of the recent discussion...

The Thing Dranko Becomes

"What sorts of food do you like?" Ernie asks the question of Galdifain, who stares at the mansion's magical banquet as though she's never seen food before.

“I haven’t eaten in over eight hundred years,” she says quietly. “It all looks delicious.”

Before bed, the Company review the prophecy of the Croaking Oracle. They think they understand quite a bit of it now.

One brings many, flame’s design seems like it could refer to Galdifain, sent from the Abyss to bring forth horrible creatures to kill Dranko. And **one hates one** certainly sounds like Galdifain’s (or perhaps Tapheon’s) hatred for Dranko.

One trip started, one trip done. They’re pretty sure about that one: they themselves have started the trip downward through the Underdark, while the Evil Trio has finished theirs.

Three are bringing, now in place. / Three have won the downward race. That would be the Evil Trio again.

Seven haste, and roll the dice, / Spun by fortune’s sacrifice. The Company numbers seven, and “fortune’s sacrifice,” while unclear, could be related to Morningstar’s magic item, *Laramon’s jade clover*. (Laramon is the Kivian God of Luck, counterpart to Corilayna, who the party have surmised fled into the Crosser’s Maze with Drosh.)

Four are needed, fore the end. / One to take the shell and rend. They’re certain it will be Kibi who will “take the shell and rend.” Years ago, Kibi had a dream in which the earth itself spoke to him. It said: **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.** They believe the splinter is the Hand of the Adversary, and so it seems that Kibi will need to break through some sort of protective shell around it, using the *Watcher’s Kiss*.

One for what is in his head. Certainly a reference to Dranko.

One to channel what makes dead. They still have no good guesses about what this refers to.

One at last, but not yet known. / One forever dead as stone. / One to drive the spike clean through. / One to die, and hope renew. Nor this, though it sounds like one of them is destined to die.

One last journey then to make. / One last prison bar to break. / One last thread of fate to pull. / One last circle to come full. They assume the “prison bar” refers to the prison in which the Adversary is confined, and that the whole verse refers to the end of their quest, one way or another.



The next morning, with no good leads as to how best to reach the next Leaping Circle, Ernie casts *find the path*. It’s difficult to pick up the proper divinatory threads, and it costs him life-force to cast the spell at all, but Yondalla can answer his prayers even beneath the Iron Barrier. He senses the best way to go, and they go – westward, over the ocean, *wind walking* a mile every minute. Galdifain assents to travel in the *flask of body pouring*, a measure taken largely for her own safety.

“It will be boring,” says Aravis.

“That sounds perfect,” answers Galdifain.

They reach the western shore of the ocean about twenty minutes later, and concurrently the end of the cavern itself. Ernie’s spell indicates the leftmost of three similar tunnels bored into the wall, and in they go. It narrows and grows twisty, making it faster to become solid and travel on foot. The tunnel has no branches, so they keep following it after the *find the path* runs out. It’s rough going; this is a natural formation, its uneven meanderings requiring many four-limbed scrambles. The motes grow dim, and they continue on for another hour by dint of their darkvision, before weariness brings an end to the day’s journey. Aravis casts another *magnificent mansion* for them to sleep in.



That night, Dranko dreams. He is back in the place between Leaping Circles, suspended in a place of madness. There are whispers all around him. **“Dranko... you are failing. You are failing...”** He turns to see the whisperers, but they are always behind him, like mischievous children darting out of sight. **“You are failing, Dranko. Failing!”** The thing in his head seems to grow heavy. It sloshes in his mind like mercury in a bottle being tilted back and forth. It roils, hot and foul.

Then one voice, louder than the rest, sounds in his ear. **“Dranko, you have failed!”** He snaps out of sleep, covered in sweat. Morningstar is beside him, sleeping peacefully. But his relief at waking is short-lived; something still churns in his head... and it is breaking free. He looks down to see his body receding from his head, then realizes his neck is stretching, his vision graying. Slimy, sinewy limbs are extruding themselves from his body, even as his head becomes long and narrow, losing its features, until it is nothing but a thick gray tentacle ending in a sharp black spike.

He has Become, and he has become something horrible. His blackened spike drips with Essence.

Morningstar is bodily shoved out of bed by Dranko's metamorphosis. He looks upon his wife, and sees only prey. The Thing He Has Become has a mind of its own, and it seeks to shove Dranko's consciousness downward where he can only watch its predations. The Thing is intelligent, malign, and absurdly powerful. Dranko's mind fights desperately against it. The Thing wants to tear Morningstar apart right there, but Dranko manages to nudge its strategy. It casts *maze* upon her instead, and she vanishes, cutting off her screams. But they had gone on long enough for her to have woken the others. No matter. He can kill them too.

He casts *time stop*, and prepares himself. *Haste. Stoneskin. Displacement. Shield.* He knocks the bedroom door free and charges into the common room, just as Flicker arrives from the opposite side. The little halfling screams. It's a pleasing sound.

The others spill into the room, bleary-eyed, having grabbed their equipment and rushed to the sound of danger. They stop short when they see Dranko in his new body. He sees them cast their meaningless spells: *mass doughy folk* from Ernie, *xorn movement* from Kibi, *shapechange* from Aravis.

Flicker calls out, "Dranko, are you okay in there? Come out so I have someone to flank with!" Silly little person. He doesn't understand. No matter. Soon he will be dead. Dranko Quickens a *disintegrate* aimed at Flicker, but the old Dranko is still struggling, and the distraction causes the beam to go wide, neatly removing a round section of wall.

His tentacle-head is stretchy. He whips it toward Grey Wolf, intending to spear him through the chest, but once more the half-orc Dranko screams in frustration within him, and Grey Wolf is able to dodge. But that uses up the last of Dranko's will; the monster he has become takes full control. He spears again with his black-spiked head, and it pierces Grey Wolf's side. He knows that in addition to the searing pain and terrible damage, his enemy's Wisdom has been badly drained. "**When you are dead,**" he tells Grey Wolf, "**I will plant Bostock in your body.**"

Flicker tumbles and tries to strike him with his dagger, but is fooled by the *displacement*. Grey Wolf hits him with an *acid orb*, and the acid stings a bit. He shakes it off like a dog drying itself. Ernie casts both *bolt of glory* (which he easily dodges) and *energy drain* (to which he is immune). He laughs, a terrible gurgling laugh. He knows the capabilities of these pathetic mortal creatures. They cannot best him.

Against logic, Morningstar appears in the doorway of her room. She has escaped the *maze* unexpectedly soon. "Where's Dranko?" calls Ernie.

"That's Dranko," answers Morningstar, pointing at him. "He turned into that, and put me in a *maze*." He delights in the horror on the faces of his former friends.

Kibi announces that he's put Dranko into a *forcecage*. How cute. He sees the others readying spells for when he inevitably escapes, but hardly cares. What's the worst they can do? He gurgles and once more casts *time stop*. First he casts *dimension door*, arriving near to Grey Wolf. Of all the enemy's spells, he knows that Grey Wolf's *acid orbs* pose the greatest threat to him, as they bypass his various resistances. Then he places a floor-to-ceiling *wall of force* that divides the mansion interior into two subsections, one containing himself and Grey Wolf, the other holding everyone else. Finally he casts *true strike*, then readies a spell. Time returns to normal, and he casts *disintegrate*. Annoyingly, Grey Wolf saves, taking only incidental damage.

Morningstar casts some kind of mind-spell that fails. Flicker charges straight into the *wall of force*. Pathetic. Grey Wolf casts *xorn movement* from a scroll and sinks into the ground. (Aravis always creates his *magnificent mansion* with a thick stone border around its surface perimeter, for just this sort of emergency, but Dranko knows it won't help.) Ernie and Kibi choose to wait out the *wall of force*, but Aravis does not. He Quickens a *teleport* over to Dranko's side, then has the gall to cast *disjunction* on him. This not only strips him of his various protections and buffs, but it dispels the *magnificent mansion* in its entirety. Everyone is ejected into the uneven stone cavern where they had finished the day's march.

Before he can kill Aravis, the wizard shapechanges into a xorn and vanishes into the rock. Dranko can't blame him. Hiding is their best option. Ernie casts *destruction* on him, which barely scratches his skin. The little halfling Quickens something else, something meant to lower his magical resistance, but of course that fails. Kibi casts his favorite spell – *Otto's irresistible dance* – and risks getting close enough to touch him. The spell has no effect; Dranko's new mind is inviolate. Kibi Quickens a *teleport* to escape.

Morningstar heals Grey Wolf, but it's a futile gesture. Viper-quick, Dranko scuttles over to where Grey Wolf is struggling to his feet after the dissolution of the mansion. He plunges his head spike twice into Grey Wolf's chest. The first hit nearly kills his target. The second one blasts a hole all the way through Grey Wolf's torso, leaving a hole as big around as a frying pan.

The rim of the hole drips with Essence. The others gape as Grey Wolf's dead body slumps to the ground, but Dranko's not finished. He whips around to face Morningstar, and casts *energy drain* upon her. It's a good one, and he knows that he's forced her best spells out of her head – her *mass heals*, her *miracles*, her *prismatic sphere*, her *fire storms*.

The halfling Flicker starts to babble at the sight of Grey Wolf. “Ohmygodohmygodohmygod.” Aravis pops out of the ground and casts *reality maelstrom* behind Dranko, a spell which briefly opens a sucking void that in theory could suck him in and eject him on another plane. Dranko ignores its childlike tug on his body. Ernie uses *miracle* to spoof *bolt of glory*, which Dranko evades entirely. Ernie then Quickens *flame strike*, which damages him a little, but he's nearly back to full health as it is. His new body regenerates very quickly.

Dranko can see the despair of inevitable defeat start to settle onto the faces of his former friends, but they're not ready yet to give up. Kibi Quickens an Empowered *earthbolt* that is maximized by his *Pulse of Abernia*. By dumb luck it bypasses all of his natural and supernatural defenses, and for the first time since Becoming, Dranko feels significant pain. Then Kibi summons an elder earth elemental that towers over him, but Dranko is unusually strong; he bats it away as it tries to grapple him. Finally, Kibi sinks again into the ground. Coward!

Morningstar tries to *revivify* the fallen Grey Wolf, but the wound in his chest already festers with Adversary blood. The spell fails. Grey Wolf is gone for good. Dranko gurgles out another hideous laugh and sends a massive *chain lightning* crackling through the Company. Then for good measure he drives his head spike into Aravis, severely wounding him and draining away a goodly portion of Wisdom.

Flicker activates the *fly* spell from his armor, and charges at him. Not smart. He swats the halfling away, again dealing massive damage and draining away Wisdom. Flicker's none too wise as it is; the little fellow is lucky to still be conscious. Aravis casts a spell on him, and everything vanishes. He's in a magical labyrinth with shifting walls. Adorable. Aravis has put him in a *maze*. He sees the way out immediately.

When he emerges, he can see new magical auras on his friends; they were not idle while he was gone. Morningstar has a protective spell upon her, something from Ernie. Kibi is surrounded by the protective gray discs of *effulgent epuration*. Morningstar and Ernie have healed themselves, and Morningstar has moved into a flanking position with Flicker. They had also readied some spells. Aravis casts *disintegrate* on him, but its damage is minimal. Kibi tries another *earthbolt*, but this one is much weaker than the last. A fleabite.

The elemental grabs him in a powerful grip, obliging Dranko to waste time killing it – which he does, easily, plunging in his head-spike until the thing goes comatose from Wisdom drain. Then he leaps atop a nearby boulder and unleashes a *prismatic spray* upon his foes. Aravis and Kibi take severe damage from acid and electricity, respectively. Ernie and Morningstar take smaller amounts of damage. Flicker is lifted bodily in the air and flung backward; his body strikes the stone wall with a sickening crunch. Another one dead. The others, he knows, are running out of spells, running out of healing. He continues to regenerate from the little damage they've been able to do.

Now he senses their despair, a palpable thing. They know they've lost. He has Become their deaths.



Dranko is thrashing wildly in his sleep. Morningstar watches with concern for a few seconds, then decides she should wake her husband from whatever nightmare afflicts him. She gives him a gentle shake.

He wakes up, screaming.

“Dranko, you look really pale. Are you okay?”

Kaodi: Rat Bastard.

Everett: Hang on just one moment here. You actually played out Dranko's dream-combat *at the table*? Like, let them think he was going to slaughter them all and then “Whoops, just a dream?” Because that's definitely the coolest thing I've ever heard of.

Sagiro: It wasn't quite that cool. We did play out the combat at the table, but I had warned all the *other* players ahead of time that it was fake. I trusted them to keep the secret, and play it straight. They did a great job. But Piratecat, playing Dranko, thought it was real. He thought he was really killing the other PCs. He was pretty... vocal... about it when he learned the truth...

Everett: Ah, that's cool enough. Did you also make Piratecat do all the rolls and “decide” what he was going to cast and who he was going to spike each round? Or did you just take control of the Becoming Dranko yourself? (What's the pluperfect of “Become”? Became?)

Sagiro: I let Piratecat play the monster straight up. Handed him the character sheet (a somewhat modified uvuudaum from the Epic Handbook) and told him to do his best to kill the party. I trusted that he wouldn't pull his punches, and he didn't. It was quite a session!

RangerWickett: I think I love you, Sagiro.

Solarious: Wow. Rodent of Uncertain Parentage indeed. I guess we don't need to worry about Dranko being killed by aquamarine-glowing epic monsters out to get him. Now he just has to worry about Becoming. I'll take a very safe stab in the dark and say that a flurry of divinations to figure out what he'll need to do to... not Become follows.

Everett: The Cleaners were clear enough. He has to avoid "delusions of grandeur." And the Company's divinations don't work below the surface.

Solarious: What the heck does "delusions of grandeur" mean from something beyond the pale of sanity? And sure the Company's divinations work beyond the Barrier; they just require extra effort to reach, and thus burn life force which could otherwise be used to power other abilities they might need in the future. It's a balancing act.

Everett: Well, they understood mortal desires well enough to trade Dranko's life for his fame in the first place. So I think we can take them at their word.

Enkhidu: If Dranko does develop delusions of grandeur, I'm pretty sure that will be grounds for breaking the deal, which would be very bad for the whole Company.

Everett: I think that after the visions he had while they were Leaping and the slaughter-happy dream, Dranko has got the message. I don't expect that Dranko will have to Become. But it's quite clear now that the Nugget of Madness™ inside his brain will prove crucial to the endgame.

Quartz: Hmm... I've just been reading the ELH entry for the uvuudaum. Very nasty, but if Dranko could control what he Becomes, then he'd be a great asset. I noted two things in particular: "Advancement: As character class" and "Alignment: *Usually* neutral evil" (emphasis mine). A good uvuudaum is not beyond the bounds of possibility.

Everett: That was Dranko's dream of what Becoming would be like. Neither he nor we have any idea what would really happen. But it would certainly be different.

How can I be sure of this? Consider that good-aligned uvuudaum-Dranko would solo massacre everyone and anyone the Company might come up against while the rest of the party stood around filing their fingernails. I don't think Sagiro is going to take the challenge out of the campaign's endgame.

Quartz: An uvuudaum of which Dranko was only intermittently in control might well be interesting. Kind of like the final encounter of the *Shackled City* adventure path. But the uvuudaum in the ELH is far worse than CR 27.

Everett: The killer is the Wisdom drain, and the fact that it's permanent. It's pretty much designed to murder anything that's sentient – good, evil or otherwise.

Quartz: Yes, and the save DCs are far too high for CR 27 at DC 47.

Ooh, I missed this: Morningstar tries to *revivify* the fallen Grey Wolf, but the wound in his chest already festers with Adversary blood. Adversary blood, eh?

Everett: Maybe the "one" who "loves all" is Abernia itself? When Kibi removes the splinter, Abernia will return them to the surface in gratitude? That's possible.

Quartz: I'm sure Sagiro has more RBDMness up his sleeve; I know I'm going to enjoy reading about it.



Psychoanalysis

Dranko spends a few minutes babbling to Morningstar about his dream. "I think I failed. I haven't done anything to Become, but I haven't done anything *not* to Become, either. I don't know what to do. All I know is that right when I woke up, I was about to kill you."

"Do you think it was an attack?" Morningstar asks. "Do you think someone *forced* you to have that dream?"

Dranko shrugs helplessly. Almost in a panic he lights a cigar, hoping for guidance, answers. The smoke forms the words **TWO PARENTS**. What?

Morningstar caresses Dranko's brow, murmuring reassurances until he drops back into sleep. She then goes into a trance and examines her husband's sleeping mind, to see if he's been meddled with. After a few minutes she is satisfied that there has been no immediate attack, but obviously the thing has been affecting Dranko since the day it was placed there. She cannot look at it too closely; it will drive her insane if she looks too carefully at it, just as it would do to Dranko. Whatever it is, it's not taking Dranko over, or altering his conscious mind. "It's not time yet," she tells it. "Be still." It seethes, quietly.



Three hours later, everyone has woken up. They meet in the common area of the mansion for breakfast. Dranko walks to Grey Wolf and pats his chest. "No sucking hole filled with Adversary blood. Good!"

"Uh... no," says Grey Wolf. "Why would there be?"

He explains his dream to the others. "These voices kept saying 'You are failing, you are failing,' and I didn't think I was, and blah, blah, blah, and then it happened..." He becomes more and more upset as he describes the gleeful violence of his attacks, and the awesome power he possessed. "There's a good chance I'm going to fail, or maybe have already failed," he tells them miserably. "I couldn't talk my way out of it, and I Became, and did my level best to kill everyone. And I was well on my way to doing it."

Ernie doesn't show much pity for him. "Did you ever stop to think, that maybe the answer to how not to Become is 'Try harder' and not 'Blah blah blah?'"

“Um... no.”

“Then think about it!”

Dranko slumps in his chair. “I tried my hardest to kill you, and I didn’t even do a very good job.”

“That’s comforting,” says Kibi. “Maybe it was just an ordinary bad dream?”

“We’re hard to kill,” says Aravis.

“I suppose I should look at the bright side,” says Dranko. “I got a demon lord to apologize to me. That’s gotta count for something!”

This comment only makes Ernie more furious. “Dranko, how can you...”

“No, you’re right, Ernie,” says Dranko. “I have to do some thinking about this. About how not to Become, whatever that turns out to mean.”

“I think to Become is to become like the Adversary in some way,” says Grey Wolf. “And that would be bad.”

Dranko looks at Ernie. “Do you have any ideas? About how not to Become?”

“No. I don’t know. I don’t have a horrible thing in my head as the result of the foolishness of my own actions.” Dranko grins as he sticks his finger in Ernie’s ear, but his friend is in no mood for silliness. Ernie swats the finger away. “No, that’s just you being annoying... though still as a result of your own foolish actions. I’d like you to *think* before you act foolish, at least.”

“I’m not foolish,” Dranko protests. “I’m adventurous. Foolish is totally different.”

“You need to concentrate!” says Ernie. “You need self-discipline. You want to not Become? Then don’t do idiotic things like pissing off a demon lord.” A bit more quietly, he adds, “I think part of you still feels unloved. You take stupid, reckless risks because somewhere deep down you feel unworthy.”

“Nah,” says Dranko. “I do crazy things because it’s fun. You may have been right once, but thanks to you, I’m a lot better adjusted. Those old wounds have healed.”

“Then think about that,” says Ernie. “Think about the scar tissue. Think about what we did to heal you, when you think about Becoming, when you think about doing something foolish. Think about the scar tissue. It doesn’t stretch the way healthy tissue does. It’s not as strong. You need to focus on what healed you, and not on keeping on doing stupid things.”

That gives Dranko pause. “Huh. I think I’ll go meditate on that for a little while.” He winks at Morningstar. “It’ll be four minutes before I fall asleep.”

“Someone should smack you if you start to fall asleep!” says Ernie, angered all over again by Dranko’s flippant attitude. “The pain will remind you of what’s important. That’s what going to teach you self-control.”

“Ernie,” says Morningstar, “Dranko spent his childhood in the hands of the Scarbearers.”

“And you know what I learned from them?” says Dranko. “I learned that hurting other people is a poor way to bring someone closer to God. That bullheadedness and stubbornness in the face of righteous piety is a great way to piss people off.”

“And yet you still did that exact thing to Tapheon!” says Ernie.

“Well, yeah. And it worked. It pissed him off. Really well. I mean, I didn’t *try* to piss Tapheon off. But I thought, here’s a demon lord, and it would be nice to give him the opportunity to repent... uh... okay, maybe you’re right. I was trying to get under his skin a little. But think about the cleric I’d have become, if I had been the one to make him see the error of his ways.”

Ernie is not mollified. “So it was all about you becoming famous?”

“Part of it, yeah. Maybe.”

“And he turned you into an inside-out fish,” Grey Wolf observes.

“I was totally getting away with it, being righteous to his face, in the name of my religion!” says Dranko. “Look, he’s evil, he’s *really* evil. You don’t tolerate evil, you don’t pretend he’s too evil, he’s too powerful, you shouldn’t bother. You have to stop it. And if you can’t stop it, you annoy it.”

Morningstar shakes her head. “You lost me at the end there.”

Aravis also fails to see the logic. “So if something is so hideously powerful that you can’t defeat it, you annoy it instead?”

“Look at it this way,” says Dranko. “Consider Ernie here. Ernie is happiest when his soul is at peace, and he is serene. When something annoys Ernie, and he’s upset, he is not at his best. He’s pissed and he’s distracted. Not on his ‘A’ game. If I can’t defeat evil, I want to make it unhappy. I’d like to think Taphon was so focused on me, he wasn’t on his ‘A’ game either. He wasn’t doing horrible things to other people.”

“It led him to send an assassin who summoned horrible things to kill you,” Aravis points out.

Ernie is still not convinced. “But he wasn’t focused on killing anyone outside the Abyss, except maybe the Lord of the Roses, until you made him angry.”

“You can’t know that,” says Dranko. “He doesn’t just sit there in his evil castle thinking evil thoughts when we’re not around. He does evil stuff. It makes me happy to think that every time he thinks of me, it angers him.”

“And when he can’t take it out on you, you don’t think he tortures things even more?” asks Aravis.

“Dranko,” says Morningstar, “I hear what you’re saying, and there’s some... bravery to it. But we’re already trying pretty darn hard to get rid of the Adversary. You caused a pretty unnecessary distraction. We had to save you from three pretty horrible monsters. We’d be a day or two closer to Seven Dark Words and Meledien, if we hadn’t needed to keep recovering.”

Dranko throws up his hands. “I can’t predict the future. I can’t *not* act, because it might cause us some problems down the line.”

“No one’s suggesting you not act,” says Aravis. “Just that you act in a way that’s more productive.”

Morningstar agrees. “Tapheon was a situation you had very little chance to affect.”

“You taunted him *in his house*,” says Grey Wolf.

“That was the action of a little half-orc boy who had no power in the world,” says Morningstar. “If you thought Tapheon was a force to be dealt with, you shouldn’t have taunted him for no good purpose in his home. We could have put him on our list of enemies and dealt with him in our own time, instead of you doing the first thing that popped into your head.”

“Sometimes you’re a little boy throwing rocks at a bad man’s house,” says Ernie. “A boy throwing rocks at the windows of a man he hates.”

“I think you’re jealous,” says Dranko. “Not necessarily wrong, but jealous. Look at how things have worked out with Tapheon!”

“*Of course I’m jealous, Dranko!*” Ernie’s anger and frustration boil over. “Do you ever stop to think about the fact that everything you do that’s selfish, stupid, foolish, thoughtless and petty, works out for you? I’ve spent my entire life being a good halfling, and making sacrifices, and dying twice over, and yet I can’t kill my foes as well as you, or absorb injuries as well as you. You threw a stupid bottle into the Far Realms and it gave you magical powers and some kind of super-weapon. I’m good *all the time* and it *never* works for me, and you’re bad all the time and things *always* work for you. So yes, I am jealous. And it makes me angry that you don’t think about how it makes the rest of us feel.”

Ernie stalks away, leaving Dranko with his mouth hanging open. Then Dranko too leaves the banquet room, in a different direction. “Someday,” says Grey Wolf, “it’s going to *stop* working out for him. That’s going to be a sad day. Based on his dream, I think that time is coming real soon...”

Piratecat: And there’s your argument. It was a doozy, and a long time coming.

Sagiro had me *entirely* suckered. It never even occurred to me that that was a dream. Humility, indeed.

Innocent Bystander: Did Dranko actually have some indication of what he would actually turn into? Or was him turning into something so powerful supposed to be a manifestation/representation of his delusions of grandeur?



After breakfast they pack up for another day’s travel. Chatter is minimal.

“I had another vision from the Maze last night,” says Aravis. “There wasn’t a good time to mention it before now.” He shares it with the others.

Morningstar’s parents, Domira and Rodvin, stand on the deck of a ship, while huge plumes of smoke rise behind them. The ship – a small passenger schooner called the *Bay Breeze* – is crowded, passengers crammed into every spare space.

Each face is heavy with grief. Children cry and tug their mothers' skirts.

Around the *Bay Breeze* are dozens of other ships – small craft, large shipping barges, light warships – all packed with refugees. They are leaving the harbor in a chaotic procession. Closest to the shore, several ships have been torched and sunk. Dozens of figures are in the water, swimming desperately, and those on the last ships are throwing tow-ropes.

The city of Kynder Hold behind them is in flames, and orcs run rampant through the streets. The air is filled with their triumphant shouts.

Tears spring to Morningstar's eyes; tears of grief at the destruction of her childhood home, mixed with tears of relief that her parents made it out alive.

"This has been a delightful morning," says Grey Wolf.



Ernie casts a new *find the path* once they have exited the mansion. The tunnels and connected caves beyond this point are too uneven for foot travel, and too serpentine for fast *wind walking*. They opt for *phantom steeds*, which offer the best combination of maneuverability and speed.

Halfway through the day, hours after the *find the path* has run out, Ernie is obliged to cast it a second time when they reach a new cavern with seven different ways out. (Morningstar first tries concentrating on *Laramon's jade clover*, the little luck item that seemed to have played a part in their successful leap away from Leaping Circle One. She is momentarily encouraged when it grows warm as she focuses on one of the exit tunnels, but then she realizes it's reacting the same way for all of them. Kibi also tries *stone tell*, but none of the stone has memory of humans passing this way in the past ten years.)

So Ernie casts his spell, forcing a divination from beyond the Iron Barrier and costing him more life force. Knowledge of the correct tunnel springs to his mind, and off again they all go. The day passes without incident, as does the following evening in Aravis's *mansion*. No one's dreams are haunted, and Morningstar checks Dranko's mind overnight. All is well.



The next day proceeds much as the previous, though sometime around mid-afternoon they are forced to abandon their *phantom steeds*. For almost half a mile they crawl on hands and knees, as the ceiling drops to height of just over three feet. A few short stretches require them to slide on their bellies, packs scraping the rock above them.

Once they are able to stand again, the way is altogether easier, with the ground, while not exactly flat, at least offering a walkable footing. Then, slowly, the wide tunnel slopes downward for another mile, before pitching steeply and emptying into a vertical shaft over a hundred feet across. The Company can see that other tunnels also end at this shaft at other heights and compass points, like pipes terminating at an enormous drain.

The shaft is not empty – it is clogged with enormous crystals, criss-crossing the space like a giant's pick-up-sticks. If one of the Company were to jump, they would not fall thousands of feet unimpeded, but would rather bounce painfully from crystal to crystal like a child falling from the highest branches of a dense climbing tree.

The *find the path* indicates downward. *Wind walk* is the travel method of choice, though Kibi allows Scree to gleefully leap and tumble from crystal to crystal. The little earth elemental thinks this is the most fantastic place he's ever seen. Long ago this formation was dubbed the Crystal Plunge by Underdark explorers, though there are few living who have seen it.

Here's a page with some images that should give you an idea of the nature and scale of the Crystal Plunge:
<http://thesavoia.com/2011/11/22/crystal-cave-of-giants/>

The Company wend their way down, through a latticework of crystal girders glittering in the light motes. At first they are dirty white, but over time they transition to a deep violet and then to a black-flecked orange. Two miles down, the light motes start to fade. Aravis sets up the *mansion* as usual, but Kibi wants to sleep outside, nestled in a formation of crystal. Dranko and Flicker offer to join him, so that no one is left to sleep unguarded.

Dranko teaches Scree to play chess, thinking that after losing so often to Pewter, perhaps he can best a pile of rocks. But Scree wins his inaugural game in a close-fought contest, then wins the second game on a four-move fool's mate. Dranko grumbles and goes to sleep.



Another night passes peacefully, though Aravis has had another vision from the Maze, and it's as troubling as any they've had so far.

"It's a shame I can only do this once." Emperor Naradawk turns something over in his hand, feeling its weight. It is a broken-off piece of a large fang.

"I think you will be pleased," says the man standing behind the Emperor. He is thin, and shifts awkwardly from foot to foot in his ill-fitting red plate. "There is nothing else here to rival it."

Naradawk smiles – a horrible sight. "Yasper, you know I have complete faith in your abilities. Now, whom have you chosen to be the sacrifice?"

The man Yasper shakes his head. "It was a difficult thing, my Lord. Many of your men and women volunteered, but we are so few, I was unwilling to give up our best. Eldegim was one of the first, but I told him his worth was too great. I decided that Asbaq would be the one. He was the last one chosen before we left Chinniphath, and though he is brave and enthusiastic, we will not miss his sword as much. And he wishes to die for you as much as any of them."

Naradawk smiles. "Good," he says. "Then let's waste no more time. Bring Asbaq forward."

A young fresh-faced man, barely in his twenties, strides forward, the sun glinting off his crimson armor. He stops before the towering figure of the Emperor. "My Lord!" he says, almost shouting. "I am here to offer myself, to die in your service, if you will afford me that honor!"

"I will," says Naradawk, with a slight bow of his head. "Stand in the center of the circle, and do not close your eyes."

"My Lord!"

Asbaq walks briskly to the center of the large ring of obsidian bricks sunk into the earth. Naradawk closes his own eyes before speaking. "Blood calls to blood, and it sings within me. Blood restores blood, spilled and reformed. The sleeping will wake, and the waking will sleep forever in the cold beyond. I call upon he that was, and will be again, to arise and serve me. From the remains, a whole. From the ashes, fire. From the memory of bitter defeat, to the promise of gleaming vengeance. Blood calls to blood."

The last thing Asbaq sees is Naradawk tossing the broken fang into the circle, almost to his feet. Then the circle fills with white flames, and Asbaq is consumed, quickly, in the unholy inferno. For several minutes the flames grow brighter, until the entire circle is filled with a roaring pillar of pale fire.

Abruptly it ceases. Nothing is left of Asbaq; even his red armor has been incinerated to a fine ash. But the circle is not empty. When Naradawk opens his eyes, he is looking up at the serpentine neck and smoldering eyes of Azhant the Ancient.

"I want my vengeance," snarls the dragon. "Where are they?"

"Beyond your reach," says Naradawk. "They have abandoned this world."

"Then what would you have me do?"

"I would have you destroy everything they held so dear. Serve me until my war is over, and you will choose your own domain."

Azhant the Ancient shows his fangs. Only, one is missing. "I will. Let me begin."

Anxe: For anyone who forgot, Azhant is the dragon-father of that ogre champion, the Great One. ... Whatever happened to his head after they decapitated Azhant? Seemed like the Company was going to deliver it to the Great One, but Steven's logs seem to be missing that part.

StevenAC: I've just checked back, and there's nothing missing from the posted Story Hour after the fight with Azhant. The Company did indeed collect his head as proof that they'd killed him, but Sagiros skipped over what they ultimately did with it..

Everett: Well, it's not like collecting a dragon's head is supposed to be somehow proof against calling it back through necromantic arts, is it? Actually, I wonder – did Azhant simply appear, whole and inviolate, when Naradawk called him? Getting a whole dragon from a fragment of a fang?

Quartz: That's all you need for *resurrection*. [From the SRD:]

So long as some small portion of the creature's body still exists, it can be resurrected, but the portion receiving the spell must have been part of the creature's body at the time of death.



No Question About the Smoke This Time

"You should have more jolly visions," says Dranko. Like everyone else, he finds it depressing that Azhant the Ancient has been resurrected after all the trouble they went through killing it.

"Why did we even bother?" groans Morningstar.

“Think of all the people Azhant would have killed between then and now,” says Ernie.

“Starting with every last dwarf,” adds Kibi.



Down the Plunge they fly, weaving between the long crystals. Scree feels great pity for Kibi, who is obliged to travel in mist form while he gets to revel in the glory of this geologic paradise. At half a mile down, there cease to be side tunnels, though the earth elemental tells Kibi he can sense open spaces beyond the Plunge. If one were to bore a tunnel sideways, they could emerge into one of those spaces, but the *find the path* still indicates downward, and the need for haste overcomes any desire for exploration.

Another two miles down, and the Company can feel their misty bodies growing a bit heavier, a bit more solid. The *wind walk* is still holding, but its effects are weakening. They descend further. At last, Kibi is certain that they have reached the proper altitude, almost four and a half miles below the stomach of the Leviathan. The *find the path* would have them keep flying downward, but Scree reports that less than fifty yards to the west is a large tunnel, heading more or less in the direction they need to go.

“*Find the path* wouldn’t know we can just tunnel through rock,” says Ernie. Kibi casts *mass xorn movement* on the party, and they slide through the rock. *Doesn’t it feel amazing down here?* thinks Kibi over the mind-link. It’s like a warm swimming pool without the awful water. He exults in it, though everyone else still finds it unnerving.

They pop out into a large tube-shaped tunnel, thirty feet in diameter, corkscrewing away to both the north and south. Immediately Ernie’s *find the path* changes its mind, now directing them to march southward. Their altitude is nearly perfect, but they’ve overshot laterally by several miles. But assuming this tunnel goes where they want, they’re now only a few hours’ travel from Leaping Circle Nine.

The tunnel is filled with a rich, earthy, organic smell, but mixed with less pleasant odors. One of these is a faint stink of acid, and the other, weaker but more troubling, is the awful tang of Adversary blood. “Something wicked this way came,” mutters Ernie. It’s obvious that some very large creature created this tunnel, though not recently. It charts a spiraling path into the dim mote-illuminated distance. The sense of Essence grows stronger as they progress, though not greatly.

After a half-mile of this they pass an opening into a small side-tunnel, this one only fifteen feet across instead of thirty. The smell coming from that direction is particularly foul – a mixture of rotting fungus and earthy excrement – though the sense of Essence is no stronger. A faint sound of slurping and squirming comes from there, punctuated with a sporadic high-pitched whining.

Kibi casts *greater prying eyes* and sends them to investigate in all directions. While most report only ongoing tunnel, the one sent down the side passage shows Kibi a disturbing image: it ends some 500 feet down in a pill-shaped chamber with a large pit, and that pit is full of worms. But not ordinary worms; these are four feet around and twenty feet long, with dark violet half-formed chitin. They writhe in a restless mass, occasionally stretching their bodies to scrape fungus off the high walls of the pit with their toothy maws.

“It’s a nest,” says Dranko. “Which means there’s a mommy somewhere nearby.”

“Hmm,” says Kibi. “Maybe ‘mommy’ would make a good monster for Galdifain to...”

The tremor grows quickly, from a distant rumble to thundering roar in less than five seconds. An enormous purple worm crashes through the tunnel wall, spraying the Company with a shower of rock. It’s fifteen feet around and indeterminately long. Worse, its purple chitin is speckled with huge black patches, and strong waves of Adversary blood roll off it. Its mouth is a gaping hole lined with hundreds of sharp teeth.

Dranko tumbles to the side and whips it several times, while Flicker does likewise on its opposite flank. Grey Wolf Quickens *true strike* and slashes with Bostock, channeling a Maximized *acid orb* into the monster. Ernie casts *fire storm* upon it, then Quickens a *blade barrier* in the center of its massing coils. When all of this is done, its blood pools thickly on the ground, and huge swaths of its hard plates are sheared or burned off. And it keeps coming, pouring out of the tunnel breach like a river, filling up the available space, crowding the Company to the edges. It looks at Dranko, who feels the hot skin-bursting pain he has come to associate with Essence-tainted monsters. And the infected purple worm is whip-quick for its size; its huge mouth comes swooping in, gulping down Dranko and Grey Wolf in a swift, practiced motion. It chews them a bit, then swallows them. Inexorably powerful muscles force them down its gullet, into the depths of its digestive system. There are no light motes down here, but with *darkvision* they can see its fleshy muscles undulating, squeezing. They are crushed, burned by acid, and bombarded with the horror of Essence. “And to think,” says Dranko, “this isn’t even the largest stomach we’ve been in recently.”

The creature's tail finally trails into the tunnel, tipped with a wicked-looking stinger. It whips the stinger into Morningstar's side, and the damage is severe, but thanks to the daily *heroes' feast* she is spared the brutal effects of its poison. Kibi blasts the worm with a Maximized *cone of cold* followed by a Quickened, Empowered *earthbolt*. Morningstar casts another *fire storm* and Quickens *divine power*. It's heavily damaged, but keeps on thrashing, looking for its next targets. Aravis strikes it with *energy drain*, sapping it of lifeforce. The worm sags and slows down; though it's holding on, the Company seem to have weathered the...

Straight down from the ceiling, a *second* purple worm emerges, this one also infused with Adversary blood. It seems the worm babies in the pit have *two* parents. This second worm comes down directly over Ernie and Kibi, swallowing them easily, forcing them down into its hellish guts. Then it too whips its stinger into Morningstar, piercing her calf.

Dranko feels his skin burned by acid, his bones bruised by the sheer power of the worm's interior muscles. He can't see Grey Wolf. Over the mind-link, he says, *Cut your own way out. I'm going to take shelter in here.*

In here? What?

Dranko's whip is useless; he has limited motion with his arms, but no way to cut himself out. But he has just enough wiggle room to call the Lucent Tower from his haversack. He speaks the command phrase: "Crystal Rise." Aravis, Flicker and Morningstar, now the only ones not inside a purple worm, are treated to an unusual sight. The Lucent Tower bursts out of the worm in two different places, its base and its apex blasting out of the monster's body. Normally the door would appear next to Dranko, but with no solid base, the tower has expanded in both directions at once. Dranko grabs the bottom edge of the tower and rides it out, enduring a painful bludgeoning as he and the tower exit the worm. He pops out looking as though he's been smeared all over with green-black tar.

Somehow the worm still isn't dead. Flicker stabs it again, and it thrashes spasmodically, but stubbornly clings to life. Grey Wolf continues to become digested in its stomach. He doesn't have room to properly swing Bostock, but with a heroic burst of strength he digs his elbow into the fleshy wall of the worm's stomach and levers the point of his sword against its flesh. He channels another Maximized *acid orb*. Having just seen Dranko and the Lucent Tower emerge from the body of the worm, Morningstar and Aravis now see a volcano of acid erupt from it some fifteen feet farther along its length. It gives one last crazed thrash, and Dranko realizes he's going to be crushed between the Lucent Tower and the tunnel wall. But the door to the tower is open! He scrambles up and dives into the tower just before being mashed against its exterior.

But there's still the other worm to deal with, and it's at full health, with Ernie and Kibi trapped in its innards. Ernie endures the massive damage of its triple attack of burning, crushing and Essence, and manages to concentrate just enough to fire off an *energy drain*. Then he tries to Quicken a *heal* on himself but can't get the gestures right. The spell fails, and his skin continues to burn. Kibi has similarly few options. He can't *dimension door* out because he cannot see his destination, and *xorn movement* won't work for obvious reasons. He'll have to blast his way out. He casts a Maximized *coldfire*, enduring some of the damage himself in such close quarters. But what choice does he have? He Quickens a Maximized *ray of enfeeblement*, dropping the worm from "monstrously strong" to merely "amazingly strong."

Morningstar casts yet another *fire storm*. Thanks to the *energy drain*, the worm doesn't resist any of the damage. Aravis Maximizes a single-target *chain lightning* with similar good results. He Quickens a second *chain lightning*. The collective damage is huge, but so is the monster's capacity to absorb it. Annoyed, it turns on Aravis, inflicting him with the skin-bursting Essence lesions, before swooping its head down and swallowing both Morningstar and Aravis in a single gulp. Inexorable peristalsis forces them stomachward.

Flicker looks around in a panic. Dranko is still inside the tower. Grey Wolf hasn't yet crawled out of the corpse of the first giant worm. The other four have all been swallowed. For a panicky moment he can't see any other member of the Company. Too late, he notices the huge stinger swooping down; it gouges his shoulder. *Ouch!*

Dranko crawls out of the tower, and sees only Flicker squaring off against the huge purple worm. At least the mind-link is still active. *I'm sorry I can't heal you*, thinks Morningstar. *I've been swallowed.*

Dranko reaches down toward the scary thing in his head, and draws on its power. "**Do not Become!**" something whispers.

"I don't intend to," he says back. He stops time. While the world hangs in stillness, he retracts the Lucent Tower, moves over to flank with Flicker, heals himself with a wand, then readies to attack the moment time resumes.

Time resumes. He strikes the purple worm with his whip. Flicker is finally in position to make a full round of sneak attacks, and essentially carves himself a tunnel through its body. Grey Wolf wades out of the sludgy acidic gore of the first worm, and

uses Bostock to heal himself. Ernie, meanwhile, continues to dissolve. He can feel his skin sloughing off, and that he is near to death. He tries to cast *iron body* but cannot concentrate well enough. With a desperate prayer to Yondalla he Quickens a *cure critical wounds* upon himself, and that succeeds, staving off his death a few more seconds.

Kibi is also taking massive damage inside the worm, but at least his *energy buffer* triggered off the acid, so he's in slightly less dire straits than Ernie. Nevertheless, his straits are dire. He casts *time stop*, giving him time to gulp down a couple of old healing potions, cast *lucubration* to get back his *cone of cold*, and ready himself to cast it. Time kicks in, and he casts his spell, Empowered. The insides of the worm are coated with frost. The monster grumbles its displeasure.

Its unhappiness is about to grow exponentially. Aravis, dissolving like the others, focuses well enough to cast a Maximized *cone of cold* followed by a Quickened, Maximized *lightning bolt*. The latter blasts a gaping hole in the side of the worm, sending out a spray of gore. The worm thrashes once, twice, and flops to the ground, dead.

The others struggle free from the corpse of the worm, and are gratefully healed. There they stand, huffing and panting, in an expanding sea of blood and viscera.

"No more stomachs, please," says Grey Wolf.

coyote6: I guess Grey Wolf found that fight... <sunglasses>... hard to swallow.

So, how many people prepared *freedom of movement* the next day?

carborundum: Yikes, and yucks!

HavokReaker: "Two parents," indeed!

Quartz: When an earthworm is cut in two both parts survive; why should a purple worm be any different?

Everett: ["Something wicked this way came," mutters Ernie.] Coolest line Ernie's ever had.

What is Flicker's weapon? The other night I was re-reading the Collected at the part where he gets a pair of +5 *returning daggers* from the hoard of Azhant the Ancient. Does he still use those?

Piratecat: "Inexorable peristalsis" is the name of my new metal band.

Everett: Kevin Kulp and the Inexorable Peristalsis: opening for Blue Oyster Cult in downtown Oslo, Norway THIS SUNDAY AFTERNOON!!



Journey to the Center of the Earth

The area-of-effect spells have left their usual swaths of darkness where the light-motes have been wiped out. Before they can redistribute themselves, Dranko asks Grey Wolf to cast *invisibility* on him, while he stands in an area of darkness. Sure enough, Dranko gets about thirty seconds of useful invisibility before the motes drift close enough to swarm and illuminate him. Good to know.

The baby worms are not Essence-tainted like their parents, but the Company kill them anyway, to make sure they don't become a threat to anyone later on.

Kibi can sense that they are very close to Leaping Circle Nine; maybe a couple more hours, if the tunnel doesn't veer. It remains smooth and wide, and wider than the purple worms they just fought. Are there bigger worms? Or do they chew themselves larger tunnels over time? They hope it's that second one.



The repellent heat of Essence recedes behind them, though the tunnel still stinks of purple worm. Just over two hours later the tunnel rises, bends, and there's a small hole in the elbow, the size of a grapefruit. The *find the path* indicates they should go through that hole. Dranko peers through it, and sees a constructed hemispherical chamber with a hundred-foot-diameter metal Leaping Circle set into the floor. The purple worms must have clipped the very edge of the chamber with their own tunnel.

Dranko goes in first, *wind walking*, to scout for traps. The ring is magical, but that's no surprise. This one has a large instruction plaque that, unlike the last one, is whole and mostly undamaged. It's made of adamantium, and there are some light scratches over the first couple of words, as though the Evil Trio thought about trying to obscure the rituals but quickly gave up. Dranko licks the plaque, and it tastes like cold metal. Ever suspicious, he casts *know age* upon it, and it's hundreds of years old.

Once he's satisfied there are no nasty surprises waiting, the others waft into the room. The wizards inspect the instruction plaque. It's simpler and more straightforward than the others, and the ritual should only take a day and half, with a single ten-hour gap in the middle when the circle must remain vacant. The second half of the ritual is identical to the first half. It all seems so easy!

“There’s clearly a trap here,” says Aravis. Kibi nods agreement, unwilling to accept any stroke of luck at face value. Flicker spends a few minutes combing over every square inch of everything, and finds nothing.

Aravis performs the ritual, though perhaps burdened by overconfidence, has a little trouble at the beginning. Kibi and Grey Wolf notice he’s speeding up a bit, and motion for him to slow down. Once settled, he aces the remainder of the first day’s casting. That leaves them with ten hours of downtime. They decide instead to take two months, activating the timeless demi-plane of Cayyat and nipping inside for a few weeks of R&R. (The practical reason they choose this course, is so that Galdifain can have the time to prep her spells, to bind the next powerful monster they encounter.)

The little goblinoid creature Gibbil is there, pleasant as ever, and entirely incognizant that he had previously turned into a hostile dragon. They ask him to cook something without mushrooms.

“I can prepare you a steak,” he says.

Dranko glances at Galdifain. “Don’t mention ‘steak’ around her,” he whispers.



The Company spend a relaxing couple of months, crafting some magic items but also enjoying dips in the lake and sunlit naps on the lodge’s long wooden deck. Galdifain commandeers half of Cayyat’s lab equipment on day one, moves it to a private workshop, and is seldom seen afterward except during meals.

Over dinner one night, Drano asks her how she bound the Thousandfold. “I studied it for eight years,” she says. “I didn’t see it until the moment I bound it, but by then I had read every historical record of the creature, studied everything ever written about it. Eight years.”

“You know we killed it in about two minutes.”

“Yes, I know.”

“How does something like that even get born?” Dranko asks.

“It wasn’t,” says Galdifain. “It was, ironically, created to be a tool of assassination, by the greatest wizard of a world different from yours. You would not have heard of her, but her name was Mannix. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to work. I am doing experimental research and fear I will run out of time.”

By the time their two-month hiatus is over, Galdifain is guardedly optimistic. She has altered the wording on her binding scroll such that she can bind a monster with much less study than is usual, though it won’t work on anything so powerful as an anaxim or the Thousandfold. She’s not certain it will work at all, but shrugs her shoulders. “I’ve done my best.”

They exit Cayyat just before bedtime. The Leaping Circle chamber is as they left it, which is not surprising since they’ve been gone for about a second. As the ritual needs a ten-hour gap, Aravis makes them a *mansion* and they sleep.



Aravis awakes the next morning having had a vision from Belshikun in the Maze.

“I’m not going first. Skulg, you go first.”

One orc turns to another. “Like hell! Braygle should go first. I’ve got rank!”

A smaller, trembling orc shakes his head. “No way. Gezz, you’re the sergeant. And Lord Rekkeret gave you the order, not me. ‘Wait ten minutes, then follow. Or come sooner if you hear the sounds of battle.’ We’ll follow. We’ll follow you.”

Gezz snarls at his task force: a hundred orcs, crouching, hiding in a half-assed way in the trees surrounding a clearing in the woods, waiting for a signal. “Look, you miserable maggots. Rekkeret’s one of the boss’s boys, and he could personally kill every last one of those louse-ridden bandits without breaking a sweat. Chances are, we’ll be mopping up women and children and eating their sheep before the sun goes down. But they’ve proven more resilient than anyone thought, and they’ve been harassing our forces for a week, so Mr. Bloody Plate Mail picked us to be his backup. If it comes to it, and we have to fight, anyone who I think isn’t eagerly hitting the front line is going to have his ears handed to him tonight.”

Skulg, a misshapen orc with a scarred snout, shakes his head. “But what about the rumors? You know, that they’ve got the...”

“Shut up!” yells Gezz. “That’s just a rumor. Any of you utters his name where I can hear it, and I’ll have your tongues on a spit. Do you unders...”

He is interrupted by the sound of someone approaching through the dense forest. “You see?” says Gezz. “Rekkeret’s already back. He and his men probably killed a few dozen of them, and he wants us to get some sport in so we don’t get bored. Skulgl! Get your orcs ready! Klaggl! Tell your...”

Something flies into their clearing and lands with a clanging thud on the ground. All of the orcs grow quiet, and stare, horrified. It’s a severed human head, still wearing its blood-red helmet. “Rekkeret,” breathes Gezz. His hundred orcs are now straining to see through the trees on the far side of the clearing, and most of them are backing up nervously.

Then one orc near the front points a shaking finger at a humanoid form emerging on the opposite edge. “It’s him!” he shouts, heedless of the fate of his tongue. “It’s the Uktul Kan!”

Soon the panicked shout of “Uktul Kan!” is ripping through the orcs, and Gezz is helpless to stop their frenzied retreat.

The others have to explain to Aravis that “Uktul Kan” is Orcish for “pale giant,” and was a nickname given to Tor after he nearly single-handedly wiped out a squad of orcs in one of their earliest adventures. It seems his legend never stopped growing, and that Tor’s skill as a warrior kept pace with it.

Aravis completes the second half of the ritual, and as he nears its conclusion, the others join him in the circle. In the final second before they hop, Morningstar feels *Laramon’s jade clover* heat rapidly in her pocket, just as it had before going through Leaping Circle One. She has little time to ponder this. They Leap.



For each member of the Company, there is an immediate sensation of being squeezed, followed by varying amounts of pain. Morningstar feels the *jade clover* emit a final burst of heat, and then finds she is wedged into a space barely big enough to contain her, arms pinned to her side, rock pressing against her face. Her enclosure is keeping her mostly upright, though her left foot is not touching the ground. She tilts her head down and sees the top of Grey Wolf’s head just grazing her right foot. There is a hurried conference over the mind-link. All of them are in similar straits, arranged in a vertical stack, jammed into a single long crevice, a gruesome human totem-pole. Grey Wolf’s elbow is broken; there wasn’t enough space for his body to arrive safely, and his arm ended up bent back, snapped like a stick. He can’t reach Bostock’s hilt to heal himself; he can’t move at all.

Flicker is not responding to the others’ thoughts. Dranko thinks he sees Flicker beneath his own feet; the little halfling arrived at the bottom of the stack, and from what Dranko can see with his *darkvision*, there wasn’t enough room for Flicker’s body. His legs must either be embedded into the rock, or compressed into a space the size of loaf of bread. Dranko has one healing spell he can cast without moving: *close wounds*, which should keep Flicker alive, briefly, while they figure out what to do.

Kibi knows where they were supposed to arrive, and this isn’t it. They aren’t anywhere close. He casts about with his earth-attuned senses, and his best guess is that there is nothing but solid stone for at least fifty miles in every direction. Scree sinks into the rock to scout and agrees with Kibi’s assessment. But by an amazing stroke of luck, they have arrived in the one tiny fissure where they wouldn’t all be instantly killed.

How did we end up here? thinks Ernie. *What happened to the ritual?*

Seven Dark Words must have sabotaged it somehow, says Aravis.

Right now we need to figure out how we’re getting out of this, thinks Dranko. *Flicker’s not going to live much longer.*

Kibi has an old magic item in his pocket – a *bead of stillness* that allows him to cast any spell, once, without moving. Unable to move his arms enough to cast, he uses that bead to effect *stone shape*, hollowing out the stone around him and his proximate friends enough to give them a little more range of motion. Aravis, near the top of the stack, uses this extra freedom to cast *magnificent mansion*. With great difficulty over fifteen minutes they wriggle upward, one by one falling into the magical doorway. Flicker has to be hauled in unconscious; his legs are indeed a gruesome sight. Morningstar heals him at once while Ernie tends to Grey Wolf’s arm.

They collapse in the foyer, each lying on the ground, panting from exertion and recovering from the claustrophobic horror of the moment. “Son of a bitch!” says Dranko.

Ernie sits up. “Just when I thought I couldn’t hate them more, I hate them even more. I want to kill them, resurrect them, and kill them again!”

Grey Wolf ponders the ritual itself. “It’s possible that Seven Dark Words altered the ritual just enough that it sent us someplace random.”

“But how?” complains Dranko. “The instruction plaque was made of adamant, and it was the original plaque; I cast *know age*, remember?”

“You also licked it,” says Flicker, rubbing his legs. “Did it taste tampered with?”

The main difficulty they face, of course, is that they’re hundreds of miles from anywhere, deep in the center of Abernia, effectively buried alive. After a brief discussion, they decide they have but one option. Kibi will reset reality, using the power granted him by Abernia. The only logistical hurdle is that his power will work best if all his friends are in contact with him, and the narrow crevice would preclude such a formation. But that is a hurdle easily cleared; Kibi exits the *mansion* and immediately casts another couple of *stone shapes*, reforming the fissure into a space more comfortable for standing in a group. Unlike the others, he quite likes it here, in this little pocket of stony solitude. It’s like being folded into a warm, comfortable blanket. He almost fancies he can hear the whispers of the world.

The others follow once he’s ready. Everyone puts their hands on his broad shoulders. “*Abernia*,” he says quietly. “*I’m here. I have a request. We didn’t mean to end up here. Can you please take us back to where we came from? Oh, and if you have some way of getting a message to Tor, saying ‘thank you,’ we’d appreciate it.*”

There is a tremor in the earth, and small flakes of rock break off the walls around them. Energy wells up around Kibi, supplying him with power, or perhaps he is supplying the power himself, he cannot tell. His sense of time distorts, wonderfully. For a heartbeat, all times are the same to him, past, present and future blending into one. He almost feels as though he could move freely through time, as easily as he now can slide through the earth.

But not yet. Time yanks on all of them, rewinding itself. Each member of the Company experiences the last few minutes of their lives, lived in reverse. They are back in the *mansion*, then out of it, squeezed, crushed, then the Leap backward into the ritual chamber, Aravis speaking nonsense, accelerated. Just as he reaches the beginning of the ritual, time snaps back to normal. The room is shaking, as if a small temblor is fading out.

They have not yet travelled, yet somehow they retain memories of their ill-fated journey. “*Thank you*,” Kibi whispers.

“That was... kind of... neat,” says Dranko, disoriented.

Aravis is furious at being tricked by Seven Dark Words. Whatever magics they used to sabotage the Leaping Circle, he’s going to sweep them away. He casts *disjunction*, brushing aside worries that he might destroy the Leaping Circle itself with the knowledge that Kibi could simply rewind time again. His spell blasts outward from the instruction plaque, and he watches it carefully, to see what spells get stripped away. There were only two. One was a minor dweomer of *undetectable aura*, that prevented the second spell from showing up to *detect magic*. The second was a simple illusion, paper-thin, exactly the size and shape of the instruction tablet, covering it with a false set of instructions for the ritual. It had only a visual component, and so went undetected by both Dranko’s tongue and his *know age* spell.

“That was very clever,” says Kibi with a sigh.

Aravis approaches the tablet. The actual instructions are lengthy and complicated; it will take four days to enact, and require all three wizards. “It seemed too easy because it *was* too easy,” he sighs.

“Hooray!” says Dranko. “We sprung the trap!”



The ritual is designed to allow the casters to sleep in shifts over its four-day duration. During Aravis’s first rest break, he sleeps, and he dreams.

“Fire!” A volley of three-hundred seventy-six arrows soars upward.

Two hundred fifty-five miss their target. One hundred twenty-one strike and rebound harmlessly away. None have made a whit of difference. Azhant the Ancient sweeps down over the city of Hydra, the last major city before the Balani Peninsula. He grabs two archers from the top of the northeast tower and idly shatters one of the few remaining ballistae with a contemptuous flick of his tail.

Fires burn here and there throughout the city, where the dragon’s breath has set it alight. The great garden park in the city’s center is rimed over with frost and icicles, and dotted with the frozen corpses of passers-by who had been taken unaware by the dragon’s initial assault. Everywhere, men and women are running in terror, ducking into buildings or shrieking in the streets.

Four nervous-looking wizards stand on the northwest tower. When Azhant’s next pass takes him close, the wizards fire

off the best of their meager arcane arsenal: two *lightning bolts*, a *fireball*, and a *cone of cold*. All of them are negated by the dragon's anti-magic. Seeing their failure the wizards try to retreat back into the tower interior; two make it, but the remaining pair are roasted by another gout of hellfire from the dragon's jaws.

"Where are your heroes?" roars Azhant. "This is child's play! Is there no one here to challenge me? Will I be obliged to leave twenty cities in ruins before someone worthy decides to peek out from beneath his bed?"

In Hydra, at least, there is no one. An hour later the city is largely destroyed or aflame, its walls and towers laid low by the might of the Azhant the Ancient. Satisfied, he takes high to the air and heads northward, following the Saph River toward his next target, the city of Storin.

So much for pleasant visions. "When we get home," says Ernie angrily, "we're going to kick your ass again." He shakes his fist at the ceiling.

"If we get out of here," adds Morningstar, "I'm going to Slay Again."



After four days the wizards finish the ritual, confident that they are not triggering any new traps. As the dust motes fade at the end of the day, the Company gather in the circle, and they Leap.

In the dark, dizzying star-space, the voices whisper to Dranko. "**Do not become!**"

"I'm not going to!" answers Dranko. "I know what it's like. It's a pain in the ass!"

"**Try harder!**" snarls one of the unseen creatures, its voice close in his ear.

"Is there a particular way to Not Become?" he asks it.

"**Stay your ambition.**"

"Dammit!"

They arrive. It is the dust-mote equivalent of dusk. They stand in something akin to a field, the stone floor a gentle ramp that slopes both upward and downward out of their range of vision. The walls and ceiling are far enough away to also be out of view, though the ceiling is supported here and there by natural stone pillars. The ground is covered with artistically arranged rows of fungus. A thin film of water coats the ground, slowly sluicing downward, watering the crops.

"It's a farm," says Ernie. He takes care not to tread on the fungus.

Morningstar casts *true seeing*, and all is as it seems. Kibi takes a moment to gather his bearings, and decides they are where Corriv's equations predicted: 0.8 miles coreward and 97 miles removed laterally from Leaping Circle Nine. The next (and final?) Leaping Circle is another mile below them, and fifty miles away nearly due south.

Aravis creates a *mansion* for them to sleep in, though before they retire, they enjoy the magical feast of entirely non-fungus-based foods. That night he dreams once again, but though this is another vision granted by Belshikun, it is not from the surface of Abernia. He is seeing into someplace else, someplace unique.

The two of them, a man and a woman side by side, watch an enormous red moon rise over a strange sea. They sit on a beach of smooth blue stones, stones that might be solid and might not be, and listen to the slow susurrus of the waves, waves that both are and are not water, waves that both are, and are not.

"I think I'm ready to go back," says the woman.

For a long time, the man says nothing. Then: "I wonder how long we've been here. Time isn't passing, the way we remember it. It's like someone had to invent time for us, and wasn't quite sure how it worked."

"I guess," says the woman. "But I don't think that matters. We fell out of the universe, and here we are, waiting, doing nothing. I think we've been watching the ocean for years now. Haven't we had this conversation hundreds of times?"

"I think so," says the man. "But how can we be sure? Have we always known, or did we figure it out over centuries? That sometimes things come loose? It probably happens in many ways, all unique. The universe didn't have a way to deal with paradoxes, so it created this place, for us wayward bits of flotsam to find purchase, instead of puncturing holes in reality."

"But something has changed," says the woman. "Can you feel it? I think it's time to leave. The universe will let us back in."

It wants us to go back. All we have to do is ask.”

Again the man is quiet for a time. “I’m not sure I want to go back,” he says. “I think terrible things happened to me there, and will probably happen again. It’s not so bad here. Here, I can think my own thoughts.”

“We can’t stay here forever,” says the woman.

“Why not?” asks the man, calmly.

“Because we’re meant to go back,” says the woman. “I know it sounds silly, but after all this time, why do we only now feel it’s even possible to go back? I think it’s because the universe is kicking us out. Like we’ve overstayed our welcome, or that this place is going to disappear, and we’ll be destroyed if we’re still here.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad, either,” says the man.

“Grow up!” says the woman with sudden vehemence. “You can go back and make a difference! You can help those who helped you. And if you get destroyed in the process, you’ll be no worse off, and maybe you’ll have done some good in the end. I saw all of my friends die, you know, over and over again, and each time I knew at the end that we’d failed, and that the whole world – whichever world it was – was screwed. So don’t play the ‘terrible things’ card with me.”

The man gives her a wry smile. “I suppose you’re right. I should go back. We should go back.”

“Good,” says the woman. “And all we have to do is make the decision, and the universe will put us where we belong, wherever that is. It’s time for time to start passing for us again.”

And beneath a night sky made of nothing, in the light of a moon that will soon cease to be, Kay and Sagirop get to their feet.

Tamlyn: Awesome! I was hoping we’d see the mustachio’d one again before the end!

RangerWickett: Kay. Now that’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time. A long time.

Tamlyn: Now we’re just missing Mrs. Horn and the old gang will all be back together.

Everett: I don’t suppose their players came back for the last few sessions?

I’ve no idea if Sagirop is going to give us multiple climactic fights, but I suppose we could have: showdown with the Evil Trio, followed by a final bid to prevent the Adversary from escaping, followed by a return to the surface and a second reckoning with Azhant and the creature that killed King Crunard and Yale and God knows what else...

Quartz: I’m guessing that defeating the Evil Trio will release the Adversary, who will break Yulan’s Barrier, allowing the heroes to escape topside, there will then be a fight with Azhant, then the Emperor, and then the Adversary.

Naturally, Sagirop will not follow this course.

Everett: Yeah, I feel pretty sure that the way they’ll get back to the surface will not be through any mechanism we already know (Yulan’s barrier) – it’ll stem from the prophecy.

I remain skeptical as to how the Company could actually have melee combat with the Adversary.

Chronikoce: [And beneath a night sky made of nothing, in the light of a moon that will soon cease to be, Kay and Sagirop get to their feet.] That bit actually sent a shiver through me. I still can’t believe I found such an amazing story on an RPG forum. I cannot thank this group enough and Sagirop especially for taking the time to write this all up. Truly awesome.



Mind Cows

Everyone agrees that the vision of Sagirop and Kay is promising, if also confusing. “First Tor, now Kay!” says Ernie, with a big smile.

“Hooray for allies,” says Dranko. “Next thing you know, we’ll find out Mrs. Horn is an archmage!”

“Maybe the three of them will start an adventuring team,” says Morningstar.

“That will kill the dragon!” adds Dranko.

Cheered up by their optimistic banter, they pack up and exit the mansion, back to the fungus farm. This time they find it being worked, by dozens of small gnome-like creatures with pale yellow skin and bushy black hair. They wear simple clothing and wield metal tools. The tallest among cannot be more than four feet tall. As each notices the Company stepping out of the doorway of the mansion, they drop their tools and stare in shock, then inch toward one another. The nearest of these creatures huddle and start whispering.

Morningstar is the last to exit. When the little gnomes see her, they stop their whispering and drop to their knees, eyes bulging wide. “Uh... hello?” she says to them.

"H... hello," one says back, voice trembling.

"We're not here to hurt you," Morningstar assures her.

"We know," says the gnome. "You don't look like a Great One, but you are. We can all see it."

"I'm sorry," says Morningstar, "but I am confused."

"You are a Dream Lord, are you not?"

Oh! "Yes, I do walk in Dream," she says.

"Of course you do. But you are unlike the others. You are... small. And you don't have horns."

The whole party have the same idea at once. Mind cows! The purported enemies of the Keffet who crowd *Ava Dormo*. "I have heard that there are mind cows," says Morningstar. "Dream cows, I mean."

The gnome is puzzled. "Cows?"

"With horns," says Morningstar.

"Yes, the Egannic. The Dream Lords!"

"How large are they?"

The gnome regards Morningstar. "Two of you high," she decides.

"Those are big cows," says Ernie.

"Can you see into *Ava Dormo*?" asks Morningstar. "Into the Dreamworld?"

Again the gnome looks confused. "You... live there, don't you?"

"I spend time there," says Morningstar.

"She lives in our world, this world," explains Dranko. "She just visits *Ava Dormo*."

"We've never seen you there when we sleep," says the gnome.

Morningstar tries again to explain what she is. "I worship a Goddess of the Time of Sleep," she says.

"You... worship? No, no, no! We worship you!"

"I'd just go with it," says Kibi with a grin. He's been here before. "See where it goes."

"You worship the Dream Lords?" asks Morningstar. "The Egannic?"

"Yes! They are so good to us. They teach us. They put in our heads the ways of the fungus. They give us peace and rest. Safety. Everything. They are all around us, but we only see them in sleep." The gnome's voice is reverent, almost a chant as she enumerates the blessings of the Egannic.

"Let's try to get out of here doing as little damage to their theology as possible," Ernie murmurs.

Curious, Morningstar asks, "What do they protect you from?"

The gnome thinks. "We... don't know. No danger comes, because they protect us. Our land is one of peace and happiness. We farm our fungus, and build great statues to the Dream Lords."

"Say," says Dranko, "did three people with red armor and black robes come through here a few months ago?"

"We did not see anyone like that."

"They would have been mean," Ernie prompts.

"Oh, no, the Dream Lords would have protected us from anyone like that!" The gnome looks at Ernie, then back to Morningstar. "Are these your servants?"

Morningstar smiles. "These are my companions."

"They are very lucky."

"We are on a very important mission," says Morningstar. "Together."

“Can we assist you?”

At Aravis’s urging, Morningstar asks, “Do you know of the Leaping Circles? One of them brought us to here, to your farm. Have others appeared here?”

“No. We have not seen anyone but you and your ser... your companions.”

The Company decide that the Evil Trio would most likely have ignored these people entirely, which is all for the best.

“When we sleep,” asks the gnome, “will we see you? In the land of the Dream Lords? That is your home, isn’t it?”

Morningstar shakes her head. “No, that is not my home.”

“But you have been there, surely! It is a paradise of fungus, and clear pools, and jeweled caverns, and peaceful worship. We go there every night, to bask in the warmth of the Dream Lords.”

“And do you provide anything to the Dream Lords by worshipping them?” asks Ernie.

“What could they possibly need from us? We pray to them, and sometimes we sing hymns of adoration. We pray to them for guidance, knowledge and protection, all of which they grant.”

“We have heard there is another race at war with your Dream Lords,” says Morningstar, thinking of the Keffet, particularly the little insane one, Checkle.

The gnome is shocked. “Who would dare such a thing? Surely you have heard incorrectly!”

“I must have.”

Dranko clears his throat. “The Dream Lord is passing through, and requires a guide. We would like to say hello to your leader, so she can properly bestow her blessings.”

The gnome nods gravely and speaks to Morningstar. “Is this acceptable to you?”

Morningstar throws a glare at her husband. “Of course.”

“She will be honored to meet you.”

They start walking downslope. The gnome says, “Please be careful not to tread upon the fungus,” then realizes that may have been presumptuous, and so adds, “Is it pleasing to you?”

“It’s the most beautiful fungus I’ve ever seen,” Morningstar assures her.

“With the Dream Lords’ help, we have perfected the ways of fungus farming. It serves all of our needs, from subsistence to architecture to art.”

“Can you take messages to the Dream Lords while you sleep?” Morningstar asks.

“We would not speak directly to them, no! Not even our leader would presume so much.”

They are led down the slope of the farm, through a series of caves filled with a variety of fungus farms. One cavern has images of “dream cows,” statues twenty feet high, grown out of a fungus that has been engineered to resemble orange marble. The Dream Lords are not actually cows; the statues are of huge robed minotaurs. They remind the Company of Horny, the bouncer employed at the Eye of the Storm in Het Branoi.

The gnomish creatures, called the Navni, live in small individual caves. The leader, a woman named **Epp**, lives in one hardly larger than most. They find her facing the back of the cave, kneeling before an idol of a Dream Lord, a statuette grown of carefully tended fungus. Their guide clears her throat. “We have visitors who would like to meet you.”

Epp turns around. “I’m sorry to disturb you...” Morningstar begins, but Epp falls again to her knees.

“A Dream Lord in the waking world!” she cries. “Have I displeased you in some way?”

“No! No, I’m...”

“You are different,” says Epp. “Are you an enforcer?” Her mouth quivers.

“No, I am a protector.”

“You have shown proper deference,” says Dranko. “You may now stand.”

Epp doesn't stand. She looks questioningly at Morningstar, who nods. "Please stand up."

"The Dream Lord has come to accept your blessings," says Dranko, "and to tell you they please her. But also, that we need a guide to a thing called a Leaping Circle."

"What is a Leaping Circle?" asks Epp.

"A large circle that allows one to travel a long distance, instantly," says Morningstar.

"Is it made of fungus?"

"No, it's made of metal," says Aravis. "They are thousands of years old."

But Epp has no knowledge of the Leaping Circles, and, when asked, has not seen or heard anything about the Evil Trio passing through the Navni territory.

"They are my enemies," says Morningstar, speaking of the Black Circle adherents. "And enemies of the Dream Lords."

"The why have you not annihilated them already?" asks Epp.

"Because we haven't caught up with them yet," explains Aravis.

"But when we do," Dranko assures her, "Morningstar will smite them."

"It's hard to contemplate that the Dream Lords *have* any enemies," says Epp, frowning. "But perhaps the Dream Lords can tell you about them, or about your Leaping Circle. Tonight you should visit them."

"Couldn't we do it now?" asks Dranko.

"No!" Epp is horrified at the thought. "You may only visit them in your sleep, after dark-dust."

Morningstar and her companions talk with Epp for another hour. They learn that the Navni have no immediate neighbors; their territory only comprises a hundred square miles or so, but no other races border their lands. The Dream Lords have warned the Navni not to venture too far afield, lest they be unable to protect them properly.

Dranko asks unabashedly if the Navni have a store of gemstones he might have. When his friends protest, he declaims that when they regain the surface, the gems will help rebuild whatever remains of Charagan. He and Flicker are allowed to scavenge from the Navni's collections of emeralds, which they use to adorn the statues of the Egannic.

At lunchtime a number of Navni bring in a feast of fungus for Morningstar to sample, and they have truly performed some culinary miracles. The fungus is of a wonderful variety of tastes and textures, and the Company chow down appreciatively. They spend the rest of the day walking with Epp through the Navni territory, heading southward, as that is the general direction of the next Leaping Circle. As they travel, Morningstar asks Epp if she knows about the Sister Gods, Yavin and Wlaqua.

"Yes," says Epp gravely. "They are the False Gods. The Dream Lords have warned us about them. We do not venerate them, and we have never seen them here. Yes, we know that they are very powerful beings, and we are wise to fear them, but they are not worthy of worship. They are merely powerful mortals."

"The mission we have been sent on is very dire," Morningstar explains. "And as part of it, the balance between Yavin and Wlaqua has become unbalanced. Wlaqua has become far more powerful."

"That is no concern of ours," says Epp. "The Dream Lords clearly can protect us from them, keeping any harm from us."

Maybe they can, thinks Aravis over the mind-link. *We don't know how powerful these Dream Lords really are.*

The pass through dozens of caverns and tunnels, many adorned with statues of Dream Lords, including four different temples dedicated to them.

"The Dream Lords are very lucky to have you as worshipers," says Morningstar.

"And you really do have a way with fungus," says Dranko.

"It sustains us," says Epp serenely, "so we sustain it."

"You're fungamancers!" says Dranko.



At dark-dust, the Navni all scuttle off to bed at once, eager to enjoy the paradise of the Dream Lords that they experience each

night. Morningstar speculates that they don't actually go to *Ava Dormo*, but that the Dream Lords grant them pleasant, if ordinary, dreams. She'll know soon enough if she's right. When all the Navni have gone to sleep, they backtrack to the nearest shrine, and Morningstar brings the entire Company with her into *Ava Dormo*.

The place they find themselves in is spacious and pleasantly lit. This is not the densely-packed territory of the Keffet. They are in a large temple, though one without any images of minotaurs. The walls are carved with rows of abstract shapes of varying hues. There is a domed glass ceiling, and light shines down through it, not the dust-mote light, but something more like true sunlight.

The temple is also under construction, being expanded by twenty-odd hard-working Navni, sweating as they labor with picks and shovels, chisels and trowels. And several tall shirtless minotaurs, male and female, lounge about on the steps and in chairs, eating fruit. Two Navni are carefully painting artistic patterns on the backs of one of the minotaurs.

The Dream Lords note the Company's arrival, but none of them stir to offer any greetings. One of them does nod respectfully to Morningstar, then raises an eyebrow at her companions. ♦ *You are new*, ♦ that one thinks to her. Its voice is entirely telepathic; there is no vocal component at all.

"My name is Morningstar, and I am from very far away."

The minotaur makes a face. ♦ *Your name is... coarse. Why is that?* ♦

"Define 'coarse.'"

♦ *It is not constructed properly*, ♦ says the Dream Lord. ♦ *My name is...* ♦ It does not utter a name, but projects a pattern into Morningstar's mind, connected with an abstract thought construction, partially a red diamond, partially the idea of a musical note.

"That is very lovely," says Morningstar.

♦ *Thank you.* ♦

"As I said, I am from very far away."

♦ *I would like to hear more*, ♦ says Red Diamond. ♦ *But before we continue, how would you like your slaves put to work?* ♦ It motions pointedly to the others.

"I would like my companions to stay with me," says Morningstar.

♦ *That is uncouth.* ♦

Dranko, don't say anything, thinks Ernie quietly.

"Is it disrespectful to you that they stay?" asks Morningstar.

♦ *That they remain here, standing in our presence, as equals? Do you even need to ask such a question?* ♦

I so want to kick its ass, thinks Dranko.

One of the other Dream Lords takes a bite out of a piece of fruit, then lazily waves a huge hand. A freestanding stone wall appears next to Morningstar. ● *Perhaps you could ask them to stand behind that, so we don't have to look at them.* ●

Morningstar gives her friends an apologetic look. They reluctantly stand behind the wall, not wanting to rock the boat. Ernie sticks out his tongue.

♦ *Morningstar, you need a proper symbol by which we will address you*, ♦ says Red Diamond.

She fills her mind with the power and presence of Ell. "I am Morningstar, and I am Ell's Shield," she says. "Will that suffice?"

One of the Dream Lords inches backward just a bit, but Red Diamond nods. ♦ *We will call you...* ♦ He projects into her mind a black triangle, connected with a mental construct of divinity and darkness.

▼ *That will do nicely*, ▼ says Morningstar.

♦ *Why are you here?* ♦ asks Red Diamond.

One of the Navni brings over a golden tray of crystal water goblets. She takes one and sips. ▼ *Are you aware of the shifting of power in the waking world? The imbalance between Yavin and Wlaqua?* ▼

Red Diamond is confused. ♦ *You mean in the dreaming, not the waking world. But yes, there are constant struggles for power, in that cesspool of a place that those creatures go when they dream.* ♦ He waves vaguely at the Navni working on the nearest wall of the temple. ♦ *But they are not our concern. We have felt it out, explored it a bit in days long past, but it is not a place for the genteel.* ♦

Well isn't that interesting. The Dream Lords consider *Ava Dormo* to be the "real" world, and the waking world to be the "dream" world! *That's why that little kobold was so confused about waking versus dreaming,* thinks Morningstar to her friends.

To Red Diamond, she says, ▼ *I am on a mission from Ell, my Goddess, a mission of great concern to her.* ▼ She projects to her hosts the sense she has when near to the Adversary's blood. ▼ *A divine being of great evil has penetrated... the Dreaming.* ▼ Red Diamond nods and yawns. ▼ *In your sleep, do you dream?* ▼ Morningstar asks.

♦ *There are some eccentric explorers among us, who have explored the land of dreams to a small extent.* ♦

▼ *And if the land of dreams was destroyed, how would that affect you?* ▼

♦ *I assume it would have an adverse effect on the Navni. We would need to find a new source of labor, for tasks which are beneath us. For instance, it would be uncouth for us to paint ourselves.* ♦ He motions to one of the Navni engaged in body-painting. ♦ *You do such lovely work,* ♦ he tells his servant. The Navni looks blissful at being complimented, as though there were no higher honor it could be afforded. Most of the Navni, however, the ones engaged in manual labor, do not look happy. They look exhausted. There are no signs of pools or paradise.

▼ *That evil being has three servants abroad in your lands,* ▼ says Morningstar. ▼ *Three people in black robes or red armor, very rude, very uncouth. Do you know of them?* ▼

♦ *Interesting that you would speak of them,* ♦ says Red Diamond. ♦ *Two Spirals spoke of something similar, months ago, during one of his excursions into the dreaming.* ♦

▼ *I'd like to speak with him.* ▼

♦ *One moment.* ♦ Red Diamond vanishes, and returns a moment later with a second minotaur. Her companion is less kempt than his fellows, with no fancy tattoos. He projects his name into her head: two perpendicular silver spirals along with a notion of curiosity and knowledge. Morningstar asks him if he has met the Evil Trio.

▢ *I wouldn't say met,* ▢ says Two Spirals. ▢ *I observed them, from a distance. I sensed they were dangerous, even though they were only in the dream world.* ▢

▼ *What were they doing when you observed them?* ▼

▢ *They were traveling, through tunnels in the dreaming. I followed them. They arrived at a place like a large ring set in the ground. They went in and vanished. I've thought nothing of them since.* ▢

▼ *And how do we get there? To the ring set in the ground?* ▼

▢ *You mean if you were in the dreaming? Like this.* ▢ Two Spirals projects a map into her head, finely detailed, showing the various tunnels and shafts one would need to traverse to reach what is presumably Leaping Circle Two.

▼ *Thank you,* ▼ says Morningstar. She has what she came from, but has a few more questions for her hosts. ▼ *What do you do when the Navni are asleep?* ▼

▢ *Pursue our creative interests,* ▢ says Two Spirals. ▢ *We compose music, write poetry, build our own temples. Carve sculptures. We advance ourselves. Become enlightened. Hone our abilities to control reality.* ▢

Morningstar brings up another topic. ▼ *We met a people who called themselves the Keffet...* ▼

Red Diamond projects a feeling of disgust and contempt. ♦ *We have been at war with those nasty little things for as long as anyone can remember.* ♦

▼ *You actually fight?* ▼

♦ *Yes, we have a warrior caste by necessity. We are more powerful, but the Keffet are more numerous, and our ability to change reality is somewhat diminished in their territory. But they are no great threat to us, and eventually we will win the war against them. My understanding, which I admit is not great because I find the subject distasteful, is that we are making slow but gradual progress toward wiping them out. Which is no less than they deserve. They are filthy, rude, unintelligent, warlike.* ♦

There seems to be nothing more to be gained by spending more time with the Egannic. Morningstar thanks them for their time.

▣ *It has been an interesting experience to meet you,*▣ says Two Spirals. ▣ *We have not seen anything like you before, and so our knowledge of the world is increased, and for that we thank you.*▣

Morningstar returns the Company to the waking world. They decide not to disabuse the Navni of what the Dream Lords are like, though they are appalled at the manner in which the little gnomes are exploited. It's one more thing for the list; after they've saved the world, they want to come back to the Navni and set things right. But for now, it's on to the next Leaping Circle. Morningstar knows the way.



Everett: Odd to think that if updates continue at this rate, the Story Hour will come to an end in a couple weeks. There actually won't be ANY MORE Sagiro updates to look forward to, ever again? I'll never log into ENWorld again? Weird.

RangerWickett: Nah, it'll just be like the classic days when Sagiro was busier. Every month or so I'd think, "Hey, remember that awesome Story Hour? I wonder if there are any updates!" And I'd check, and there wouldn't be, but it'd be okay, because the stuff that was already there was great.

It'll be like that, except less guilt for Sagiro.

carborundum: What are you guys playing now, Sagiro? Are you... ahem... recording it? :-)

Neurotic: Why don't you look for the Halmae saga, lazybones or some other great writers?

Everett: I've looked at other Story Hours from time to time. Some of them seem interesting, but the truth is that I've never seen another story that's as across-the-board excellent as Sagiro's is. In terms of writing, plotting – Sagiro's writing is clear and moves through complex dialectical arguments without ever being dull or pedantic. (This is also to the players' credit, of course. I'm thinking of the episode when the Company had sworn to give up the Crosser's Maze, but couldn't do because it was part of Aravis's physiology. Ernie uttered an on-the-spot profundity: "Wanting the Crosser's Maze is like wanting the ocean. 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.")

The fights are filled with D&D specific-mechanics, but the mechanics never overpower the storytelling, as they do in many other campaigns; the mechanics instead serve plot points that actually mean something. Think of the Company's transition from low to high-level play, which was marked by the archmages giving up their powers, leaving the Company as Charagan's predominant heroes. Think of how that was mirrored by the transition we just saw into epic level play, after the Thousandfold, when the Company was supported by Abernia itself. Memorable villains – Moirel, Condor, Shreen, Belshikun, Octesian – and characters who only serve a particular story arc feel just as individual and real. Praska, Mokad, the divine animal-rings of Abernia...

Even one-shot characters linger in the mind. There's a woman who appeared for half a page, in Bakersfield, before the "lightless room" and One Certain Step's sacrifice, who I've never forgotten. I just looked her up (StevenAC's collected makes it pretty easy to find this stuff) – her name was Spindra. She believed that everyone there was suffering their deserved punishment because they had all been consigned to hell. She had no particular plot function to serve, but her presence for half a page added volumes of dimension and depth to my engagement with the story.

It's just the best thing ever.

Vargo: I've been on ENWorld since before the release of D&D 3.0. I've stopped playing pen & paper RPGs (lack of time/group) but I've been coming back for this Story Hour (and I'd come back for Piratecat's if he ever started writing again) – when it passes, it's going to be the end of an era for me.

Cerebral Paladin: I hope that at some point Sagiro will start up a new campaign. This Story Hour may be approaching its end, but that doesn't necessarily mean the end of Sagiro Story Hours in general.

Sagiro: Thank you all, as always, for the nice comments! But if you're enjoying reading the Story Hour, you largely have yourselves to blame; now that the game is over, I'm mostly writing it because I know so many people are having fun reading it. And also, because if I didn't finish it, StevenAC would likely fly to America and beat me to a pulp...

StevenAC: Ha. No, I'd simply leave the incomplete Story Hour page there, nagging at you with its insistent little "...to be continued..." at the bottom like a loose tooth... My career in software development has made me far too familiar with working on large, multi-year projects that don't reach a satisfying conclusion (or if they do, I've already moved on to another job) to be dismayed about it. Now that this one is actually within reach of the finish line, I'm not quite sure how to react...

Admittedly, when the Collected Story Hour was first made available (exactly eleven years ago today, believe it or not!), I had no conception of just how *big* the story would end up being (right now, over 1400 pages, and still some more to go...). But it really has been a pure pleasure to gradually collect the pieces of this wonderful construction that both you and the players should be very proud of; in fact, thanks to the quality of the writing and the ever-fascinating twists of the adventure itself, making this compilation has been one of my favourite things I've ever done.

Piratecat: Sagiro is notorious for loving practical jokes. If he updates right to the very final post, and then never updates again, please don't say that I never warned anyone...

Sagiro: Now there's a Rule One violation if ever I heard one! (Rule One: Never give the GM any ideas.)

Kaodi: I must be behind the times on rule numbering too. I always thought the rules started:

Rule #1: The DM is always right.

Rule #2: See Rule #1.

Everett: So we can "largely" blame ourselves and we can "minutely" blame you? I think I want percentages on that.

And please – if StevenAC won't do it, I will take the bus to Boston and give Sagiro a stern talking-to!



Checkle's Bargain

The Navni all wake at the same time the next morning, refreshed for another day, having dreamed their dreams of paradise. The Company briefly consider telling them the truth, that the Dream Lords effectively enslave them for nine hours every night, but

decide against it. While they agree that what the Egannic are doing is morally wrong, it is not so heinous as to throw two civilizations into chaos putting an end to it. And the Navni do lead peaceful, happy lives, and are sent back to the waking world each morning with pleasant memories.

Kibi wonders what would happen if they woke a Navni prematurely, assuming that the Egannic alter their memories at the end of each night's sleep. "You'd probably ruin the life of that one Navni," says Aravis. "The others wouldn't believe him."

The Company bid a farewell to Epp. She and several other Navni nearby all bow low to Morningstar and wish her good fortune. Morningstar now has in her head a perfect map showing how to reach Leaping Circle Two, and it doesn't seem difficult. The first stage involves winding through the remainder of the southern portion of the Navni territory, which takes them through long stretches of caves and fields, tunnels and temples. In one of these, a half dozen Navni have nearly finished a thirty-foot tall statue of a Dream Lord, constructed out of a clever melding of fungus and stone. Baskets of fungus are already piled at the statue's feet, along with a scattering of emeralds and khet chips.

One of the sculptors approaches Morningstar, tentatively, not looking her in the eye. "Your name is Morningstar, yes? Would you like a statue of you? How would you like it to look? Tall? In a certain pose?"

Morningstar considers. "If you want to record that I have been here, how about making an image of this." She presents her triangle shield. "It's what is most important to me." She tells them about Ell, and what She stands for. The Navni are confused to think that Morningstar worships something greater than herself, but they accept her request.

The party move on, and the Navni population thins as they approach the outskirts of their territory. As they reach one of the last cave-homes, an old Navni waves to them. "Are you going that way?" he asks, motioning to a wide tunnel snaking away and downward. "You should be careful."

"Oh? Why?" asks Dranko.

"Our lands used to stretch for many more miles in that direction. Our kingdom was once three times the size it is now. But we abandoned those places. There are Cloakers there. They are creatures that look like blankets, and cling to the ceiling, and will drop upon you. Be wary of them."

"Thank you," says Aravis. "We appreciate the warni..."

A little ball of orange flame flares up in midair, in the midst of the gathered Company. "Not this again," says Grey Wolf.

It's the same size as before, slightly larger than an apple. But this time it grows brighter and dimmer, brighter and dimmer, slowly strobing, and makes a crackling sound. "Are you friend or foe?" Ernie asks it. There is no response, though it hisses and spits out a few small sparks. "Who are you?" asks Dranko. It vanishes.

Morningstar immediately casts both *detect thoughts* and *thought capture*, but both spells come up empty. Kibi opines that the flame reminds him of a scrying sensor, though it's obviously more than just that. "Maybe it's Kay and Sagirop trying to find us?" But that wouldn't make sense. The timing doesn't work, and neither Kay nor Sagirop have that sort of casting ability.

The Company pass out of the Navni's little kingdom, Morningstar leading the way as they navigate a complex system of tunnels, caves, and steep stairwells. Once, long ago, the Navni occupied all of this space. Did they really flee from Cloakers? Or did the Egannic convince them to become more consolidated, in order to better take advantage of their somnolent slave-labor? They get a clue to the answer part way through the day, as they enter a tall cavern on the floor of which are twenty-odd bundles, small bones protruding from them. Each in the Company instinctively looks up to check for Cloakers, but the twenty-five foot ceiling is clear.

Dranko moves to check out the bundles. He sees that they are not the past victims of Cloakers, but rather the Cloakers themselves. They're thicker than the Thousandfold, like rubber sheets. Each one has a hole burned right through its middle. Some of the bodies are also wounded in more conventional ways, slashed or crushed or burned in other places, but someone methodically burned out the heart of each one. Could Meledien be growing stronger each time she vaporizes the soul of a living being?

"I think they're sending us a message," says Grey Wolf.



There are no further signs of Cloakers after that. Perhaps when the Navni fled the region, the Cloakers also migrated away in search of sustenance. Two hours later the light motes fade, and Aravis casts their nightly *magnificent mansion*. He dreams.

A small bronze urn rests upon an altar to Pikon. Members of the Spire surround it. Lady Cornelia, High Priestess of Pikon,

lifts her hand from the lid of the urn. “He does not wish to return. He has made the ultimate sacrifice for his kingdom, and is at peace.”

Salk bows his head. “He did his job, and did it well.” To the urn, he speaks softly. “Farewell, Octavius. You were truly a master of your craft, and a good man as well.”

Fylnius turns to Belinda the Diviner. “Will Naradawk believe it?”

“I think so,” says Belinda. “I’m not pretending to know what Naradawk might do to ascertain the truth, but I think he’s more likely to question the assassin, and the assassin certainly believes what it saw. Also, I had a final trick up my sleeve; a special anti-divinatory that Chiswick told me I’d need for this sort of occasion. If anyone can keep Naradawk from the truth, even for a while, it’s him.”

“Good, good,” says Duke Nigel. “The Vault of Scrolls has been emptied, its contents distributed. I gather that our forces on Nahalm are hard-pressed. Kynder Hold has been sacked, and now Hae Kalkas is sorely besieged. Some of the scrolls have been teleported there. Others have been sent to Sand’s Edge; our scouts report fifteen thousand orcs marching southward or riding the Norlin River on barges. A few scrolls have been sent to High Priestess Rhiavonne in Kallor, and now she seems more confident that they can repel an invasion with the assistance of the troops from Dimres and Dimrelor. And the final half-dozen or so have gone to the strike team.”

King Crunard IV, very much alive, walks to the body of Octavius Hightower and kneels before it. “You rest now where our debt to you cannot be repaid. May the Gods reward you properly.”

There is a moment of silence, before Belinda speaks again. “If you don’t mind my asking, how did you discover that Yale had been replaced by a monster? My guild has been wary of the Emperor infiltrating the Spire ever since his arrival, and we have had no inkling at all.”

King Crunard smiles grimly. “We’ve known since the moment it arrived. After every Spire meeting, we’ve had it taken in secret to Rhiavonne in Kallor to have its memories modified. It thinks we believe Naradawk is a demon, and that Ozilish’s group was sent to the Abyss to learn how to stop him. It thinks we have no idea what we’re really up against. It even thinks it’s been spying on us much longer than it really has. But the most important thing was for Naradawk to believe the Scrolls had been destroyed, which it seems likely he now does.”

Belinda frowns. “But how did you discover Yale had been replaced in the first place?”

The King smiles again. “Naradawk may be powerful, but we have our own ally that may be his equal. Parthol Runecarver told me. He even knew the day that the monster was going to kill me. When I asked Parthol why he was helping us, he gave the same answer as before: that Naradawk is merely a servant of the Adversary, and neither is likely to do Abernia any good in the long run. As such, he dislikes Naradawk Skewn just as much as we do. The enemy of my enemy, as they say.”

The High Stormknight Dalesandro snorts. “But we still can’t trust him, can we?”

“No,” says Salk. “But we need him. If he can help defend against Naradawk and his allies, we’ll take that help. If and when Naradawk is no more, we can place Parthol under greater scrutiny.”

There is much cheering the next morning when Aravis retells his latest vision. The Spire is not so helpless against Naradawk as it seemed, and that’s two promising dreams in a row.

Anxe: The party cheered? My immediate thought was that the Yale monster is now pretending to be the King.

Sagiro: Briefly: Octavius Hightower was the leader of the Starshine Players, who served as spies for Dranko’s thieves’ guild. In that capacity he was a master of disguise. In case it wasn’t clear from Aravis’s vision, the Spire had known (from Parthol) that a monster had killed Yale and was impersonating her. They knew its job was to gain the King’s trust, and by extension access to the Spire’s store of ancient and powerful scrolls. They allowed the monster to think it was succeeding, going so far as to have Octavius pretend to be the King so that the monster could kill him, thus making certain that it would report back to Naradawk, with utter surety, that it had carried out its mission.

Anxe: Oh... I thought he was just another casualty. Cool!

Everett: So Octavius knew he was going to his death? That’s exceedingly selfless of him, for a Player – must have been quite the noble soul, then?



Wind walk has stopped working, this far beneath the surface. Kibi can feel a palpable increase in the ambient Earth Magic, and it thrills him. The *Pulse of Abernia* warms his fingers when he holds it. Traveling by *phantom steed*, they arrive at the proper coordinates of Leaping Circle Two at mid-day. There’s a final tunnel that presumably leads to it, but its ceiling has been deliberately collapsed.

“Did Meledien think this would slow us down?” asks Dranko.

“It wasn’t her,” says Kibi, looking at the tumbled stones. “This cave-in is decades old at least.”

Someone has cleared out the rocks at the top of the pile, allowing one to crawl along just beneath the fractured ceiling. It couldn’t scream out “trap” any louder, so they send Scree under the rockfall to see how far it goes. *The collapse goes on about thirty feet, he reports. There’s a big circular room on the other side of it, with a Leaping Circle in it. Only the tunnel is collapsed; the Leaping Circle is undamaged. I don’t see any Cloakers, or anything else dangerous. There are four other tunnels leading out of the Leaping Circle room, but they’re all caved in like ours.*

Still untrusting of the situation, Dranko casts *omen of peril* to see if there’s danger upcoming, and gets a result of SAFETY. Ernie casts *true seeing* and inspects the rubble, while Aravis casts *greater arcane sight* and does the same. There are no magical auras on this side of the cave-in, or anything concealed magically. Aravis uses his staff to make a *passwall* tunnel through to the Leaping Circle room, and once Dranko and Flicker are through they sweep the place for physical traps. It’s clear. Other than the five truncated corridors leading out of it, the only feature in the room is the fifty-foot-diameter Leaping Circle set into the floor.

What’s missing, Kibi realizes, is an instruction tablet. There’s no sign that there ever was one. Hmm. He casts *stone tell* and queries the wall of the room. **HELLO, KIBILHATHUR, says the stone. IT’S AN HONOR TO SPEAK WITH YOU.**

Hello, says Kibi. **Could you tell me if anyone arrived here recently, other than us?**

THREE PEOPLE WERE HERE, NOT LONG AGO BY OUR STANDARDS BUT MAYBE BY YOURS. THEY WENT INTO THE METAL CIRCLE AND DISAPPEARED.

Do you know what they did to make themselves disappear?

ONE OF THEM WAS SPEAKING ALOUD FOR SEVERAL DAYS. JUST LIKE OTHER PEOPLE USED TO DO, LONG AGO.

Was that person reading something?

No, I DON’T THINK SO.

Did they collapse or destroy anything?

NO. THEY CRAWLED OVER THE RUBBLE, COMING FROM THE SAME WAY AS YOU. THREE BIPEDS, LIKE YOU. A SHORT ONE, AND TWO TALLER ONES. ONE OF THE TALLER ONES SPOKE FOR SEVERAL DAYS, WAVING HIS ARMS. HE HAD A CROWN OF METAL UPON HIS HEAD.

Not helpful. **Do you know how we might activate the Circle?** Kibi asks.

HAVE YOU TRIED CHANTING AND WAVING YOUR ARMS?

Kibi sighs. He runs his fingers along the wall, feeling the deep-bones power of Abernia. **You are good rock**, he says. **When someone vanishes out of the Circle, are you involved in its magic?**

NO, NO. I DO NOT WISH TO GO ANYWHERE. I AM ONE PLACE, AND THIS IS IT. KIBILHATHUR, YOU ALSO UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ONE PLACE, BUT NOT YET.

Before Kibi can ask the stone about this cryptic comment, there is a popping sound behind him. Someone has appeared in the room with them. It’s Checkle, the little half-mad kobold creature that last appeared in the Drevin’s feasting hall.

The creature – a Keffet – looks around with quick, twitchy motions. “Hi. Hi. Oh, good, it’s you. Right. I knew it would be. Are you awake yet?”

Morningstar regards him curiously. “I am awake.”

“Are you sure? I have to tell you something, but one of us is still sleeping, and I don’t know who.”

“Just tell us,” says Dranko impatiently.

“Yes, yes,” says Checkle. “It’s that... I... we’re going to... oh, it’s all so much clearer when I’m awake. But it’s important. I said before you would need something from me, and now is when you need it, and I still have it! So here I am, awake for you, and sleeping.” Checkle pauses, rubs his eyes, tugs on his stringy hair. He looks imploringly at Morningstar. “Can you quiet my mind, please? It’s very loud in here, and confusing, and I don’t know which is the waking part and which is the sleeping part anymore. But there are a lot of things I know, and one of those things you need to know, so if you could just quiet me down a bit... I’d appreciate that...”

Morningstar quickly drops into *Ava Dormo*, thinking Checkle might be there as well, but the immediate Dreamscape is empty. “You can do something, I know it!” Checkle shouts at her. “But don’t go to sleep. If you do, they’ll get you! You know what I’m talking about.”

Morningstar nods. “So you know the truth about the Mind Cows?”

“Yes, I do! And I’m going to tell you that truth! But you are not asleep, and I am not awake. But soon I will be. It’s so noisy here I can’t think, but I have it all here.” The Keffet taps his head knowingly.

Ernie and Aravis can see there’s no magic on Checkle, no spell causing him to be here. “What do you need to tell me?” Morningstar asks, soothingly.

“I... almost know what it is. I knew it a minute ago, and I’ll know it again soon. I’ll have to fall back asleep for that. It’s so hard to think while I’m awake.”

Morningstar has an idea. She bestows *protective sleep* upon him, and then brings him into *Ava Dormo* with her. He immediately wakes up, and the edge of confusion is gone from his voice, though he’s still twitchy and a bit manic. He looks about. “Thank you. Now I’m home. Except that... I’m not. I understand it now. It’s all about the Egannic and us. That’s why we ended up the way we did. Nobody remembers anymore, except for me. We’ve all been born again too many times. We’ve always... no, not always. For a long, long time we’ve been at war with the Egannic. Once upon a time we were all awake. But we were powerful in Dream, the Keffet and the Egannic, so powerful. We would war in the waking world, and war in the Dreaming. Two fronts.”

Morningstar motions for him to continue. “But the Dreaming war was more important,” says Checkle. “In the Dreaming, you could affect the waking, more easily than the other way around. So we started sending in permanent dreamers to do battle. We’d put people into permanent sleep, ageless, staying in *Ava Dormo* forever. We did that more and more, and so did the Egannic. Eventually, the last of us, and the last of them, went to sleep. And the fighting didn’t stop. We are all asleep, and they are all asleep, whole races hidden away, sleeping and fighting forever in the Dreaming. And each side thinks that the other has some artifact, or power, or source, that is why we cannot kill them. You kill them, and they come back. But that’s not what’s happening! As soon as someone dies, we go right back in. Our minds may return to our sleeping bodies for the smallest of fractions of seconds, and then we’re back, fighting again. We don’t realize that we’re dying, and we don’t understand why the Egannic keep returning.”

“Your bodies don’t die of old age?” asks Morningstar.

“We’re in stasis. We have to be. It’s the only way to make it work. We are all of us in stasis, in giant caverns built to house our sleeping bodies. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, and nobody knows but me. They’ve all forgotten. But I can see back, through all of my memories. I remember the vats, climbing into mine, going to sleep for the last time.” He shudders and hugs himself. “But that’s all going to end now, because of you. Because you are going to wake us up! We have been asleep long enough, Morningstar. We are going to end the war, because...” And here Checkle leans in and whispers conspiratorially. “...because I know where they’re sleeping. When we are all awake, we will march to their sleeping places, and fall upon them, and then there will be no more Egannic. We will wake our people from a slumber that we never should have entered. And when we are awake...” Checkle motions to the Leaping Circle, a gleam in his eye. “I will tell you how that works.”

Mathew Freeman: Sagi, with that last line of “...I will tell you how it works” you provoked a throaty appreciative chuckle from me. Thank you.

Also – like others, I’ve been reading this Story Hour since at least the early 3E days. I honestly can’t remember when I first picked this up. To face the idea that it’s somehow going to finish, well, it’s kind of sad. I also know that it cannot possibly have the kind of ultimate finale that would match the hours of pleasure I’ve had reading through all of this. I know that on some level *any* ending will be a little disappointing.

But you know what? That’s FINE. That’s actually, completely and utterly fine. I’ve already had so, so many brilliant memories of reading this that you cannot possibly let me down, because I can always go back and re-read some of my favourite fantasy literature ever. I’ve even had the pleasure of meeting KidCthulhu and Piratecat and they’re even more delightful in person that I’d have hoped. However, if or when I ever get to meet you, Sagi... man, I owe you a beer or a dessert or something. At the very least you’re getting a manly hug or a hearty handshake.

Now, and with full respect for the fact that you have a life and other things to get on with...more, please?



One Last Annoying Moral Dilemma

The Company are momentarily stunned by the enormity of Checkle’s proposal. Assuming he’s telling the truth, he’s offering his knowledge in exchange for genocide.

“We don’t *like* the Mind Cows,” says Kibi slowly, but...”

"You have to be careful," says Checkle. "The dreaming caves are guarded. At least ours are guarded by... something terrible. You may have to fight it before you wake us up. So be careful. But I know you'll do it."

Morningstar glances at Kibi. "I don't like them either..."

"They are wholly evil!" Checkle interjects. "They are slavers, you know."

"We noticed," says Morningstar. "But to kill all of them does not seem right to me."

Checkle shakes his head in frustration. "They are trying to kill all of us, all of the time. If you were to wake *them* up, they would wipe us out in a heartbeat."

Dranko offers an alternative. "But if we wake you up, you won't *have* to go fight them. You'll be awake, and they'll still be in Dream. You'll each have your own realm. You could just leave them alone."

"They deserve to be killed!" says Checkle vehemently. "They've been the aggressors for centuries!"

"That's where you take the first step on the path to wrongness," says Ernie. "Whether or not they deserve it, has nothing to do with how you live your lives."

"No," says Checkle. "We've been fighting too long... I will not give it up. They are evil, hideous... the world will be a better place without them!"

Morningstar casts *brain spider* on Checkle. She needs to know what he knows, particularly about the ritual. If they can simply extract it from his head, that would make all of this much easier. But she soon realizes that's not an option. The ritual, Checkle knows, has never been written down. It has been magically encapsulated as a mental construct, and can only be passed from one mind to another via telepathy. It's like a book. Checkle owns the book, but is not smart enough himself to open it, read it, or understand it. His plan is to hand the book over to the Company, once they have woken his people.

"None of us like the Egannic," says Ernie. "But they can't *all* deserve to die in their sleep."

"If we don't use the Leaping Circle," says Kibi to Checkle, "the world is going to end, with you in it."

"Then we'd best come to an agreement! It's in all our best interests. I agree!"

Morningstar ponders. She hates this sort of moral dilemma, but it needs solving, and quickly. "I think if we wake you, we would also need to wake the Egannic," she says.

"Wake them too? Then they would defend themselves! We would still destroy them all, but at great cost to us. So the result would be the same, save you'd be causing the deaths of thousands of my people for no good reason."

"You don't *need* to wipe them out," says Ernie, but Checkle ignores him.

"If we do wake your people up," says Kibi, "won't they see us and immediately attack?"

"They will be disoriented and weakened at first," says Checkle. "You'll have plenty of time to escape; my people won't be able to harm you."

"But then we'll have to come back here and spend four days casting the ritual," says Kibi.

"They would never think to come here," says Checkle. "I certainly won't tell them you're here. I'm happy to make that part of the bargain, if you'd like!"

"There must be another way!" Ernie insists. Over the mind-link he says, *Maybe we can convince them not to be hostile, using magic?*

We'd have to convince their entire race not to take the opportunity to kill their enemies, says Aravis. I don't see how that's going to happen.

"Why can't you wake your people from stasis yourself?" asks Kibi.

Checkle sighs. "I'm not strong enough. The monster would eat me. It's very big. It's kind of like a... what do you call it... dragon?"

"Sounds like a perfect monster for Galdifain," says Kibi.

"For what?"

“I think we can take care of the monster for you,” says Kibi.

“And then I can wake up my people myself!” says Checkle brightly.

“That way, you’re the hero,” says Dranko.

“I’ll have to remember how to turn off all the machines...” Checkle says, mostly to himself.

To his friends, Dranko thinks, *I feel better about taking out the monster, and letting him make up his own mind about what to do afterward.*

Morningstar doesn’t buy that rationalization. *We’re still committing genocide.*

I disagree, says Dranko. And there’s a good chance he won’t be able to wake his people up by himself, and we get a free monster out of the deal.

We can’t count on that, says Morningstar.

I think Morningstar had a good idea before, says Aravis. If we do this, we also have to wake the Egannic, to make it fair.

I don’t feel like we owe the Egannic anything, Dranko grumbles. Those guys are jackasses.

We can at least warn the Egannic, that they’re sleeping, and need to wake themselves up, says Aravis. We’d be preparing them so that both races have a fighting chance. They’re already fighting; we’d just be changing the venue.

In the end, the Company decide that this is the best of the bad options available. Ernie is disgusted that they’re helping perpetuate the cycle of violence, and Morningstar still feels that they’ll be complicit in thousands of deaths, but they need to get moving. The world needs saving either way.

They explain the plan to Galdifain, who thinks she can do her part. “For something as powerful as a dragon, it will take me about half a minute to bind it. That’s how long it will take me to read my scroll. I’ll need a direct unimpeded line to the beast the entire time, and remember, when I’m done, it will be bound in whatever physical state it’s in at the moment of completion.”

“So we have to keep it away from you, but not *too* far away, without hurting it, for thirty seconds,” says Dranko. “Wonderful.”

“Sounds like a *forcecage* with bars would do the trick,” says Kibi.



Thanks to her *brain spider* on Checkle, Morningstar knows exactly how to reach the Keffet dreaming caves. The way is through one of the other caved-in passages leading out of the Leaping Circle chamber; Scree scouts, and then Aravis *shapechanges* into a Digger long enough to eat his way past the rockfall.

They travel for three uneventful days, sleeping each night in a *mansion*. On the third night, Aravis receives another vision of the surface.

Hae Kalkas is under siege. Its massive stone walls, though scarred and cracked from an unrelenting barrage of catapulted boulders, still stand unbroken. The ground just outside those walls is littered with corpses, almost entirely orcish. Here and there lie ruined siege ladders, testament to several failed attempts by the orcish mob to scale the walls.

Thousands upon thousands of orcs now sit camped outside of bowshot range, restless, as more siege engines are built. Having ascertained what a tough nut Hae Kalkas will be to crack, their next assault will not be so easily rebuffed. Dozens of massive trebuchets are under construction. Hundreds of orcs are preparing huge wads of pitch, which will be set alight and lobbed over the walls. Others are slaughtering cows by the hundreds, and throwing the corpses into a charnel pit. These, too, will be loaded into the trebuchets and fired – disease is often a besieger’s greatest ally. From the looks of things, the dwarves and men inside have about forty-eight hours before the next great assault will begin.

High on a hilltop, a lone orc stands at the apex of a sentry tower, gazing southward. He has been told that there is little to worry about; all of Charagan’s armies have been accounted for, and none are within two days’ march of the besieging force. But it’s odd – there is a heat shimmer on the grassy plains that looks quite a lot like an army. He watches it for a few more minutes, thinking it’s some trick of the light, but soon he can no longer deny it. Hundreds, maybe thousands of human soldiers are marching up the Norlin River from the direction of Sand’s Edge. That can’t be right; the main host of orcs had recently been sent down that river. There’s no way a force of humans could have bested them. Could they?

The sentry grabs a horn and blows it, three long blasts, and this bestirs the command tents down below. Let someone with more authority come take a look, he thinks. Still, he continues to squint through his spyglass, and now he thinks he

can make out the insignia on the banners of the approaching force. He doesn't recognize the white sun on a red field, but even if you had told him that he was looking upon the 2nd and 3rd battalions of One Supreme Intellect's Army of the White Sun, those names would have meant little to him.

None of the Bloodseer's orcs have ever even heard of the Jewels of the Plains, but that's about to change.

It seems as though, up on the surface, the tide may be turning. Now the Company have to do their part.



They expect to reach the Keffet dreaming caves later that morning. It's time to warn the Egannic. Morningstar dreams herself into *Ava Dormo*, back to the same temple where they had met Red Diamond and Two Spirals. There are only two Egannic there now, not ones she has met before, and there are no Navni. That makes sense; it's morning, and they would have woken up.

The two Egannic whisper to one another when she arrives. ❖*Morningstar, you've returned,*❖ says one. ❖*A pleasure to meet you. My name is...*❖ She projects an image of a cluster of spinning rhombuses. Her friend introduces himself with an image of a broken khet chip.

▼*I learned something very grave in our travels,*▼ says Morningstar. ▼*It's going to be very difficult for you to understand and accept, but I need you to try. May I show you something?*▼

❖*I don't see why not.*❖

Morningstar has never tried this before, but in theory it should work. Mustering a titanic force of will, she forcibly expels the two Egannic out of *Ava Dormo*. The Dream Lords may be her match for power in *Ava Dormo*, but they don't know how to resist, don't even understand that this is a thing that could happen. They vanish. She waits.

A minute later they return, blinking, confused. ❖*That was very strange,*❖ says Rhombuses. ❖*What was that? You... gave us a vision?*❖

▼*I woke you up,*▼ says Morningstar. ▼*Your people are not from this world. Your people, and the Keffet, have been at war for a very, very long time...*▼

▣*That is no secret,*▣ interrupts Khet.

▼*...and while at first you waged it while awake, now you wage it in Dream.*▼

❖*We don't dream,*❖ says Rhombuses flatly.

▼*Your people developed powerful magic, to do something I never thought possible, to send yourselves, permanently, into what I call Ava Dormo. But you and I are both from the waking world.*▼

▣*This is the waking world,*▣ Khet insists.

▼*There is a cavern, similar to what you just saw, filled with Keffet,*▼ says Morningstar.

▣*But... the cavern we saw was filled with Egannic, with our people.*▣

▼*They are in stasis,*▼ Morningstar explains. ▼*Just as you are. When you battle in dream, one of the facts of it is, you don't truly die. Your people have been permanently in dream, never dying, and always coming back.*▼

▣*We have mastered death, it is true,*▣ says Khet.

▼*No. You have machines keeping you in stasis. You are only living half a life.*▼

❖*What you are saying doesn't make any sense,*❖ says Rhombuses. ❖*You sound like a madwoman.*❖

▼*I know, it's difficult.*▼

▣*I am not inclined to believe you,*▣ says Khet. ▣*What you are saying is, on its face, absurd. But... there were... trays, I suppose you'd call them, for a mile in every direction... with our people. They were all sleeping. We tried to wake up the nearest in the little time we had, but then you ended the vision. But we were lying asleep in our thousands, resting upon stone slabs, one atop the other.*▣

▼*As I said, there is some magic keeping your people asleep.*▼

▣*So we're sleeping now? Those are our real physical bodies?*▣

▼ Yes. ▼

▣ And the Navni... ▣

▼ They are awake. They worship you when they are awake, and spend their entire days building statues to you. ▼

❖ Well, yes, ❖ says Rhombuses. ❖ We know that they dream about that. ❖

▼ No. They dream about you, here. They rush to sleep at night, and come here when they dream. And you give them pleasant memories afterward. ▼

▣ Yes, of course, ▣ says Khet indignantly. ▣ We are not cruel savages. The Navni are very useful, but we don't wish them to have bad dreams at night, when they are finished. We modify them. ▣

❖ I am sorry, Morningstar, but do you have any proof of this? ❖ asks Rhombuses.

▼ Did you try to exercise your Dream Lord powers while you were there? ▼

❖ It was a vision; no. We were not truly there. It would not mean anything one way or another, what we can do, in a vision you granted us. ❖

Morningstar sighs. ▼ Here's the thing. The reason I'm telling you this, is that the Keffet are waking up, and that will... tip the balance of power considerably. ▼

▣ But they are awake, ▣ says Khet. ▣ They fight us every day. They... ah, I see. You are telling me that they are dreaming, but that they are going to wake up... ▣

▼ And they will find your sleeping bodies, and they will kill you. All of you. I doubt I can prove it to you, but can you afford to take that risk? ▼

▣ We will consider. ▣

Khet and Rhombuses talk quietly to one another. Morningstar can hear Khet when he raises his voice. ▣ They could be in league with the Keffet. This might be some sort of trick. ▣

▼ Who do you think I'm more likely to side with? ▼ asks Morningstar. ▼ You, or the Keffet? ▼

❖ I would have thought us, obviously, ❖ says Rhombuses. ❖ You are intelligent and enlightened. You'd not side with the barbarians. ❖

▣ We could send Two Spirals to investigate, ▣ says Khet. ▣ He is an explorer. He has even been to the dream world, so he says. Or, if Morningstar is right, to the waking one. ▣

❖ I can't see how it hurts one way or another, ❖ says Rhombuses. ❖ If he finds nothing, we're no worse off than before. ❖

▣ Two Spirals will think this is an interesting venture, ▣ says Khet. ▣ But how will he know where to go? ▣

▼ I will show him, ▼ says Morningstar. She has extracted the exact location from Checkle's mind.

Khet teleports away, and returns quickly with Two Spirals. Morningstar explains everything to him.

▮ That's extraordinary! ▮ he says when she's done. Then, to the other Egannic, he asks, ▮ Do you believe her? ▮

▣ No, ▣ says Khet.

❖ I don't think so, ❖ says Rhombuses.

▮ Well, I believe her, ▮ says Two Spirals. Morningstar detects a twinkle in his eye, one that reminds her, oddly enough, of Checkle. ▮ I believe her, ▮ he says, ▮ because I've dreamed of it. ▮

▣ But we don't dream! ▣ Khet protests.

▮ I do, ▮ says Two Spirals. ▮ I'll go. I'll take a look. If it's true, we'd best be waking up. If it's true, we will owe our race's survival to you. ▮

▣ You're crazy, ▣ says Khet.

▮ I know. ▮ Two Spirals winks at Morningstar, and vanishes.

Piratecat: It seems like grievously bad form to give us ethical conundrums as the world is ending.

Rughat: True. Only a rat-bastard would do something like tha... Oh. Never mind.

Zelc: I'm just happy King Crunard is alive and they got the scrolls. Man, that was such a gut-punch when Sagiro set up the scrolls as the hope of the surface world and then took it away so abruptly.

Quartz: So I don't check the thread for a while and come back to not one but two updates! Yay!

The Warlock: When the end of the world is nigh, you should check on your heroes daily.

Solarious: Well, the story is accelerating to an apocalyptic conclusion, and Sagiro seems eager to deliver. Abernathy's Company has been around so long, it seems like their adventures would never end, having apparently spanned two entire editions from beginning to end.

But before the book closes, we're going to see the Company roll up a dragon into a scroll like a Pokemon and unleash it at their discretion. And the return of the magnificent Emberleaf, Kay, and possibly even Mrs. Horn! Things to look forward to, then!



The Disposition of Dragons

As they travel toward the Keffet dreaming caves, the Company discuss various possible approaches to the problem of Galdifain binding the monster that stands guard. Should they try a battery of illusions? Have Flicker dash and tumble around, evading it? Or load Dranko down with every buff spell in the book and have him go toe-to-toe? Ideally they would make Galdifain invisible, but the light motes make that strategy untenable.

"If the Keffet is correct, and it's a dragon," says Galdifain to Dranko, "I suggest you not be in its stomach when my spell completes." Dranko agrees. He's had enough of stomachs for a while.

When they are only a mile out, Morningstar goes into *Ava Dormo* to scout. She takes Grey Wolf as backup, just in case. The tunnel continues downward and westward, snaking this way and that, growing ever wider. The transition between tunnel and cavern happens so gradually, it's something of a shock when they realize they can no longer see the walls to either side or the ceiling high above. Then, in the dimness of the motes up ahead, they see the first pillar.

It is a wide column, thirty feet across, fashioned of stone and hardened fungus. A vertiginous spiral staircase twines around it like a vine, up, up. And coming off the staircase are slightly concave stone slabs, like fan blades. On closer inspection they resemble little stone coffins without lids. Here in *Ava Dormo* they don't contain Keffet, but each is partially filled with a strange glowing purple fungus.

The cavern is immense, and Morningstar and Grey Wolf can see dozens more of these columns, each set far apart from the others. Altogether they count fifty of them, each able to hold five hundred Keffet. And this cavern is adjacent to at least three others, each just as enormous, each with its own fifty columns. There may be more beyond that, but they've seen enough. Hundreds of thousands of Keffet are presumably sleeping here in the waking world, dreaming of a false life, and endless war with the Egannic.

There is no sign of the dragon that guards them.



The Company approach the dream caves cautiously. Dranko is already loaded down with their longest-lasting spells, but they intend to hold off on the minute- and round-per-level spells until they get closer. Morningstar is the designated guardian for Galdifain, so she also gets some protective magics, as does Galdifain herself – though if things reach the point where the assassin needs them, the plan will have fallen fairly well apart.

While still a minute away from the nearest of the massive columns, the light motes around them start to cling to their clothes and glow a cherry red. There is no discomfort; it seems like an early-warning system. An idea pops into Kibi's head. He scoops up four small rocks and casts *magic mouth* on them. The rest of them start to cast their minute-per-round spells, but only have time for one each. About five seconds later, the dragon appears. The lines of sight here are long, and it surely could see them coming a long way off thanks to the red motes.

It's... big. Easily a hundred feet from noses to tail, it hovers a few feet above the ground, wingless and brown-scaled. It regards them with its two monstrous heads, each full of deadly teeth. The claws on its hands gleam like sharpened broadswords.

Dranko hopes his buffing spells are enough. He steps forward boldly. "I'm here to kick your ass," he says. It growls out of both mouths and falls upon Dranko like a reptilian God of Death. Dranko vanishes into a flurrying storm of teeth and claws. The beast's tail lashes around with the power of a trebuchet.

"A dread linnorm," says Galdifain calmly. "A very nasty sort of dragon. I'm familiar with them, though I've never bound one."

“Another thing I can turn into,” says Aravis, taking mental notes.

The linnorm finishes with Dranko, and, having killed the little morsel, turns its heads to the others. One head does a double-take, and looks back at where Dranko’s shredded corpse should be. Dranko is just standing there, smiling, barely scratched. It turns its whole body and brings both heads right up to Dranko, confused about what it’s seeing.

Dranko reaches out and pats its snout. “That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen,” he says, in a voice appropriate to conversing with a toddler.

Should I start? asks Galdifain over the mind-link.

Not yet, says Aravis. *But be ready.* Morningstar, standing next to Galdifain, casts *antilife shell*.

Dranko points to the nearest column of dreamers. “I’ll bet I can kill a few of those guys before you can stop me.” He dashes away. The dragon starts to follow, then stops. “Hey, dumbass,” Dranko calls. “I’ll make you a deal. My friends won’t hurt you unless you kill me first. But if you do kill me, they’ll...”

“Shut up,” says the linnorm. It casts *maze* on Dranko. Dranko vanishes. The monster turns around to look at the others. “How do you put up with him?” it asks, right before both heads breathe upon them. The Company are engulfed, simultaneously, in a roaring blast of hellfire, and a deathly cold spray of icy wind. All sorts of protective spells and energy buffers are triggered. Most in the party take damage, but nothing a *mass heal* won’t take care of. Galdifain, having been thoughtfully bestowed with *energy immunity* to both fire and cold, is entirely uninjured.

But what to do now? With no good idea of how long it will take Dranko to escape the *maze*, they retreat. Kibi *teleports* the entire group back the way they came, to the limit of his sight. Morningstar heals everyone, and they put some more protective spells on Galdifain. But they need to return, if Galdifain is going to attempt her binding.

Dranko is caught in a glowing, pulsing labyrinth. He sees the exit and heads for it, but, no, that was just another left-turn. Oh, there it is! He... no, hm, dead end. This is trickier than he expected. It takes him more than half a minute to find his way out. When he does, the dragon is waiting for him, twenty feet away. It casts *meteor swarm* on him. Massive fiery boulders explode all around him, chunks of burning stone flying in all directions. The cloud of dust and smoke dissipates... and there Dranko stands, unharmed. “Really? Little fiery pebbles? You’re so *cute*.”

“*Stop calling me that!*” roars the dragon.

“I just want to put a bow on you and take you for walks in the park,” says Dranko. The dragon casts another spell upon him, and something squeezes his mind, but bolstered by a battery of protective spells, he resists whatever it was.

The linnorm bellows in frustration. “I will figure out how to eat you,” it promises, “and then I will!”

The others cast a few more spells, including *mass doughy folk* and *mass xorn movement*, before Grey Wolf *teleports* them back to near Dranko and the linnorm. Kibi tosses his enchanted rocks in different directions, then sinks into the ground. Aravis casts *maze* on the dragon. It vanishes, giving them time to cast some spells on Dranko, including a *dimensional anchor* in case it tries to *maze* him again.

The dragon appears again; the *maze* didn’t hold it very long. The Company scatter, though Morningstar stays with Galdifain. Kibi pops up to *summon* a cadre of greater earth elementals which appear around the linnorm. They are like small dogs nipping at a lion; it swats them away. Having ascertained from Galdifain that it won’t be a problem until the moment she finishes, Aravis changes shape into a beholder, rises up, and plays its anti-magic cone over the dragon. It drops to the ground, unable to hover.

Galdifain takes out her scroll and begins to cast. In doing so, she triggers the *magic mouths* on Kibi’s rocks; they all start to yammer, loudly. The dragon whips its head around, annoyed and confused. “Out of the goodness of my heart, I offer you a deal,” says Dranko. “You may, should you wish, agree to surr...”

“You talk too much,” the linnorm snarls. “Do I get to eat you as part of the deal, or not?”

“Not so much.”

“Then I decline.”

“You’ve lived a long life,” says Dranko. “It’s a shame it’ll end this way.” He touches its nose with his whip, then moves off, drawing a slashing claw that he deftly avoids. He continues to lecture the dragon on its shortcomings.

The dragon seems to come to a realization. “Your friends have spent a lot of effort trying to protect just you. The real target

must be someone else. Wait right there.” It moves out of the anti-magic cone, and casts a *forcecage* around Dranko. Then it moves to Kibi, leaving the elementals behind. “Always eat the summoner, and ignore the things it summons,” one head says sagely. The other head bites down savagely on Kibi. The dwarf has plenty of his own protections by now, but still takes massive damage from the thing’s teeth. Kibi grimaces; in addition to the damage, he has suffered life drain. One of his two prepared *wish* spells is forced from his mind. But still, he is satisfied that the dragon hasn’t yet identified Galdifain as the true threat.

The others cast more spells on themselves: *moment of prescience* for Grey Wolf, *iron body* for Ernie. Any of them might be a target. Kibi casts *Otto’s irresistible dance* on the linnorm, but the creature is outright immune to enchantments. He sinks back into the earth. Aravis fires his beam of *disintegrate* on the *forcecage* around Dranko. Then he fires two other beams at the dragon, but it shrugs off the effects of *charm monster* and *slow*. Galdifain continues to read.

“Hey!” calls Dranko to the dragon. “You want to guess what I’ve been carrying around for the last few years and almost forgot I had?”

“No,” says the dragon.

Dranko pulls out his *book of infinite spells* and casts *dimensional anchor* on the dragon. The beast glows green.

“Really?” says the linnorm, incredulous.

“Give me a few minutes, and I’ll have a leash for you,” says Dranko.

The dragon glares at him, trying to piece together the puzzle. “What are you doing here?” it asks.

“The people you’re guarding want to be woken up,” says Dranko, thumbing over his shoulder toward the stacked columns of sleeping Keffet.

“No they don’t,” says the linnorm.

“Yes they do. One of them is already awake, and came to tell us himself.”

“And where is he now?”

“Not here. Dreaming again, probably.”

The linnorm scoffs. “Let me guess. You also have some prime Myconid real estate you want to sell me.”

“I’m not lying,” insists Dranko. He doesn’t expect to convince the dragon, but he only has to stall it for twenty more seconds or so.

“Yes, you are,” says the dragon. “Now hold on while I tenderize your shapechanger.” The dragon turns and casts *meteor swarm* on Aravis. The wizard takes massive damage, fortunately mitigated by some protective magics. Morningstar, standing in front of Galdifain, is close enough to get caught in the fire splash. She’s badly burned, but stands her ground. Behind her, Galdifain keeps on reading. “How do you like that, eyeball?” says the dragon. “Are you a little runt who changed into an ugly eyeball, or a beholder who changed into a little runt?” For all that these little people are a nuisance, the linnorm is still mostly unharmed, and confident in its abilities.

Ernie casts *mass spell resistance*. Aravis uses his eye of *telekinesis* to drop Dranko onto the dragon’s back. Dranko tangles a rope in the scales around its neck. “Giddyap!”

Kibi pops up out of the ground and casts *rainbow pattern*, which the dragon ignores. But his spell does raise more suspicion in the dragon’s mind. “Given how powerf... how annoying you are, why are you not actually trying to kill me?”

“We’ve been asked to do this by the people you’re guarding,” says Dranko. “As soon as you’re done resisting, we’ll negotiate the terms of your surrender.”

“What you’re saying doesn’t make any sense,” says the dragon. “What happens at the end of all this dancing around?”

Dranko starts blabbing about the Keffet, and the Egannic, and how they’re all fighting in the dream world. But after only a few seconds of this, the linnorm finally notices Galdifain, standing behind Morningstar, quietly muttering the words of her spell.

“There we go,” says the beast. “Let’s put a stop to that.” With terrifying speed it scurries over, rears up, and brings both heads down upon Galdifain. They stop ten feet short, contacting the soft but unyielding barrier of the *antilife shell*. It realizes it will have to breathe, but its breath weapons haven’t yet recharged.

Dranko reaches out and heals the monster of a few minor wounds it suffered at the hands of Kibi’s earth elementals.

“Why did you do that? I don’t understand!”

“You will,” says Dranko.

The dragon pops out of existence as Galdifain utters the final syllable of her binding spell. She staggers backward, recovers, rolls up the scroll, then quickly ties it with enchanted golden thread before popping it into an even more heavily enchanted mithril tube. “It’s done.”



As much as they would like to explore the dreaming caves, the Company know that time is running short. They have agreed to meet Checkle back at the Leaping Circle, where he will give them the encapsulated ritual that will allow them to Leap.

On the second night of travel, Aravis once more dreams a vision of the surface.

Azhant the Ancient spits out the charred remains of Dalesandro, High Stormknight of Werthis. *You see that? the dragon thinks into the minds of the others. You’ll all end up like him. You can flee, or you can be devoured. Too bad for you that fleeing isn’t really an option.*

Anhaya Sunblossom, leader of the Church of Yondalla in Charagan, flies around to the east and drops a *Quickened flame strike* on the dragon’s head. It dissipates harmlessly on its *antimagic field*, and Azhant laughs. *Amusing*, it thinks. *Was that your way of volunteering to be the next course?* Anhaya glances nervously at the bits of Dalesandro that are still dropping from the dragon’s jaws, spiraling down to the ground far below. “Maybe next time,” she says, failing to hide the panic in her voice. She flies downward and away at top speed.

She’s flying extremely fast – much faster than a normal *fly* spell would allow – but not fast enough to outpace Azhant. Five Silent Crow shouts from his golden head, “Retreat! We’ve got to get out of here and figure out something else! This plan has failed, and miserably!”

The four surviving heroes take off toward the ground at high speed. Azhant gives chase. “Too bad you used up all those *teleports* trying to outmaneuver me,” the dragon chuckles. “But I thank you. It’s more fun to play with my food.”

It is not long before the heroes have reached the ground, but there is no good place for them to retreat. They are on the flat plains of central Lanei, several miles out from where Azhant has recently destroyed the city of Storin. The Lady Cornelia, High Priestess of Pikon, cannot help letting some panicked thoughts escape. “Crap. Crap, crap, crap!”

Slowly, Azhant gains. Bits of Dalesandro still drip from the dragon’s jaws. Now the pursuit is skimming along the ground. Azhant will be in breath weapon range in just a few more seconds.

And the heroes stop.

Five Silent Crow produces a scroll, which he quickly activates. The author of the spell – someone named Typier – has given it the quirky name of *arcane double negative*. As Crow reads the command words, the fast-approaching Azhant is doused in a shower of sparkling red motes. The dragon immediately realizes that his *antimagic field* has been removed. He instinctively tries to reactivate it – and nothing happens, save that he feels an odd prickling pain.

Next! thinks Crow over the heroes’ mind-link. Anhaya now holds up a scroll, which she wastes no time in activating. At the top of the scroll are some written words, a bit of humorous editorial content: *In case of emergency, make glass.* – Alander. Anhaya completes the spell, and a huge crystal dome appears, ninety yards across, encompassing herself, all of her allies, and the dragon. Everyone inside the dome, Azhant included, briefly glows a deep indigo color.

“That’s Alander’s *Inescapable Arena*,” says Anhaya. “Next!”

The final member of the strike team produces a third scroll. At the top it is labeled *mass pan-elemental immunity*, and she thinks that it’s at least two valences above such paltry magics as *wish* and *Mordenkainen’s disjunction*. With a smile, Isabel Horn, the Spire’s last archmagical ace up its proverbial sleeve, reads a scroll penned centuries ago by one Parthol Runecarver. She, Anhaya, Cornelia and Five Silent Crow are wrapped in impenetrable elemental abjurations.

Azhant reaches the edge of the dome and whirls around, doubling back toward the heroes. His movement is restricted by the dome, but he flies overhead and breathes hellfire all over his enemies. They are, of course, not singed in the slightest. Starting to realize what he’s up against, he *Quickens a greater dispel magic* on Mrs. Horn. He again feels a sharp stinging pain, and his magic fails to manifest. It seems that *arcane double negative* has made it impossible for Azhant to actively negate magic in any way.

That turns out to be bad news for a dragon trapped in a dome with four angry spellcasters. They bombard him with spells, and three of the four – two Empowered *chain lightnings* and a *flame strike* – penetrate Azhant’s spell resistance. The dragon

snarls in pain. He's immune to cold and fire, but lightning hurts him, and the holy damage of the *flame strike* sears through his scales. In a panic, he tries to *teleport* away, but he glows a slight blue color and fails to go anywhere.

"It's not called *Alander's Arena You Can Teleport Out Of*," says Anhaya.

"Damn you!" the dragon roars. But he's not done yet. With a quick mid-air lunge, he seizes Anhaya in his huge jaws. There's a sickening crunch, but the priestess is still alive. He endures another round of spells, resisting all of them this time. Anhaya, however, *teleports* out of the dragon's jaws, appearing on the far side of the dome.

"Not only is she not out of *teleports*," says Cornelia, mockingly, "she has about a hundred left today. We read *Alander's Day of Blinking* right after this morning's *heroes' feast*. I can't remember if that was before or after the scroll that makes people – or dragons – believe practically anything we say."

Azhant is screwed, and he knows it. He fights gamely, but his breath weapons are useless, and with his targets blipping around the dome like blink dogs, he can't bring his full physical might to bear on any of them before they simply vanish from his claws or teeth. All the while they bombard him, and about half of their spells get through his innate resistance. Toward the end he hurls himself at the crystal dome itself, but it's as resilient as a *wall of force*.

It takes many more spells – *chain lightnings*, *searing lights*, and even some *magic missiles* – and Azhant does enough damage with his teeth and claws that Anhaya and Cornelia are down to *cure serious wounds* at the end. But with a final honest-to-goodness *lightning bolt*, Mrs. Horn casts the spell that brings down Azhant the Ancient in a blistered ball of flesh and scales.

carborundum: W.O.W.

Quartz: Oh the shame, to be taken down by NPCs...

Cerebral Paladin: Has to count for something that one of them was a retired PC.

Anxe: I've got a feeling that this is false hope. Naradawk probably has a few scrolls of his own or something.

RangerWickett: I dunno. It doesn't seem his style, and I especially don't see why he'd be creating illusions to fake out the PCs, who are effectively dead as far as he knows.

Y'know, I'm kinda dreading the fact that I'll be unable to resist rereading this Story Hour once it's done. I'll enjoy it, but man... I need like an audiobook version. Or I'll just sneak a chapter at a time when my boss isn't looking at work.

Anxe: I meant false hope in the sense of a literary device done by Sagirop. The archmages may be successful, but the Company's actions need to be meaningful for it to be a fun campaign. Therefore, the people left on the surface will eventually be losing until the Company does whatever they're doing in the Underdark to turn the tide.

Piratecat: I felt kind of bad for Sagirop. He was presumably planning an epic battle. Instead, Dranko got layered with protective spells and was on full defensive. I don't remember what my AC was, but it didn't suck – even if I can't get out of a *maze* to save my life.

Also: screw you, Azhant!

Everett: Why would he have planned such? He knew what your plan was. What he needed was a monster who could be difficult to deal with while Galdifain performed her rite, not a slaughter-happy epic type like Azhant.

carborundum: I'm astounded by the genius planning of Sagirop, bringing in the Maze so he could dish out dramatic and worrying handouts many years later.

Everett: He probably didn't come up with the Maze knowing that he'd use it in the endgame or exactly how. But he can tell you himself...

carborundum: I wouldn't put it past his Evil Geniusness.

Enkhidu: I read that as "Evil Guinness," and began wondering what you had against a nice stout.

carborundum: They can't be left unattended for too long, either...

Tamlyn: I've been known to say exactly that, if I've spent a little too much time with said stout the previous evening.



Coming Home

So, the Company now have a dread linnorm in their proverbial pocket. They start musing about whom they should release it upon. One of the Three, surely? Dranko suggests Tarsos, since they don't hate him as much as the others; the Company won't want to be denied the satisfaction of killing Meledien and Seven Dark Words themselves.

As they discuss this the next day, cheered by the vision of Azhant's downfall, a small earthquake rocks the tunnel as they walk. Dranko looks all around, wondering if another purple worm is coming for them. "Kibi, what's happening?"

"Feels like a minor temblor," says the dwarf. The quake continues for another fifteen seconds and subsides, leaving small flakes of rubble and puffs of dust as its only immediate consequence. Not trusting this as a natural occurrence, Kibi queries the nearby wall with *stone tell*.

HELLO, KIBILHATHUR, says the wall.

I just felt a tremor, says Kibi. Why were you shaking?

BECAUSE ALL THE ROCK AROUND ME WAS SHAKING.

But what was making all of you shake?

The immediate wall doesn't have specific knowledge of that, but it guesses that the epicenter was several miles beneath them. Kibi consults the calculations of Corriv, and finds that Leaping Circle Two should send them 3.9 miles coreward.



On the final night before arriving at Leaping Circle Two, Aravis has another vision of the surface.

The paladin Glade parts a thick knot of web with her scythe. Old bones crunch beneath her feet. "Wellington, I've followed you into some foul places in the past couple of years. This? Nothing quite compares with it."

The boy wizard nudges his glasses higher onto his nose. "We're past the worst of it," he says. "And if I'm right... and Belinda is right... and the *Banishing Lens* is up here, we could end this war in a single stroke."

Royce Tillman laughs. "Remind me why is it that no one thought of this before now?" he asks.

Wellington looks serious. "The Masking," he says. "Its last remnants are fading away, but it's not all the way gone. No one knew about the upper vaults of God's Thorn until about week ago. It's a long shot, but worth it."

"And are there any more monsters or traps between us and the prize? Assuming it's there?"

"I don't know," says Wellington, as he consults a faded, crinkled map. "Probably. But we're almost there. That door up ahead should lead to the innermost chamber. If the *Banishing Lens* is here, it should be in that room. Standard procedure?"

Royce creeps forward, magically stealthy, and listens at the door for a good minute. He shakes his head. Wellington casts a number of buffing spells, before casting *knock* on the door. Royce grins and kicks it inward. Splinters fly, and Glade and Royce move swiftly into the room beyond. When they give the all-clear, Wellington follows.

The room appears empty. Wellington looks about with *true seeing*. "There are small niches in the stone walls," he says. "They're masked by illusion, but you should be able to find them by feel. They're about knee height. Look for a way to open them, but be wary of mechanical traps. According to Belinda, there should be ninety-nine false Lenses, and one true one. Our job is to grab them all and bring them back to her; she'll figure out which one is the real one."

Royce spikes the door open, and the three fan out, finding that the hundred small shoe-box-sized niches open if pushed in hard enough. The first fifty are vacant. "This doesn't seem right," says Glade. "There were no signs on the way up of anyone having been here in centuries. Why are these empty?"

The door to the room slams shut, shattering Royce's spike. A green glow fills the entire small chamber, just as a person materializes in the center of the room. Wellington's eyes go wide.

"They're empty," says Parthol Runecarver, "because I've already taken everything."

"You?" Wellington exclaims. "What are you doing here?"

"Evening things out," says Parthol coolly.

"What the hell does that mean?" demands Royce.

Parthol makes a quick gesture with one hand. Wellington and Royce find themselves paralyzed. Then he Quickens a second enchantment upon Wellington. "No metamagic for you, kiddo." Glade, wearing a ring of *freedom of movement*, rushes forward and sweeps her scythe across Parthol's chest, but her swing barely makes a scratch on the old wizard's unarmored skin. Parthol takes a step back, casts again, and traps Glade in a glowing *forcecage*.

"It means the balance has shifted too far in your direction," says Parthol. "The scrolls you people had in the Vault were a little too powerful. Azhant should have done much more damage before you bested him. At the rate you're going, you might actually end up *defeating* Naradawk, especially with the *Banishing Lens* in your hands. I can't have that. Or, rather I *can* have it, and you cannot. After Naradawk finishes off the Spire, I'll need the *Lens* to get rid of him."

Parthol walks forward and stands before the stricken Wellington. "You had promise," he says. "A pity it had to end this way." He yanks an amulet from the young wizard's neck, and pulls off the boy's magical headband. Then he places a glowing black hand on Wellington's head. The boy, paralyzed, cannot even cry out in anguish as he turns to dust.

Glade screams in fury, tears running down her cheeks. “You unholy bastard!”

Parthol chuckles. “Nothing unholy about a good old-fashioned *disintegrate*. Or Parthol’s *Peerless Paralytic*, for that matter. Now, you and the warrior may be tougher, but I’ve got over a dozen of these. Royce, Glade, it’s been nice knowing you.”

It takes eleven more *disintegrates*, but a minute later there are two more piles of dust on the floor. Parthol dismisses his *forcecage*, thoughtfully sweeps the dust piles into a large bag, stows what of his victims’ magic items he can carry, dismisses his *dimensional lock*, and vanishes.

All are quiet for a moment as they consider this vision, then break into a chorus of profanity.

“I really, really want the opportunity to kick in his face,” says Dranko. The only shred of a silver lining is that things were going so well on the surface, to prompt Parthol into such drastic action. But they mourn for their lost comrades.

They quietly pick at their morning’s *heroes’ feast*, occasionally speculating on what dangers they have yet to face. “We’re going to end up fighting Wlaqua, right?” asks Morningstar.

“One more before she comes herself,” says Ernie, nodding.

“You know what would be great?” says Dranko. “If we end up fighting the Adversary, and Seven Dark Words, Meledien and Tarsos, and Wlaqua, all at the same time.”

Galdifain looks up from her plate. “One more before she comes herself? Are you sure that wasn’t referring to me?”

That at least is a cheering thought; maybe Wlaqua isn’t coming for them after all.



They emerge from the *mansion*, and find signs that there was another small earthquake overnight. “This suggests they’re doing horrible, horrible things,” says Dranko, kicking at a dislodged bit of rubble.

“We’d better get going,” says Aravis.

They make great haste to Leaping Circle Two, reviewing once more the Prophecy of the Croaking Oracle. They’ve figured out (or think they have) a great deal of it, but some remains opaque. Ernie opines that **One loves all and one hates one** might mean the Sister Gods, Yavin and Wlaqua. As for **One to channel what makes dead**, that could be Grey Wolf, a spellsworn who channels his deadly magics through Bostock. And the line **One to drive the spike clean through** could refer to the thorn in the side of Abernia; perhaps it needs to be struck in a way that pushes it out the other side, but the other side of what? The world? No one knows the proper levels of abstraction and metaphor to apply to the Croaking Oracle’s words.

Two more small tremors shake the tunnels before they arrive at Leaping Circle Two some six hours later. “They’re torturing the planet,” says Grey Wolf dourly.

Checkle is there waiting for them. “You did it! Amazing! Thank you! Who wants the instructions?”

Kibi volunteers. Checkle walks up to stand before the dwarf. “I’m not sure exactly how this works,” says the little Keffet. “But if I just think about transferring... whoa!”

A huge rush of knowledge comes into Kibi’s head, as though he’s crammed a week’s worth of study into a single second. As he examines the details in his mind, he frowns. It’s a four-day ritual, and a tricky one at that. Any number of small errors could require the wizards to start over, delaying things unacceptably. As if underscoring the need for haste, the earth shakes and groans.

Kibi consults with the others, and they all concur: it’s worth using up another one of Kibi’s reality tweaks to speed up the process. Everyone gathers in a circle around the dwarf, and he beseeches Abernia to shift its reality to favor his wishes. The Leaping Circle room shudders and vibrates, the Leaping Circle itself rings like a bell, and the sum of information in Kibi’s head about the ritual shrinks to small fraction of its original size. He thinks now that he and one other wizard can easily complete the ritual in twelve hours, down from the original 100 hours.

It would be nice to know what awaits them beyond. Will Leaping Circle Two take them directly to where the Evil Trio are working their mischief? If only there was some way they could know. Morningstar blinks, and fishes in her pack. She produces one of the oldest items the Company still possess: a *potion of clairvoyance* brewed by Abernathy himself, and left for her on the very day he summoned the original group to his tower. It’s a minor item, and there’s no way it could possibly allow her to see across miles of rock. That’s not how the spell works. She drinks it anyway.

Abernathy was always a bit scatterbrained. Maybe he was distracted while brewing it, and infused it unintentionally with great power. Whatever the case, Morningstar feels *Laramon's jade clover* grow warm in her pocket for a second, and then she has a quick vision, of an uninhabited place over a steep rocky slope. Assuming that's their landing spot, she now knows it's free of immediate danger, though the floor is pitched such that they will immediately tumble downward if unprepared.

Kibi and Aravis spend the day enacting the ritual, managing (barely, in Aravis's case) to maintain their concentration through two more earthquakes. As they near the end, Morningstar casts a new spell of her own devising: *Morningstar's mind status*, which will let her know if anyone is trying to read or influence any of the minds of her allies. Everyone is made to *fly*, burning off charges of an old wand.

The ritual ends, and the Company Leap downward.



Dranko, as is typical now of these jumps, experiences a side-trek to the Far Realms. The whispers are familiar. **“Do not Become,”** they warn, many voices in near-but-not-quite synchronicity, beseeching him, warning him. But then a new voice sounds, louder, sibilant, as though the speaker has its lips almost pressed to his ear.

“Dranko, you should Become! Become, Dranko.”

“I cordially invite you to bite me,” answers Dranko.

“It can happen,” says the new voice. **“You can Become. You can become famous again. It is almost upon you, Dranko. Don't let it slip away. Become!”**

They arrive. The *fly* spell barely functions now, so far beneath the surface. It acts more like *feather fall*, allowing them to run down the steep stone slope in a more-or-less controlled fashion. Seventy feet they descend, until they stand at the bottom of a subterranean ravine, shaped like a V. It's hard to stand at its bottom, the ground sloping up steeply on both sides. In both directions, east and west, the ravine extends into the darkness.

Kibi senses that they are nearly four miles deeper than they were a moment earlier. The Earth Magic around him is wonderfully strong. He can hear the whispers of the stones all around him, and though he cannot make out words, he feels as though they are telling him, *“Welcome home.”*

“Kibi, what's happened to you?” Ernie is pointing his face. The others see that patches of his skin have taken on a rough, earthy texture and hardness. Kibi finds it comfortable, natural, but when he holds still, the others perceive something akin to a stone statue.

“He looks like Cranchus,” says Flicker.

But all is not well. While only Kibi can sense the ambient Earth Magic, all of them can feel the tainted stink of Essence all around them, a foul odor everywhere. In Morningstar's pocket, *Laramon's jade clover* is warm, and holding a steady temperature. She pulls it out and looks at it thoughtfully. “Maybe Laramon, the God of Luck, is in this clover somehow?” But if that's so, one wouldn't know to look at it. Beyond its warmth, it's just a trinket.

Kibi casts *stone tell* on the sloping wall of the ravine. **What's happening down here?** he asks it.

PLEASE MAKE IT STOP, KIBILHATHUR. IT'S NOT NATURAL!

Kibi can tell that the stone of the world is sad, worried, pained. **What was making the earth shake?** he asks.

WE DON'T KNOW, BUT YOU'RE NOT FAR FROM IT. PLEASE, PUT AN END TO IT!

I'll try to make the badness go away, Kibi promises.

OF COURSE YOU WILL, says the wall.

Kibi knows, can feel, that the source of the evil is to the east, not the west. They begin to stumble in that direction, keeping inside a *magic circle of protection vs. evil* as they travel. The ceiling slowly descends toward them, until the ravine has become a corridor shaped like an inverted triangle.

After half an hour of this, something strange happens ahead of them. A wave of stone is coming toward them, as though the ground were a cloth sheet that someone snapped at the far end. It rushes toward them, and most of the Company take a step back, assuming an attack. Only Kibi is not troubled. Ten feet away, the wave stops, and the ground buckles and bubbles into an oval dome, largely blocking the passage.

A doorway opens in the stone side of the dome nearest them. Inside they see that it's hollow, the ground flattened.

"A trap?" says Morningstar. Ernie fires off a quick *divination*, but gets nothing from it.

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

"Kibi," says a familiar voice from inside. "You coming in?"

He moves to step inside, but none of the others follow. "If Dranko's afraid," says the voice, "ask him who else would know about the stone he swallowed, or what his cigars can do."

Dranko lights a cigar and puffs out smoke. It forms the words **IT'S PERFECTLY SAFE, YOU DOLT!**

They all go in. The dome is empty, but Kibi can feel Cranchus's presence as keenly as though his grandfather had an arm draped around his shoulders.

One by one the voice of Cranchus speaks the names of the Company, greeting them hastily, as though he's trying to get through them before he forgets. "It's hard for me to be this... coherent," says Cranchus. "To be this 'in one place.' You're in deep enough now that I think I can keep this up for a few more minutes."

Kibi feels overwhelmed with peace and happiness. "It's great to... uh... to sense you," he says. "Are you... part of the earth now?"

"Yes. Yes I am. And I've been trying to communicate with you for a while, but you weren't in deep enough, and my efforts were clumsy. I only managed it a couple of times. I did manage to goose that toad for you. Did it tell you anything good?"

Kibi grins. That was his grandfather, blasting the Croaking Oracle with Earth Magic, prompting it to speak its prophecy!

"And I tried to give you a burst of as much power as I could, sometime after that. Wasn't sure how well it worked."

"It worked great!" says Kibi. "Thanks! We didn't know that was you."

"It's been a few centuries now," says Cranchus. Kibi thinks his voice is already beginning to waver. "I couldn't stay myself, being that close to the Source for so long. So, I became one with the Source. And now Abernia and I are hard to tell apart."

"You must feel awful," says Kibi, "with all the Essence around."

"Yes. The thorn in my side... the splinter has encased itself. I tried to send you that message once. The splinter is the Hand of the Adversary. It's lodged here, encased in a shell of its own blood."

Kibi understands. "And we have to get through it..."

"It has to be you, Kibi. It must be you who breaks its shell."

"But you're so powerful..." Kibi begins.

"I can't get that close," says Cranchus. "My consciousness doesn't stay coherent if I try to get near that place. Kibi... it has to be eradicated. Only you can go inside."

"How?"

"I don't know. Don't you?"

"No," says Kibi. "But I'll figure it out."

"I can't sense what's there, not on the inside. But there is something powerful guarding it on the outside, so be careful." Cranchus's voice is clearly strained now, as though he's having trouble keeping his focus.

"Do you know about the three Black Circle people who came down?" asks Kibi. "Are they the ones guarding it?"

"No. They set something else to guard it. I don't know what. But the Three are inside. You have to stop what they're doing."

"Are they making the earth shake?"

"Something inside is causing it. I don't know if it's them. They went inside, and that's where I lost sight of them. That's where the splinter is. The thorn in my side, the Hand of the Adversary. It's in there."

Kibi recalls that the other archmagi mentioned getting messages from Cranchus, though they never spoke with him directly. Kibi asks him how that was possible.

“My consciousness extends through the Barrier, since I surround it,” says Cranchus. “And it was Abernathy, always Abernathy, who heard my whispers. He’ll hear yours, too.”

“He will?”

“Or maybe he did in the past,” says Cranchus. “It’s hard for me to know. I exist in all the pasts, all the futures. That’s why it’s hard for me to have this conversation. I am forcing myself into one time.”

“I’m so glad that you could gather yourself enough together to have this talk,” says Kibi, tears coming to his eyes.

“You’re going to join me, you know.”

In his heart, Kibi knows it. “But what about mom?” he asks.

“She doesn’t expect you to come back,” says Cranchus softly. “And we’ll have a long time to figure out how to get a message through that big slab of iron.”

There is a pause, and Kibi fears Cranchus has gone, but his voice comes back, faint, wavering. “It will... be nice to have some company. I know that it happens. Remember, I’m in all times, and when it happens to you, you’ll be the same. But not yet. But don’t fear death, Kibi. You’ll just change your state.”

“Maybe that’s why I’m smiling in Leantha’s Book,” says Kibi. “Because even if I’m dying, I’m becoming one with the earth.”

“You’ll become,” whispers Dranko. “You’ll become the world.”

“This place will be safe for you tonight,” says Cranchus. “No Essence will trouble you. I’ve also smoothed things out for you, so it won’t take you so long to get to the Shell. It’s a straight path for you, Kibi. Tomorrow this will all be over.”

“And there are no enemies between here and there?” asks Morningstar.

“I don’t think so, no. And I’ll talk to you again soon, grandson. It’s been nice. Now go and do to those bastards what you did to Condor. Goodbye, Kibi.”

The sense of Cranchus fades away, and the dome is silent, save for the sound of their breathing.

Everett: And yet... Kibi cannot be both the one "to take the shell and rend" and the one "forever dead as stone." The verse specifies four beings.

Zelc: I so called it... [From page 20:]

Crazy theory: the dwarf with the rocks in Leantha’s book is not Kibi, it’s Cranchus. He somehow became “dead as stone.”

Although there’s still a chance the prophecy wasn’t talking about Cranchus after all.

Everett: If Cranchus is now part of Abernia, I suppose he could “drive the spike clean through,” but it just seems off to me considering the last line. He can’t die to renew hope if he’s not exactly alive as it is anyway. But I guess that could be it.



*The Last Day***Sister Act**

Their sleep is deep and peaceful, untroubled by nightmares or worry, but Aravis has a vision of the surface. It is the most momentous he has had yet.

The location – underground, probably? It’s a place that’s so well protected from divinations, even this vision from the Maze is a bit cloudy around the edges. But wherever this sanctum lies, it is being assaulted. The room into which your vision extends has recently seen some immense magical energies. The rock walls are fractured and scarred. Shattered glasswork is scattered everywhere, and scorched paper scraps still waft here and there through the charged air.

It’s also a bloody mess. Bodies litter the floor, killed by means various and gruesome. Judging from their descriptions, you guess that five of them were the adventuring group led by the siblings Jerzembeck and Junaya, whose vital missions for the Spire never brought them into the Company’s sphere. Others you are saddened to recognize more clearly. The golden head of Five Silent Crow has been crumpled like tin, as if it had imploded in on itself. Isabel Horn is a statue, her left arm broken off at the elbow. The bodies of Anhaya Sunblossom and the Pikonish priestess Cornelia are scorched ruins. Attrius and Portia, the bodyguards assigned to keep you safe at Verdshane, seem to have hacked one another apart, judging by their wounds and bloody blades. Sagiros Emberleaf’s sprawled body is in better shape than some of the others, but his left leg from thigh to ankle is charred to the bone. His face has been scalded and half of his moustache has been burned away.

In fact, only two beings seem to still be alive in this chamber. One is Parthol Runecarver, injured but not near fatally. He dusts off his robes and stretches his neck, then smiles cruelly at the kneeling man before him. That man is Tor Bladebearer, who looks like he was rendered solidly paralyzed in the act of standing up. An ornate flaming sword is gripped tightly in his right hand, a useless appendage to the statue Tor has become.

“Well, wasn’t that interesting,” says Parthol. “Twelve against one, and you still couldn’t manage it. None of you could even lay a hand on me! You just weren’t in my league. Though if it makes you feel better, you wouldn’t have bested Naradawk, either.” He idly flicks a piece of fallen ash from Tor’s shoulder. “But now my job has become more difficult. At least you would have weakened his forces somewhat. Now there’s no one of any significant power – myself excepted – standing between Naradawk and complete control of Charagan. I’m going to have to spend more serious effort and firepower taking the place over from him. What an annoyance! I hope you feel good about yourself... Tor, is it? Or would you prefer Darien?”

Tor, of course, says nothing. “I suppose I could leave you alive,” Parthol says. “You and Isabel are both salvageable. But no, now that you’ve found a way to breach my defenses, I can’t let you live. Naradawk might capture you and make you squeal. I suppose I really do have to make an end of you.” He puts a hand on Tor’s head. “I might as well try this first,” he says. “It worked for Glade and Royce, eventually.” He casts *disintegrate*, and sweat pours down Tor’s face, the only sign of the pain he feels.

“If I run out of *disintegrates* before you’re dead, what should I try then?” asks Parthol. “Would you think less of me if I just *magic missile* you to death?” He casts another *disintegrate*, and again Tor resists, but his eyes are bloodshot and watery. “Third time’s the charm, they say,” says Parthol. But before he can invoke another spell, he himself seizes up, his eyes going wide with surprise.

On the ground behind him, Sagiros body has dragged itself over to lie next to Parthol’s feet. Sagiros eyes are still closed, his mouth hanging slack, but his right hand has reached out, seemingly of its own volition, and closed around Parthol’s ankle. Parthol straightens, takes a step back, and waves his hand. Tor feels the paralysis lift, and surges to his feet. Your vision of the scene suddenly becomes much sharper, clearer.

“Gah,” says Parthol. “That’s the first time I’ve ever gotten someone unconscious to move. It’s a sickening feeling, honestly.” His body convulses, his arms bending at painful angles, his facial muscles contorting wildly. “Sooner would be better,” he gasps. “He’s resisting something fierce. I think I’ve removed all of his abjurations and resistances, but damn, his mind is strong! He’ll have them back in less than a minute.”

Tor nods, and cocks his sword over his shoulder in anticipation of a tremendous swing. It blazes with enchantments infused into it by scrolls from the Vault. “Farazil, by the power invested in me as a Knight of the Spire Guard, I hereby grant you citizenship in the Kingdom of Charagan, with all its attendant duties and protections.” So saying, he brings his sword down upon the possessed and defenseless Parthol Runecarver, and shears the head from the old wizard’s shoulders.

RangerWickett: I'm a fan of Farazil.

Kilroy: Things like this are why I have been reading this story for over a decade, and why I will come back and read it again, years from now. Thank you, Sagiros.

Bits like this and "I. Am. WROTH." and the arrival of Elder from Piratecat's Story Hour are remarkable, just for showing the length of time a plot hook can dangle before catching the perfect fish. (Speaking of, when is PC finishing his story? ☺)

A cheer goes up from the Company at hearing Aravis recount his dream. Their mercy toward Farazil has been amply rewarded. But two troubling truths go unspoken. First, that the ability of their friends on the surface to resist Naradawak has just been badly diminished. And second, that none of this will matter if they fail to stop Seven Dark Words from awakening or summoning the Adversary.

Kibi finds he can *stone shape* an exit from the dome with the merest thought. A smooth, wide boulevard now stretches away to the east. As they prepare for what could be the day of confrontation with the Evil Trio, casting spells and making plans, Morningstar notes that *Laramon's jade clover* is still warm, and may be a little bit warmer than it was yesterday.

They step out of the dome, and the rank radiation of Essence strikes them. Dranko's head prickles uncomfortably. *Wind walk* fails to function, and even *phantom steed* fails; no spell will work if it invokes something misty or insubstantial. Kibi is not surprised. This is the Deep Earth. "We started out on foot," says Ernie. "We'll finish this on foot."

It feels good to have their boots on solid stone, and they march, their last march, to face the greatest danger Abernia has ever known. The heat of Essence grows stronger as they go, battering their *protection from evil* spells. Ernie stands in front, the Ward of Drosh around his neck allowing them to progress. Without it, none of them would be able to take even a single step forward.

Then, up ahead, the passage widens, and some three hundred feet distant it ends at a flat black wall. In the very center of that wall is something shiny and white, but they're too far away to make out any details. Dranko, whose sight is keenest, peers into the gloom as they approach, and what at first is just a white oval against a dark background resolves into a face.

The corridor widens further, and now they are only a hundred feet from the black wall. The length of the wall they can see, stretching across the entire width of a small cavern, is mildly convex to them, as though it's only one small section of a great circular barrier. The gleaming white face, twenty feet in diameter, is dead center to them, as if set to watch this very approach. The wall is dead black, giving no cues of depth, and the marble face is unnaturally clean, such a pure white that its features are hard to make out. The only things that give shape to the face are little black dots that slide across its cheeks, its forehead, its eyeballs. The wall, they realize, is made of pure congealed Essence. And embedded into it is the head of the Sister God **Wlaqua**.

Closer now. Wlaqua's enormous white marble eyes dart back and forth, and its mouth opens. She lets out a terrible howl, filled with anguish, frustration and shame.

"Well, look at that," says Grey Wolf. "It's warning someone that we're here." He casts *indomitability* on Kibi.

Dranko and Flicker move forward together, though it's not clear how they might flank something set into a wall. The eyes swivel to watch them, and Wlaqua screams, "**Gooooo baaaaaack!**" Magical energies blast outward from Wlaqua's head, striking most of the Company. Morningstar's *mind status* spell pings: something has tried to *dominate* Kibi, but failed. It pings again, as Dranko resists a *feeblemind*. Ernie is turned to stone. Grey Wolf resists a *disintegrate* but suffers minor burns. And Dranko... Dranko starts to caper and prance, struck by *Otto's irresistible dance*.

"**Flee for your lives!**" screams Wlaqua. "**Go back!**"

"You've made a terrible mistake," Morningstar says to Her. "We're here to restore things."

"**Yes!**" agrees Wlaqua, Her voice desperate. "**You have to slay me, but you can't! I'm a God!**"

Aravis casts *protection from spells* upon Grey Wolf, Flicker, Morningstar and himself. Morningstar casts *holy aura* on everyone. Kibi uses *break enchantment* to restore Ernie to flesh, before Quickening *xorn movement* and sinking into the ground. Ernie (who felt his skin grow hard for a moment, but who must have resisted a petrification) casts *mass doughy folk*, giving all of his allies further protection. "Can't we circumvent you by finding another way through the wall?" he asks Wlaqua.

"**They've placed me at the weak spot!**" She screams. "**It's the way they went through. It's the only way to... AUGHHHH!**" She shrieks louder, as though some painful compelling force cut Her off, not wanting Her to say more.

Grey Wolf casts *iron storm*, centered on Wlaqua's head. Flicker runs forward, thinking Dranko is by his side. "Come on, Dranko, keep up! Can't you... oh, for the Gods' sake."

“I’m sorry!” Wlaqua screams. She erupts with another burst of magic energy. Flicker sags, struck by a potent *energy drain*. Ernie feels his own *energy drain* forced out of his mind and cast back upon him, though thanks to the spell resistance granted by Morningstar’s *holy aura*, he is unaffected by it. Aravis resists *feeblemind* and Ernie shrugs off *hold monster*. Dranko is stripped of his own highest-level spell: *cure serious wounds*.

Aravis casts *maze* on Wlaqua. To all of their surprise, the Head vanishes. It doesn’t leave a hole behind, just more solid black oozing Essence. It seems that it’s not Wlaqua’s severed head that fights them, but merely her sliced-off face. The Company move forward, but Wlaqua soon reappears. Even in death, the Sister God radiates a furious power that competes with the evil of the wall of Essence. They’re not sure they have the wherewithal to harm Her, and eventually Her magical blasts will prove too much for them.

They need help, and Morningstar knows how to summon it. She casts *miracle*. “Yavin!” she shouts. “We face your Sister. She is insane. We require your assistance.”

There is a ripple of power in front of Morningstar, so strong that the ground shakes and the air ripples, though the Black Wall doesn’t react at all. A being appears in front of Morningstar, a twenty-foot black marble giantess holding a black sword. It is the Sister God **Yavin**, and She is dead. Her black body is riddled with holes, and large pieces have been hacked out of Her, leaving weeping wounds. One of her eyes has been gouged out, and the gap where it once was goes nearly all the way through her head.

“Sister!” wails Wlaqua. ***“I killed you, and I’m sorry!”***

“I am sorry too,” says Yavin. *“But it appears I have been given another chance to set things right. You were very, very foolish, Sister. You knew what you were dealing with. Are you at all surprised?”*

“Have mercy, Sister!” screams Wlaqua.

Yavin looks down upon Morningstar. *“You have brought me back from the Necropolis of Naslund,”* she says, her voice powerful but underscored with cracks. *“My time here is very short. What would you have me do?”*

“When You go back, take Your sister with You,” says Morningstar.

“I cannot. She can only go if She is dead, but the Adversary’s foul power keeps Her alive.”

“Then we need to get through this wall,” says Morningstar. “Right where Your Sister is.”

Yavin understands. She raises her enormous black sword. ***“I take no pleasure in this,”*** She says to Wlaqua. And the Sister God Yavin, who once resolved conflicts peacefully but who in death is freed from that tenet, takes a mighty swing at Wlaqua’s head. A large chunk of white marble is knocked free from Her cheek, and it lands on the ground with a heavy thud. More, a spider-web of cracks appears, running through the entire Head, and it no longer radiates its aura of indomitability.

Yavin steps back and motions to Her sister, while Wlaqua screams in pain. Kibi casts *cone of cold*, and it clearly damages the Head. Aravis casts a Maximized *chain lightning* into the *iron storm* and Wlaqua screams again.

“Let me introduce you to Ell.” Morningstar closes, Quickens *divine power*, and strikes once with *Ell’s Will*. It knocks another piece out of Wlaqua’s head. ***“It hurts, it hurts!”*** She cries, and though Her pain is genuine, the Company think Her voice also sounds almost encouraging, as though She wants them to hurry and make an end of Her.

Dranko strikes with his whip, and Grey Wolf dissolves most of Wlaqua’s nose with an *acid orb*. The black spots on Wlaqua’s face roil, and sympathetic lesions burst out on Yavin’s dead countenance.

“I’m sorry!” Wlaqua shrieks. ***“It’s not me that’s doing it!”***

“It is you, Sister,” says Yavin. ***“You made this happen, and now you are paying the price of it.”***

Once more Wlaqua unleashes magical energies on her attackers. Aravis is set to dancing, and Flicker is struck blind, but everyone else resists the various effects. Dranko lines up his whip strikes more carefully this time, and connects twice, knocking a hole straight through Her cheek. They can see the Black Wall behind it. Kibi pops up from the ground and casts *greater dispel magic* on Aravis, curing him of his unwanted disposition to tango. Aravis immediately casts *disintegrate*, and the Head fails to resist. The entire thing flashes and becomes a gritty white powder, falling to the ground like a bucket of white sand upended by a giant.

“I’m sorry, Milady,” says Dranko to Yavin.

“Thank You for Your help,” adds Ernie.

“*You are welcome*,” says Yavin, “*but this is no longer my place*.” She nods, and vanishes.

Piratecat: And now, at long last, we are to it. Wish us luck.

Everett: If anyone starts dancing in the showdown with the Evil Trio, I will LOL continuously for many minutes.



The End

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.

It was years ago that Kibi had that dream, and now it is about to come true. The Shell is before him, a wall of pure Essence. If not for Ernie's Ward of Drosh, he and all the others would be physically blasted backward by its presence, their minds crushed by its innate malice.

“I bet they're waiting right on the other side, to kill us as soon as we're through,” says Dranko. Maybe they should send the linnorm in first?

Kibi feels a certainty that his ability to bend reality will not work on the other side of this barrier, and so he uses that ability for the third and final time. He requests of the world that he and his allies be fully restored to perfect health, with a full day's complement of spells at the ready. And the world assents, sending its power rumbling up through the Company, infusing them, refreshing, strengthening. The Wall stands implacable, unimpressed.

Dranko lights his cigar one final time. **DO NOT BECOME**, warns the smoke.

Kibi draws the *Watcher's Kiss*, fragment of the blade that Uthol Inga once used to stab the Adversary in the back. Everything save the golden blade fades into a muted grayscale. Then, only because it brings him comfort when he's about to do something risky, he puts on his *helm of water breathing*. He can feel the solid stone beneath his feet, the Earth Magic of Abernia bolstering his resolve.

“Let's get this done,” he says, and brings down the *Watcher's Kiss* in a diagonal slash, slicing the Wall where Wlaqua's head had been. The shell is nearly a foot thick, and Kibi's hands almost come into contact with it. But where the blade touches the Essence, the wall parts, the edges of the cut curling away and smoking like burning paper. The hole widens to a ragged opening big enough for them to fit through. Kibi raises the sword aloft, a smile on his face for just a second, before evil washes out from beyond the opening like a hurricane blast, knocking them all a step backward. Even with the Ward of Drosh present, they can feel its sting.

Aravis vanishes. Everyone gasps. Then he returns, clutching his head. “Belshikun had one more vision he wanted me to see, before we go in,” he says.

“I have decided to show you something of a different nature, an encounter that happened many months ago, and not on the surface of Abernia. I may be overstepping my bounds by sharing it with you.”

Belshikun vanishes, and your perspective changes, and you observe...

“It has to be done,” she says. “There's no other choice, and we both know it.”

Two figures sit at a simple wooden table, in simple wooden chairs. She is tall, thin, imperial, wearing golden robes and a crown of coherent light. He is not quite as tall, and his clothes are beggar's clothes, though with golden trim, and on his chest is a sapphire pin cut in the shape of a lightning bolt. They are Corilayna and Laramon, Deities of Fortune, and they are here to gamble.

“Yes, we both know it,” says Laramon. “I can see where things are headed as well as you. Though if you had a shred of honor, you'd do it yourself with no games. You brought him here, after all.”

Corilayna waves her hand dismissively. “No. We fled here, and you accepted us, eventually. The Adversary's rebirth on Abernia is all of our problem. There's only going to be one chance to put things to rights, and as things stand now, that chance will fail.”

“You speak, of course, of the mortals chosen by Abernia,” says Laramon, steepling his fingers. “Alander's so-called Chosen.

You'd think if the world wanted to save itself, it wouldn't need us to take such drastic measures."

"Who knows?" says Corilayna. "Maybe the world has already taken us into account? Either way, Abernia's band of precocious mortal misfits, at this very moment, doesn't stand a chance. The wizard Abernathy may have heard the world whispering their names, but all of the recursively-derived prophecies in the world won't do them any good as things stand now. Even if they find a way beneath the Barrier, the journey they must make is too long, too dangerous, and too *improbable*."

"Yes," says Laramon with a sigh. "And that's why we're here. They'll need a thumb on the scale just to have a prayer. And even then, it won't be enough by itself. They'll have to be smart, *and* resourceful, *and* powerful, *in addition to* being absurdly lucky, especially as regards the confluence of far-separated events. But of course our thumbs aren't allowed where they're going."

"And so we come to this," says Corilayna. "They're going to need good fortune, and lots of it. We could make them a magic lucky trinket the conventional way, but even that wouldn't be powerful enough. Only one thing will be enough."

They stare at one another across the table for a good long while. "Well, we can't use dice," Laramon says eventually. "I don't trust you."

Corilayna smiles. "And we can't use a coin. I don't trust you either."

"How about a roulette wheel?" Laramon suggests. "Neither one of us will be able to cheat on that without the other knowing."

"Fine. We'll manifest one jointly."

Seconds later a beautiful gaming wheel appears on the table, crafted of mithril and diamond. There are no numbers on the spaces. Every other slot is black jet, etched with a gleaming red die standing on one corner, the holy symbol of Corilayna. The remaining spaces are polished ruby, each inscribed with a black lightning bolt inside a coin, the symbol of Laramon. The ball is a perfect white pearl.

For long minutes they do nothing but stare intently at the wheel, expressions of grim concentration on their faces. Then Corilayna looks up. "I'm satisfied."

"I am as well," says Laramon.

"Good." Corilayna smiles. "I have my token. Do you have yours?"

"Of course."

"Then we will spin the wheel, and let fortune dictate our fates, as is fitting."

Through some unknown medium, one that must have been acceptable to both parties, the wheel begins to spin. Both Deities of Luck watch intently as the wheel turns and the pearl glides around the edge. After an exquisitely tense minute the ball drops and bounces several times before coming to rest.

It sits in a red slot. Laramon smiles. "I win, it seems."

Corilayna stares at the wheel. "Yes. Yes, it does look that way."

Again, moments of silence across the table.

"There will be local fluctuations on Abernia," says Corilayna, keeping her expression neutral. "Luck is going to go haywire for a while. No one is going to know what to make of it. When they figure out I'm gone, my priesthood will probably assume I've fled with my tail between my legs, just like Drosh did."

Laramon studiously says nothing.

"It would be best if they don't know what it is, at least in the short term," she adds. "Put it somewhere they'll find it, and enchant it so they won't lose it. Goodness knows they've misplaced enough magical objects in their short careers. Now. I don't see any reason to delay."

Laramon produces his token, a jade clover with his symbol – a lightning bolt on a coin – inscribed on each leaf. He places it on the table.

Corilayna lets out a long breath, and closes her eyes. "Goodbye," she whispers. And then she dies. All of her divine life energy is immediately channeled into the clover, until it glows like a green fireball. After a moment, when the last of her godly force has been contained in Laramon's token, Corilayna's body turns to vapors, disperses, and vanishes. Laramon is left alone in the room.

He takes a silver coin from his pocket, and flips it into the air, letting it land on the table. It bounces, wobbles, and comes to rest standing on its smooth, thin edge.

He stays in his chair for a long time after that, fingertips pressed to his lips. “You did have honor, after all,” he says at last. “Let’s hope it’s enough.” He stands and puts the jade clover into a pocket of his shirt.

Morningstar gulps and reaches into her pocket. Her fingers close around *Laramon’s jade clover*, and she realizes that her earlier guess was nearly on the mark. For months she has been carrying the full divine power of Corilayna in the lining of her robe!

Ahead of them stretches a black tunnel like a diseased throat, its walls an even mingling of stone and Essence. It is repulsive in every sense. “And thus begins possibly the last journey we will ever make,” says Aravis.

“Well, I couldn’t ask for better company,” says Ernie. The others nod quietly.

Ernie goes first, wearing the Ward of Drosh around his neck. There are no light motes in here, but *darkvision* suffices. They make slow progress, through a place so stifling and sickening, it takes all of their nerve and resolve not to turn back, or just lie down and curl into a ball. They cast a few spells as they go, protecting themselves from spells, from various energy types. Morningstar, seen as the most indispensable if they end up fighting something, gets a *mind blank*.

The tunnel is the embodiment of black despair. With each step, they realize more certainly that something has gone wrong. This can’t be right, can’t be where they are meant to be. Nothing they have done heretofore could possibly matter.

In Morningstar’s pocket, *Laramon’s jade clover* suddenly becomes so hot, it burns her skin through the cloth of her robe. At the same moment a small ball of orange flame appears, glowing in the darkness of this accursed tunnel. Even as the Company stare at it, still wondering what it is, it expands rapidly into a fiery oval ring, like the frame of a full-length mirror that has caught fire.

“There!” shouts a voice. “I did it! Go now before it closes! Go, go!” The voice sounds familiar, but no one can place it right away.

A man steps through the mirror. It’s Cashbox Jack, one of the ones who helped the Company survive in the Lightless Room of Het Branoi. Close on his heels are Kiro, the dwarven cleric, and the sorcerer Ox. They stumble into the tunnel, gasping in horror at their surroundings. But more are coming. Something like a lobster claw sticks through the portal, followed by the rest of an iron barrel-like contraption. It seems that Aristus, from the Eye of the Storm, finally finished building his *apparatus*.

And then Yoba steps through. She rushes forward, heedless of the doom she has stepped into, and embraces Ernie in a fierce hug. “I know you said you’d come back,” she whispers in his ear. “That’s how I knew it would be okay. I’ll just come back with you.”

But Yoba is not the last to come through the burning portal. One more person emerges: Kay Olafsen, one of the original seven summoned to Abernathy’s tower all those years ago. Kay, who was lost in Het Branoi, her elemental nature unable to exist in a place created by an Eye of Moirel. As soon as she is through, the portal closes, leaving behind a last breath of heat.

“The mystic Peralta saw you’d need help,” says Yoba. “Her ‘Seeing Flame’ told her your entire world was in mortal danger. She contacted as many of us as she could with *sendings*, and told us we could return the favor you did for us. She’s been trying to open a portal for weeks; this place is hard to reach!”

“Of course we all said yes,” says Cashbox Jack. “And besides, we figured after the last place we helped you out of, how could *this* be any worse?”

The Company shake hands, utter words of thanks, and embrace Kay. For Kay’s part, she is just as happy to see them alive. “I wasn’t with you,” she explains, “but I was with other yous. And the other yous kept dying.”

They quickly bring all the newcomers up to speed, explaining how dire are the straits they are in, and making some quick introductions. No one flinches at learning there is likely no return from here, win or lose.

As the expanded group prepare to continue their final journey, there is a sound.

Gods, the sound. It is a sound that pierces their souls to the core, like a great bell shattered by the force of its ring. It is a sound of pure despair. It is the sound of the world ending.

The Essence-infused rock of the floor starts to boil and bubble like the surface of a fetid swamp. The walls pulse and undulate like a great black esophagus about to vomit them into hell. Kibi feels all the stone of the world cry out in pain, and a terror floods down the tunnel like water. Terror, and defeat. They have failed. Yoba weeps, and Cashbox Jack sinks to his knees.

And then, the Voice. It is a Voice that would make Tapheon sound like an archangel. It carries such malice and power, just hearing it causes them pain like nothing they have ever felt.

“I AM HERE, AT LAST AND IN FULL,” says the Voice. **“I SENSE YOU, SURFACE DWELLERS OF THIS PITIFUL ROCK. COME HERE WHERE I CAN LOOK UPON YOU. AND BE HUM-BLED THAT YOU ARE MY FIRST VICTIMS... THE FIRST OF MILLIONS.”**

None of them can move, or act. Just thinking is an agony. The Adversary has arrived, and his Voice pollutes them. They should have done something different, something they didn't think of, something hidden among all the hints and clues and prophecies. But they missed it, and now it is too late. They have failed.

And then they are teleported, as the laws of the Underdark that should prevent this are harshly violated by the Adversary. *Lar-amon's jade clover* melts and vanishes in a puff of metallic steam. Now they are standing in an enormous cavern, the floor of which is worked smooth and inlaid with large black obsidian circles. Equations and lines are scrawled everywhere, some of them hundreds of feet across. High above them, protruding from the eastern wall, are four deep purple fingers, each as long as the Greenhouse is tall. The thumb, if there is one, would be under the floor.

Standing in the very center of the cavern, in the centermost of the inlaid black circles, hundreds of feet tall, is the Adversary. His skin is purpled iron. One hand grips a black sword; the other arm ends in a stump. The failed heroes are scattered around Him, apart from one another. They cannot move, but the Adversary has arranged that each of their heads is tilted up, where they can look at Him, see His glory, and know that they could not prevent His arrival. His very presence would be annihilating their souls if not for the presence of the Ward of Drosh. But even with it, their souls are crumbling. They are hardly aware of three other figures in the room, smiling, standing in smaller black circles on the floor.

With his last shreds of consciousness, Kibi realizes that the cavern in which they stand was not, until just now, large enough to contain the Adversary's physical form. His arrival wrenched the stone away, altering it, changing its nature, to make room for Him. Now He is standing in something akin to a great bell jar. His arrogance, his exultation in victory, is crushing. With their last fleeting bits of thought and sanity, each of the Company are left to wonder what they might have done differently, how they could have prevented this.

But they didn't. And they have lost.

THE END

Piratecat: Worst. Campaign. Ever.

HavokReaker: **stunned silence** Say what!?! (Oh, there'd best be an epilogue!)

Neurotic: Nah, he's just messing with us... There must be some outpouring of luck (clover), time (Cranchus), Abernia's power (Cranchus again) or some other long-forgotten item waiting to come to the fore... and let's not forget Dranko's madness.

StevenAC: Er, Sagiro... you do know it's nearly three months past April Fools Day? And for those of us with long memories, that trick won't work again...

Kaodi: Cripes. If this is how it ended, maybe Dranko Becoming and killing everyone would not have been so bad.

Gulla: This cliffhanger is of a kind to warrant a trip from Norway to get the next installment.

Pretty please, tell us more? (And I think this invalidates the prophecy, so it cannot be the True Ending. I hope.)

Piratecat: Just to be clear, this is exactly what happened at the gaming table. Exactly. And Kay's player got to game for, what, 15 minutes? But you can't fight a God, not in this world.

I think at this point he started to fold up his GM screen. Which was unwise, as we had dice to throw.

Everett: You know, I think Sagiro does stuff like that because all of you on EN World expect him to. Though the tension up until the... June Fool's Day joke was really good. Probably the next update will just delete the last few paragraphs and start from there.

By the way, PC, we *have* been waiting years for you to resume *Defenders of Daybreak*.

Sagiro: Nothing will be deleted, I assure you. As Piratecat said, everything I have typed is exactly how it played out. I told my players they had lost, and packed up my stuff.

Everett: Right, then. Cheers to that. Though you may have trouble publishing if you end the novel the same way.

Also, was Kay's player actually there for this session?

Sagiro: Yes.

Pyske: [*Piratecat*: But you can't fight a God, *not in this world*.] **cough** Emphasis mine.

P.S.: You managed to get me to de-lurk for the first time in 4 years. Well done.

Kaodi: I thought about that, but I am not so sure... Though I would not put it past Sagiro to pull some kind of stunt like that, such as phoning everyone the next week to make sure they were going to be there for the conclusion of the campaign.



You know, I considered leaving the Story Hour here for several days, while I go off camping with the family. But there are limits even to my cruelty.

I *did* pack up my things. But then I stopped, and unpacked, and returned to the table. It turned out there was more story to tell, after all.

What's in Dranko's Head

Dranko has a somewhat different experience.

For him, time stands still. Oh, he is vaguely aware of the ocean of despair in which his friends are drowning, but he regards it with a detached curiosity, like a collector regarding an insect pinned to a board.

Something in his head has stirred, and done something akin to casting *time stop* on his behalf. Like the others he is looking at the Adversary, and cannot look away. He can *feel*, acutely, the God's satisfaction at having destroyed the world of Darwin and most of its pantheon before the rest of the Godlings fled.

He can feel the pain of betrayal, as the God is stabbed in the back by His lover, the Goddess Uthol Inga, in the moment of His victory.

He can feel horror, as He is caught in a net, placed in a cage He cannot see, because Ell has woven a net of darkness around Him. He has been imprisoned, and His prison set inside the Far Realms, and He reaches His hand through to escape, but the cage closes and seals, and His hand is severed. Dranko can feel His pain. He can feel the madness of aeons; not even a God can endure confinement in the Far Realms for so long.

He feels the impact of the God's Hand, smashing through the surface of a distant world, then digging, clawing its way downward until it has arrived in this cavern, there to wait, wait until someone arrives to make use of it.

Then, at last, there is the exultation of rebirth, as Seven Dark Words calls Him back, in the heart of Abernia, a world that will now suffer the same fate as Darwin.

Abruptly, Dranko is somewhere else. He is standing deep inside Naslund, Necropolis of the Gods. He thinks for a moment that he has been brought here because he, like everyone else on Abernia, has died. Despite his lack of fame or (more importantly) divinity, he has been afforded the honor of interment among the dead Gods.

But, no. He is not really here. Something is showing him a memory, a clear, distinct memory of when he was here before. He is standing with his friends before Viersk, the lone caretaker of Drosh after Meledien and Tarsos raided the tombs.

"How much do you know of what you have seen here?" asks Viersk.

"Very little," Aravis admits. "We can't even read half of the names above the entrances to the tombs."

He refers to the fact that written over each God's tomb are two names, one they all can read, and a second that cannot be read by any means they possess.

"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."

Then Dranko is back in the cavern, looking up at the Adversary.

A voice whispers in his mind. **"Even if something doesn't exist, we can still find it. And in return for your fame, I have given it to you."**

The Name of the Adversary. All Dranko has to do is *think* it to himself, and he would *become* the Adversary. He would have all of the God's power, along with His malice, His urge to destroy. He would have fame on such a scale, His name would be spoken in reverence and fear until history came to an end, on this and every world.

The impulse to do this is very, very strong.

Or...

Or, he can speak the name as a weapon, and strip the Adversary of His immortality, and a large part of His power. Time is slowly starting up again as he faces this choice. He must decide.

BECOME, whispers a voice in his head.

DO NOT BECOME, Abernia seems to say.

Dranko shouts the Name of the Adversary, flinging it upward from his lips like a spear. The power is too much. He drops to his knees, blood running from his ruined eyes, even as the sound of the Name echoes all around.

In the midst of their despair, the others hear Dranko say something they are not supposed to hear, that he is not supposed to be speaking. The earth trembles, pieces raining down, smashing into the floor, breaking apart some of the carefully set obsidian bricks. The Adversary Himself screams in pain, and the crushing despair vanishes, leaving behind terror, but now also, for the first time, hope. Seven Dark Words, Meledien and Tarsos try to master their confusion.

The Adversary shrinks, physically shrinks, until he stands a mere forty feet tall. He looks down, enraged at the obscenity perpetrated on His being. He grips His sword tightly. He is still a God, fulminant with divine power. He is still a God, but now He is one no longer beyond the reach of mortals.

He is a God who can be slain.

And so, the battle for the fate of Abernia begins.

Piratecat: Don't think I wasn't tempted, especially after he'd packed up his things.

Everett: And how would *that* have worked? "Oh BTW folks, Dranko Became the Adversary and spent the next millennium feasting on your souls, geez, look at the time, take care now..."

Piratecat: I asked him that. He said they'd get to try and take down me instead. It would have been interesting academically, but Dranko would have only sacrificed himself if he could make the Adversary a kinder, happy, fluffy God – and that wasn't in the cards.

Everett: How would Dranko even get a choice in the matter? As with your dream, you'd Become an incarnation of pure evil. How else is the campaign going to end? "And then Dranko Became, and yea, Abernia did tremble at His feet... except on Wednesdays, when He gave out free milkshakes and invited toddlers to sit on His knee..."

Piratecat: Actually, I think Friday is the Drankoverse's holy day. But I see your point. Sagiros didn't actually need a plan; the chance of Dranko choosing to Become was so low as to be non-existent. Sagiros knows me extremely well.

The Warlock: But, free milkshakes and toddlers! Or is that free toddler milkshakes... I can never remember...

Everett: Even were you to choose the Becoming option, you simply don't get to end a 16-year campaign without a climactic showdown, whether it's Dranko vs. Party or Party vs. Adversary...

Anyway, here we are, final boss fight, and it still isn't clear who is to channel what makes dead, or what they channel, or how. Any guesses out there?

coyote6: Hmm. The True Name of a god is known but once, when the god dies. Hence, that Name could be said to be what marks the god as dead, and so Dranko just channeled it. Maybe?

Everett: Interesting. Yeah, that certainly would fulfill the prophecy in some sense, except that "four are needed" and Dranko's already one of them, for having the Name in his head. So I think the channeler must be yet to come in the final battle.

Jarrod: No wonder Tapheon didn't want [Dranko] around...

Everett: Tapheon couldn't have known what it was, but sure, it would terrify him. That works.

Tamlyn: What struck me as genuinely awesome was the role of Cranchus in the selection of the party. Cranchus had become one with Abernia. Cranchus tried to speak to people, but the only person who could hear was Abernathy. Abernathy got the names of the party from Abernia/Cranchus. And all this happened *after* the party's visit to Cranchus in the past. Incredible!

Solarious: So, Abernia was alive and doing mad gambit plans to save itself and everyone on it the way Chrono Trigger's world did, setting up stable recursion loops, preparing trials and arming living weapons to point directly at the heart of the enemy.

Well done, rodent of uncertain parentage. Stealing from the classics is the greatest homage you could pay them.

Everett: So, just for funzies, what do you suppose the Name of the Adversary was? Was it Sherman?

Anxe: What's Sagiros's real name? Because I bet it's that. Or something like Diabolox...



The Fate of Abernia

Meledien and **Tarsos** stand inside their small black circles, clad in their red armor. Meledien holds a glowing, flaming spear in one hand, and a shield in the other. Tarsos holds a heavy hammer, and his shield is ornate, radiating power. A design of a book is upon it, reminding the Company that in addition to looting the Spear of Caba, Tarsos and Meledien also stole the Bulwark of Leantha. **Seven Dark Words** wears no armor. His black robes hang loosely over his lank body. Stringy black hair hangs down to his shoulders. His complexion is sallow. He and his two confederates occupy three points of a virtual triangle, with the Adversary standing in the middle. The God wears a human expression, one of confusion mixed with outrage.

The fourteen heroes have been brought to this place and scattered widely about, none particularly close to any of the others. Above them loom the fingers of the Adversary's Hand, protruding from high up on one wall.

The Adversary looks at Himself as though He's never seen His own body before. Fury is writ large on His features. He shakes His stump, still weeping Essence, and where the blood strikes the ground, two enormous constructs, blood golems, rise up like looming shadows. Then the Adversary *teleports*, appearing next to Dranko. Dranko is still on his knees, blind, blood pouring from his burst eyes. **"YOU WILL PAY FOR YOUR INSOLENCES,"** thunders the Adversary.

"Hey," says Dranko, blocking out the pain and pointing his head upward. "Since we're on a first-name basis now, let me tell you, it was totally worth it."

The Adversary brings his titanic black sword down upon Dranko, who senses it coming but still cannot fully evade it. It slices deep into Dranko's flesh, burning him. Then He levels His stump and *disintegrates* Dranko. The half-orc resists, and does not die. He does not die! The Adversary experiences a new effrontery. His will is Reality; He wished Dranko dead, and took steps to make it so, and yet His will has not been realized. Outrageous!

The two blood golems each move toward the closest living foe. One bludgeons Ox with dripping fists, while the other does likewise to Morningstar. When it touches her, something burns beneath her skin, as though her blood is slowly catching fire. As though she has been infected with Essence.

Seven Dark Words shoots a glance across the cavern at Tarsos, Quickens a spell upon his person, and then casts one of his most powerful magics. A two-foot-diameter *sphere of annihilation* appears next to Morningstar. She resists getting sucked into it, but it grazes her armor and burns a section of it away, searing the skin of her shoulder beneath. She takes a step back, understanding what it is. "Oh, crap!"

Aristus maneuvers his *apparatus* to face the nearest blood golem, and fires out a spray of bubbling green acid. No magic here; the stuff is purely chemical, and it burns a bit of the golem away, sending a splatter of Essence to the ground. Grey Wolf places an *iron storm* as carefully as he can, encompassing both one of the blood golems and Meledien, and none of his allies. Ox then casts an Empowered *chain lightning* into it. Meledien dodges the electric storm but still takes significant damage; the blood golem gives off just the barest hint of null shadow smell, and takes no damage at all. Then Ox doubles over in pain. Suppurations have appeared where the blood golem touched him, and black fluid bursts out. "I'm okay," he croaks, though he feels far from it.

Flicker was placed farthest away from his enemies; while he dashes toward Seven Dark Words, Meledien and Yoba sprint toward one another, each with a weapon raised. Yoba *smites evil* with her sword, the *Holy Blade of Anx*, and it shears through Meledien's plate. Blood pours out that's thicker and fouler than it should be; it stinks of Essence. At the same time Meledien pierces Yoba's shoulder with the Spear of Caba, the weapon striking like a bolt of fire. Yoba's whole body becomes wreathed in orange flames.

Aravis casts *time stop*. For a few seconds, the horrors recede, but even with no time passing, the reek of the Adversary is all around him. He casts *effulgent epuration*, then manifests a *black blade of disaster*. Two can play at the game of controlled annihilating voids. Then he readies an action for when the *time stop* ends. When it does, he casts *maze* on Tarsos, the combatant he feels will be least likely to resist. Tarsos vanishes, Bulwark of Leantha and all.

Kay, who had been moving toward Tarsos, finds her target suddenly missing, so she runs toward Seven Dark Words instead. The Adversary takes an idle swipe at her as she dashes by, still groping for the memory of what it was like to have to strike mortals physically, rather than simply causing their destruction by desiring it. He opens up a frightening wound in Kay's side.

Meledien bends backward to evade Aravis's *black blade of disaster*, and avoids the worst of its effect, but she looks every bit as worried as Morningstar.

The Adversary looks over at where Tarsos just was. It is wrong that he is gone; Seven Dark Words and Meledien need Tarsos and his Bulwark to tell them about their enemies, their strengths, weaknesses and ability to resist physical and magical effects. And so, because He is still a God, and can still make *some* demands upon reality, He snaps, **"GET BACK HERE."**

And Tarsos reappears. He is a short, wide warrior, barely taller than five feet. He rushes to his nearest foe, who is Kibi. "I know everything," he tells the dwarf. "I know you're Kibilhathur Bimson. Goodbye, Kibilhathur." He swings his hammer, and Kibi is lifted up and thrown back almost thirty feet, landing with a bone-jarring crunch on his back.

Kiro, the dwarven cleric who had joined the Company to battle beyond the Black Door of Het Branoi, casts his most potent offensive spell, a *fire storm* large enough to encompass both Meledien and one of the blood golems. The golem is unaffected. As for Meledien, the Spear of Caba erupts in sympathy with Kiro's flames, and when the fires have died down, she has *healed* as much as the spell should have damaged her. She looks over her shoulder at the crestfallen Kiro. "Thank you!"

Dranko is still blind, but his tongue works just fine. “You might not be able to guess,” he says to the Adversary, “but I’m a pretty devout cleric. So I’d like to give you the opportunity to convert. I hope Delioch will help you find peace.” Then, because he’s not quite *that* stupid, he breaks his *refuge* token that brings Morningstar to him, before healing himself with a wand.

Like Flicker, Cashbox Jack was brought to this cavern far removed from everyone else. He runs across a section of floor thickly covered with equations and black circles, and hurls two of his returning daggers at Seven Dark Words. Both miss. Morningstar casts *mass heal*, bringing Dranko and Kay back to full health, and curing Dranko of his blindness. For good measure she Quickens *righteous wrath of the faithful*, imbuing her allies with extra fighting prowess. Ernie moves up and casts *lion’s roar*, damaging his enemies and further bolstering his friends. For the first time, the Adversary feels pain. It is not a sensation He is used to, and it brings forth an ear-splitting bellow of rage. Ernie then spins and casts *holy smite* upon Meledien. “Don’t touch my girlfriend!” he yells.

Kibi groans, stands up, and *summons* five greater earth elementals. They immediately commence grappling, and soon Tarsos, Meledien, Seven Dark Words and one of the blood golems are wrapped up in rocky embraces. Though the Adversary is still free, that seems to have decisively turned the tide of combat in the heroes’ favor.

With most of the enemies engaged, Galdifain decides it’s time. “Who would you like me to name?” The others are unanimous in their choice. She produces a scroll, utters a few brief syllables, and in a loud voice declares, “*Seven Dark Words*.” The dread linnorm, limned in aquamarine, springs into being from the scroll. It looks directly at Seven Dark Words, whose arms are pinned by an earth elemental. It tries and fails to fly, and so settles for a bounding leap. It lands in front of Seven Dark Words and casts *disintegrate*. The Black Circle adherent resists, but still flinches from the pain.

The Adversary looks about Himself, and sees His allies occupied by elementals, and that a dragon is attacking His most devoted servant. “**No,**” he says. “**I WILL NOT HAVE THIS.**” He casts *miracle*, and all the elementals, as well as the linnorm, blink out of existence. Satisfied, He waves His bleeding stump, and a jagged bolt of Essence sprays from it, striking Morningstar and Kay. Dranko bends backward and the jet of blood narrowly misses him. He can feel its evil heat on his face.

One of the blood golems bludgeons Ox, and more oozy black suppurations appear on his skin. The other golem tries to smash Flicker, but the little halfling dances out of the way. Seven Dark Words, freed from the elemental and finding the threatening dragon gone as well, smiles as he brings forth a *crushing fist of spite*. It’s huge, a clenched fist fifteen feet across that drips with black fluid. It smashes down upon Aravis and Ernie, clipping them as they dive out of the way. Then Seven Dark Words’ *sphere of annihilation* glides *through* the blood golem engaging Flicker, and rolls into the halfling. He can’t fully get out of the way; it cleanly removes the greater part of his thigh. As he screams and falls to the ground, clutching his diminished leg, Seven Dark Words Quickens a *teleport* and removes himself from the immediate vicinity of his enemies.

Aristus backs up his *apparatus* and sinks a claw into one of the golems. The machine is a battle dynamo, its claws delivering massive strikes. Essence pours out of a large rent in the golem’s body. Grey Wolf sees that Seven Dark Words has not gone so far as to be out of range of an *acid orb*. He fires a green globe – which splashes harmlessly from Seven Dark Words’ robes. “I hate him,” mutters Grey Wolf, as he moves to close.

Ox has better luck, striking Meledien with one of the two *polar rays* he can cast today. She cannot avoid it, and her body is covered with frost, but she survives. Yoba still stands before her, and so Meledien strikes with the Spear of Caba, once, twice, three times. Yoba is terribly wounded, and still on fire, and as if that weren’t bad enough, the flames destroy both her *cloak of resistance* and *ring of deflection*. “So, you’re Ernie’s girlfriend?” sneers Meledien. “It’s a shame your souls won’t be together in the afterlife.”

Aravis moves to Ernie and Quickens a *teleport*, bringing them both near Meledien. Then he casts *reaving dispel* on Seven Dark Words. This has the effect of stripping away several spells: *energy immunity: fire, cold* and *sonic* as well as *indomitability*. Better, it confers these spells onto himself! Over the mind-link, he warns his allies that Seven Dark Words still retains immunity to acid and electricity, as well as a *death ward*. Finally, Aravis moves the *black blade of disaster* to Meledien, who ducks its deadly swing.

The Adversary looks at Seven Dark Words and Aravis. “**No.**” All the spells Aravis reaved from Seven Dark Words are re-instantiated, though Aravis still retains them himself.

Kibi points out that he still holds the *Watcher’s Kiss*, and that while he’s unlikely to make use of it in combat, surely *someone* ought to attack the Adversary with it. Kay sends Oa-Lyanna to retrieve the golden blade from Kibi. Though flying is impossible here, and airy things cannot exist, Oa-Lyanna defies these laws. Whether this is because her innate power has grown so much, or because some vestige of Cranchus is bending the local rules, none can say. Kay herself looks up at the Adversary,

gulps down her fear, and slashes at Him with both of her swords. She makes several deep cuts in His legs; black blood gushes out. The Adversary looks down, annoyed, enraged, confused... How is it possible that mortals are damaging Him? Why is this fight still going on? His power is absolute!

Yoba is still on fire, and nearly dead. She steps away from Meledien and *lays on hands*, though she has still looked better. The flames from the Spear of Caba are, for some reason, not scarring her skin or consuming her hair, but they feel terribly enervating, as though they are consuming some essential vitality within her.

Tarsos strides forward to Kibi and again smashes the dwarf with his hammer. Kibi is lifted and hurled against the wall, dropping to the floor and struggling just to get to his knees. Kiro, closest to Flicker, casts *heal*, undoing most of the damage the *sphere of annihilation* had done to the halfling's leg.

While Cashbox Jack continues to battle one of the blood golems, Ernie decides to go full offense. He prays to his holy blade and invokes the *Glory of Nemmin*, becoming a peerless holy warrior of Yondalla. He puts himself between Yoba and Meledien. "You do not touch the people I love!" he screams.

Dranko and Morningstar find openings to strike the Adversary. The God feels a terribly agony as he is scored by Dranko's whip and crushed by *Ell's Will*. "I had the option of taking your place," says Dranko, "but I decided that I'd much rather kill you instead."

Kibi realizes that by rolling just five feet, he can line up Seven Dark Words and Meledien, though it will leave him close to Tarsos. He casts an Empowered Maximized *earthbolt*, then Quickens another, also Empowered. Meledien is barely hanging on to life, stumbling and reeling from the Company's attacks. "Meledien, you're a giant bitch," calls Dranko. "Also..." – he calls Meledien's severed arm from his haversack – "...got your arm." He waves it at her.

The Adversary snarls downward. Something about the glowing mace in the mortal woman's hand is particularly disturbing; it is a weapon made to fight the divine. She who wields it must not be allowed to continue. His terrible black sword comes sweeping down, and with a series of titanic slashes He cuts Morningstar into pieces. For a second she is kept alive by a *delay death* cast upon her, but the Adversary asserts His will. "**NO. YOU ARE NOT TO SURVIVE.**" Morningstar's life goes out.

The Adversary flicks His hand, and *Ell's Will* flies up and across the cavern to stick, embedded and quivering, in the wall. The God looks down at Dranko with a cruel smile. "**I'M SORRY,**" He says. "**WAS SHE SOMEONE IMPORTANT?**"

"Am I supposed to be demoralized?" asks Dranko, his voice low-pitched and flat. "Now, I'm going to pluck out both of your eyes before I kill you." The Adversary merely laughs. Killing one of these mortal insects has filled Him with confidence, putting the troubling reality of His wounds out of His mind.

While one of the blood golems batters at Kibi, and Aristus in turn gouges the golem with the claws of his contraption, Seven Dark Words steps to Meledien and casts *heal* upon her. The *sphere of annihilation* rolls towards Kibi, who barely avoids it. All of his enemies have moved out of the range of his hovering *crushing fist*, so he sends it toward Dranko.

Grey Wolf channels a Maximized *acid orb* and slashes at Meledien. Just healed, she is now nearly dead again, screaming as the acid burns her face. Ox sees he has a chance to finish her off. He has now been pummeled so many times by the blood golem that he looks like he suffers from a terrible black pox, but he concentrates enough to strike Meledien with his second *polar ray*. "I don't know you," he says, "but I know I don't like you." The thin blue ray goes directly through Meledien's head. She crumples, and the Spear of Caba blazes up. Her body is incinerated, her red armor falling empty to the ground. The Spear falls upon it, and with no one wielding it, its flames go out. The fires wreathing Yoba likewise are snuffed. The Company cheer, but their celebration is tempered by Morningstar's death. And as Ox finishes his casting, his body succumbs to his affliction of Essence. His body bursts open, his insides liquefied and turned into an unholy sludge by the infection of Adversary blood.

Aravis directs his *black blade* to slash again at Seven Dark Words, but the servant of the Adversary is so well warded, it inflicts only minor wounds upon him. Seeing it would be better just to nullify his enemy's abilities, Aravis *shapechanges* into a beholder and plays his wide anti-magic cone over Seven Dark Words.

Oa-Lyanna returns to Kay, bearing the *Watcher's Kiss*. Kay drops her shortsword and wields the *Kiss* in its place, and as her fingers close about its hilt, everything around her, even the Adversary, grows gray and faded. Only the sword itself retains its color, shining so brightly golden it hurts to look upon it. The Adversary looks down, and for the first time a shadow of fear crosses His features. Kay strikes. The *Watcher's Kiss* sings in her hand, its metal infused with the memory of laying low the Adversary once before. Each wound it inflicts fills with an aureate fire, burning the God's corrupted flesh. The Adversary stares, horrified, down at Kay, her sword's light reflected in His eyes. But He will not be killed, not by a mortal wielding a

fragment of Uthol Inga's sword. He brings down his own blade in a mad fury of death upon Kay. The black sword obliterates her, so thoroughly there is nothing left of her except for Oa-Lyanna. But the Yrimpa is part of her, and where Kay goes, she will follow. As the air spirit dies, she unleashes a parting whirlwind that sears the wounds left by the *Watcher's Kiss*, and then she too is gone. The Adversary flicks His stump, and as with *Ell's Will*, the *Watcher's Kiss* hurls itself into the darkness, straight up and out of sight. It does not come down.

Yoba had been moving to strike Seven Dark Words, but would have to enter the anti-magic cone, so she opts instead to cast a healing spell on Ernie.

Tarsos shouts to the Adversary, "My Lord! Our agreement!" The Adversary nods His head, and the Spear of Caba appears in Tarsos' hand, his hammer falling to the ground. Fire roars along its length, as he strides forward and thrusts it into Kibi's side. The dwarf catches on fire. Kiro casts *flame strike* on the Adversary, and penetrates the God's resistance. The holy damage burns away chunks of the huge God's flesh.

Dranko decides there's no longer any reason to stay sane. He reaches into the depths of his mind and finds the gifts of the Cleaners still there. He casts *time stop*, and everything around him ceases to move. Except the Adversary. The God has somehow joined him in the effect of the spell. **"I WAS THERE FAR LONGER THAN YOU, NAME-THIEF,"** He says. But the Adversary is still unused to lacking his full might, and struggles to take action. Dranko takes full opportunity, donning his *ring of blinking* and unleashing a full flurry of deadly whip-strikes. The Adversary doesn't die, but his wounds now are terrible. With a little luck, Dranko thinks, they can pull this off.

"STOP THAT!" The Adversary waves His stump, and the *ring of blinking* crumbles from Dranko's finger, turning to dust. With everything around them still frozen in time, the Adversary brings down His killing blade upon Dranko, just as He did to Morningstar and Kay.

Dranko doesn't die. He's made of tough stuff, and though he is gruesomely wounded, he endures the fierce cuts of the great black sword. He spits out a mouthful of blood. "That all you got?"

"No," says the Adversary. He casts a point-blank *disintegrate*, striking Dranko in the chest. And Dranko *still* doesn't die. Time resumes. From the others' perspective, both Dranko and the Adversary have spontaneously become grievously hurt.

Ernie realizes that while the *Honor of Nemmin* will be suppressed by the anti-magic cone, he himself will retain his formidable fighting skills, while his target will be nothing more than a brittle old man. He carves up Seven Dark Words, bringing the sallow-faced man perilously close to death.

Kibi is badly wounded, and his insides still burn from the touch of one of the blood golems. He tries not to think about Ox's fate. Instead he thinks about what he can do that will most help the forces of good win this battle. "I *wish* that Morningstar were returned, in full health, wielding *Ell's Will*." And Morningstar appears, though her pale skin is gray. *Ell's Will* dislodges itself from the wall and flies to her waiting hand. She knows, and Kibi knows, that she has merely assumed a brief revenant state, and soon she will die again. But for now she has been given a change to avenge her own death. She casts *heal* on the barely conscious Dranko, then smashes the Adversary once more with her holy weapon.

Having cast his *wish*, Kibi sinks into the ground, since Tarsos could easily finish him off otherwise. The Adversary looks at where he was, then down at Morningstar. **"No."** The Adversary wills that Kibi not be hidden. The dwarf is forcibly ejected from the ground, and lands in a heap at Tarsos' feet. The red-armored warrior smiles down at him, raises the Spear of Caba, and plunges it into Kibi's heart. Kibi can feel time slowing down, and a chill runs through him. He knows full well that when a victim's heart is burned out by the Spear, his soul is irrevocably destroyed. Kibi is protected by a *fortune's fate*, which should cast *heal* on him when he suffers mortal injury. But its magic now acts in contention with the Spear of Caba, and the fiery artifact's magic is stronger. His soul is overheating, burning away...

But there is a *third* magic at work on the dwarf, one strong enough to overcome even the searing power of a God of Fire. Abernia is with him. As his soul ignites, Kibi hears the voice of the world, and it is the voice of his grandfather. **"KIBI,"** it tells him calmly. **"I TOLD YOU NOT TO FEAR DEATH. I WILL KEEP YOUR SOUL SAFE FROM HARM. THE SPEAR IS A POWERFUL THING, BUT IS NOT OF THE EARTH. I CAN FOCUS ON YOU, AND YOU WILL JOIN ME HERE. IT'S TIME, KIBI. I'M NOT SURE WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOUR SOUL, BUT IT WILL ENDURE."**

"I'll come with you," says Kibi, "as long as I can return here and finish the fight."

"YOU WILL ALWAYS BE HERE, KIBI. YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN HERE. I'VE KNOWN IT ALL ALONG. WELCOME HOME, GRANDSON."

Kibi's body erupts in flames, burning so thoroughly that no remains are left behind. The others look on in dismay, assuming his soul has been destroyed, but Kibi himself retains a diffuse sense of self, his soul spreading out into Abernia. Cranchus is with him, and Kibi can feel his grandfather's benevolence surround him. It is muted, slightly, by the ambient evil in this one location, but compared to the entirety of the world, that evil is weak, holding on now by only a tenuous black thread. Kibi realizes that if he focuses before his consciousness fades, he can take on a new form, and have a bit more to say in the battle with the Adversary. Mere seconds after Kibi's mortal body is destroyed, a tremendous humanoid form steps out from the wall, as though an enormous statue has carved itself from living rock. It is sixty feet tall, towering even over the Adversary. It resembles a cross between Kibi and an earth elemental, with enormous emerald eyes.

He is the Vengeance of Abernia, and he is displeased.

Seven Dark Words hastens out of the anti-magic cone, Quickens a *teleport* to a spot far from its area, and casts a *polar ray* at Ernie. Its damage is severe, but Ernie was bolstered with elemental protection, and so endures it. Flicker, Cashbox Jack and Aristus continue to battle against the blood golems, which have proved unnaturally tough.

Aravis *teleports*, strikes Seven Dark Words one more time with his *black blade of disaster*, and Quickens a *disintegrate*. Seven Dark Words does not fully succumb to either but the small amounts of damage they do are piling up, and he falls, weakened, to his knees. "My Lord!" he beseeches, reaching toward the Adversary.

But an answer comes instead from Grey Wolf, who launches a mighty flurry of swings with Bostock, channeling one more *disintegrate* through the first swing. Seven Dark Words, killed beyond doubt, starts to fall forward, but twitches and returns to his feet. "**YOU MAY NOT DIE YET,**" says the Adversary. "**I STILL NEED YOU.**" Black fluid pours from the body Seven Dark Words, but his body retains a horrid pseudo-life, twitching like a badly held marionette.

The Adversary looks down at Dranko and Morningstar. He has killed one of these beings already; He should kill the other. "What's it going to be?" Dranko asks defiantly.

"**YOU WILL GIVE BACK WHAT YOU STOLE FROM ME!**" thunders the God. He slashes at Dranko, once, twice, three times, four times with His immense black sword. By some miracle Dranko is still alive, but barely. The Adversary grins. "**GOOD-BYE,**" He says, and strikes Dranko with a final *disintegrate*. Dranko cannot resist it. He turns to dust.

As Dranko's body is destroyed, he feels his soul depart, but it does not ascend to the afterlife. Instead it remains standing, present but impotent, on the spot where he died. He is experiencing what Aravis described when the wizard was killed by null shadows. He sees Kay's spirit as well, still trapped in this cavern. Morningstar's soul is a flickering thing, fading in and out as her body continues to endure thanks to Kibi's *wish*.

Yoba, now having witnessed the deaths of Morningstar, Dranko, Kay, Kibi and Ox, screams and charges the Adversary, *smitting evil* with every ounce of power that remains to her. Her blade sweeps through the God's ankle, shearing off His left foot. A look of profound confusion crosses the Adversary's face, and small tentacles sprout from his face and neck. He is losing control of His physical form. With the Adversary thus distracted, the animated form of Seven Dark Words wavers and wobbles. Ernie hacks it in half with the *Honor of Nemmin*. The congealed blood inside is no longer sufficient to hold it together. Seven Dark Words falls apart, and Ernie sees that there were no organs in his body. The man was just a bag of skin filled with Essence. But now even that is gone.

The Vengeance of Abernia looks down upon the Adversary. The world is angry, and ready to make an end. Kibi raises an arm and an avalanche of boulders flies from it, smashing into the Adversary's broken body. After a few seconds the hundreds of huge rocks have collected against the far wall, and the Adversary is lying on the ground, crushed. "**YOU... CANNOT...**" He croaks, coughing up a gout of bubbling black blood. "**I AM FOREVER! I WILL OUTLAST THIS WORLD!**"

The *Watcher's Kiss* falls from the darkness above, landing point-down in the ground next to the Adversary's shoulder. He lolls His head to look at it, and its golden light plays across His features. Then His eyes roll up in His head, and He loses consciousness. But His chest still rises and falls.

"My Lord?" Tarsos is in disbelief. He takes a step toward the fallen God, but his legs fall apart as he moves. Over the course of a few feet, he dissolves into a chunky sludge of Essence. The blood golems likewise collapse into puddles of impotent goo.

The Vengeance of Abernia sinks into the ground one last time, but Kibi's dwarven spirit is, for the moment, left behind with the other fallen heroes. Aravis, Ernie, Flicker, Grey Wolf and Morningstar move to stand around the body of the Adversary. One of them, they realize, must finish off the Adversary, doubtless perishing in the attempt. Morningstar, knowing her borrowed time is almost gone, decides it should be her. She tries to pull the golden blade from the ground, but it will not move. It whispers in

her mind. *There is not enough life left in you, daughter of Ell.* And Morningstar understands. Her body falls to the ground, and her spirit moves to stand beside that of her husband.

"I will do it," says Yoba.

"No, you won't," says Ernie.

Aravis steps forward and pulls the *Watcher's Kiss* from the ground. Without speaking to anyone, he plunges the blade downward toward the Adversary's heart, but Flicker grabs his arm and the blade misses its mark. "Why did you do that?" Aravis demands.

"It shouldn't be you!" shrieks Flicker. "You're too important!" He motions to the others, to Yoba and Ernie, to Aristus and Galdifain, to Cashbox Jack and Kiro and Grey Wolf. "These people are going to need you to help them survive after this! I'm nobody! What am I going to do for them?"

Aravis opens his mouth to argue, but his eyes abruptly become star fields, and maze-lines draw themselves over his face. A black energy rushes from his eyes and mouth, coalescing in front of him into Belshikun, the Avatar of Drosh. He looks much more powerful than when they last saw him; he has brought much of the power of Drosh with him.

Aravis offers Belshikun the *Watcher's Kiss*, but the Avatar shakes his head. "It is not for me," he says. "You have channeled me, and I am here, but it is not for me to strike the killing blow. But before you decide who will, I wish to thank you, Aravis Telmir. The use of your mind, your unique mind, was instrumental. It was not simply the Crosser's Maze I needed. It was you. Through great study, I was able to penetrate the Iron Barrier, using the Maze. And now I am here to do what must be done." He puts a hand on Aravis's shoulder. "I'm afraid the Maze is nearly destroyed, but it was necessary. I had to be here, now, at the end."

"It is probably better for the world that the Maze be destroyed," says Aravis.

Belshikun smiles. "I discovered an interesting fact about the Crosser's Maze while I was studying it, Aravis. The Maze, it turns out, will be created eight hundred years from now, in the far future, by the Abernian God of Knowledge. That God will clearly possess a unique perspective, in all the ways the Maze might someday come to be used."

Before Aravis can respond, Belshikun looks down at the body of the Adversary. "I am here to take His soul. I cannot do it until one of you has killed Him. I am sorry. Whoever of you makes this choice will be dead, forever."

Ernie motions to the bodies of Morningstar, Dranko and Kay. "Can they be brought back?"

"If they wish to be," says Belshikun. "They are dead by a conflict of mortals. Now, I cannot stay long. One of you must drive the spike clean through." He gestures to the *Watcher's Kiss*.

Aravis is still trying to absorb Belshikun's implications about the origins of the Crosser's Maze. "Is it necessary that it not be me?"

"No, it can be you," says Belshikun. "Perhaps I am wrong about the Maze after all. If you are the one to kill the Adversary, I certainly will be."

"Let me do it!" says Flicker. "You know the thing I most want in this world is a thing I can never have. And if I stay with the people I love the most, it... she... will always be there. And not with me." He conspicuously avoids looking at Ernie and Yoba as he speaks.

Ernie gestures to the bodies of his friends. "I would volunteer, you know I would, but I'm the only one now who could bring them back, if they wish it."

Grey Wolf steps forward and takes the *Watcher's Kiss* from Aravis. "This is my job," he says quietly. "After all, the *Watcher's Kiss* is a family heirloom."

Aravis nods his head, and Flicker doesn't argue. "I'll miss you a lot," says the halfling in a small voice.

"I'll miss you all, too," says Grey Wolf. "Keep fighting the good fight."

"May the doors of home always be open to you," says Ernie.

Grey Wolf draws Bostock and hands the sword to Flicker. *I would normally find this intolerable, says the sword. But you are about to engage in an act of ultimate self-sacrifice, so I cannot find fault, despite my personal feelings. Perhaps I will allow Flicker to carry me until he finds a suitable warrior.*

I'm coming with you, says Edghar to Grey Wolf. We've come this far together.

"If it's going to be done, best it be done quickly," says Grey Wolf. He channels the spell of *phoenix fire* into the *Watcher's Kiss* and stabs it into the off-center heart of the Adversary. A golden light flares up that fills the entire cavern, and when it fades, Grey Wolf, the sword, and the body of the Adversary are gone. Grey Wolf's soul now stands beside those of the other fallen heroes, but where the God's body had lain is now just a shadow, the God's fading spirit.

Belshikun manifests a tall, gleaming scythe. "Good riddance," he says, and he sweeps the scythe through the spirit's neck. The last vestiges of the Adversary break apart and depart the world.

"And now, I have one more vision to show you," says Belshikun. And into the minds of the living and dead alike, he shows them that...

Naradawk and over sixty red-armored warriors stand before the ruins of the Greenhouse. The upper floor has been wrecked, and the section with the secret room has been obliterated. The remaining members of the Spire are there: all of the archmagi, along with Tor, Mrs. Horn, Maple Sunblade from Victory, and a tall, powerful man wearing the insignia of the Jewels of the White Plains. Only Eddings appears unperturbed.

Naradawk laughs. "So, at last I've turned over the last rotten log, and what do I find? All the remaining insects, blinking in a light too bright for them. It will be a pleasure to..." Naradawk Skewn seizes up and his body convulses. Eyes wide, he literally falls apart, as the God's blood that holds him together boils away. The same happens to the red-armored warriors, all of whom have been heavily infused with Essence. They fall prone, each in their own puddle of black sludge.

While the members of the Spire stand dumbfounded and slack-jawed, Eddings breaks into a huge grin. "See! I told you! I told you something like that would happen. Hmph. So much for the room full of geniuses."

Everett: ["If it's going to be done, best it be done quickly," says Grey Wolf.]

*If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come.
– Macbeth, Act I, scene vii*

Mathew Freeman: *applause* I have no words. What an ending, what a great fight.

Everett: Though it's after the fact, if anyone wants a soundtrack for this fight and the apocalypse therein, any/all of the boss tracks from *Infinity Blade III* do well: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gg8x4O5cPBo>

Quartz: Wow.

Tamlyn: Terrific, terrific, terrific! Perfect climactic battle to this epic story. And to think, it all started with rats in Goghan's basement!

Kaodj: So they made it through without anyone's soul being completely snuffed out?

blargney the second: Wow! I've been eagerly awaiting that update all week. Make that all decade...



One Last Circle to Come Full

Belshikun looks upon Dranko's hovering soul, which he can see just as well as any of the survivors. "Well done," he says. "Well done. I don't know what's going to become of you; I'm not the one in charge. But you have served the Gods well."

"I'll find my way," says Dranko. He still holds Morningstar's hand.

"Can you return the Shield and the Spear to Naslund?" asks Aravis. "That's where they belong."

"The Spear belongs in Naslund," Belshikun agrees. "The Ward of Drosh as well. And I will take *Ell's Will*. Morningstar, someday, in the far future, someone who aspires to your greatness will pick it up, and do their best to honor your Goddess. Aravis, you should keep the Bulwark of Leantha. It will serve you well."

To all assembled, he says, "I have one more job for you. One more journey for you to make. Will you make it?"

All in the Company, living and dead, agree. Belshikun turns to Aravis. "Your ally in the Crosser's Maze stuck his nose in one too many places that he shouldn't have, and has been imprisoned by an old Keeper. You should rescue him, because in less than two days' time the Maze will collapse and be no more. All the Keepers, and those foolish enough to inhabit the Maze over

the centuries, will vanish along with it. You have two days, but you won't need them. This is an easy task, but you will be glad of it. When you are done, those of you still alive will find yourselves back here. You will not be able to cross Yulan's Barrier, but I do not know if that will always be the case. Your destinies are your own. All of you may journey, spirits and living mortals alike. When your service is finished, the dead may move on. Perhaps you will bring them back someday, perhaps not. Certainly all of the dead here have earned honored places in the heavens."

"I don't want them to be gone yet," says Ernie.

After a long silence, Aravis speaks. "No sense in waiting."

"Your benefactor is a prisoner of an old Keeper named **Esheq**. By persuasion, coercion or violence, do what you must."



The entire Company find themselves in the Crosser's Maze again. They are floating in its vast starfield, an echo of the multiverse. Aravis knows where to go. With a small effort of will he translates himself and his friends across great spans of reality to where Esheq makes his home. The old Keeper lives in a huge red metal pyramid with no obvious way in or out.

"We've had a very, very long day," Aravis calls out. "We suggest you come out and make this easier for us."

A voice sounds all around them. "Who's there? Who is that?"

"Aravis."

"Never heard of him."

"He wants to do this the hard way," says Grey Wolf.

"You have someone imprisoned," says Aravis. "I want him."

"I have lots of people imprisoned."

"Then I want them all."

"No. Why should I?" Esheq's voice is petulant, annoyed.

"Because we killed a God today, and we're still not out of spells," says Ernie.

In the center of one of the pyramid's sides, a small hatch flips open. A white-haired old fellow pokes his head out. Dranko leans over and licks the red metal.

"Stop that!" shouts Esheq. "Don't lick my house! What's wrong with you? And how did you rabble find me?"

"I am Aravis."

"Why should I care about that?"

Aravis sighs. "Are you going to make this easy, or are we going to have to take your prisoners by force?"

"You can't get in," says Esheq.

"Oh, really." Dranko activates his sash, turns invisible, and starts to climb the wall of the pyramid, up toward the hatch.

"I see you there! You expect that to fool a Keeper? You haven't been in the Maze very long, have you..." – he leans out a little more – "...Miss Charagan? You have more facial hair than I'd expect. Aravis, you've brought me a freak show."

Aravis *teleports* up to him. "Hmm. Okay, you can teleport." Aravis then turns into a beholder, and shines his anti-magic ray; Dranko lashes Esheq's arm with his whip before he can close the hatch again, and starts to pull the old man out.

The whip vanishes. "I was a Keeper of the Maze, you know," says Esheq crossly. "What, you'd think I'd be a pushover? Now get off my pyramid before I turn you into something unpleasant."

Aravis turns and returns the whip to Dranko. "I was also a Keeper of the Maze," he says.

"Fine, fine. Who do you want again?"

"I want everyone you have imprisoned."

"No. That's a ridiculous bargain. But if you swear upon the Maze to go away afterward, I'll let you look through the cells and take one person out."

Dranko again lashes Esheq's arm, and this time yanks him all the way out. Aravis immediately *polymorphs* him into a garter snake. "You could have been nice about it," says Dranko. Esheq turns into a cobra and tries to bite Dranko's arm, but Dranko has the snake by the neck. The cobra then vanishes, and the hatch slams closed.

Enough is enough. Esheq is good, but no match for Aravis. Aravis exerts his will and removes the door altogether, along with a large section of the pyramid. Esheq is revealed, cringing. "Fine, fine, fine! The cells are that way." The old man points.

"Show me the way," says Aravis.

The interior of the pyramid is a series of tilted, angled hallways, but gravity works in an Escherian fashion such that the floor always feels like it's down. Esheq leads the Company to a long corridor with fifteen cell doors. "These are it. I have sixteen prisoners at the moment; got two in one cell."

"Why do you keep prisoners?" asks Dranko.

"Because they trespassed. And they might be useful someday." Morningstar casts *detect thoughts*. Aravis augments it. Esheq isn't lying.

Aravis removes the doors to all the cells with a simple thought. "Now," he says sternly to Esheq, "I suggest you leave."

"Do what you want!" Esheq throws up his arms. He has figured out how badly he is outclassed.

Aravis *teleports* all the prisoners out of the pyramid, where they float in the void. There are indeed sixteen. Some are extremely alien-looking, some are no more than coherent thoughts. A few are even stranger. But one, the Company know very well.

It's Abernathy. He is sleeping, snoring evenly.

Ernie wakes him with a gentle nudge. "Abernathy? Sorry to interrupt your nap, sir..."

Abernathy's eyes pop open. "Ernest! So nice to see you again!"

"We killed the Adversary," says Ernie.

"I'm so pleased!"

Morningstar is confused. "We thought you were dead..."

"Morningstar, my dear, I *am* dead. You were present when I passed away, I recall."

The Company look at the old wizard expectantly. "I was following your exploits quite closely, you know, after I passed on. You can do that from the afterlife. I had an interest in how things would turn out. And just look at you!"

"How'd you end up in the Maze?" asks Dranko.

Abernathy gets that old gleam in his eye. "Ah! The Maze has a strange relationship to the Universe. When I was watching you, and saw you go into it, I petitioned certain higher powers to be allowed to pay you a quick visit. There's some overlap between the afterlife and the Maze. I'm still not certainly exactly how that works."

"You visited us in the Maze?" asks Flicker. "When was that?"

"You were about to fight some large battle the next day, and I thought you could use a comfortable place to stay, so I popped in, and figured out how things worked, and tried to rebuild the Greenhouse as best I could. A little sanctuary to rest in. I wasn't very good at it. Solomea had to help me. Nice old chap, when he was sane. But when you had moved on from there, I couldn't figure out how to get out! The Maze is very confusing, you know."

"Yes, I know," says Aravis, smiling.

"So I spent some time trying to contact you," Abernathy continues. "Occasionally I could catch glimpses of you in the real world. I saw that that rascally Parthol Runecarver was after you, and tried to send you warnings. Did you get them?"

"Yes, we did."

"It was hard to get anything specific through, but I did try to leave an impression that a powerful and dangerous wizard was coming for you. Once you cleverly left a little piece of yourself in the Maze, it became much easier. I could just talk to you directly."

"That was very helpful," says Aravis.

“So I roamed about the Maze, trying to find anything, bits of the past, present and future that might be useful to you. Then I would sit down and have a pleasant chat with the bit of you you left behind. He’s a lot like you, but very single-minded. I did eventually figure out how to return to the afterlife, but once I had worked that out, there didn’t seem any hurry. So I kept on helping you, until one day I had an inkling that this bozo might know something, but he was wily in his way. I was lurking around, thinking he might have some old memories from his time as Keeper that might be relevant, but he caught me and popped me in a cell. I was good at escaping from things before they caught me, but I wasn’t much good after I was caught. And now, here I am. It was nice of you to rescue me.”

The Company spend some time telling the old wizard all about their adventures, and he listens raptly. His favorite bit is hearing that Dranko and Morningstar were married. When he hears about Dranko’s interactions with the Cleaners, he shudders. “Ah, yes. Terrible place. I sent Aravis one vision from near the Far Realms and swore I’d never go back there.” He sighs, then smiles broadly. “Would you like to make a quick trip to the Endless Shore? I really ought to get back there, but I don’t see a reason you couldn’t be my guests for a little while. Spend a day or two on the beach.”

They happily agree. To the few other prisoners still lurking around, Aravis gives warning that the Maze will soon cease to be, and they should leave it if they can. Aravis would like to send out a more general broadcast, but even with his advanced powers in the Maze, he’s not that strong. But he knows someone who is. Before going to the Endless Shore, he takes the group on a quick side-trip to visit King Vhadish XXIII.

“Ah, Aravis!” exclaims Vhadish when they arrive.

“I owe you a service,” says Aravis. “And my service is to tell you, if you don’t already know, that...”

“Yes, I know. You wrecked it. Careless, but not very surprising.”

“I’m sorry,” says Aravis. “I am, after all, just a shadow of what you are.” Vhadish inclines his head in agreement.

Aravis requests that Vhadish let as many Maze denizens as possible know that their home will soon be collapsing. “Your goals are noble, young Aravis, and I will do as you request. You were... a respectable pupil in most regards.” Vhadish vanishes.

With no errands left, Abernathy leads them on a circuitous route, arriving at last on the Endless Shore, the Heaven of the Sea God Brechen. A pristine beach of pure white sand stretches as far as the eye can see, and in their ears is the steady sound of rolling blue waves making landfall. “You’re not *really* here,” says Abernathy. “This is the Maze’s reflection of the Endless Shore. But *I* am here, and that is sufficient, since we’re all here together. You can stay as long as the Maze survives, and then you’ll return to your bodies, or move on to the afterlife. I suppose you might end up stuck down there forever... but forever is a long time.” Abernathy reaches out a finger, and in the changeable sea he traces the word “forever.” It is quickly erased, as are all things written upon water.

“After all,” says Abernathy, “nothing in this life is certain. The future, least of all.”



And that is nearly the end, but there is one final postscript to the story of Abernathy’s Company. While the others bask in the glorious warm sunshine, Abernathy speaks briefly to Kibi, alone.

“Kibi, now you are Abernia, and to you, all times are the same. The ordering of events is no longer any impediment to your actions or understanding. Before you become one with all the world and lose your focus, you need to find me, years ago, and speak to me a list of names. Don’t forget, Kibilhathur. Whisper them to me. I will hear them. I will hear them.”



HERE ENDS THE STORY

OF

THE ADVENTURES OF ABERNATHY’S COMPANY



I imagine that, now that I'm done, a few readers will want to go back and read the entire thing from the beginning, to experience the tale with greater continuity. I think I will start a new thread, where readers can talk about the Story Hour generally, commenting as they re-read (or read the first time) [<http://www.enworld.org/forum/showthread.php?356443-Sagiro-s-Story-Hour-Now-That-It-s-Over>]. I'll try to check it regularly, to answer questions anyone has about the whole experience.

Also: now that I'm done writing the Story Hour, it's time to return to my books! I have finished my second revision of my first novel, and now will get to work on the third iteration of editing, as well as starting a first draft of the second book. Having finished the first one (titled *The Ventifact Colossus*), it's time to start on the second one, which I'll probably title *The Crosser's Maze*. I'll keep you up-to-date on my progress. After all, I'm hoping some of you might buy the novels when I eventually release them...

Thanks, readers, for all of your time, encouragement and support! I never would have finished this story without you. And special thanks of course to StevenAC, for whose wonderful compilations I will always be in debt.

– Dorian Hart (a.k.a. Sagiro)

Kaodi: Oh my God(s). After all these years the story has finally ended. A substantial portion of my life it has been, even as just a reader. Thank you, Sagiro, Piratecat, and everyone else in the group. It has been very enjoyable, and a great learning experience in gaming too.

radich: Long time lurker, first time poster...

Dear Sagiro,

I came upon your story some years ago, while rummaging through EN World. Quickly and surely I determined that here was a story worth reading and over the years I have never come to regret it. It has been about 25 years since I picked up my first fantasy novel – and in turn got hooked on the whole reading thing, having at that time been a boy of 10, and hated everything related to reading. Fantasy has never abandoned me since, and I still take great pleasure in stories about dragons and wizards and what-not.

But I must take my hat off to you, sir – for you have enlightened me and taken the concept of fantasy to a whole new level. The immersion that you provide to us as readers is breathtaking, the visualization that your descriptions spring to mind are amazing. Add to this the depth of character development, and the ability to include and encourage your players is astounding. As pure icing on the cake, I am taken back by the plot turns and villains you create and the level of complexity that you end up achieving (despite your responses over the years, that you only develop them as needed).

I stand in awe of you and salute you for your work. You have inspired me as a GM to do more for my players. You have kept me on the edge of my seat, hoping for another update – and even though I am already underway with my third re-read of the material available so far, it hasn't gotten the least bit tiresome yet.

It's one thing to be a good GM and have a lot of fancy work laid out for the taking – it's another to be blessed with players such as yours. For all the hard work that you have put into orchestrating this campaign, your players have been there to back you the entire time. And were it not for their deeply committed involvement and drive, everything might have turned out differently. So my hat as well goes off to every single player with the greatest of respect. You make me strive to be better as a player, with the examples that you set!

With my final words, I just want to summarise everything that I have written above into a small easy to understand metaphor. I am not a religious man – I do not believe in a higher power in any way. But if given the opportunity to sit at your table, and play with this group of people – I would be willing to leave my wife, my kids and travel the 3600 miles needed to be there. That is my level of respect and admiration for what you have given unto us, your humble and thankful readers.

Sincerely, Mads Radich

Sagiro: radich, I really appreciate you taking the time to write all of that. I always feel a bit sheepish when someone says such nice things. You're certainly right about my players; I know I've said this before, but they were incredibly supportive and engaged... for fifteen years! I couldn't have run the game for so long (and probably wouldn't have bothered, even if I could) had I not had such a wonderful group of players. Not to mention that everything I learned about DM-ing, I learned from one of my players – Piratecat – in whose own D&D games I have been so fortunate to play.

But don't leave your wife! ☺

coyote6: That was awesome.

So... next campaign is what, again?

LightPhoenix: Obviously, the next campaign is when someone discovers a name long forgotten from the ears and minds of all across the land... the very whisper of it drives men mad as they try desperately to hold on to it, certain that it has meaning. Dranko...

Quartz: Thank you.

K4K: Thank you. Another long time lurker and first time poster.

Gulla: Wow! Thanks for a wonderful (long) ride and for pulling off a suitable finale.

The Warlock: Well done!

thatdarncat: Awesome... Thank you so much!

Everett: It seems like a really banal question after that lovely ending, but... I still have no idea who channeled "what makes dead," or what they channeled.

Sagiro: Belshikun was "what makes [the Adversary] dead." And Aravis was the channel by which Belshikun was able to bypass the Iron Barrier.

Redwald: Thank you for the many years of work and for sharing your and your players' story with us, Sagiro. Your Story Hour was one of a very few things that got me back into gaming... though I have now spent many more years following your Story Hour than I spent away from gaming in the first place. You have constructed a monument, sir, and it honors our little pastime immeasurably.

Sagiro: Thank you, Redwald. It has been my pleasure to write it, and I'm glad you enjoyed it so much.

coyote6: Did the survivors ever get out of the Underdark?

LightPhoenix: Did any of the players come up with epilogues? Or was it left as is?

Sagiro: To answer recent questions: no, the players did not come up with epilogues. We preferred to leave the game in a bittersweet state of ambiguity. As such, I also cannot tell you if the characters ever escaped the Underdark. There's Belshikun's implication that Aravis survives long enough to create the Crosser's Maze and become the God of Knowledge (not necessarily in that order), but I don't think that implies anything definitive about the fate of the others.

Piratecat: I don't know for sure, but I'm pretty sure that Dranko and Morningstar decided to stay dead and pass on together, hand in hand. Occasionally, Dranko surely gets sick of the afterlife and tries to find some way to haunt a 1st-level adventurer, but that's really more of a hobby.

My only regret in that marvelous final fight, other than the sadness of Flicker's vast loneliness: our bound dragon completely went out like a punk. I wish it had had an effect on the fight (other than using up an Adversary wish, I suppose!). On the plus side, getting to waggle Meledien's arm at her was *immensely* satisfying.

If Dranko had to die, this was an excellent place and time to do so.

Everett: Right – so Flicker was in love with Yoba? Where was that alluded to previously?

One day I suppose I may give the whole Story Hour a re-read, but surely not anytime soon...

Piratecat: Most recently, it's what Flicker threatened to stab Dranko about when Flicker was maudlin and Dranko wouldn't stop pestering him about why. It's more obvious in the Story Hour than it was in-game; I don't think most of the group was aware of it, although Dranko was. Poor little guy.

Everett: Come to think of it, I was curious about Kay's words in the tunnel – that she was with "other yous" that kept dying. There wasn't any time to discuss it, but clearly that could be a whole novel in itself. Is there any more that can be unpacked about that?

Sagiro: Nah, that was mostly just flavor text. Kay kept slipping between parallel worlds, parallel Het Branois, joining alternate realities in which the Company failed at their quest, before the multiverse grew tired of her shenanigans and dumped her into that holding-cell pocket dimension. But that's as much thought as I ever gave it.

Everett: Seeing Kay's character sheet, especially, would be fascinating – to see where her class stats "would" have ended up had she stayed in the game.

Sagiro: I whipped up a very rough-n-ready character sheet for Kay's player to use in the last battle. With everything else I had to prepare, I didn't try to hew too closely to how I thought her character sheet would have naturally evolved. Also, Kay's player hadn't played D&D in many years by that point, and I wanted to keep it relatively simple. Here's what I gave her:

Kay, 18th-level Ranger

Hit Dice: 18d8+90 (179 hp)

Initiative: +12 (+6 Dex, +4 Improved Init, +2 Quick Charm)

Speed: 35'

Armor Class: 33 (+6 dex, +5 deflection, +7 Armor, +5 natural armor)

Attack: +30/+25/+20/+15 w/Flaming Longsword; +30/+25/+20 w/Spelldrain Shortsword

Damage: Longsword 1d8+10+1d6 fire; Shortsword 1d6+10

Saves: Fort +20, Ref +22, Will +13

Abilities: Str 20, Dex 22, Con 20, Int 10, Wis 16 Cha 12

Leather Armor of Free Movement, +5 (*freedom of movement* always on)

Shield +4, Resist Acid 20

Flaming Longsword +5 (main hand weapon)

Spelldrain Shortsword +4 (off-hand weapon) – Strips one spell on a critical (19-20)

Oa-Lyanna

1/day: Yrimpa Whirlwind. 18d6 to all adjacent creatures, 3d6 damage to self. Creatures so struck make a DC 30 Fort Save or are staggered for 1 round (can move or attack but not both, no full attacks).

2/day: Chain Lightning. 20d6 to main target, 10d6 to secondary targets. Reflex Save DC 28.

3/day: Air Shield. As a move action, create a shield of wind around you or an ally within 30'. Until the start of your next turn, the subject gets a +4 unnamed bonus to AC.

At Will: You and Oa-Lyanna fly at will; in this battle, 12 miles underground, you'll have speed 40' when you fly, and you have to land on the ground at the end of each round.

Everett: Ah. Interesting.

It's not something that is really an oversight, because of nature of storytelling vs. nature of interactive gaming, and Morningstar's player just didn't choose to manifest it, but through the whole Adversary battle – until she died – I was waiting for Morningstar to assume the visage of Ell's Shadow again. The fight just seems a little incomplete without it; her initial assumption of it is arguably the most dramatic character-driven moment in the whole campaign (Octesian is arguably the most dramatic battle in the whole campaign), and of all the PCs, she most clearly fills the role of a classical hero. In a novel, the casting of Ell's Shadow against the Adversary would be the moment that everyone's been waiting for the whole time.

Teflonknight: Congratulations on an excellent adventure and know that you have a guaranteed book sale from me.

Sagiro: Woo hoo! That's one!

Krellic: Phew...! Thank you, Sagiro, for sharing with us the type of game that we'd all like to have a chance to play in and the type of game that we all would like to be a good enough DM to run.

I'll look forward to seeing the fictionalised version of it; I suspect that's quite a difficult task making the translation. Very best of luck with that endeavour. Of course if it hasn't got "by Sagiro" on the front cover there's a good chance I'll miss it...

The problem is of course that now we're all wondering what sort of magical campaign you're running now...

spyscribe: Just wanted to pop in and give you my *humongous* congratulations on getting to the end!

The Warlock: Well, while it's sad that one of the things that has kept me coming to EN World regularly over the past few years is done, it was a fantastic story and adventure. Thank you again for writing it up. And yes, I will likely also buy a novelization – because it will be both familiar and new.

SolitonMan: Thanks to Sagiro and the entire group of players for so many years of unparalleled entertainment! Your game epitomizes the best of what I look for in a game. Though it's been a while since I've sat down at a table to roll some dice and adopt a bad accent to portray a fantastical personality, I continue to look for the opportunity to participate in an experience that could be even a shadow of the tale you all have crafted. You guys rock!!

Tortoise: Sagiro, thank you for giving us this view into your incredible campaign. Put me down for some copies of your books. I know a number of poor deprived souls that they will make great gifts for, and I of course want copies for me...

Everett: Okay, my turn. I first happened on the Story Hour in 2005, which is almost a decade ago. Since then I've moved from San Francisco to New York City; I've gone through dozens-on-hundreds of different work gigs, plays, relationships, creative projects. I played my last tabletop D&D game in 2008, and though I grew up immersed in fantasy literature I read very little of it these days. There is really nothing at all that I can point to as a constant through all of those transitions. Except Abernathy's Company.

I grew to know all of these characters intimately (as any reader does, when the imagined world becomes to them tangible and enduring and a thing beyond the author's control), and I can look back at the Company's exploits like milestones of my own. When Grey Wolf (nearly) died to prevent Naradaw's return, I was there; when they learned of Mokad's possession of Praska, I was there, and through the Ritual of Seven Stars to banish him from her body, and the Black Circle's discovery, and the 18-second battle to destroy them.

I was there when Grey Wolf mysteriously chose a monkey as a familiar, and when *Bostock* began to speak, and when they met the boy wizard Wellington and his stupid spider familiar. I was watching when Farazil nonchalantly possessed Ernie's mom to make his first friendly contact, and when Sagiro Emberleaf returned from the dead. I explored the Crosser's Maze. I was with them when they first met Cranchus; I pondered the tragic tale of Condor and grappled with Moirel.

I watched Kibi sink into the ground for the very first time (he played tag with Scree). I was wary of Parthol Runecarver, and always enjoyed seeing the eyeless butler Eddings or the condescending genie, Al Tarqoz. I witnessed the scene from somewhere behind the *heroes' feast* table when One Certain Step took his final step, and I still remember how magnificent it felt. I remember when Abernathy died. Each of those is a moment, and there are many more, like pearls I happen across from time to time, and inspect, and find that they still shine.

It is *strange* to me that the story is done, that in the future I won't read new installments of it. And it's strange that we'll never know if Kay, Morningstar and Dranko chose to return to life, if they ever got out of the Underdark. They'll all always be finally lost, in some sense. Or so it seems to me. Writ in water... but like the Crosser's Maze, like the ocean, the story cannot be given. Only found.

Sagiro: Everett, you have long been one of my most perceptive and detail-attentive readers, and your comments over the years have always shown an accurate insight into my own thought processes. I'm glad you stuck with it through to the end, and I thank you for all of your thoughtful and encouraging commentary. It is strange to me, too, that it's all over.

Everett: Anytime.

StevenAC: **standing ovation**

Congratulations, Sagiro, on providing this Story Hour with such an epic conclusion. I particularly like the fact that you didn't go for the "happily ever after" ending. The Company achieved everything they set out to do and saved the world, but the cost was high and even the survivors remain trapped (for the foreseeable future, at least) beneath the Iron Barrier, meaning their journey through it really did turn out to be as irrevocable as advertised.

Thank you, as always, for the nice things you persist in saying about me... For your information and/or bogglement, the completed Story Hour will contain well over 900,000 words – that's nearly twice the length of *The Lord of the Rings*! And given that Part One, which was initially written in a much more condensed fashion, contains more than half of the campaign's 266 sessions, my guess is a full-length telling of the tale would have ended up over 1.25 million... I'm eagerly looking forward to reading your novels based on the campaign, to flesh out the story of those early days.

I love rereading through the story – there always seems to be more things to discover. It was literally just a week or so ago that it finally dawned on me just who Aravis's mysterious benefactor in the Crosser's Maze had to be, as I was flicking through the early chapters of Part Three. When I suddenly realised the significance of the line about how he "missed the ocean" (page 62), I'm surprised you didn't hear the forehead-slap all the way over there in Boston. Bringing back Abernathy for a final appearance to tie up the last loose ends was wonderfully well done.

The final(!) part of the Collected Story Hour should be done soon... For the moment, let me just offer this little tribute in musical form... I hope you enjoy it!

If you want to make a story... (with the usual apologies to Sir W.S. Gilbert)

If you want to make a story that will be a thing of glory
in the realm of RPGs,
You must start out with a world, to be gradually unfurled,
that's packed with mysteries.
You must find a bunch of players who will work with you and stay as
their PCs will learn and grow and change,
With all the complications and surprising revelations
that your cunning can arrange.
And ev'ryone will say, As you play your epic way,
"If this campaign builds multi-year plots with dreams and prophecy,
Why, what a very singularly deep campaign
this deep campaign must be!"
Have monsters great and small bringing menace unto all
that the Company hold dear,
And some villains to despise, each of whom's deserved demise
receives a hearty cheer.
Their triumphs will then send them onward to the end
that they're fated to decide;
From humble pawns, they'll become the fatal thorns
in the Adversary's side.
And ev'ryone will say, As you play your epic way,
"If this inventive group shows off all that's good in D&D,
Why, what a very wonderfully fun campaign
this fun campaign must be!"
Then with eloquent expression after every gaming session
you must write up what transpires,
Thus providing the redaction of the table interaction
that your readership admires.
We can relive every moment from their earliest opponent
to the final clash of power;
With the gripping storytelling and the characters compelling
it's a classic Story Hour.
And ev'ryone will say, As you play your well-told way,
"If this campaign has resulted in a tale that's as good as I've ever seen,
Why, what a most spectacularly great campaign
this great campaign has been!"

Sagiro: Ah, the inimitable lyrical stylings of StevenAC! Not only have your PDF compilations made reading the Story Hour a vastly more enjoyable experience, your efforts made the game itself better. Having a well-organized, easily accessible archive of all my posts made it so much easier to plan my games, look for old references, and tie distant plots together. Everyone here who has enjoyed experiencing my game second-hand has you, in part, to thank for its (relative) coherence.

As for the novels: fair warning to all. They are not going to be a prose retelling of the campaign beat for beat. Not even close. To make a book that works as a *book*, I've had to cut innumerable side-plots and combats; change, eliminate and add characters; and muck about with the pacing to an absurd degree. It would be more fair to say that I am writing books *heavily based* on my campaign, but which are in no way beholden to its particulars. I still hope everyone here buys them when they're done, though...

Thanks for everything!

Quartz: I don't have the eloquence of the others, so I will again just say thank you.

Chronikoe: I cannot believe it is finally over. Thank you for continuing until the end and an even bigger thank you to your players for sticking with a game for so many years so that such an amazing story could unfold. I can't wait for some free time so that I can read through StevenAC's awesome compilation. As for your books, I'll definitely keep lurking around the threads and hopefully one day see that you have one ready for us to buy!

My final thank you is for creating unique and terrifying creatures that I can use to torment my poor players with when I DM!

RangerWickett: I'm quite curious how the word count of the whole Story Hour stacks up against, say, the *Wheel of Time* series.

Everett: Not really the same ballpark. [Source: <http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/fantasy-book-discussion/word-counts-of-epic-fantasy-novels/>]

The Lord of the Rings – J.R.R. Tolkien

The Fellowship of the Ring:	187k
The Two Towers:	155k
The Return of the King:	131k
TOTAL:	473k

The Adventures of Abernathy's Company – about twice that. Though I don't know if StevenAC is including EN World commentary in the word count.

The Wheel of Time – Robert Jordan

The Eye of the World:	305k
The Great Hunt:	267k
The Dragon Reborn:	251k
The Shadow Rising:	393k
The Fires of Heaven:	354k
Lord of Chaos:	389k
A Crown of Swords:	295k
The Path of Daggers:	226k
Winter's Heart:	238k
Crossroads of Twilight:	271k
Knife of Dreams:	315k
TOTAL:	3,304k (official count)

With the final book, *The Wheel of Time* passed the 4 million word mark.

StevenAC: The 900,000 words figure is just for the story content. According to Word, the total word count for the Story Hour, including all the text boxes containing the commentary, stands right now at 1,125,324. (That includes this last chapter.)

RangerWickett: All in all, a great campaign, and a great story to read. And I'd love to make a joke about "let us never forget the heroes" (while forgetting to include Dranko in the list), but really I think of him as the main character.

Everett: I agree, but that's more to do with Piratecat's personality than anything about the campaign.

Piratecat: Not even close. Dranko is the sarcastic anti-hero who's never even going to be close to the leader, who's appropriately resentful about it, and who skulks around on the sidelines convinced that he's way more amusing and charming than he actually is...

RangerWickett: So, like Tyrion?

Everett: No, Tyrion knows exactly how amusing he is and how charming he isn't. Piratecat – he *seems* like the main character most of the time, whatever your own perception of him is. There's probably a number of reasons for that, but that's the impression the Story Hour yields.

Oh, hey Sagiro – I don't think we got a clear answer on the sections of the prophecy that referred to "one" who "loves all" and "one hates one." My previous guess was that Abernia "loves all," and the only thing I can come up with for the latter is that the Adversary hated Dranko. Am I on?

Sagiro: A quick summary of the Prophecy of the Croaking Oracle:

One brings many, flame's design.
One does also, all malign.
One trip started, one trip done.
One loves all, and one hates one.

This entire verse is about Peralta and Galdifain. Peralta "brings many, flame's design" – referring to Kay, Yoba, Ox et al. "One does also, all malign" is Galdifain bringing forth summoned monsters – all malign – to attack Dranko.

"One trip started, one trip done." The journey of Peralta's Heroes™ had started; Peralta was working on the rituals that would eventually allow her heroes to join the Company. Galdifain's trip was done at that point. She was already in the Underdark, summoning her monsters to find and accost Dranko.

"One loves all, and one hates one." Peralta loves the whole Company; they collectively rescued her from Het Branoi. Galdifain only hates Dranko, he having become the living symbol of her torment.

Three are bringing, now in place.
Three have won the downward race.
Seven haste, and roll the dice,
Spun by fortune's sacrifice.

The Three are, obviously, Seven Dark Words, Meledien and Tarsos. And the Seven are the Company, riding the wave of luck engendered by Corilayna's sacrifice.

Four are needed, 'fore the end.
One to take the shell and rend.
One for what is in his head.
One to channel what makes dead.

Kibi, Dranko and Aravis in that order.

One at last, but not yet known.
One forever dead as stone.
One to drive the spike clean through.
One to die, and hope renew.

Turned out to be Grey Wolf, who sacrificed himself in stabbing the Adversary through the heart with the *Watcher's Kiss*.

One last journey then to make.
One last prison bar to break.
One last thread of fate to pull.
One last circle to come full.

This refers to the rescue of Abernathy, though one could argue that the "last circle to come full" is Kibi telling Abernathy which heroes he should summon to his tower.

Piratecat: I was there, and I *still* didn't realize what several of those prophecy lines meant. That makes it a darn good prophecy.

Neurotic: Sagi, you cannot end yet!! What about Parthol in this new world? What about King Farazil? Did the heroes make it back to the surface and create their own archclass (as opposed to archwizards...) group? What about the dwarves they freed, did they survive? Oh, and did that sidekick they lugged around, you know that half-orc that is never there for the heroic action... did he manage to live his life fruitfully? Etc., etc.... There are numerous subplots and epilogues to write.

Thanks for the wonderful story.

Everett: Parthol gotz decapitated. He be dead as dead can be.

Neurotic: Stupid of me to forget it... But still, he is (was?) an archmage, who knows where he stashed his soul...

And Farazil helped and is a citizen, but what happened afterwards with him?

Everett: The campaign be over. What happens next is only in your imagination.

RangerWickett: Fanfiction! Turlissa/Farazil all the way.

Richards: Sagi, that was a thing of great beauty all the way to the very end. Thanks for finishing it up for the enjoyment of your legion of fans, despite your other commitments. I know it's been over a year since the campaign sessions actually ended; dare I ask if you've started up another campaign? And is *Piratecat*'s "Defenders of Daybreak" campaign still going? (I know he doesn't update his Story Hour any more, but I'd love to hear what Velendo's been up to.)

Put me down for a copy of your novels when they come out. Actually, better make that two of each, since I know my son won't be willing to wait for me to finish them and I certainly won't be willing to wait for him to do likewise!

Piratecat: More like 3+ years, I think! He hasn't started a new campaign, a fact that we're all really sad about. Sagi will be the first person to tell you that he over-preps games, so there's a pretty serious time commitment that he doesn't have yet. Instead he's composing music, writing a novel, raising kids, and generally being awesome.

The Defenders campaign wrapped up about 5-6 years ago. I'm running two 4E campaigns, one of which has all the players from the Defenders campaign, and those have perhaps a year or two to go on them. They just hit epic level. Sagi is playing the most un-Velendo-like unwise thief imaginable.

Kain Gallant: It's been a long while since I last checked in with Abernathy's Company, and I'm both saddened and a bit relieved that's come to an end. Now to read the entire thing!

Thank you, Sagi, and your group for the many hours of entertainment you've provided! Your campaign is one of the examples I look to as a great example of a long-running campaign that gets into the high levels. I'm hoping we'll eventually see a new Story Hour campaign from your group! And a big thanks to StevenAC for collecting the campaign in a great PDF format! I'm currently reading it to catch up, and I can't wait to re-read the whole thing again from the beginning!

wedgeski: I'm not sure what to write here that others haven't already said a lot better than me. I've just caught up, in the last couple of days, on about the last twenty or so installments. It was an absolute pleasure to read everything through to the epic finale of the campaign.

For the record, I would have been quite okay with the story as it "ended" in the semi-penultimate update. You had me there, for a few seconds, and a few seconds was all it took for me to move from numb disbelief to a state of zen acceptance that, ultimately, going up against a god-killer is just not the sort of thing mortals are going to get away with, especially since their enemies had already been in the Underdark for so long before the heroes arrived. It was, of course, deeply satisfying to be shown the error of my ways... I loved the hints and implications dropped in the epilogue... just enough for the rest of us to build a little picture of what might have happened to everyone after we parted ways with them.

Like so many other people here, your game has had a deep and fundamental influence on my own DM'ing. Before reading about your game, I had a vague, aspirational fancy of what an epic narrative D&D campaign could look like, and over many years I tried (and failed, frankly) to assemble the right kind of group, and muster the appropriate level of skill to make it so. There's no longer anything vague about my views on what an epic narrative D&D campaign looks like. It's all here, in this thread. So thanks, and all that.

Enkhidu: Sagi, thank you...

- For finishing! Many of my favorites in this forum over the past decade have petered out before the conclusion, but you persevered.
- For inspiration! If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, know that I have (and plan to continue to) flattered the hell out of you and your group since I sat back in the DM's chair at my table. This Story Hour has been a veritable firehose of ideas, many of which I have stolen wholesale.
- And for years of enjoyment! It's hard to believe that this Story Hour has been going for so long, harder to believe that it took you much longer to actually play through it, and hardest to believe that the ride is finally over.

This has truly been a pleasure. Thank you.

Sagi: I am only too pleased that you (or anyone else) borrowed ideas for your own games. Goodness knows I did the same, from numerous sources. Thank you for reading!



