

Sagiro's Story Hour

PART TWO



CHAPTERS 11 TO 20
OF
THE ADVENTURES OF ABERNATHY'S COMPANY



Sagiro's Story Hour, Part Two

Contents

CHAPTER 11: The Way Back	5
The world is not what it was. History itself has been changed, and the Company are lost and alone in a twisted, hostile version of the world they knew. To restore their timeline, they will have to find the third Eye of Moirel in the tower of Het Branoi and “travel nowhere,” as the Eyes prophesied long ago. They journey back to Kivia, and set about trying to find the secret tower, but find they have some giant-sized problems to deal with if they are ever to see home again...	
CHAPTER 12: The Worlds of Het Branoi	67
Having at last gained entrance to the mysterious tower of Het Branoi, the Company find themselves exploring a series of small, self-contained pieces of worlds, whose inhabitants range from gentle farm folk to the deadliest of monsters. Death again strikes the Company as they delve ever deeper into a network of planar gateways, searching for the Black Circle controllers of this labyrinth, who must be defeated if they are ever to see home again...	
CHAPTER 13: The Eye of the Storm	115
The maze of sliced-off bits of worlds somehow contained within Het Branoi is occupied by all kinds of creatures friendly and hostile, from undead hydras to living god-storms. The Company arrive at a place of sanctuary – The Eye of the Storm. Here they can rest and gather information about the Slices, hoping to find a clue about which of the several unpleasant options available – the Chaos, the Demon Slices, or the Way of No Return – they must take if they are ever to see home again...	
CHAPTER 14: The Importance of Being Kibi	161
Everyone seems to be interested in Kibi. Carved figurines of him have been distributed through the Slices, and the Company fight off assassination and kidnapping attempts while deciding their next course of action. A wild journey through Chaos leads them to the monastery of the Vree, where an attempt to use Kibi’s abilities to fix the Slices ends up attracting the attention of the horrific Cleaners – beings whose power to destroy entire Slices makes it even less likely that any of them will ever see home again...	
CHAPTER 15: Sassing the Demon	209
After finding more evidence of Kibi’s significance to the creator of Het Branoi, the Company begin a perilous journey through the many and varied Demon Slices. In an assortment of unpleasant environments, they encounter demons of all sizes, shapes, and degrees of deadliness, from insignificant dretches to the mighty Lord Tapheon. Dranko’s outspoken bluntness makes for a tense confrontation with the Abyssal lord, who the party must negotiate a way past if they are ever to see home again...	
CHAPTER 16: The Lord of the Roses	253
The Company have passed from the Demon Slices into the domain of the mysterious and powerful Lord of the Roses – the confrontation with whom sees them face again a foe they had thought long since dead. Victory results in the gain of another Eye of Moirel, but there are unforeseen complications, and they realise they have not yet found the true source of the Slices. Despite all the progress they have made so far, there is still much to be done if they are ever to see home again...	
CHAPTER 17: Step Into the Lightless Room	293
At last the Company are moving toward a direct confrontation with the power behind Het Branoi. But first, they spend some time in the peaceful town of Bakersfield, gathering allies and information for an assault through the deadly and ominous Black Door – behind which lies One Certain Step’s prophesied destiny, and a titanic struggle with the deadly Cleaners. A painful sacrifice will be necessary if the Company are to prevail against these creatures of madness and ever see home again...	
CHAPTER 18: Completing the Circle	335
The Company have finally emerged in triumph from their adventures in Het Branoi, having obtained the third Eye of Moirel which they need to “travel nowhere” and restore history to its rightful path. Escaping a Black Circle ambush and returning to Charagan, they attempt to do just that. But even as they seem to succeed (and clear up several long-standing mysteries into the bargain), they find themselves stranded in the distant past, even further away from ever seeing home again...	
CHAPTER 19: In Search of Cranchus	381
In the remote past, at a time when the old Emperor Naloric still rules in Charagan, the Company begin to investigate the provenance of the strange gold talisman in Ernie’s possession, which they know as “Cranchus’ Gift.” After a conflict with a dragon-riding minion of the Emperor, they head for the dwarven mining towns of the Kalkas Peaks, and from there underground, in search of the mysterious dwarven archmage Cranchus, who could well be the key to their ever seeing home again...	
CHAPTER 20: Back to the Future	417
The Company have saved the future; now all they have to do is return to it. The archmage Cranchus is the key to them getting home – and turns out to have a far closer connection to Kibi than he had ever dreamed. After a final confrontation with the original architect of the Eyes of Moirel, the Company triumphantly journey back to their own time, to find the Charagan they knew restored. Well, almost – and Dranko in particular may well be wondering if he will ever truly see home again...	

Dranko, I Don't Think We're in Kansas Any More

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“This is weird.”

Everyone turns to look at Flicker.

“Which part?” asks Grey Wolf. “You mean the part where something almost tore the Greenhouse to pieces? Or the part where the Eyes of Moirel made awful-sounding proclamations through Kibi? Or the part where...”

“I mean that there’s a wall right on the other side of this window that wasn’t here this morning. It’s only about five feet away. And it’s a *stone* wall.”

Tal Hae has always been known as the Great Wooden City, since there are city ordinances against stonework. Although few in the kingdom know why, the Company know that a powerfully augmented *rock to mud* spell was cast here long ago, so powerful that ‘aftershocks’ are still possible.

“The door’s boarded up as well,” says Step.

“Someone wanted to keep us in here?” muses Aravis. “They must not know us very well.”

“Smells smoky outside,” comments Kibi. “Like a big fire is burning somewhere in town.”

“I’m going to scout,” says Morningstar. “In *Ava Dormo*, I mean,” she adds, cutting off several objections. She sits down and enters a trance.

In the Dreamscape, buildings exist as they do in the real world. She has seen Tal Hae many times in Dream, an empty metropolis save for the guarded temples of Ell. What she sees now is not the Tal Hae she knows.

The earth beneath the city is for the most part the same. The river flows where it should, and the ground beneath rises west to east to a sudden hill on which the ducal palace should be set. The palace is not there. What *is* there is utterly terrifying.

A huge black fortress rises menacingly from the hilltop, many times larger than Duke Nigel’s castle. Made of metal and stone, it is an evil-looking heap of towers, ramparts and battlements. Worst of all, it is heavily guarded in *Ava Dormo*. Rather than risk detection or capture, Morningstar drops out of her trance and reports to the others.

“What’s happened?” asks Step. “The words that the Eyes spoke through Kibi... what did they mean?”

“From what little evidence we have, I would say there are two likely choices,” says Aravis. “One is that we have somehow been sent back in time to a point when the Emperor is still in control of things.”

“Ugh,” opines Grey Wolf.

“I’m afraid to ask what you think the second is,” says Flicker.

“It’s also possible,” continues Aravis, “that someone has contrived to alter history. It is still the present, but things have changed in the past such that the Emperor won.” Everyone chews on that for a moment.

“God damn it!” Dranko explodes. “You mean that everything we did... stopping the Black Circle, and then keeping the Emperor out of Verdshane, and us getting titles and a castle and being all famous... it was all for *nothing*? That Naradawk just changed the past and – wham! – it turns out he wins after all? That... that sucks!”

“We don’t know that’s what happened,” says Aravis. “It’s just a guess.”

“But it makes sense,” says Morningstar. “‘The world is as it has always been,’ the Eyes said. If it’s always been this way, that means someone changed the past.”

“We didn’t get changed, though,” says Snokas.

“No,” says Ernie. “Because the Greenhouse kept us safe. Somehow it kept us outside of the effect.”

“What did it mean, ‘They are following back the path of Moirel?’” asks Kay.

“I wrote down what the Eyes said about Moirel last time,” says Aravis. He finds the parchment and reads:

CONDOR IS A NAME YOU HEARD LONG AGO, GREATEST OF NALRIC'S INNER CIRCLE. HE DROVE A SPIKE THROUGH THE FABRIC OF ALL THINGS, AND LOCKED THE HOLE WITH SEVEN KEYS. HE TOLD NALRIC THAT IT WOULD BE NECESSARY, TO CORRECT FUTURE MISTAKES THAT COULD NOT BE CORRECTED. THE EMPEROR WAS A SKEPTIC, LIKE ALL GREAT MEN. HE DEMANDED THAT CONDOR'S DAUGHTER, MOIREL, BE THE FIRST TO GO THROUGH, AS A TEST. SEVEN KEYS SHE HELD, AND SHE PLUNGED INTO THE HOLE THAT HER FATHER HAD MADE. SHE EMERGED WHOLE IN BODY, BUT BROKEN IN MIND. THE KEYS WERE SCATTERED, AND MOIREL WANDERED FAR TO FIND THEM, UNTIL SHE FORGOT WHO SHE WAS. SHE HAD NO FOCUS. SHE HAD NO OPENER. SHE HAD NO HOPE.

"I don't get it," says Flicker.

"I think it means it's time to go find Het Branoi," says Ernie. "We have to 'travel nowhere' to fix things, and for that we need the third Eye of Moirel."

"Our first order of business should be to find out what's outside," says Morningstar. "I want to know what the rest of Tal Hae is like, and if we're likely to be found and captured if we set foot outside."

"I have just the thing," says Kibi. "*Prying eyes.*"

"I also have just the thing," says Dranko. "Me, invisible."

"Kibi's spell is safer," says Kay.

"My *eyes* can gather information with much less risk to ourselves," says Kibi.

"How far can they go?" asks Flicker.

"A mile," answers the dwarf. "We can learn a great deal from them about what's going on in Tal Hae."

"I can go a lot further than a mile if necessary," says Dranko.

"No, Dranko, it's too dangerous," Morningstar admonishes. "And there's no reason to risk yourself yet; the *eyes* can go first."

"What I'll do," says Kibi, "is have them spread out, looking for anything and everything interesting. I'll tell half of them to come back in ten minutes, and then one more each hour for the duration."

"I could go out at the same time," says Dranko, peering out a boarded up window. "I don't see why you guys are making such a..."

"Dranko!" Kay turns on the half-orc with a furious look in her eyes. "It's clear what you want. You want to put all of us at greater risk just to satisfy your own restless itch. You want to do what's most exciting for you, not what's best for all of us. What if you get captured, or killed? What position does that put the rest of us in? Stop thinking about yourself for just a minute." Everyone looks at Kay, taken aback but impressed.

"I just want to do something," says Dranko angrily. "We need information more than anything else, and I can get it."

"Kay's right," says Ernie, gently. "We need information, and we have a way to get it without putting you or anyone else at risk. If Kibi's *eyes* show that it's safe, then you can go out scouting." Dranko fumes for a moment, glares at Kay, then turns his back on the group and stomps upstairs.

"He shows the stress that we all feel," says One Certain Step. "I don't blame him."

"I do," says Kay. "This is exactly when we can't afford to be stupid."

Kibi casts his spell, and sends a dozen tiny sensors out into the city. While they wait for the *eyes* to come back, Aravis tries *scrying* for Tor. "Maybe in this reality he's alive and somewhere we can find him." No such luck, alas.

Eventually the *prying eyes* start to return, where their 'knowledge' is downloaded directly into Kibi's brain. He shares his new information with the Company. "The Greenhouse is in the center of a mostly abandoned ghetto. It's surrounded on all sides by other buildings, closely packed together. Even the front door opens out onto a narrow alley. All of the buildings in this neighborhood are boarded up. There's a person two buildings over, sleeping or dead.

"There are almost no people on the streets, either, given that it's late afternoon on a warm fall day. One of the *eyes* found what looks like an armory, guarded by two well-armed humans. There are other guards scattered throughout the streets, guarding various buildings and intersections. Not all that many, but more than there are ordinary citizens. It's strange. Several *eyes* saw people, individuals or pairs, hurrying through the streets. One of them was stopped by a city guardsman and asked to produce papers."

“Sounds like martial law,” mutters Step.

“It gets worse,” says Kibi. “The last eye saw a group of twenty slaves, chained together and led by four armed guards. They looked fit but tired, and none of them offered any resistance. They were herded through the streets to a large stone building and marched inside.

“But the most interesting things that my eyes saw were the mines. At least, I think they were mines. There are four of them within a mile of the Greenhouse, wide avenues that angle down into the ground until they become tunnels. Don’t know what’s inside them, though... none of the eyes went in.”

“It’s a good thing the Greenhouse is tucked away like it is,” says Flicker. “I don’t think the people running Tal Hae would be happy to find us here.”

There is another horrid scream in the distance. “No kidding,” says Grey Wolf.

“It does sound like it would be safe for Flicker and I to go scouting,” says Dranko. “Kay, I... I apologize for before. You were absolutely right. I was putting my own desires ahead of the greater good. If we’re going to get through this, I’ll need to be smarter.”

“Apology accepted,” says Kay. “We’re all on edge. Our whole world has been turned upside down. I’m sorry that I lost my temper.”

Dranko and Kay share a look of mutual understanding, which is interrupted by Ernie piping up. “Aww, I’m glad to see you two are...” Dranko and Kay both turn to the halfling and speak as one: “Shut up, Ernie.”

Morningstar casts *Rary’s telepathic bond*, connecting herself with Dranko, Flicker and Aravis. Kay uses the Woodcutter sword to slice through the boards on an upstairs window while the wizards make Flicker and Dranko invisible. The two rogues slip out of the window and into the deepening dusk.

Dranko relays what he sees back to the others via the *telepathic bond*, as he makes his quiet way into the heart of Tal Hae. As he expects, the streets are nearly empty. There are homes, some shops, lots of barracks and armories, and some buildings of governance; he pulls up short in front of one of these. A large red and black banner hangs above the doorway of a large municipal building, bearing a strange design that Dranko has not seen in a long time. *It’s from those rings*, he thinks to the others.

Rings?

You remember our very first mission for Abernathy? To find that ring underneath Gohgan’s shop? And that ring has a weird device on it? That design seems to be the symbol of the ruler of this city. And judging by the words carved above the building, it’s not called Tal Hae. It’s called ‘Pyke Vale.’

I know that name, says Morningstar. *When I spied on a dream conversation between Meledien and Octesian, she referred to Abernathy as ‘the wizard of Pyke Vale.’*

Hold on, thinks Dranko. *Another slave march is coming. It’s just like Kibi’s eye saw. There’s about two dozen slaves chained together. They’ve got the muscles of hard laborers and the expressions of the damned. They’ve probably been slaves a long time. They have... tattoos on their cheeks. Or maybe branding marks. It looks like the same symbol as on the banner.*

Flicker interrupts. *I’ve reached one of those mine thingies that Kibi saw with his spell. Whoa.*

What do you see, Flicker? thinks Dranko over the link.

There’s some kind of giant machine right near the entrance to the mine. It has a huge furnace next to it, belching smoke into the air. And I mean huge... it’s the size of a small house! There are cables and ropes running from the machine into the mine, looped through a complicated pulley system. Three large flatbed carts are pulled up at the mine entrance, empty. There are a few guards milling around, but the operation seems to have shut down for the night, whatever it is. I could go scout around inside the mine if you wanted. It might be...

No! Several voices sound across the *telepathic bond*.

I’m coming back then, thinks Flicker, disappointed. *There aren’t a lot of lights burning in Pyke Vale, and I don’t see in the dark like Dranko can.*

Dranko continues to scout. *I’ve reached a more upscale part of town. Lots of nicer houses. I’m going to peek in a window. A minute later: Ooh, nice. That’s some fancy-looking furniture. Nice artwork, too.*

Don't steal anything, admonishes Aravis.

Or at least don't get caught, adds Flicker.

No breaking and entering tonight, thinks Dranko. I have some more streets to check out.

He roams for a few more blocks. Hey, sounds like a smithy. Someone's working late.

Pause.

I hate this place. There's a smith here. He's chained to his forge, pounding away at a sword blade. There are two guards standing nearby, eating and having a good laugh. At least the smith doesn't have a tattoo. Screw it, I'm coming home. I'll let you know if I see anything interesting on the way back.

A few minutes later: There's a horse and carriage coming. The driver has a lamp, and I can hear the horses. Must be someone in the nobility. I'll just hide here in the shadows and take a look when it rides by. Here it comes. It's... oh, crap. The markings on the carriage. We know those. It's Delfirian.

The Nifi? thinks Morningstar. Pyke Vale is ruled by the fire worshippers?

More likely it's just a visiting dignitary, says Aravis. Remember, in the old days, the Delfirians controlled the Balani Peninsula and the Isles of Forquelle. If the Emperor never lost, the Delfirians are probably still there.

Dranko and Flicker return to the Greenhouse undetected. Dranko sums up their situation: "This sucks."

Kay lets out a long breath. "We should have let the turtle win," she says despondently.

thatdarncat: Again with the gibbering under the desk. My coworkers are starting to shift their workstations away from me...

Swack-Iron: I thought the telling line was, "We should have let the turtle win." I think I see Sagiro's grand design now. Had the party let the Colossus win at [Sand's Edge], had they turned left instead of right, then they would have spent all the adventure time up to this point stopping the evil plot to change the past. Which means that they wouldn't have quested for the Crosser's Maze, and the Emperor would have brought his armies across virtually unopposed.

Wow. Sagiro's a real Rat Bastard! What hints do we have about who's behind this evil deed?

Ancalagon: Wow. Rat bastard indeed! I'm impressed!

Lord Pendragon: I believe the current theory is that it's a result of the Sharshun. I do seem to remember at least one of the buggers running out into the Mirrors of Semek and vanishing.

What I want to know is, have we accounted for all of the Eyes of Moirel? The Company has two, one is in Kivia... where are the other four? Are they in the hands of the Sharshun?

Zaruthstran: This is the part that creeps me out the most. If Abernathy is known as "the Wizard of Pyke Vale," and this alternate Tal Hae is called Pyke Vale, then maybe this evil reality is the real reality and the Tal Hae reality – what we know and love – is the fake one. Maybe, originally, the Emperor did win except for the efforts of Abernathy and co., who went back in time and altered things. Now the bad guys have set things as they were. And our heroes have to change it again.

Or did I miss something: Tal Hae was previously known as Pyke Vale, and the "wizard of Pyke Vale" thing can be explained by the fact that Abernathy was really, really old?

Wolfspirit: I'm assuming that the area that now is (?) called Tal Hae once was (now is?) Pyke Vale.

Supposedly Abernathy lived to be about 997 years old, give or take a few, so I don't think he could have been hanging around from before the defeat of the Empire. If the Masking took place about 1000 years ago, even if that is just a neat number, a teenager or younger wouldn't be considered much of a wizard. Of course, there is the possibility that Abernathy was older than he even let on, but I think people would have noticed.

Doesn't one of the Company have the nickname of the "Opener"? Kibi, maybe? I think that the Opener needs to use the 3 Eyes (keys) to change things... I wonder if there are now 9 Eyes, what with the new time frame and everything.

Anyway, my last rambling before I go back to studying: Does Het Branoi have the distinction of being a home to seven dark words? If not, then they probably won't find an Eye there. One thing to think about is the fact that a lot of portable things won't be in the same place.

Piratecat: We're 95% sure that there is an Eye in Het Branoi. There were seven Eyes of Moirel; we have two (one taken from Lizardo the great big lizard, and one taken long ago from a crystal skeleton at our recently gifted keep). According to them, one is unclaimed at Het Branoi. As far as we now know, the Sharshun have [another] three – and you need three to "travel nowhere," whatever that means. We think the Sharshun did so to unmake the world.

Interestingly enough, Ernie immediately came up with the idea that "the house of Seven Dark Words" might actually be a home of someone in Djaw! It's certainly the right naming style (such as "One Certain Step," or Dranko's assumed name of "One Slippery Slope"). It's a cool theory that hadn't occurred to me, and certainly sounds better than a scary bad place.

Your theories that "our" reality is the fake one are really disturbing, and unfortunately might be borne out by various hints. We haven't really considered that in character... but I keep remembering that one bad guy saying, "We were here first!"

I believe the word we're looking for is, "Crap."

Caliber: I read it that the city of Tal Hae was once known as Pyke Vale, and when the Emperor was booted out it was changed to Tal Hae (something the other guys would never have learned). But the whole 'already changed and now changing back' thing is a lot cooler.

LightPhoenix: Well, how has Djaw changed since the Emperor is in power? I don't think that there are any friendly good places in Sagiro's world...

Destil: Well, the Delfirians, allied with Skewn, are from the other continent... Who knows what kind of trouble they're making with his help over in Kivia? Too much that's good here to comment on all the specifics, guess I'll just pick one point... nice use of *prying eyes*. Always liked that spell.

LightPhoenix: Technically the unmaking of the world (which in itself implies that the world was artificially made in the first place) could have had two effects on the Eyes. Either the Eyes have a variable existence based on what happened, or they are independent of the unmaking. Since the two Eyes remained in the group's possession it's relatively safe to assume the Eyes maintain a constant existence, and will be in Het Branoi.

Zustiur: My guess says: the situation is exactly as written, without any between-the-lines stuff; that is to say, all that happened in the Part 1 past is true, and then the Sharshun got hold of a third Eye and rewrote history.

Futhermore, since the Eyes of Moirel are required to reshape history, they cannot be increased in number. Else it would be too easy to rewrite history. As for Abernathy being "the wizard of Pyke Vale," I go with the theory that he is called that simply because he comes from the city that the bad guys refer to as Pyke Vale. They just don't care what the new inhabitants called it.

That was a seriously powerful switch between part 1 and part 2, and fully deserves all the credit we can impart to Sagiro. Excellent work.

MavrickWeirdo: I'm hoping that this "go nowhere" world will give us an opportunity to explore some "forgotten" plot-threads such as the "Wilberforce Legacy."

Plane Sailing: Hey Sagiro - I take a couple of months holiday from reading your Story Hour (so I can read several bits in one go) and I'm gobsmacked at what has happened! Being a RBDM is all about the switcheroo, but I've never dreamt of such a big one as this! Many congratulations! Great responses by the PCs too... Kudos to all for making this sound like a novel rather than a game in an upstairs room.

Number47: When the heroes re-build the world, they might be able to tie up a few loose plot hooks also. They can just rewrite things so they don't have to free the dwarven slaves and [Morningstar] doesn't have to go serve the fiendish ogre.

Claran: So, does the remade world have a living Abernathy? The Abernathy the Company knew ended his life of his own will, so he could still be alive if he felt he was still needed. On the other hand, this world's Abernathy might not be benign...

KidCthulhu: Sorry... but there's no joy on that front. We did some *scrying* and other divinations, and as far as we can tell, none of the Archmagi from our time exist here. Their great-great-grandparents never met, because they were too busy being enslaved, digging big holes, etc.

Lord Pendragon: Does that include Parthol Runecarver?

KidCthulhu: Yep. This world is clearly 1000-some years of very different history, not just some bizarre *Star Trek* mirror universe. We're not likely to meet anyone we know, and certainly not with little goatees.

More's the shame, really. I was looking forward to saintly Turlus and Mrs. Horn the evil dominatrix.

Piratecat: Ernie is a strange, strange little halfling. Either that, or you're channeling for Dranko.

Sialia: Now dearest, no regrets. Her domination/bondage episode with Turlus never made prime-time in the old universe anyway. This way, at least you haven't missed out on anything.

MavrickWeirdo: I bet Farazil exists in this world. What you need is a "Guinan" character walking around saying, "This is wrong, everything is wrong."

KidCthulhu: We don't have the budget for Whoopi cameos. We tried putting a dead flumph on Ernie's head and having him dispense drinks, but it wasn't the same.

"So what should we do then?" asks Flicker, after a few moments of depressed silence.

"Het Branoi," says Aravis. "I don't see any reason not to make that our first priority."

"Would we use the *rope*," asks Kay, "or try the gartine arch?"

"Rope?" asks Snokas.

"We have a rope that will take us directly back to Kivia," explains Ernie. "But we don't know how many more times it will work. If we use it to go there, it might not work to get us back."

"I came through the arch," says Snokas. "But I snuck through. I doubt we could get a group this big past the Delfirians."

"And we don't know if it's more guarded or less guarded in this reality," points out Grey Wolf.

"We need more information," says Morningstar.

"It might not matter," says Aravis suddenly. When everyone turns to look at him, he adds: "Maybe the Uncrossable Sea isn't uncrossable anymore. It's possible I could simply *teleport* us there. I can try tomorrow morning."

Everyone is quiet again for a minute, thinking. "It's late," says Flicker. "I've had a long day. Unless you want me to go sneaking around some more, I'm going to bed."

"We all should," says Ernie. "I'll be up early to make us some breakfast, unless Skorg beats me to the Icebox. Skorg, I don't want to wake up to the smell... of..." He trails off. "Say, where is Skorg, anyhow?"

"Maybe he went to bed already?" suggests Flicker.

"I'll check his room," says Eddings.

"He was down in the basement with us, right?" asks Dranko, pensively. "I mean... he was, wasn't he?" But no one remembers seeing Skorg there.

"He's not in his room," says Eddings, coming back down to the living room. "Or in the secret room. Shall I check the basement?"

"I'll bet he went outside," says Morningstar. "He usually goes off by himself when we're doing something dangerous."

"But," cries Flicker, "if he was outside when whatever happened happened, and only people inside the Greenhouse were protected...?"

"I guess Skorg was never born!" says Kibi, trying really, really hard not to look as pleased as he feels.

"Well, if we fix what's happened, that should bring him back," says Dranko. "And in the meantime, I'll have to start looking around for another torchbearer."

The Company sleep, their first night in a strange new world.



"Damn."

"Didn't work?" asks Flicker.

Aravis shakes his head. "No teleporting to Kivia, I'm afraid."

"Now what?" Flicker pesters.

"First things first," says Morningstar. "Who's got the rash this morning?" Everyone looks at everyone else, but no one speaks up.

"Hey, something good came out of all this!" says Ernie brightly. "Whatever causes the rash doesn't exist in this reality."

"Which means that if we ever solve this mess," says Grey Wolf, "we have more mystery itch to look forward to."

Over breakfast, the Company make a thorough review of the various prophecies spoken by the Eyes of Moirel, bits of relevant conversations they've had, books they've read – anything that might help them in their current predicament. The signs still point to Het Branoi, and the need to find a third Eye of Moirel. The only question is: go there straight away, or wait to collect more information about what Charagan has become?

The majority of Company sentiment is for the second of these options. As long as they can go undetected there is no immediate rush, and many in the group want to know more of the 'new' world. And Kibi is keen to scribe the spell *nondetection* into his books, which will take a few days anyhow.

So begins three days of information gathering, in which most of the Company remain safely inside the Greenhouse. More *prying eyes* are sent out to scour the city for a mile around the house. And most usefully, individuals are made invisible and then sent *wind walking* to observe everything possible about Pyke Vale and its environs. From these scouting missions the Company are able to piece together a fairly complete picture of what they've landed in.

Pyke Vale is about the same size as Tal Hae, but the population is difficult to measure. This is because groups of slaves, all dressed in uniform drab grays or browns, are constantly being shuttled down into the mysterious mines, and then back again to be herded either into buildings or large outdoor holding pens. One thing is clear: the slaves are more numerous than the free citizens. And most of the latter seem to be armed; there is a highly disproportionate number of soldiers and barracks in Pyke Vale, as if its ruler expects to march off to conquer his neighbor at any moment. Disturbingly, there are no children in the city.

Atop the hill sits the grand fortress that Morningstar observed in *Ava Dormo*. It is ringed by stone walls with iron gates, guarded by hundreds of men on the ground, and dozens more upon walls behind the parapets. Even invisible and *wind walking*, the Company stay outside the inner walls of the fortress, fearing a magical alarm.

The strangest feature of Pyke Vale lies beneath the earth. The mines aren't mines at all, in the sense that valuable ores or gems are their purpose. Instead, thousands of slaves appear to be put to work simply to expand the city downward. Already there are roads, crude buildings, living quarters, built in the large hollowed out spaces beneath Pyke Vale. And yet there is always more digging, downward, downward, not following valuable veins of anything. Just downward. It's baffling, especially considering the huge effort (and expense, no doubt) required for the undertaking. All day the huge machines are run, connected to their pulleys and cables that help haul the endless fill up from the caverns below. Forest-loads of wood are carted into the city to be fed into the monstrous furnaces that power the machines. Hundreds of slaves shovel the fill onto dozens of elongated carts, which are driven out of the city to the Waste Piles in a constant stream. "Waste Piles" is the name for the hundreds of acres east of Pyke Vale used as a dumping ground, where mountains of rock, mud and debris blot the landscape as far as the eye can see. It stands in stark contrast to the abundant fields north of the city, where yet more slaves tend the crops that feed Pyke Vale.



After three days, the Company are unanimous in their intense dislike for the city and whoever runs it. The only real bone of contention is what to do about the person Kibi's *prying eyes* discovered on their first day in Pyke Vale, alone in a building less than fifty yards from the Greenhouse. Every once in a while someone peers through a boarded window to check on him; he is always curled up in a ball in the corner of an empty room, probably sleeping.

"I don't see the point," grumbles Aravis. "What can he tell us that we don't already know? I think the real question is whether we should go to Djaw to find this 'Seven Dark Words,' or just head straight for Het Branoi."

"It's possible that person could tell us something useful," says Kay. "And I'd like to know if the slaves here are criminals."

"It's dangerous," says Grey Wolf. "Do we want anyone in this place knowing that we're here?"

"He doesn't seem like the sort of person who'd report us to the authorities," says Ernie. "He's probably a slave who's escaped. He's got a mark on his face."

"We can check easily enough," says Dranko. "We could bring him back to the Greenhouse and question him. I can just knock him out, and..."

"...Or I could cast *sleep*," points out Aravis. "We don't *have* to hit everyone over the head."

"Yeah, I guess we could do that," mutters Dranko.

"We can get some information without waking him up," says Morningstar. "I can cast *memory read* while he's asleep. If he wakes up during the spell, Aravis can be ready to put him back to sleep magically. We can *wind walk* over there to avoid waking him getting into his house."

So that's what they do. After some discussion they agree to delve for two memories: one of how the man became a slave, and another of how he escaped. Morningstar, Aravis and Dranko slip gaseously beneath the door and into the man's building. It's a small, squalid one-room hovel. The man is lying in the fetal position up against a wall, on a rough pile of dirty rags. Scattered around the room are the remains of meager meals, rotting and smelly. There is no furniture.

The three members of the Company coalesce in the room, Morningstar standing above the sleeping man. She can see the slave mark on his left cheek; at this close distance she can tell it's a brand. And that's not the only mark on his body – his face, arms and hands are covered with burn scars, but not from branding. Whatever caused them, they've long since healed naturally, and Morningstar thinks the man is very lucky not to have developed infection.

Shaking her head, she casts a Silent *memory read* and gently touches the man's arm, targeting the memory of when the man first became a slave. The man stirs in his sleep but doesn't wake, and Morningstar...

...is a ten-year-old boy, sitting on a bunk. The bunk is one of many, as is the boy. The room is large and crowded with children and beds, maybe fifty of each. Two adult guards stand near the only door. Candles light the room with an inadequate glow. There are no windows. Each child wears a plain gray tunic and no shoes. Most are nibbling on hunks of hard bread. All have fear in their eyes.

The door opens and an adult male enters. All of the children look up anxiously, some of them shrinking back in their beds. The man points at another child, a girl of about eight, and snaps his fingers. The girl slides sullenly off her bunk and shuffles over to the door. The man points again, at a different boy two bunks down. That boy doesn't move; the man strides quickly over, grabs the child, and hauls him back to stand with the girl.

Then the bad man points at him. Morningstar stands... he stands, slowly, still chewing, and walks to join the other two children. Five more children are selected, and are ordered to follow the man out of the room. They are led into a dimly-lit hallway and marched a long way, past several more rooms full of children. From somewhere up ahead comes the sound of a boy screaming. He cringes. One of the girls in his group of eight starts to whimper. The man cuffs her on the ear.

Eventually they are led into the room with the screams, and made to line up against the near wall. Morningstar sees that in the center of the room (bare, stone, windowless) is a Device. It has a seat, and clamps, and a cruel man, and a pit of glowing coals, and metal rods. Another boy is shoved into the chair of the Device, where his head is restrained by clamps. The cruel man takes a metal rod out of the fire pit; the end is flat and wide and glowing red and white. Tears roll down the trapped boy's cheeks even before the rod is applied, and he wails in anticipation of the pain. The brand is pressed to the boy's cheek; his scream becomes louder and mixes with horrified cries from the other children. There is the smell of scalded flesh.

The boy is released and ushered out of the room, still wailing.

The cruel man motions to Morningstar. The boy is led to the chair. She... he... doesn't resist. He doesn't want to cry. Her head is clamped tightly, and the glowing brand comes closer to him, closer to her, closer...

Searing pain. The boy refuses to cry out. Morningstar struggles to stay quiet. The smell of his own burnt skin reeks in her nostrils. The cruel man chuckles.

Morningstar yanks her hand away from the man on the floor to find tears dampening her face. Dranko gives her a questioning look: is she OK? Is she willing to do another one? She nods. Trembling slightly she casts again, hoping that the memory of escape and freedom will have some measure of happiness after the fear and pain of the enslavement.

The second memory is much worse...

Number47: Excellent as always, evil as ever.

wolff96: Your sense of Rat-Bastardy cliff-hanger style has only improved over time, Sagiro. Letting the heroes get so involved in your campaign world and then yanking the rug out from under them is so evil and brilliant...

Claran: [...]as far as we can tell, none of the Archmagi from our time exist here – KC] What, not even Cranchus? Jeepers. You'd think that someone in Charagan would be over a thousand years old...

Then again, you aren't limited to Charagan. At the very least, Aravis can have another chat with the former masters of the Crosser's Maze, assuming that any of them might have information that the Company might find useful. And assuming that the Maze itself hasn't been duplicated.

energy_One: That just reminds me how confusing and difficult things have just become.

KidCthulhu: Unfortunately, ever since the battle at Verdshane, Aravis has been unable to access the Maze. I don't think it's permanently off-line, he's just sprained his brain rather badly, and needs to rest a while.

energy_One: What sort of difference is there now as opposed to before he "sprained le brain"? Is it simply a matter of him not feeling it, or can he not get together enough brain power and concentration to use it?

Sagiro: It's more the latter. The Maze is still there, but Aravis can no longer make a connection with it. Every time he tries it, his brain hurts.

He was free, and now he will be killed. Was it worth it? Maybe. Dying will be, must be, better than living.

He doesn't struggle. Two armed guards hold him in a vice-like grip. Two more walk ahead and two behind, as they force him down the dark streets of Pyke Vale. Ahead in the light of torches one of the monstrous furnaces comes into view. His heart sinks.

Although he has never seen it, he has heard from some others that if a slave escapes and is caught, he is thrown into one of the furnaces to be burned alive. Now he is learning those stories are true. The guards march him right up to the door of the massive furnace, a hulking box of steel and heat. The two guards in front lift a metal bar from the door and swing it open. Heat pours out; the guards instinctively turn their faces.

Then the escaped slave is flung inside. He hears the door clang shut behind him and the bar thrown down.

In his mind, in the seconds leading up to this, the slave envisioned that he'd simply erupt into flames, instantly burned to death by intense fires. Although his death is still not in doubt, his confounding survival for the first five seconds causes his instincts to take over, looking for a way to stay alive.

The furnace is huge – almost twenty feet on a side – and has not recently been stoked. Oh, it is hot – brutally hot – and here and there the coals are still red and pulsing. Small fires burn all around him, and the air immediately provokes a drenching sweat. His pant cuff catches fire and he swats it out, even as his head jerks this way and that, looking for a way to survive. Miraculously, he finds one.

In the far back corner of the furnace it is slightly less hot, though in scrambling there he badly burns his foot, and once slips and lands his forearm on a hot coal. But in the corner he finds that by burying himself in old warm ashes he achieves some insulation from the heat. Part of his mind urges him to give up. What is the point? He is trapped. Tomorrow the furnace will be ten times hotter. He cannot flee while the door is open; guards and workers will be swarming outside. In the best possible scenario he can imagine, he will die of thirst in days. Better to burn quickly now than die of slow roasting.

But in man there is nothing to rival the basic instinct to survive. So he stays in his corner.

The next day is a nightmare that Morningstar can hardly bear. In the early morning the furnace is open; logs, kindling and torches are thrown inside. By late morning it burns with the fires of hell. Burrowing as far as he can beneath his pile of ash, the slave still feels as though the skin is melting off his bones. The air in his lungs is mixed with ash and burns with every breath. Hot embers find their way to bits of exposed skin. One time a wet log explodes nearby and showers him with fiery fragments; his ashen blanket gives him some protection from the scalding air, but when burning wood touches down, it makes holes in his body. He knows he will die. He wishes he would die. Morningstar's reliving of his memories swims in and out along with the slave's consciousness.

In the evening they stop throwing logs in. The door is shut for the final time, clanging in its frame. Minutes pass.

In the back of Morningstar's mind, the slave comes to a foggy-headed realization. There had been no sound of the bar being lowered. Slowly he turns his head on his ashen pillow. The door was not securely closed! He nearly jumps up to make a run for it. Yes, there will probably still be guards outside, and they will catch him, but maybe they will simply cut off his head and make an end, instead of throwing him back inside...

No. Survive.

He is terrified that someone outside will notice the open door. But his best chance is to wait until the wee hours of the morning, when the furnace will be abandoned. The hours creep by, the air in the furnace slowly cooling. When he can bear it no longer the slave hops to the doorway, trying hard not to look at his own burned and blistered body. He peeks through the half-inch gap between door and frame. He sees no one, hears no one.

The exhilaration of freedom is just enough to mask the pain as he flees into the night.

Morningstar lifts her trembling hand from the slave's arm. "We should get him back to the Greenhouse," she whispers. "He needs... help. Food. We can't just leave him here."

They *wind walk* back to the Greenhouse to pick up some soft bread and cheese, then fly back with Aravis to the slave's hovel. They set the food down next to the sleeping man and withdraw to the other side of the room. "Wake up," says Ernie, in a normal tone of voice. "We have food for you."

Ernie has to repeat himself a few times, but eventually the man stirs, blinks, sits up slowly. He sees Ernie, Dranko, Aravis and Morningstar, standing nearby and smiling. They expect that he might startle or even attack, but he does neither. Instead he slumps down, back still against the wall. They can read his emotions easily enough; he knows he's finally been caught, and now they'll throw him back in the furnace.

"We're not going to hurt you," says Ernie. "And we won't tell anyone you're here. We brought you some food." He points at the bread and cheese. "Eat. That's for you."

The slave looks down at the food, puzzled. Poison? A trick? Maybe he's hallucinating. Dranko senses what the man is thinking. He walks forward slowly and the man shrinks back. Dranko picks up the bread, tears off a small piece, and deliberately puts it in his mouth. "See?" he says. "It's good."

They're pretty sure the slave understands them; people in Pyke Vale speak a thickly accented Common tongue. But he doesn't touch the food. His eyes are full of fear and doubt. "What should we do now?" asks Aravis, speaking low. "We can't make him eat. And now that he's seen us, we can't afford to let him go."

"We'll take him back to the Greenhouse," says Ernie. "We can heal him, give him a comfortable bed..."

"...and have to keep him there for the entire duration of our stay in this reality," says Aravis. "If he ever leaves, he could be caught, and made to tell the Emperor about the Greenhouse."

"That's better than him staying here," says Dranko. "Look at him. Look at this place. This isn't life."

"It's better than what he had before," Morningstar whispers.

"I'm going to cast *sleep* on him," says Aravis. "Then we can get him back to the Greenhouse without him knowing how far it is. We don't have a choice at this point."

Aravis casts his spell. The slave's eyes go wide as Aravis chants and waves his arms, and then he drops into a peaceful slumber. Gently they carry him back to the Greenhouse and set him on the couch in the living room. Before too long he wakes again, sitting up on the sofa and looking around in wonder. Ernie has set some oatmeal and water in front of him, which he eyes suspiciously for only a second before greedily consuming.

"What is your name?" asks Ernie gently.

The slave opens his mouth but no words come out. For a minute the Company think he might be dumb, or have had his tongue cut out. But it's simply the vocal rust borne of a long solitude. After a moment of working his jaws, he whispers: "**Carp.**"



The education of Carp is slow and delicate. He vacillates wildly between mistrust, confusion and gratitude. The Company explain that they have come from a far-off land, that they are enemies of the Emperor, that they are safe in this strange house.

It is tricky convincing Carp that he may not leave the Greenhouse, but they manage it. The promise of unlimited food and drink, combined with protection from the Warlord **Pinfaro** (who is the ruler of Pyke Vale) is enough to satisfy him. “And I’m stuck here as well,” says Eddings, handing Carp another slice of buttered bread. “But here we have books, and food, and cats to keep us company.”

In the days that follow, Carp provides some more information about his escape. Free from the furnace, he fled through the streets of Pyke Vale, dodging guards and hiding in the shadows. He made his way to this abandoned ghetto of boarded up homes, eventually finding an unsealed window. For two days he had gone into and out of delirium. Had it not rained the first night, he would have died from thirst. He was able to leave his shirt out in the downpour and wring filthy drops into his mouth. Since then he has lived on stolen scraps; he knows of a guards’ eating house where leavings are tossed in a back alley. Each night he scavenged for food. Each day he hid, terrified. It has been months.

When he is more at ease, Carp answers some of their questions about Pyke Vale. There are no children on the streets because they are kept underground – fed and exercised, but not educated. He guesses the children of important people are raised inside the palace grounds. Warlord Pinfaro keeps such a large army because he fears another Warlord – somewhere to the north, he thinks.

The Company find this fascinating. “I bet the Emperor keeps his generals at each others’ throats,” says Ernie, “so they don’t come after him.”



Over breakfast one morning, Aravis reiterates his impatience. “It’s time to go,” he says. “We’ve learned everything we can about what Charagan has become. We’ve helped the only person we could find to help. Now it’s time to go set things to rights.”

“One more thing before we go,” says Morningstar. “I have a few questions I’d like to ask of Ell.” Offering up a bit of her life energy, Morningstar casts *commune*, seeking answers from her goddess. The connection that she typically feels is slow in coming after the spell is cast, but she asks her first question undaunted:

“Are we likely to succeed if we try to travel to Kivia via the Delfirian Arch?”

The answer does not come immediately. Just enough time passes to make Morningstar start to doubt, when a divine voice sounds in her soul. It is faint.

NO.

“My connection with the Goddess is weak,” she tells the others. “I don’t know why.” She asks a second question.

“Is the gate at the Delfirian Peninsula in active use?”

Again a delay, before:

YES.

“Will we still end up in a jungle clearing if we use the rope to return to Kivia?”

YES.

“Does the rope have enough power to work a third time?”

PROBABLY.

“Is an Eye of Moirel at Het Branoi?”

This time the delay is especially long. Several minutes pass. Then:

I BELIEVE SO.

“Is Seven Dark Words a person?”

HE WAS.

“I knew it!” says Ernie.

“Is the house of Seven Dark Words in Djaw?”

ONE OF THEM WAS.

“Are there Sisters of Ell in Kivia?”

YES.

“Are there Sisters of Ell other than Morningstar in the place we know as Charagan?”

NO.

“Are any of the people we know as the Archmagi alive?”

NO.

"Is Het Branoi abandoned?"

Again there is a long delay.

I DON'T BELIEVE SO.

With one question left, Morningstar asks a question on Ernie's behalf.

"Are there any halflings in Kivia?"

YES.

Morningstar's connection with the divine drops immediately. She finds herself winded.

"Looks like we use the *rope* then," says Grey Wolf, reaching for his sword. "I say there's no time like right now."

Not knowing if the Greenhouse would muddle the use of their magical rope, the Company assemble on the roof. Eddings is left behind with Carp. "We know we'll show up in that jungle clearing," says Morningstar, as Ernie lays out the long *rope* in a circle. "But we should still be ready for trouble."

It takes fifteen minutes for the magic of the *rope* to take effect. The Company stand within its circumference, fidgeting, eager to get on to the next part of their adventure, to start the process of setting the universe back on its proper course. All at once the world around them changes, as they are teleported en masse, thousands of miles to the east, to Kivia and the Jungle of Lost Dreams.

Plane Sailing: Carp. Now that guy is *really* heroic.

emergent: Carp was brilliant and moving. An incredible way to get across to the PCs how horrible this new timeline is and how much is at stake. Very well done, Sagiro.

Plane Sailing: And Ell... Doncha just wish that the gods would be a bit more forthcoming with their answers sometimes? They seem exactly like DOS-level computing! If you ask exactly the right question, you get brilliant answers. *If...*



It is night, and around them is a jungle clearing. That much is expected. Everything else is an unpleasant surprise.

They are not standing on grass. Beneath their feet is a wide circular floor, fifteen feet in diameter, made of gray stone slabs. That circle is edged by a circumference of black obsidian bricks. A nine-pointed star made of similar bricks circumscribes their circle, and at each point of the star is a squat, unsettling statue. The air around them glows with a wan reddish light.

Outside the circle, many torches on tall stands illuminate the night, and what they show the Company is a vast array of people surrounding them. Sixteen of these have crossbows aimed at them. Another eight have drawn scimitars. Two wield rapiers in each hand. In the back, outside of any direct torchlight, two immense bulky figures shift and grunt. And none of these are what immediately grab the Company's attention.

Only fifteen feet from their circle stands a tall, imperious man. He wears a black robe with a red fringe, and a pendant with a black circle hangs around his neck. Next to him is a short armored woman in similar robes.

Aravis wastes no time; he has recently added the spell *mass haste* to his books, and starts to cast. But as his arms move in the patterns of spellcasting, the air in their enclosed cylinder begins to glow bright red and heat up rapidly. Some unseen force makes Aravis's hands shake, and in less than three seconds the spell is disrupted. Morningstar tries casting *prayer*, with the same result.

Seeing that spells are failing, Dranko adopts a wait-and-see attitude, keeping an eye on the foes outside the circle. Kay draws her bow and fires an arrow straight at the tall man's chest; it flies eight feet before splintering against a force barrier at the edge of the obsidian circle. The tall man chuckles.

Grey Wolf also tries casting, but his effort is similarly thwarted. Step, furious, charges forward, crashes into the force barrier, and falls back. Kibi drinks a potion, and even that fails to have any effect. Magic seems to be completely nullified inside the trap.

In the torchlight, the Black Circle leader holds up his hands. The Company watch and listen, a captive audience.

"The Prophets of the Circle spoke," the man's voice booms in heavily accented Kivian Common, "and we listened. The Prophets did not lead us astray." He turns to the smaller woman standing beside him. "You see, my Lady? It is all as I expected. There was no need for this..." he gestures to the armed soldiers around him "...unseemly show of force."

"I read things differently than you," grumbles the woman. "I'll relax when they're dead. Get on with it."

The man clears his throat. "Here, at the exact time and place foretold, are the mortal enemies of our Lord. They come from a world much like this one, but one in which the Black Circle suffered bitter defeat. They have traveled across time and space in an attempt to change our world into one like their own. As you can see, they have failed, because I read the Dark Books and was prepared. You will all be witness to their destruction, that I have engineered."

He strides forward towards them, stopping just short of the nine-pointed star. He speaks in a low voice meant only for them. "But tell me one thing," he murmurs. "How did you do it? If you share with me the secret of crossing the infinite boundaries of worlds, I will find a way to spare your lives." No one responds.

"And if you don't tell me," the man whispers, "the remainder of your short lives will be extremely uncomfortable." No one responds.

The woman behind him hisses, "Stop playing with them. Get this done with. I'm sick of this accursed jungle."

The tall man steps back with a sigh. "I suggest you make peace with your gods." He turns and walks back to where he was originally standing, at the woman's side. As he walks, Dranko takes out a spike from his pack, places it against the flagstones (glowing a slight red) at the very edge of the obsidian circle, and smashes down on it with his mace.

The spike entirely fails to penetrate the force effect that coats the stones like an impervious skin. Dranko seethes with frustration. The tall man turns to face the circle and begins to chant in an evil tongue. Inside the circle, the air suddenly gets very, very warm.

Out of options, Dranko resorts to one of his oldest means of showing displeasure. He unbuttons his trousers and pees towards the man. The stream of urine strikes an invisible barrier at the circle's edge and splatters to the stones. The woman standing by the chanting man wrinkles her face in disgust.

The temperature in the circle continues to rise. It seems that the Black Circle has finally caught them in a trap with no escape...

From somewhere in the jungle behind the Black Circle practitioners, there is a tremendously loud roar.



Nail: I can't wait to see how this *deus ex machina* works out. Somehow my own players never buy it... Things must be different with Sagiro...

Zaruthstran: *Deus ex machina?* No, you don't understand. The players are rescuing themselves. Dranko just cast *summon monster X*. Of course, that's too high level for him, so he cast the delayed version... from a potion.

RangerWickett: It took me about a minute of thinking to figure out just what you meant by 'casting it with a potion.' You, sir, have inspired the article I will write for next year's "Portable Hole Full of Beer."

Fade: No, Dranko cast it himself. That is to say, after becoming high enough level to cast it, and using the Eyes to 'travel nowhere' and send the effect of the spell back in time.

Nail: LOL! See, that's why I read this Story Hour: just to see how this sort of thing can be pulled off convincingly... or should I say "pulled out"?

Sagiro: Don't get too excited about this. What follows really is a *deus ex machina* on my part; I never expected the party would escape this trap on their own. As my players correctly noted afterward, this was a short "cut-scene" designed to give them a couple of moments of panic, and to show the scary divinatory powers of the Black Circle.

I guess it also taught the moral lesson of "Don't piss off the locals," as you'll see when I write the next post...

RangerWickett: Or in Dranko's case, piss at the locals.

Rumble in the Jungle

Run #144 - ?March, 2003

There comes the sound of a large object crashing through tree branches, and a large boulder lands in the midst of the assembled forces with a loud thud. This elicits some chaos in the ranks.

While the man continues to chant, his female counterpart gives him a venomous "I told you so" glare before shouting new orders. She runs back toward the far edge of the clearing, and the Company hear the sounds of even more soldiers than they can see in the torchlight. The woman leads a dozen or so others into the jungle, toward the sound of the roar.

A second boulder soars over the heads of the Company in the trap; crossbowmen scatter away before regrouping. The Black Circle caster keeps up his chanting, though his eyes are darting nervously. The heat has continued to rise inside the trap; sweat is dripping down the party's faces. Ernie thinks that in a few more seconds he will start baking alive in his plate mail.

A third boulder crashes through the trees and comes whistling toward them. It strikes one of the squatting black statues that surround the circle trap, smashing it into fragments. Inside the trap a harmless red light flashes and fades; the air quickly cools. A suppressed *telepathic bond* between several party members springs back to life. Step, his sword drawn, pokes it forward through the circle's edge. No force wall stops it. "We're in business," he says.

The battle that follows is fantastically chaotic, even by the established standards of such things. Morningstar opens up with a *flame strike* on the head of the Black Circle leader, which leaves him smoking but not as damaged as she'd hoped. Grey Wolf and Dranko activate *improved invisibility* from magic items. Kay fires off arrows at the leader, after which Step and Grey Wolf charge forward at him. The shocked Black Circle leader, now bleeding from several wounds, takes a step back, casts a spell, and flies straight up. Aravis chugs a *potion of flying* and gives chase.

A hail of arrows pelts the Company, most pinging off armor but many finding their marks. Ernie casts *castigate* and gives the nearest cluster of bowmen a magical tongue-lashing. "LOOK AT WHAT YOU'RE DOING! SERVING AN ICKY EVIL GOD, FIRING ARROWS AT GOOD PEOPLE! YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELVES!" The archers cringe in pain, most of them deafened. All of them look sheepish.

Snokas moves out to engage the mass of enemy soldiery. He finds himself in melee with one of the fellows wielding dual rapiers. Before Snokas knows what's happening, he's bleeding from three deep cuts. His own weapons didn't strike once. His foe smiles knowingly.

Dranko charges invisibly out into the ranks, hoping to take out one of the large demonic-looking creatures in the back. He snaps his whip and the creature bellows with rage. It shifts its bulky form around to face in Dranko's direction. It cannot see the half-orc, but it cocks its head carefully. Is it listening for him? Smelling? Using some other beastly sense? Somehow it pinpoints him, but instead of attacking with its enormous lobster-like claws, it folds its arms and glares in Dranko's direction. Dranko feels a cold shudder go through his body, and a bit of his life force drains away.

The roaring of some huge beast continues out in the jungle. It's clearly speech of some kind, though not in a language anyone in the Company knows. Whatever it is, it sounds angry.

The Black Circle leader blasts the flying Aravis with an Empowered *acid bolt*, before flying off into the darkness. Aravis considers giving chase, but instead directs a sonic *chain lightning* down into the melee. Many enemy combatants are blasted.

The chaos increases, and the battle slowly turns against the Company. On the one hand, the good guys do pretty well against the enemy rank and file. Step, Flicker and Kay are more than a match for the soldiers armed with scimitars; Grey Wolf takes flight and pelts the archers with *fireballs* and *lightning bolts*. Kibi casts a *confusion* which has a number of the bad guys attacking each other or wandering around aimlessly. Then he follows it up with a *fireball* targeting another group of enemies. Aravis flies down beneath the trees at the edge of the clearing and casts a *fireball* of his own into the melee. Dranko manages to evade the friendly fire while his monstrous adversary does not, and he finishes off his foe with his whip. Morningstar has deterred attackers with a *chill shield* that's dealt out some serious damage on its own.

But the fighters with the rapiers are exceedingly skillful, with an uncanny ability to inflict critical wounds. A handful of surviving archers continue to whittle away at the Company. Morningstar and Ernie are kept busy applying healing, but the injuries to their friends are piling up faster than they can deal with.

It gets worse. Out from the jungle steps an enormous giant, eighteen feet tall, wielding a frighteningly large morningstar. It's shouting with rage. Kibi activates his *ioun stone of tongues* to hear what it's saying: "...teach you to invade my jungle, setting fires and chopping wood from living trees! I'll smear you all into paste! I'll pulverize you! I'll crush you to powder! I'll..." Kibi gets the idea. And Step gets the giant's morningstar, right in the chest. **WHOOOOF!** He goes reeling backward.

"Hey, Mr. Giant!" calls Kibi. "We don't want to hurt you or your jungle! We're not with those other people!"

"Liar!" shouts the giant. "Didn't I just watch you throw magical fire around? You little people are all in league... and you'll all get what you deserve... a pounding!" Oh, well.

Then it gets even worse! Aravis, crouching behind a tree at the edge of the clearing, and just having healed some of his wounds with a potion, is struck in the back by a *searing light* from inside the jungle. He wheels around and thinks he catches a glimpse of someone ducking behind a tree some fifty feet away. He can't see very well; the only light is the ambient glow from the torches still burning out in the clearing. Kay, Grey Wolf and Step rush over to Aravis to administer aid. Aravis chugs another healing potion, clinging to life.

A hurried consensus is reached over the *telepathic bond*. Things were grim enough before the giant showed up and (presumably) the female Black Circle cleric came back. Now it's time to flee! Ernie shouts "Come to the center!" in Charagan Common before casting *obscuring mist*. Most of the Company (and a few enemies) are enveloped in thick magical fog. Morningstar's intent is to cast a pair of *wind walk* spells to allow a speedy evacuation, covered by the mist. But the four over by Aravis are unable to join the others; from the jungle comes a *command* in Kivian Common: "Sleep!" Aravis and Step drop into a deep slumber.

“**Hide from me, will you?**” bellows the giant. The Company huddled in the mist hear the sound of the giant’s weapon slamming into the ground about fifteen feet away, accompanied by the dying scream of an enemy soldier.

“We’ve got to carry them out of here,” says Grey Wolf. “Kay, you get Aravis, and I’ll carry Step. Edghar, Ernie’s got the right idea. Covering fog, please.” Grey Wolf’s monkey familiar grabs the *horn of fog* from his master’s belt, carried for just such an emergency as this. He blows on it, sounding a low foghorn-like note and filling the air with mist.

Meet back at the hut, thinks Morningstar over the *telepathic bond*. She casts her *wind walks*, and the majority of the party leave the scene at top speed. As the other group gets set to fly away, the Black Circle leader reveals himself nearby by casting a last Empowered *acid bolt* in their direction, into the expanding fog cloud. It just misses Kay and Aravis but sears the flesh of Step and Grey Wolf.

“God damn it!” cries Grey Wolf. “We’re leaving already!” They fly up, out of the fog and through the treetops, into the night sky. Below them they see the towering jungle giant lifting its morningstar from the flattened corpse of the second demonic-looking monster. It turns on the mage who had just cast the *acid bolt* and lets out a furious shriek.

And that’s the last they see of their Black Circle foes. The Company have escaped the trap. But as they fly away, they hear the sound of the Black Circle mage shouting after them, panic in his voice: “You don’t understand! You must not be allowed to live! The universe cannot abide your presence!”

KidCthulhu: Yeah, yeah. Universe cannot abide our presence. Stupid universe. Doesn’t send a warning letter, no “You’re going to be cut off if you don’t become more biddable” warning. Just right out of the gate with the not abiding.

Sometimes it doesn’t pay to strap on the plate mail in the morning.

Zaruthstran: So, what did this mage expect? *Dranko*: “He’s right! Quick, everyone – back to the circle so we can be killed!”

Evil henchmen are silly.

Tallarn: Fantastic stuff! Sounds like one big complicated battle. Do you guys use battlemats for this sort of thing?

thatdarncat: [Ernie casts *castigate*...] Where would I find this wonderful spell? It doesn’t appear to be in the PHB.

coyote6: *Castigate* is, IIRC, in *Defenders of the Faith* and *Oriental Adventures*; I don’t recall if the two versions are the same or not.

nemmerle: I love the very idea of castigating someone and deafening them and causing them damage – as the very weight of your words hammered on them. It is a wonderful image – which for me always makes for a great spell...

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again – this Story Hour is my favorite superhero Story Hour! It is just a different world but they are the Avengers of that world... Your game sounds just so god-damned fun!

KidCthulhu: *Castigate* is indeed in DotF. When I read it, I knew I just had to have it for Ernie. Stern little lectures that actually do something! This is the first time he’s cast it. It’s also a first for *obscuring mist* which I’d been carrying for years and never used. Really proved its usefulness that day, though.

Fade: Ernie seems to have a lot in common with the character of Piffany (*Nodwick* [<http://www.nodwick.com>]).

KidCthulhu: I think Ernie and Piffany actually developed as a parallel evolution. I started playing Ernie about seven years ago, just about the time *Nodwick* was starting. So neither is influenced by the other, but they are very similar. Ernie’s language is a little saltier, thanks to many years’ proximity to Dranko. He’ll actually use an occasional bad word. But he feels guilty afterwards.

QR 80

Even beneath a waxing gibbous moon, one patch of jungle looks very much like another from the air. The flying members of the Company recall the general direction and distance to the mysterious hut, but an hour of criss-crossing the area reveals nothing but a continuous thick canopy of trees.

Tired and wounded, and deciding that the hut housing the gateway to Zhamir must not exist in this reality, the party settle into a small sort-of clearing with enough space for a *secure shelter*. They pile inside and set about healing their many wounds. Morningstar casts *restoration* to cure Dranko’s *enervated* state.

“That was frikkin’ embarrassing!” cries the half-orc. “We fled for our lives!”

“Which we still have,” points out Flicker.

“I say tomorrow we hunt that Gods-damned Black Circle mage,” Dranko grumbles. “Hey, can we *scry* him now?”

“My *secure shelters* have few amenities, and a large expensive mirror isn’t one of them,” points out Aravis.

Grey Wolf sends Edghar out into the jungle to scout around. *Let us know if you spot anyone approaching*, instructs Grey Wolf. *Especially our recent attackers. Or jungle giants*. The monkey scampers off, happy to be back in its native habitat.

While Ernie prepares a meal, Morningstar sits silently on her bunk, cogitating. “I’ve an idea,” she says suddenly, looking up at the group. “An Ellish spell I’ve never uttered, but which could prove useful right now. Not to mention satisfying.”

The rest of the party look at her expectantly. "Nightmare," she says. "I can give that Black Circle guy a nightmare so bad, he won't be able to learn new spells tomorrow."

It's a popular plan. After spending the fifteen minutes to prepare it, Morningstar drops into a trance. Her mind reaches out to locate her prey, but she finds him still awake. She can wait. He'll go to sleep eventually, and when he does...

The others watch over Morningstar's body and munch Ernie's waybread while Step stands guard at the door. An hour goes by. "I hope he goes to sleep soon, wherever he is," whispers Flicker. "Morningstar's going to be really hungry."

The air in the center of the *shelter* starts to shimmer and warp, as if seen through a curtain of intense heat. A low throbbing hum emanates from it. "That's some spell," remarks Kay.

"Morningstar didn't say anything about the air going wonky," points out Dranko. "I hope this is normal."

The strange effect continues for a few moments. Then Morningstar's eyes pop open, and she utters some strange syllables while making clawing gestures in front of her. "It's done," she says with satisfaction. "I don't know if it worked, but if it did, he's going to be awfully unhappy in the morning." She looks up, startled. "What's that?" she asks, pointing at the twisting air.

"You don't know?" asks Kibi.

"Everyone out!" cries Grey Wolf. And to Edgar: *Get back here right away!* The Company scramble out of the *secure shelter*, weapons drawn, scanning the dark jungle for attackers.

Nothing happens. They can hear the humming continue from inside the *shelter* for another fifteen minutes before it stops abruptly. Dranko peeks inside and sees that the shimmering effect has also stopped.

"What do you think that was?" he asks, looking at Aravis.

"I've never seen anything like it," Aravis admits. Kibi and Grey Wolf also shake their heads.

"Maybe some kind of *scrying*?" guesses Kibi. "They could have detected your *nightmare*, Morningstar."

"I don't know how," says the priestess of Ell. "Until the target goes to sleep, they shouldn't detect anything. And afterward... well, they're asleep."

"Not much we can do about it," grumbles Grey Wolf. *Edgar? You spot anything?*

Nothing interesting, says the monkey.

They sleep uneasily.



Early the next day, a team of *wind walkers* – Flicker, Dranko, Kay and Grey Wolf – return to the scene of the previous night's crime. There are many signs of the battle – carrion birds feasting on corpses; scorch marks left by energies variously acidic, electrical and fiery; and huge indentations in the grass left by the jungle giant's morningstar. The stone trap circle is still there, but the undamaged statues have been removed. After grabbing the obligatory souvenir (a fragment of the smashed statue), Dranko flies into the air and spirals outward from the clearing, looking for smoke from a cook fire or birds startled out of the trees by intruding humans. While Dranko scouts the air, Kay scouts the ground for tracks. After a thorough examination of all tracks leaving the clearing she concludes that all the surviving Black Circle types probably escaped through the air. Dranko's search doesn't turn up anything, and the scouting group returns to the others without any leads.

The Company sit outside in the jungle discussing their travel options. Next on the agenda is a thousand-mile journey to the northeast, where their old map-scrap indicates a region called "Surgoil." It is there that they expect to find Het Branoi and a third Eye of Moirel, with which they can "travel nowhere" and thus unmake the world. How they intend to find an invisible tower in a barren expanse of hundreds of miles – that's a problem for another day. For now, talk turns to the merits of *wind walk* and *phantom steeds*, and how the Company can most quickly make the trip.

Abruptly the air in their midst starts to ripple again, while a low humming sounds from the disturbance. As before, the party leap to their collective feet, grabbing weapons and looking for an assailant. No threats are evident. Ernie, though, feels a warmth growing by his hip. The Wilburforce Circlet hanging on his belt is glowing slightly and emanating heat! Without knowing exactly why, he snaps it on around his waist.

Kibi! says Scree in alarm. *Something's... uh... I seem to be moving. Oop... here I go!* The earth elemental familiar rolls along the ground to assemble at Ernie's feet.

Scree? asks Kibi over their shared mind-link. *What's happening?*

I think it's the Eyes of Moirel, says Scree. *They're interested in Ernie's belt. They want a closer look.*

Why?

They're not very communicative, says Scree gloomily.

For two full minutes, Scree (and presumably the Eyes within his body) stands before Ernie, watching him. Ernie finds this extremely disquieting but he doesn't dare move. Nearby, the air continues to warble and thrum. Then the disturbance ends and Scree regains control of his body.

Are you all right? asks Kibi.

Fine, says Scree. *It's weird, being walked around like that, but the Eyes don't seem to be causing me any harm.*

They'd better not, says Kibi.

"Does Scree know what's going on?" asks Ernie.

"Sorry. The Eyes just use him to move around. They don't confide in him."

"I guess my belt – my *talisman of stability* – is connected with that weird shimmering," says Ernie. "I wish I knew how."

StevenAC: When did the Eyes of Moirel take up residence inside Scree? That came as a surprise to me. I remember them shining in Kibi's hands, just before the world changed, but nothing about them after that.

Sagiro: I went back to find the passage you missed about the Eyes, and discovered to my shame that I never wrote it! So, for you and all other readers, what happened was: when the Company decided to leave Pyke Vale and head to the jungle, they wanted to take the Eyes with them. Kibi asked them (verbally) if they wanted him to carry them. In response they rolled out of their closet and hopped into Scree's body. Scree was startled at first, and crepted out as you might expect. But it wasn't painful or uncomfortable and he soon got used to it.

QR SO

There's just one problem with *wind walking* everyone and flying straight to Branoi at sixty miles per hour; there's one person too many. Morningstar can only turn nine of the ten of them windy each day. The solution to that problem is proposed by Aravis; he'll *polymorph* himself into a large, fast-flying dragon. Pewter can cling to his back during flight. It will slow the group down, since even a dragon can't fly as fast as a *wind walker*, but it's the best plan that doesn't involve splitting up the party for long periods of time.

Soon the Company are soaring over the jungle at 35 mph. It takes a few minutes for Pewter to overcome his terror at riding so high on dragon-back, but he can dig his claws into Aravis's scaly back as deeply as he needs to. The *wind walkers* match speeds with the dragon. Below them, the jungle speeds by.

Less than four hours later the jungle comes to an end, giving way to a bucolic countryside stretching northward to the foot of the mountains. They see small huts, some isolated farmhouses and others clustered in little villages, spread out across the rolling grasslands. While Aravis stays high to avoid causing a panic, the *wind walkers* fly lower to investigate.

What they see looks at first like the Yuja, the peaceful race of gnomes they encountered immediately following their adventures in the ogre-infested mountains. The creatures that live in the straw huts look very similar to the Yuja. But these all carry spears, and their faces are covered in colorful war paint. It seems as though there are several tribes of these gnomes, each with its own territory and colors.

Up ahead there seems to be a commotion out in a field. A battle? Ernie cringes at the thought that the kindly Yuja from his own reality have ended up a violent race at war with itself in this one. To his relief, what the *wind walkers* see is a hunting party that has surrounded a huge beast. Their prey is something like a cross between a lion and a mammoth. A dozen spears already protrude from its flanks. Twenty gnomes surround it, each with a quiver of hunting spears on his back. Three particularly fast and nimble of the gnomes are dressed in bright colors; their job seems to be to distract the beast from the spear hurlers while the hunters bring it down.

The Company's curiosity about the gnomish people is not greater than their desire to make the best possible speed toward Branoi. After over half a day of flying Aravis is exhausted, but they continue on for another hour, by which time the last straw hut is far behind them. Aravis spots a clear field and soars down to land.

The only problem being, he has no idea *how* to land. The only time he has ever seen a dragon go from air to ground was when the one he was fighting was killed in mid-air. Pewter notices something's amiss as Aravis is still some two hundred feet in the

air. *Er... boss? We're coming in awfully fast, don't you think? Should we... boss? BOSS?? Watch out! Pull up! Straighten out! Aaaaaah!*

Pewter bails at the last minute, leaping off Aravis's back and rolling through the tall grass in a ball of gray fur. Seconds later Aravis crashes into the ground, skidding across the field and leaving a furrow of torn earth and a few dislodged scales. He ends up on his back, sheepishly looking up at the descending *wind walkers*. He hopes that dragons don't bruise easily.

OR SO

"I think I know what I did wrong," Aravis says, chewing on one of Ernie's travel cakes. "My next landing should be smoother." He has changed back to human form and is sitting up against the outside of his latest *secure shelter*. The wizard is exhausted. "I doubt I'll be able to fly that long for many more days," he adds. "I need more rest breaks."

"And more practice," says Flicker, smirking. Aravis shoots him a dirty look.

"It will slow us down even more," points out Morningstar.

"I can turn into a dragon too," says Kibi. "Halfway through the day he can turn back into a human and ride on my back the rest of the way."

Kibi! No! Scree is horrified.

I know, says Kibi sympathetically, but it would be for the good of the group. You'll be in your familiar pocket as usual. You'll never even know.

I suppose, says Scree gloomily.

"Look out!" shouts Step. The air in the midst of the party is shimmering again. Ernie feels the golden belt growing warm again; he puts it on.

"It has to be someone *scrying* on us," says Grey Wolf. "It keeps happening right where we are."

"Not necessarily," says Ernie. "It could be happening all over the place, but we're only seeing the one nearby."

Kibi casts *detect magic*, and not surprisingly the effect is magical, but he cannot discern the type.

A black sphere the size of a fist appears in the center of the coruscating air. A few seconds later there is a short hissing sound and the black ball goes shooting off into the air, upward and somewhat eastward. It vanishes into the falling dusk.

"What do you suppose that was?" asks Morningstar. No one has an answer.

Not again! cries Scree. His body moves without his own will, rolling over to stand before Ernie.

"Kibi? This is really creeping me out," says the halfling.

That makes two of us, says Scree. And then, in a somewhat different voice, the earth elemental says to Kibi:

DON'T TAKE IT OFF. WE'RE WORKING ON THE PROBLEM.

Kibi looks shaken. "Ernie, Scree says to keep the belt on. I think it's the Eyes of Moirel talking, but they're using Scree's voice. They say they're 'working on the problem.'"

"What problem?" asks Ernie, his voice shrill.

Scree, can they explain any more?

I don't know how to ask them.

The Eyes have nothing more to say at the moment, and some thirty seconds later the air stops moving.

"I hope it's not a *serious* problem," mutters Grey Wolf.

OR SO

In the middle of the night, Aravis wakes from his bunk inside the *shelter*. *It's happening again, boss*, says Pewter.

Aravis sits up and sees that the air is pulsing in the middle of the hut. The other members of the Company are still sleeping soundly around him. Not wanting to wake them over something that's so far proved a harmless curiosity, he watches intently for a few minutes. Before long, a dark spot appears as it did the previous day.

With a loud hissing sound, louder than the first time, the black ball separates into a dozen or more copies of itself, all of which go shooting off in random directions. Grey Wolf is awoken by the horrible pain attendant to a chunk of his shoulder being sheared away by the touch of one of these spheres. Others continue straight through the walls and ceiling of the *shelter*, leaving clean holes behind. Grey Wolf screams in pain, and that wakes everyone else up in a hurry.

"Get out! Out!" shouts Aravis. The *shelter* is evacuated in short order. The Eyes of Moirel walk Scree over to stand before Ernie again. Morningstar heals Grey Wolf's mutilated shoulder.

Ernie feels the belt grow extremely warm around his waist. In the voice that isn't really his, Scree speaks to Kibi:

WE HAVE THE SITUATION UNDER CONTROL. YOUR PRESENCE IS NOT COMPATIBLE WITH REALITY AND THE FABRIC OF SPACE-TIME WAS BEGINNING TO UNRAVEL IN YOUR VICINITY. THINGS SHOULD NOW BE MORE STABLE. TELL ERNEST THAT HE SHOULD NOT REMOVE THE BELT IF POSSIBLE, AND ONLY FOR VERY SHORT PERIODS OF TIME IF NECESSARY. THE REST OF YOU SHOULD STAY CLOSE TO THE BELT – NO MORE THAN 200 TO 300 FEET DISTANCE.

Kibi relays the Eyes' warning to the rest of the Company. "If things are under control, I'm going back to bed," says Flicker.

The party go back into the hut and discover it riddled with holes. "It's *Leomund's strainer*," says Ernie, giggling.

"It's only a few holes," says Aravis.

"Then how about *Leomund's mostly secure shelter*?" suggests Grey Wolf.

"Or *Leomund's holey shelter*?" adds Morningstar.

"Enough with the shelter jokes!" cries Aravis. "If you want, you can sleep outside!"

¤¤

The next day's flight northward is largely uneventful. The mountains loom closer and closer as the sun rises to its noonday height. The air is cold and fresh.

Hey boss, says Pewter, clinging to the dragon's shoulder. *Can you see something glinting down in the mountains ahead?*

Yeah, says Aravis. *What do you think it is?*

Might be a building?

Soon the rest of the Company can see what Pewter has spied. It's not just a building. As they rise higher, higher even than the peaks of the Stoneguard Mountains, the party see that the mountains are covered with stone edifices. Towers, walls, houses, fortresses and palaces cover the mountain ridges as far as the eye can see. Small creatures move around among them, tiny dots from the Company's viewpoint. But Kibi doesn't need to see them to know what they are. The bold stone architecture can only have been built by dwarves.

Kibi's heart at once both sinks and is uplifted. In their own universe, the dwarves here were driven out by ogres and enslaved by men. Here, the Empire of Great Gurund flourishes at its very height. And if Kibi and his friends are successful in their quest, it will be as if it never was.

nemmerle: And the master Rat Bastard strikes again...

Lord Pendragon: This is really great. It shows a lot of thought on Sagiro's part (as if that weren't already apparent) and adds to the moral complexity of what the Company is doing. To many, they're saving the world. But to others, they'll be destroying it.

KidCthulhu: And isn't that just the kicker. As if we needed another reminder of how knee-deep in suck we are.

Fade: So now you can add 'the fabric of space-time' to the list of 'things that are trying to kill us.'

Finding the Path

Run #145 – ?March, 2003

Kibi, of course, wants to descend for a closer look. The *wind walkers* get together for a conference while Aravis spirals high above. "I don't see what we get out of stopping," says Morningstar.

"A break?" suggests Flicker. "A meal with the good guys for a change?"

"We don't know they're the good guys in this reality," points out Grey Wolf.

"It's a moot point," says Dranko. "Unless you want to have Aravis just plop down on one of those battlements. Remember, the Eyes said we shouldn't separate by more than a few hundred feet. Those dwarves would probably start shooting at a dragon."

There's a bit more debate, but the group decision is to avoid the dwarven empire if possible. The Company settle into a rocky valley, hidden from sight of the dwarfish habitations. A quick search reveals some small holes in the ground, and tracks made by (Kay thinks) lizards the size of dogs.

Late at night, while most of the party sleep, Kay hears a strange sound out in the darkness. It sounds like... electricity? It's followed by the sound of a mountain cat scampering away up a rocky slope.

¤¤

When she investigates in the morning, her conclusion is that a few lizards must have scared off a large lynx-like animal. "Lightning lizards, I think," says Kay. "We're near to where we encountered them in our own reality." She unconsciously rubs her sternum, where a bevy of such lizards had blasted her.

"We don't bother them, they don't bother us," says Aravis.

You're about to turn into a dragon, says Pewter. You could just eat them.

¤¤

By mid-day the Company have left the mountains behind and are flying northeast over the green flood plains east of Kivia's Eternal River. The air is cool – probably thirty degrees cooler than in the hot climate of the jungle a thousand miles south. Aravis has just about reached his point of exhaustion so, wanting to make good speed, they land for Kibi to take his first turn as dragon. *Scree, I'll be sure to...* says Kibi.

I don't want to know about it, interrupts Scree. Just let me know when you're back on land, in proper dwarfish form. Aravis climbs onto Kibi's back and the others help rig a light rope harness to give him something to hold on to.

A few hours later, having passed over miles of uninhabited wilderness, Kibi glides down for a landing. He's gotten some instruction from Aravis and is full of confidence.

Boss?

Yes, Pewter?

I don't mean to sound alarmist, but he's making the same mistake that you did the first time. We're coming in too fast.

Nonsense, says Aravis. Kibi is an intelligent wizard. We'll be fine.

We should be ready to bail, says Pewter.

I have complete faith in my fellow mage, Aravis sniffs.

Suit yourself, says Pewter. I have complete faith that I'm going to land on my feet when I... ABANDON DRAGON!!

Pewter leaps off and tumbles through the grass. Aravis has just enough time to tighten his grip on the ropes when Kibi crash-lands, rolling over several times before coming to a skidding halt. Fortunately for Aravis, he loses his hold and is thrown free of the out-of-control dragon before getting squashed. Pewter runs over to make sure his master is OK. *Yes, Pewter, I'm fine. Ow. Mostly.*

Boss, I told...

Yes, you did.

Next time...

Yes, I will.

¤¤

It is two days later, and below the Company the desolation of northeastern Kivia rushes by. It's cold enough that the Company are flying lower than they have been; Kibi (taking his turn as the dragon) flies a couple hundred feet higher than the rest to avoid alerting anything on the ground. It's been hundreds of miles since the last sign of intelligent life, and those were some ancient ruins discovered the previous day. But now, up ahead, there is something interesting: a farmhouse on the tundra.

As they draw near to it, they see that it's huge. Not huge in a multiple-barns or a dozen-rooms kind of way, but huge in a scaled-up, giants-live-here kind of way. The stone wall pen adjacent to the house holds a half dozen giant-sized cows.

Destil: Pewter can talk, now? I remember the party used speak with animals in order for him to relay information between Aravis (in the Maze) and themselves at one point, so is this new?

Not that I'm complaining. I've always liked Pewter. That line had me laughing for a while.

Sagiro: Naw... That's just Pewter and Aravis 'talking' over their standard mage-and-familiar mind-link. Sorry for the confusion.

Over the next couple of hours, the Company realize that the entire region is populated with giants. There are more isolated farmhouses, but most of the giants live in small walled villages. Well, OK, they're *enormous* walled villages, but from a giant's point of view they must be quite modest. The giants themselves are about 15 feet tall and dressed in warm furs. Most of them carry enormous clubs.

There's a strange pattern to the settlements. There will be a few giantish villages connected by crude footpaths, and then several miles of uninhabited wilderness. Beyond that, more connected settlements. The uninhabited parts don't seem any different from the populated areas – flat, dusted with snow, with occasional patches of scrubby growth. Clusters of unowned cows roam the fields looking for bits of grass to eat.

In one of these unsettled areas the *wind walkers* note a gruesome sight – several bloody cow carcasses lying at the foot of a small low hill. “I want to check that out,” says Kay. “It might give us a clue about why this area doesn’t have any giants in it.”

The group land a few dozen feet away from the dead cows. Kay and Dranko go solid. Kibi lands (gracefully, even!) and Aravis dismounts. Kay cautiously approaches the carcasses.

The nearest one quivers. Kay stops. From a dozen feet away it looks like something has bored holes through the body of the cow. Dark blood is splattered around the nearby rocks.

Something pokes its head up out of the animal’s remains. It’s a red animal, looking like a cross between a weasel and a fox. The local giants would call it a blood fox, but Kay has never seen anything quite like it before. She casts *speak with animals*. “Hello. What are...”

“Hungry! Fresh food!” chatters the creature. Kay has just enough time to wonder how a creature that small, that seems to have recently devoured most of a cow half the size of an elephant, could still be hungry. Then the blood fox springs on her.

It’s the fastest living thing she has ever seen. There is a blur of red, and in less than a second the creature has latched its jaws onto the flesh below her left shoulder. Four claws grip her body while razor-sharp teeth tear into her flesh. She cries out in pain and shock, but has enough presence of mind to draw her dagger and stab at its body.

It seems like it should be an easy enough target to hit, given that it’s mostly stationary and attached to the side of her torso. But just as the point of the dagger grazes its red fur, the sinuous body *bends* and snakes to the side, and it’s all Kay can do not to follow through and stab herself. The claws never move, and the creature continues to chew.

Horrified, Aravis decides to take no chances. He fires off a *chain lightning* (albeit with only the one target) at the strange weaselly creature. **CRACK! BOOM!** And the animal is unharmed, having unlatched its rear claws just long enough to swing its body out of harm’s way. A half second later it has fully latched on again.

The others realize that Kay’s life is in real danger from this creature, and start to de-mist. To Kay’s horror, the beast is now burrowing its way down the side of her body; already its head and shoulder have disappeared inside the hole it’s carving for itself. The left side of her body has gone numb, and she feels faint. Desperately she stabs again with her dagger, but the animal effortlessly twists out of the way.

Dranko watches in shock, wondering what he can do to help. He could cast healing spells on Kay, but that would just serve as a delaying action; he can’t possibly heal her faster than this... thing... is eating her alive. Not knowing what else to do he takes out his *decanter of endless water*, takes aim, and shouts, “Geyser!” The stream of water knocks Kay back a few feet, but does not deter the creature in the slightest. Kibi is also not sure what to do, but there’s surely no help he can offer as a dragon. He changes back into his natural dwarven shape.

Kay feels her consciousness starting to slip away. The creature has now burrowed from her shoulder to her waist; her skin bulges grotesquely, splitting open in places. In another few seconds she will be dead, just like the cows. With nothing else to do, she steadies the dagger as best as she can, and stabs *through her own body*, into the body of the beast where Kay’s own torso prevents it from twisting out of the way. With pain and satisfaction she feels the dagger sink into the creature. *At least I’ll take you with me, you son of a...*

In a split second it has leapt fully out of Kay’s body, landing several feet away and chattering angrily. The pain is too much; Kay falls over in a faint, blood pouring out of her. The red furry beast flees across the tundra, and Aravis sends a parting *fireball* after it, which it smoothly dodges.

Dranko rushes over to apply healing to Kay. A few seconds later, the rest of the party solidify and crowd around. “What in Delioch’s name *was* that?” wonders Dranko out loud.

“Fast,” says Grey Wolf.

“Supernaturally fast,” says Aravis.

“Nothing would just evolve that way, out here,” says Kay weakly.

“But now we know why certain areas are uninhabited,” says Kibi.

The party opt to sleep in *rope tricks* that night.



Dranko wakes up the next morning on the floor of the *rope trick* looking idly at his hand. Specifically, the hand with the *ring of djinni summoning* on it. He slaps his forehead. “You know,” he says to the others waking up beside him, “we’ve had the ability to *wind walk* everyone this whole time. The djinni can do it!”

“That will be useful today,” says Morningstar. “I’m thinking that it’s time we started working on the problem of just where Het Branoi is. That means *find the path* spells, and no *wind walks* for me.”

From prior experience the Company know that Het Branoi is shielded from direct divinations – not surprising, given the Black Circle’s affinity for Divination as a school. The morning and early afternoon are spent thinking of ways to fool the tower’s protections. Dranko hits upon the idea that if there’s a tower in the wilderness full of Black Circle mages and priests, they’ve got to have somewhere *outside* the tower to dispose of their wastes. Eventually they settle on two wordings to try.

Morningstar casts *find the path*, seeking “*the waste dump nearest to Het Branoi*.” She feels a stirring in her mind as the magic reaches out... and is abruptly cut off, by... something. “Nope,” she reports, shaking her head. “It could be that the mention of Het Branoi by name triggers the defense, even though I wasn’t targeting it directly.”

She tries again. She seeks “*the waste dump nearest to the closest invisible tower*.” Again the divinatory magic is pinched off near the source. “Damn.”

Kibi casts *nondetection* on Morningstar right away to foil any possible counter-scyring the Black Circle might attempt.

The party members look at each other gloomily. “We can still make some distance today,” says Aravis. “If nothing else, we might as well keep heading toward where ‘Branoi’ is marked on our map.”

“I don’t think the genie can *wind walk* all of us, but it will save us some *fly* spells,” says Dranko. He concentrates on his ring and blue smoke starts to billow out from it. A few seconds later, the impressive Al Tarqoz floats before them.

He’s eating a chicken leg.

He looks around, and his expression curdles. “Ah,” he says to Dranko, his voice booming and yet aggrieved. “Your timing is exquisite. With your permission, oh most generous master, may I finish my meal? It will only be a moment.”

“Er... yeah,” says Dranko. They watch Al Tarqoz finish his meat and drop the bone to the tundra.

“Now, how may I serve my benevolent master?”

LightPhoenix: Is there any chance we might be able to see the stats of the blood fox...? I’m willing to bet it’s just a fox or something with a natural *haste* effect, but I want to know for sure.

Sagiro: Sure... here it is!

Laboratory-spawned superweapon? Crazed wizard’s experiment gone horribly awry? Refugee from a distant plane? Could be all three!

As you’ll note, this creature doesn’t follow some of the “official” rules of monster creation. Har har. Also, I make no guarantees that the math is exactly right, even where I mean it to be. But this should give you an idea...

BLOOD FOX

Tiny Magical Beast

Hit Dice: 2d10+4 (15 hp)

Initiative: +19 (Dex)

Speed: 40 ft.

AC: 37 (+2 size, +19 Dex, +6 natural)

Attacks: 4 claws +21, bite +19

Damage: claws 1d2+2, bite 8d6+2

Face/Reach: 5 ft. by 5 ft./5 ft.

Special Attacks: Improved grab

Special Qualities: Improved evasion, Darkvision 60 ft.

Saving Throws: Fort +5, Ref +22, Will +0

Abilities: Str 14, Dex 48, Con 14, Int 4, Wis 10, Cha 9

Skills and Feats: Hide +20, Move Silently +20, Weapon Finesse (bite), Weapon Finesse (claws), Multiattack

COMBAT

Improved Grab (Ex): If a blood fox hits with a bite, it makes an opposed grapple check at +31 (+19 for BAB, +2 for STR, and a supernatural bonus of +10). If it latches on, it does an automatic 8d6+2 damage (bite) per round thereafter as it burrows its way into the victim’s body. A blood fox may use this attack on a creature of any size category.

Any damage done to a burrowing blood fox will cause it to leap free of the victim and flee.

Caliber: The blood fox sounds nasty...

KidCthulhu: Now the blood fox was indeed a nasty, speedy little bundle of fur and ouch. But the really brilliant moment was when Aravis (the player) got home and told his wife (*Iron Chef BBQ*) of the evening’s fun.

“Why didn’t you just cast *magic missile* at it?” asked Chef, who plays a mid-level sorcerer in my game, and knows the power of MM. The sound of the collective forehead-slapping when Aravis told us this could be heard four streets away. D’oh.

Ug. Us smart gamers. Us play many years. Us forget first-level spells.

coyote6: I wondered that very thing. “Dodged a dagger and a *chain lightning*? Ooh, high AC and evasion. They’ll have to *magic missile* it.”

Fade: *Polymorph other* or other non-ray Fortitude-save spell would also work.

“You can cast *wind walk*, right?” asks Dranko.

“Of course! Many have been the times that previous masters of the ring have requested this service. I would be most pleased to cast the spell for you. I’m sure that I would have no need of it myself, after all.”

“Thanks,” says Dranko, diligently ignoring the sarcasm. “How many of us can you get?”

“Six of you. Will that suffice?”

A moment later, over half the Company are vaporous. “Will that be all, my master?” asks Al Tarqoz.

“Yes, that will be...” The genie vanishes. Dranko shouts after him: “Take the chicken bone! No littering!”

Grey Wolf looks down at the discarded bone. “Ah, the circle of life,” he comments dryly.



The next day, the party wake to find it snowing outside the *rope tricks*. Ernie prepares breakfast, shivering in the blustery morning air. A breeze blows across the tundra, kicking up little whorls of powder. While people huddle around a small fire and eat, Aravis speaks up. “I’ve been thinking. We may have already *seen* Het Branoi. Remember, in the Crosser’s Maze, when Solomea tried to trick us into thinking we had succeeded? And we asked to be teleported to Het Branoi, and we saw that tower in the distance? The Maze’s interior is fashioned partly out of reality. I’m going to try going into the Maze and see if I can find it again. That might help us find the real version, out here.”

It’s an interesting idea that unfortunately has no chance of working, as Aravis finds that he still cannot access the Maze. He slumps over with a pounding headache just for having tried. Dranko pokes him with a finger, administering a *cure minor wounds*.

They eat the rest of their breakfast in silence, all of them thinking of what to do next. Here they are, camped on the cold plains of northeastern Kivia. The only intelligent life for hundreds of miles are giants. And they’re looking for an invisible tower shielded from conventional divination magic. “Couldn’t we have looked for a needle in a haystack instead?” complains Flicker. “This is stupid. We might as well fly around in pairs with string, waiting to find the damned tower that way. That should only take us a couple of decades.”

More silence.

“Wait a minute,” says Aravis, sitting up straighter. “I can’t use the Maze, but maybe Morningstar can...”

He shares his new idea with the rest. Eyebrows shoot up all over the place. “Could work,” says Morningstar. “Let’s work on the phrasing, and then I’ll give it a try.”

A few minutes later she casts *find the path*, seeking “*the place that Solomea showed us a representation of, when we believed we were being shown the next step in our quest.*”

Aravis feels a dull twinge in his head.

And Morningstar knows the direction. She points to the southeast. “That way,” she says, smiling. “Let’s go.”



Big Monsters and Baby Monsters

Run #146 - ?April, 2003

The Company break camp and are soon flying across the snowy plains of Surgoil, Morningstar in the lead. But about half an hour later, Aravis feels another odd twinge in his head and Morningstar (independently) comes to a halt. “It’s gone,” she says, frowning. “I’m no longer sensing a direction.”

“I think the defenses of Het Branoi kicked in,” says Aravis.

“We’ve been going in a straight line all this time,” Ernie points out. “We should just keep flying.”

Kay assumes the lead position, having the best sense of direction in the group. They fly onward, high above the largely featureless landscape, still speckled with giantish farms and villages. Twenty minutes after the *find the path* spell stopped working, Morningstar informs the others that it has come back on again.

“We haven’t passed it,” says Morningstar. She adjusts Kay’s trajectory by a couple of degrees and they continue on. For another hour this pattern persists, with Morningstar’s divination blinking on and off as it clashes with the mystical defenses of Het Branoi. Eventually the spell expires on its own, but they keep going.

An hour later, they spy a particularly large giantish town ahead. Kay and Morningstar don't think it's precisely on the line indicated by the *find the path*, but it's their best lead so far. A few party members are made to be both *wind walking* and invisible. "We should be looking for places where an invisible tower might be standing," says Dranko. "Lawns, courtyards, open spaces. We'll signal over the *Rary*'s if we run into something."

He means this last part literally. Moving at top speed, half the party fly over the walls and start whipping through the giantish town, staying low and avoiding giants. They fly bodily through every likely open space they can find, hoping to smack into Het Branoi. For the duration of the *invisibility* spell they search, but come up empty. Dranko has a moment of excitement when he rounds a corner and flies into a giant's knees, but the giant merely looks around puzzled before continuing on his way.

They fly on for another hour before a second large town comes into view, and this one is directly in the path of their divination. More *invisibilities* are cast and another *wind walking* sweep is made... and this time they find something.

It's not an invisible tower, but it sure is interesting, and more than a little disturbing. There is a courtyard in the town, surrounded by buildings on all sides. In the center of that courtyard is an enormous statue. The base is a thirty foot tall, ten foot diameter stone monolith, slightly wider at the base than the top. And atop this base is an enormous stone beholder, itself fifteen feet in diameter.

The Company have seen beholders before. There was a mutilated beholder in a rare-creature zoo in Zhamir. The daughter of Ozilish's old mentor had prepared an illusionary beholder to guard her library. And Solomea in the Crosser's Maze had briefly taken on the aspect of a beholder.

They fervently hope that if there are any *real* beholders around, they aren't as big as this one!

An interior balcony twenty feet off the ground runs the entire perimeter of the courtyard. Two bored-looking giants dragging large clubs patrol this balcony, casting glances into the courtyard from time to time. Thinking that whoever is in the tower might have the means to see them, the *wind walkers* withdraw to rejoin the others flying several hundred feet above the town.

Morningstar checks out the location in *Ava Dormo*. She is surprised to find that in the Dreamscape, the courtyard is empty. No beholder statue, no secret Black Circle tower, no nothin'. But that discontinuity itself is a sign that they have stumbled across something of magical significance. The Company withdraw a couple of miles from the town and take the Divination Sink out of their *bag of holding*, to foil any attempts to locate them magically.

An hour later, Dranko and Kibi (both invisible) set out to walk back toward the city. No, they're not planning an assault. When they get within a mile of the place, Kibi casts *prying eyes* and gives his little sensors instructions to "spread out and stay hidden, scouting around the courtyard with the beholder statue. Come back in one hour to report." Off go thirteen little magical eyes.

An hour later, two of them return. Kibi holds them in his hands and absorbs their information, after which he and Dranko return to the camp. It's dark by the time they arrive.

"Eleven of my *prying eyes* were dispelled," says Kibi as the others crowd around to listen. "But the other two saw why. I think the entire courtyard area is inside a huge Divination Sink. There are four large round stones, one at each corner of the balcony. I caught a glimpse of blue light coming from inside these stones. As soon as a *prying eye* got inside the covered area it was annihilated. But two of the eyes watched from a high vantage point, up near the top of the beholder statue. I guess the Sinks don't extend up that high. They watched from there for most of the hour, and saw several of the other eyes blink out of existence.

"They also watched those two guard giants make their rounds. From so high up it was tough to figure out what they were doing, but they may have been involved in some kind of ritual. They were walking in opposite directions, and making some gestures to each other as they passed. But that's it. No one else came into the courtyard. No one walked out of the statue. The statue didn't do anything. It was... boring."

The Company talk for a few more minutes about the situation. They are collectively of the opinion that the statue *is* Het Branoi, and that there must be some secret entrance to it.

Ernie starts preparing dinner while the others wrap themselves in warm blankets against the wind. "I hope the smell of my food doesn't attract any of those fox things around here," he says.

The Company look around nervously at the thought. Then Flicker pipes up: "Say, Aravis and Kibi, if we do get attacked by a fox, couldn't you guys use *magic missile* to kill it? I mean, they're super quick and dodge everything, but you can't dodge a *magic missile*. Right?"

Everyone is quiet for a moment. Aravis stares at Flicker, which is always unnerving given the wizard's star-field eyes. The silence stretches on long enough that Flicker starts to think he's made some kind of *faux pas*. "What? It was just a sug..."

"Flicker," says Aravis. "In the years to come, feel free to remind me of this moment, in case I ever get too sure of myself. *Magic missile*. Of course that would work! It's the most obvious thing in the world! I have no idea why I didn't think of it."

"Maybe it was the sight of Kay getting eaten?" says Flicker.

"Maybe."

Don't feel bad, boss, says Pewter. *I didn't think of it either*.

Morningstar sits down next to Snokas while they eat. "Snokas, I need to talk to you about something."

"Sure. Go ahead!"

"You've probably seen by now that our group makes decisions democratically. When there's disagreement about our collective course of action, we take a vote."

"I've figured that out, yeah."

"I've noticed that every time, you've voted the same way as I have."

"Yup," agrees Snokas.

"Is that because you don't want to disagree with me?" asks Morningstar.

Snokas scratches his head. "No, I don't think so. More likely, since both of us are serving Ell, we just see most things the same way. But if you don't want to me to vote with you when it matters, I would certainly be happy to..."

"No, no!" Morningstar interrupts. "What I'm trying to tell you is, I *don't* want you to feel like you have to vote the same way I do. You're a full-fledged member of our company. You should think for yourself, and decide for yourself how you feel."

Snokas thinks for a minute. "Yeah, sure. That's fine with me. Thanks."

An hour later the Company are sleeping soundly, safe inside Aravis's *rope tricks*.



An hour after that, the Company are treated to as rude an awakening as there is; their *rope tricks* are dispelled out from under them! **Whoomph!** The party are greeted by the shock of cold night air, followed closely by the shock of falling six feet onto the snowy ground. Shaking off sleep with the efficiency of seasoned adventurers, they start to scramble for weapons. Dranko and Kibi, the only ones able to see in the dark, cast quick looks around them. Where are their attackers?

Ah. There they are. Above them. And they're...

AAAAAAAH!

Floating about thirty feet off the ground, in a wide ring around the Company, are seven miniature beholders. Each has a mottled purple round body slightly bigger than a soccer ball, with eight wiggling eyestalks protruding from the top. Each also has a large central eye, and these are looking directly down at the party.

As one, all seven close their central eyes, and the magic starts flying. Each mini-beholder fires from the same three front-facing eyestalks. That makes seven white rays of dexterity draining, seven arcing one-target *lightning bolts*, and twenty-eight *magic missiles*. The magical artillery rains down around the party, crackling and hissing. Significant quantities of damage are taken by various members of the Company.

There is almost no talk of fighting, though Kay quickly picks up her bow and slings her quiver over her shoulder.

"We've got to get out of here!" shouts Morningstar. "One more volley like that and we'll start dropping."

"Agreed!" says Dranko. "Ernie, can you give us cover?"

"On it!" answers Ernie. He casts *obscuring mist*.

“How did they find us?” wonders Flicker aloud.

“If they can see invisible people, they could have followed Dranko and me back after I cast *prying eyes*,” says Kibi.

“It doesn’t matter!” says Dranko. “But whoever’s in that statue must know that we’re here. Crap!”

“Gather up your stuff!” says Morningstar, her voice muffled by the fog. “Once we’re ready I’ll cast *wind walk* and the wizards can *teleport* us back to yesterday’s camp.”

It’s standard operating procedure for the wizards to study a safe ‘*teleport* here’ location at each night’s campsite before going to bed.

“Or maybe angry giants will save us,” says Kibi.

A few seconds later, the magical mist vanishes. The seven mini-beholders still hover above and around them, watching. All of their main eyes are open again. Kay takes aim and lets fly with an arrow; it sticks into the side of one of the bobbing creatures. The beast emits a small shriek.

“Why aren’t they attacking us?” asks Flicker, as he grabs for loose items on the ground. “Oh, hey, Morningstar, I think this is your *ioun stone*.”

“Just stuff it in your pocket.”

“They can’t attack us,” says Aravis, “because they have us in an *antimagic field*. If they drop the field to attack, the fog comes back and they can’t easily target us. It’s a stalemate.”

“Not quite,” says Kay. She shoots three more arrows, two of which find their mark. The mini-beholder drops out of the air and splats on the ground like a half-deflated volleyball.

“Either way,” says Dranko. “Keep picking stuff up.”

Hastily the Company gather their belongings. As they do, the beholders start to let out strange keening noises. “I think they’re communicating,” says Ernie.

A few seconds later, the beholders begin to shift their positions slightly, drawing in one end of the oval. One Certain Step, at the edge of the party’s cluster, is suddenly enveloped in a small fog cloud of his own. Just as it dawns on the party what the beholders are doing, the three creatures on Step’s side of the oval fire into the fog with their dexterity-draining rays and *lightning blasts*. They can’t see him, but they’ve narrowed down where he can be to a single small area. “Augh!” shouts Step, from his sliver of fog.

“Crafty little things,” says Morningstar. “They’re trying to isolate one of us outside of the anti-magic zone. But actually that’s just what we need if we want to flee. If everyone’s got their stuff, crowd into that fog, and leave enough room for me and the wizards.”

Everyone scrambles and jams themselves into the pocket of fog that’s outside the *antimagic field*. Morningstar moves into it and casts *wind walk* on as many of her friends as possible, making the total weight of the party viable for mass *teleporting*. Then Aravis and Kibi move in, reach out to make contact with everyone else, and cast *teleport*.

Just like that, they are miles away, at the encampment spot of the previous night.

“Shit!” exclaims Dranko. “I’m getting sick of fleeing from ambushes.”

“We’ve got it down to a science though,” points out Grey Wolf.

“To think,” says Ernie. “All those years I never cast *obscuring mist*, and now it’s saved our butts twice. It’s good to know we have an out.”

“We ran from baby monsters!” objects Dranko. “Baby monsters!”

“I hate to bring this up,” says Aravis, “but they found us once already, inside *rope tricks*. They could do it again. We even had the Divination Sink out. We must be cautious.” Aravis casts *Leomund’s secure shelter* and the party pile inside, bringing the Divination Sink with them.

Ernie dumps his stuff next to one of the bunks and climbs into bed. As the Company fall asleep for the second time that night, he mutters, “I like beholders better when they’re selling us chess pieces.”

StevenAC: Ambushed by baby beholders. How embarrassing. I bet if Dranko ever tells the story to anyone else, the beholders will all be the size of that statue...

How much of all the dialogue in the Story Hour posts actually comes from the players “at the table,” and how much is generated during the write-up? The recent posts have had a wonderful storytelling feel, with characterisation and dialogue more like a novel than a game session.

Sagiro: Heretofore not much of the dialogue in the Story Hour is precisely verbatim, though most of it is highly representative of what was actually said. Maybe 10% of the dialogue is actually quoted (including Dranko’s line about baby monsters) – when someone says something particularly funny or important, I write it down. Also, the sooner I write up the story after a session, the more dialogue I get right because it’s fresher in my mind. But my memory isn’t the best, alas.

I’ve made a conscious decision recently to write the Story Hour more like a story, with more dialogue, and less like a dry journal. I want it to be more fun for people to read. Other Story Hours on the board have raised the bar in this regard; I’m just trying to keep up! They are still extremely faithful to the game itself; I don’t add anything that didn’t happen, or make significant embellishments to the narrative.

The last game I ran (still a few runs away Story Hour-wise) I tried an experiment which worked pretty well: I audio-taped the game session! (I was tired of forgetting all the witty banter, and occasionally forgetting important bits, like the Eyes deciding to travel in Kibi’s familiar...) As a result, the Story Hour post for that run will contain nothing but actual dialogue, and is guaranteed to be 100% complete.

An Inconspicuous Entrance

Run #147 - ?April, 2003

The next morning, the Company prepare for an assault on the statue. The attack by the beholders is clearly a sign that the enemy – either the giants, or the Black Circle inside the tower – is on to them. The longer they wait, the more likely it is that they’ll be rediscovered, Divination Sink or no.

A plan is made and prep spells are cast: *wind walk, invisibility, fly*, and *Rary’s telepathic bond*. The wizards will *teleport* back to the well-studied location of last night’s battle, and from there they’ll breeze invisibly in toward the statue. There’s a momentary setback when Aravis’s *teleport* goes awry, leaving half the party in a similar-looking but far distant area. Fortunately, Aravis always carries a spare.

The only sign of the miniature beholders is the corpse of the one they killed. It lays on the ground, motionless and slightly collapsed. The Company spend a minute debating whether it would be worth casting *speak with dead* on the body, but decide to press ahead with their assault on the statue. Moments later the whole Company is high-flying toward the giantish city. As they approach they see several livestock enclosures on the town’s outskirts – giant cows and sheep, mostly, but one pen holds enormous giant-sized chickens!

Hey Flicker, thinks Dranko over the mind-link. *We could steal one of those for you as a mount!*

I have no desire for a riding chicken, Flicker thinks back at him.

Unseen, the Company soar high over the stone walls and settle on a rooftop near to the central plaza with the beholder statue. Morningstar is well prepared for the next stage of the plan. She comes out of *wind walk* but is still flying and invisible. She drifts above the courtyard where two giants (a different pair from the ones seen by Kibi’s *prying eyes*) are walking patrol up on the balconies. For a minute she just watches them. Twice on each circuit they meet up, walking in opposite directions. When they do, the two giants raise their hands and give each other a “high five” with varying numbers of fingers raised. Is it a game, or a secret signal? Are there Black Circle priests watching from inside the statue somehow?

There are spots along the balconies where the four Divination Sinks probably don’t cover. When the two giants are approaching one of these she swoops down and casts three Silent *thought captures*.

The first reveals a general feeling of boredom. *That’s about to change*, thinks Morningstar to herself.

The second reveals a specific thought: *I sure can’t wait for dinner*.

The third is similar in tone; the thought is: *I can’t believe I got this crummy assignment twice in one week!*

They don’t tend to think about their job, or about the Black Circle, or about the statue, Morningstar reports over the *telepathic bond*. *It seems like they’re just grunts.*

She casts a Silent *detect thoughts* and waits for one of the giants to walk past. The creature is humming, and its thoughts match the humming. It’s a tuneless little ditty, and the giant smiles as it hums. **“Grook pak braaaag, Grook nish florg. Grook blug dekker etter snog snog plorg.”**

It sounds like the giant is making up a song! Continuing with her plan, Morningstar casts a Silent *comprehend languages* to learn just what the giant is singing. Maybe it holds a clue...

“I saw me a boulder, looking like a house. Even had a chimney and some little pebble cows. Saw me a boulder, looking like a jug. Went to take a drink, but I didn’t have a mug...” It continues like that; it’s a ballad about a giant who goes wandering and sees boulders in various shapes.

Barastrondo: Genius.

Not the giant, obviously, but the person behind him. Sagiro, if you ad-libbed this at the table, I'm going to cry a little tear of jealousy.

The giant's thoughts change as the other giant approaches. Now it's thinking: *Odd. He's going three fingers I'll bet, so I'll go two. OK, here he comes... Ready, up, and...*

The two giants slap hands. Morningstar's giant does so with two fingers raised, and says, "Odd"; the other giant has four fingers raised. The second giant laughs, and Morningstar's giant thinks: *Dang. That's four in a row I've lost! Boy, I'm hungry.*

Oh, for crying out loud, thinks Dranko upon hearing Morningstar's report. *It's time to move in and get a better look at the statue.* All of the Company who are invisible fly over to the top of the statue, congregating next to the huge stone beholder.

Wait, back off for a minute, thinks Morningstar. *I have a couple more Silent thought captures. If this statue is really Het Branoï and there's a way in, I could get some useful thoughts up here.*

Both of the thoughts she picks up are by Dranko and Flicker. Oh, well.

Upon close examination, the beholder statue is an exquisite work of art. The stone is crafted beautifully, each eyestalk cunningly carved. The body's stone surface shows the patterned mottling of its skin. Each tooth in its open mouth looks razor-sharp.

Maybe it's an actual giant-sized beholder, turned to stone, thinks Flicker.

The strange thing is, it's not weathered, thinks Dranko. *I mean, it's windy and cold up here. It must hail and sleet sometimes. But there's not a scratch on this thing. It could have been sculpted yesterday.* He ponders for a moment. *In fact...*

Dranko disbelieves that the statue is real. A few seconds later it fades (to him) into a background translucency, revealing a stone tower of about the same size and shape, just inside the statue, like a weapon in its sheath.

Bingo! thinks Dranko. He conveys his discovery to the others, and soon they all see the reality. The beholder statue and its huge pedestal are an illusion, masking a tower whose surface is just beneath the surface of the illusion.

Unfortunately the tower has no visible doors or windows. *It's like Abernathy's tower*, thinks Kay.

But full of evil stuff, adds Grey Wolf.

We shouldn't be dawdling out here, thinks Morningstar. *They're probably watching us right now. We still need to get in.*

I've got something to try, says Aravis. *If it doesn't have a door, I can make one with passwall.*

The others agree that this is the best plan. They can be inside the tower before the giants know what's going on. They all fly down near the tower's base, ready to enter Aravis's magical entrance. He waits until the two giants are far away and on the opposite side of the statue, and he casts his spell.



The entire party is enveloped in a burst of hot energy that blisters their skin and knocks them backward onto the grass! Worse, there is no sign that the *passwall* had any effect save to set off the magical blast.

With her *comprehend languages* spell still up, Morningstar hears the two giants up on the balcony.

"**What was that?**" cries the first.

"**Holy shit!**" cries the second. Both giants are staring down at the base of the statue.

There is a panicky mental discussion over the *telepathic bond*.

What do we do?

We can't let them raise an alarm.

Should we kill them?

We can't just kill them; they haven't done anything.

I kind of like them.

We still have to keep them from bringing other giants.

We can fight to subdue.

I can trap one of them.

If we do something about those Divination Sinks, we might spot a way into the tower.

I'm on it.

OK, let's do it.

Aravis flies to one corner of the raised courtyard walkway, where one of the Divination Sinks squats in its stone casement. He knows it won't be possible to remove the Sink itself (as it's set deep into the stone) or to move the stone casing itself (it's a boulder almost five feet in diameter). So (still invisible, mind) he *polymorphs* into a giant himself!

Flicker, mindful of what happened when Aravis tried to *passwall* into the tower, tentatively reaches out toward its smooth stone face with his hand. He winces at the moment of contact, but when nothing painful occurs he busily sets out searching the tower exterior by feel. Ernie and Kay join him.

Up on the wall, the giants move a bit closer for a quick confab. Morningstar, still under the effects of a *comprehend languages*, relays their discussion.

“Do you know what that was?”

“Hell, no! I mean, yeah, we have to guard the statue, but everyone knows nothing ever actually happens to it.”

“It flashed!”

“Yes, I saw.”

“I guess we should go get **Eigomic then.”**

“Yeah.”

“But... uh... one of us should stay, right? In case anything else happens.”

“Good point. You stay, I’ll go tell Eigomic.”

“I think I should go. I’m faster.”

“Fine, you go, I’ll stay. Hurry up!”

“Wait... what’s that sound? Someone down there is talking!”

The giants listen curiously to the sound of Kibi, invisible to the last moment, casting *confusion* on them. Miraculously one of them shakes it off, but the other clutches its head and then looks around stupidly. The unaffected giant’s eyes widen as Kibi pops into view down in the courtyard. **“Hey! There’s a tiny little...”**

He’s cut off as he becomes trapped in a constricting lidless stone cell; Morningstar casts *wall of stone* and confines the unconfused giant to a box five feet on a side and fifteen feet tall. It would be a roomy enclosure (relatively speaking) for a human, but for a fifteen foot tall giant it’s terribly cramped.

“Krag!” shouts the giant, alarmed. **“There’s a midget magic guy down there. Get Eigomic! Get help!”**

Near the opposite corner, over a hundred feet away from the giants, Aravis sets his giantish shoulders to the stone block and heaves. Strong though he is, the stone is too much for him. It moves less than an inch before the wizard pulls up, panting. *Damn*, he thinks to the others. *Still too heavy. I’ll need help.*

Dranko flies up to stand near the trapped giant’s prison, ready with his whip in case the giant tries to climb out. Grey Wolf, near the statue, flies straight up and keeps a constant watch on all of the entrances to the courtyard.

The confused giant looks up, looks down, looks to the right... and then looks right at Kibi, who’s the only visible member of the Company. Filled with a sudden rage, the giant leaps down from the high balcony, landing awkwardly and wrenching his knee. He stumbles toward the dwarf. Alarmed, Kibi flies around the statue, putting it in the way of the giant’s line of sight. Then the dwarf uses his *staff of conjuration* to call forth a small xorn.

Still *wind walking*, Step and Snokas fly over to and then swirl around the giant, who now becomes *really* confused. It swats vaguely and ineffectually at the two of them.

From inside Morningstar's *wall of stone* come the sounds of a struggling giant cursing the lack of elbow room. He can't get any leverage to even try smashing the stone. Giantish fingers appear, curled over the top lip of the box. Dranko cracks his whip with an expert touch, the fingers vanish back inside the box, and the cursing continues.

Morningstar casts *memory read*, and moves a bit closer to the confused giant, which is waving its club menacingly as it limps toward Kibi. *Still could be a problem touching it*, she thinks.

Aw, what the hell, thinks Aravis. *Hold on*. Leaving the stone housing the Divination Sink, Aravis (still in giant form) flies straight across the courtyard and plows into the giant. They fall to the ground and start to grapple.

That'll make it easier, thinks Morningstar. *Just don't roll over at the last minute*.

Kibi finishes summoning his xorn. He speaks to it in Terran. "**MR. XORN, IF YOU WOULDN'T MIND, WE'D LIKE YOU TO TUNNEL YOUR WAY INTO THAT TOWER. THE STATUE IS AN ILLUSION, AND THE TOWER IS RIGHT INSIDE.**"

"**YES,**" rumbles the xorn. It reaches out and pushes its body into the tower, expecting to glide through the stone as though it were water. It fails. "**THE STONE RESISTS,**" grumbles the xorn. "**IT'S NOT NATURAL.**"

"**I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE,**" sighs Kibi. "**SORRY.**"

Maybe it can help with the Divination Sinks, suggests Aravis over the mind-link.

The giant in the box tries to climb out again. This time it gets an elbow up onto the ledge and pokes its head out the top. He peers at Dranko (now visible). "**Gooka ruk takka blarg skiblish?**" it asks.

It wants to know what we're doing here, thinks Morningstar, translating.

Aha! cries Flicker. I've got something! It's a seam, like there's a doorway cut into the tower. It's got a keyhole and everything. And the door is human-sized, not giant-sized.

Can you pick the lock? thinks Dranko.

Not likely, answers Flicker. *I may be good, but I can't pick locks by feel. I need to see it, but the whole doorway is invisible.*

With those Divination Sinks, no one's seeing anything, thinks Step over the mind-link.

Kibi looks at the little xorn. He looks up and across the courtyard to the nearest Divination Sink. "**I WANT YOU TO TRY MOVING THAT ROCK,**" says Kibi to his summoned creature.

"**I CAN'T REACH IT,**" it rumbles. "**IT'S OFF THE GROUND.**"

"**I'M GOING TO PICK YOU UP AND FLY THERE. IT'LL ONLY TAKE A FEW SECONDS.**"

"**WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?**" asks the xorn suspiciously. "**FLY?**"

"**I'M GOING TO LIFT YOU OFF THE GROUND. WE'LL MOVE THROUGH THE AIR.**"

"**YOU'LL WHAT? NO! I CAN'T LEAVE THE... HEY... PUT ME DOWN. WHAT'S... AAAH... NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!**" The xorn's terrified cry sounds like a tiny little earthquake, as Kibi wraps his arms around what passes for its waist and flies up to the balcony. He quickly drops it onto the stone walkway.

"**NEVER. DO. THAT. AGAIN.**" the xorn threatens.

I know how he feels, says Scree sympathetically.

"**SORRY! NOW, PLEASE, CAN YOU TRY MOVING THAT STONE?**"

Dranko can't understand Giantish, but he can motion easily enough. He brandishes his whip, making it obvious that attempted escape from the little stone prison is going to be very painful. "Back in the box!" he adds. The giant looks conflicted for a few moments, and then drops back down inside the enclosure, muttering in Giantish. To show there are no hard feelings, Dranko takes his wineskin and tosses it in with the giant.

Morningstar steps forward to the grappling giants; the actual giant has gotten the upper hand, having rolled over on top of the Aravis giant. This makes Morningstar's spell easier; she touches the true giant and casts *memory read*, looking for the memory of "the time Eigomic divulged the most information about this area." But through force of giantish will, or maybe because he's confused and cannot remember, she gets no memory of the event. Damn!

Aravis and the giant continue to roll around on the ground, wrestling. Pewter scrambles onto the giant's back and bites.
Got 'im, boss!

Did the giant... oof... notice?... Ow!

Doesn't look like it. I'll keep trying, though.

There's some quick mental discussion; they need to talk to the giants, not just listen to them. Kibi activates his *ioun stone of tongues*, and begins acting as translator.

"How you doing in there?" Dranko calls to the giant in the box.

You little guys are gonna get in big trouble!" answers the giant.

"From you?" asks Morningstar, leading him on.

No, from the chief, and from Eigomic. You shouldn't be messin' around with the statue!"

"Does someone have a way I can see the door and the keyhole?" asks Flicker impatiently. "I'd love to get started picking this lock. We can get in before this Eigomic character shows up."

Kibi looks over at the xorn, who's having no luck with the Divination Sink. "**TOO HEAVY,**" it complains.

"Wait, how about this?" says Kibi. He flies down to ground level, tells everyone to back away, and casts *glitterdust* on the side of the tower with the door and keyhole. Tiny flecks of reflective glitter coat the area.

Flicker moves in for a look. "Better. Not great, but better. It's still going to be tough. I'll need some time. I'll check for traps first."

I hate to... ow!... bring this... oof!... up, thinks Aravis, but I'm not making any... ouch!... headway here. This giant's a better wrestler than I am, and as long we keep fighting, we're just wasting the last few rounds of the confusion. I could use some help in subduing him.

Morningstar starts in attacking the giant, taking great pains to inflict only subdual damage. Dranko flies down to join her, using his whip. It then occurs to Kibi that this might be a good time to try out a long-held magic item that they've never used – a *deck of illusions*. He fishes out the twenty card deck, deals off the top, and flings the card down near the giant. A huge red dragon springs up.

The dragon looks real. It sounds real. It *smells* real. Wisps of brimstone scented smoke rise up from scaly nostrils as the beast towers over the courtyard. At Kibi's mental command it rears up and glares down at the giant wrestling with Aravis. Said giant, shaking off the last of the *confusion*, whimpers at the sight of the dragon. Having already been bludgeoned by Morningstar, whipped by Dranko, bitten by Pewter and grappled by Aravis, this is too much for him.

"**I surrender!**" he calls out in Giantish. Kibi relays this to the others. Then, just for fun, Kibi has the dragon get up on its hind legs and crane its neck over the top of the other giant's prison on the high balcony. The creature puts its head right up to the opening.

"**Aaaaaahhhhaaaaaiiiieeee!**" comments the giant. The dragon winks at him and pulls its head away. Then the Company get down to questioning the unboxed giant, using Kibi as their spokeshwarf.

"We don't want to hurt you or any other giants," says Kibi. "But you should answer our questions." He gestures meaningfully toward the illusionary dragon, which turns its head and shows its teeth.

"Why are you guarding this statue?" asks Kibi.

"Cause Eigomic told us to," answers the giant.

"Who is Eigomic, and why do you do what he says?"

"Well, he's the Keeper. We always do what he says. He works for the chief, **Tegmannic, and he can do magic stuff. He's in charge of the statue, and he makes sure it stays guarded all the time."**

"Do you know where Eigomic lives?"

"Sure. It's about seven blocks from here. You go out the northern archway, turn left, walk down the road past the smithies and turn right at the barrel-ball field. His house is down that way, with the boars' heads mounted on pikes. Can't miss it."

“Do you know why Eigomic always has someone guarding this statue?”

“I dunno. I guess it’s important or something. Always thought it was kind of ugly, personally. I mean, why would someone want to make a giant version of those nasty little tundra eyes?”

Hmm. “What exactly are ‘tundra eyes?’” asks Kibi.

“Oh, you know. Pesky little floaty zappers that live out in the wilderness. They don’t bother us much; don’t like towns and us giants. They’re kinda like you: really small, but all sorts of magic zappy stuff comes out of ‘em. They don’t fly too high though, so we can swat ‘em with clubs if we get the chance. They fly pretty good if you get a good whack. They’re not usually as big a problem as the big frost boars, or worse, the blood foxes. Boy, you sure don’t wanna get caught by one of those little blood fox critters. They’ll eat your insides out.”

No kidding, thinks Kay. But the whole Company groan at hearing this, and Dranko in particular starts to seethe. Their whole hurried plan was predicated on the idea that the mini-beholders had been sent by whoever was guarding Het Branoi, that they had been spotted, and that the jig might already be approaching up.

Those were WANDERING MONSTERS? he thinks, fuming. *We let ourselves get rushed into a quick assault on the tower because of a RANDOM ENCOUNTER?*

Looks that way, thinks Grey Wolf.

Leareeth: I love this. Sagiro, that is just evil. I love everything about this story. I’m going to be giggling like a mad woman for the rest of the night. Can’t wait for more.

Piratecat: Sagiro is a SOB! We were crapping ourselves with worry that they had somehow tracked us down, and it... was... a... random... encounter!
ARRGH!
(... I wish I had thought of that...)

I don’t detect any traps here, thinks Flicker. *I’m going to try to pick the lock, using Kibi’s glitter to see. It’ll take some time.* The dragon continues to watch the giant for another couple of minutes while Flicker works at the lock.

Aha! thinks Flicker excitedly. *I’ve got it figured out. I just have to wiggle this a little bit and...*



Flicker is blasted backward in a cone of bright energy that tears skin right off his face and hands. Blood fountains up around him as he flies some fifteen feet through the air, landing on his back on the courtyard grass. The clerics rush over to heal him, fearing the worst, but barely, barely, he is still alive. Half a minute and several healing spells later he is back on his feet.

“I think I avoided the worst of it,” says Flicker, his voice trembling. “If I hadn’t...”

Don’t think about it, thinks Step.

“I could try again,” says Flicker, “but I have to see what I’m doing. The glitter is good, but not good enough.”

“I can cast *true seeing* on you,” says Morningstar, “but with those Divination Sinks, it won’t do you any good.”

“Mr. Giant,” says Kibi, “We need your help. We want to finish our business here as soon as possible, and not cause any trouble. To do that, we need to move one of those big rocks with the blue gems inside. Aravis here is going to carry you up there. Just help him move that rock, and there won’t be any trouble, we promise.”

The giant looks skeptical. The giant looks at the dragon.

The giant helps move the Divination Sink that points at the door and keyhole.

Morningstar casts *true seeing* on Flicker, who wastes a few seconds oooh-ing and aaaah-ing at what he sees.

“The tower is loaded with spells,” he says. “All kinds of ‘em. I don’t really know what I’m seeing, but it’s impressive. And the door isn’t really a door. It’s more like a door-shaped impression in the stone. It’s only about half an inch deep.”

“Do you see the keyhole?” prods Dranko.

"Oh. Yeah."

"Do you see magical traps on the keyhole?"

"Maybe. There are plenty of spells on both the door and the keyhole, but I don't know what they are."

"Whatever they are, I'm going to try to *dispel* them," says Morningstar. But Morningstar isn't able to remove any of the spells on the tower. Neither is Ernie, who also tries.

"I've got an idea," pipes up Dranko. "Hold on a minute..." He prays to Delioch and channels pure faith into the door of the tower. It dissipates, finding no receptacle. "Sorry, Flicker."

"I'm going to try anyway," says Flicker. "First, though, I'm going to see if I can disable the traps on the 'door.'"

For a few long minutes Flicker works gingerly at the door, scraping, tapping, chipping at the edges of magical effects no one else can even see. Eventually he steps back.

"Did it work?" asks Kay.

"I don't know," answers Flicker. "I don't see any change in the magic on the tower. But I can see the keyhole perfectly now. I should be able to pick it, traps or not."

"I'll help you," says Dranko. "Just tell me what I can do."

"I'll help you too," says Morningstar. She casts *shield other* on him.

Flicker leans in and starts to work. His fingers move with dexterity and confidence, handling a myriad of thieves' tools with a deft touch. "I need light," he says after a few minutes. "Right about here, behind me, reasonably bright."

Morningstar activates the *daylight* power of her holy shield. "Ack! Too bright! I'm actually looking for sharper shadows, and that washes them all out."

"Sorry," mutters Morningstar. Step fishes out a *continual flame* coin and holds it up.

"Yeah, that's good," says Flicker. "Now Dranko, do me a favor and hold this pick in place for me..."

For almost ten minutes, Flicker works at the lock on the tower. The rest of the party look on, worried, hopeful, curious, as the halfling plies his trade. Even the giant is fascinated by Flicker's work. Sweat borne of intense concentration beads the little rogue's brow despite the chilly air. No one speaks aloud what they all fear; that even with Morningstar's spell in place, another triggered trap could incinerate Flicker. And no one is more aware of that fact than the halfling himself.

"Almost there," he says at last. "Dranko, when I tell you to, I want you to pull the pick you're holding out, as quickly and as straight back as you can manage."

"Got it."

"And don't worry... about..." Flicker stops talking. A confused expression crosses his face. Then he smiles wryly to himself.

Only Dranko sees it. "What is it?"

"I'll tell you later," says Flicker. "Now, are you ready?"

"Ready."

"OK... on three. One. Two. THREE!"

Dranko yanks out the pick. Flicker turns his wrist and pushes in with a hooked wire.



Once again the trap is set off, and Flicker is blown backwards by a crushing wave of energy. Morningstar cries out in pain as the skin is torn from *her* face and arms, even as the same thing happens to Flicker. The halfling lands in a heap as Morningstar drops to her knees. Again the clerics and Step rush to apply healing. Both are alive, and from the severity of their wounds it is clear that without Morningstar's *shield other* spell, Flicker would be naught but a smear on the grass.

"He should probably stop doing that," comments the giant. "It looks painful."

"Shush," says Kibi.

"What are you people, exactly? You're like little tiny giants, except for him." He points at Aravis. "Where did you come from? And you, giant, why are you helping them?"

"We're from really far away," says Kibi.

"Oh," says the giant. "And what about..." He points at Aravis, frowning. Then his eyes go wide with shock. "I know what this is about!" he cries, his voice hardening. "And I'm not saying anything more."

Kibi translates for the others. "What is it?" asks Kibi. "What's the problem? I doubt you really know what's going on."

The giant just glares at Aravis. "He's not from around here, either," says Kibi.

"He's from Krizzag, isn't he!" blurts the giant.

"Where's that?" asks Kibi.

"I'll bet he knows. He's from there! He's a spy from Krizzag come to spy on Rikorag. I'm not talking any more."

Kibi sighs. "He's from a lot farther away than that. I promise you, none of us are from Krizzag, and we're not here to spy, or do anything to harm your town. Our only concern is with that." He points at the tower.

"Why are you messing around with the statue in the first place?" asks the giant.

"To save the universe," says Kibi.

"Universe?"

"The whole world."

"Oh. Well. Uh, I'm pretty sure you're in the wrong place. That's just a statue of a big monster. It doesn't do anything, except I guess it blasts that really little guy."

"You're probably right," says Kibi. "We should probably just give up and look somewhere else."

Flicker sits upright, healed of his recent wounds. Despite his failure, he wears a contented smile on his face. Dranko gives him a curious look for a moment before it dawns on him. "You heard the waves, didn't you?" he says to Flicker.

Flicker nods. "I did what I should have done that first time in Gohgan's basement," he says quietly. "My debt for Mrs. Horn's life is paid."

"You did good, Flicker."

"I guess. Would have been better if the dang door had actually opened. Morningstar, you saved my life, as usual."

"I'm the only one left, then," says Ernie. "But my promise is kind of open-ended."

"Er," interrupts the giant. "Since I'd rather not see more fighting, I'm going to warn you that the next shift is going to be along in just a few minutes."

There's some more hasty discussion over the mind-link. The general consensus is that the next step is Eigomic. The Company consider various plans of diplomacy, stealth and violence, weighing pros and cons. The plan they decide on is this: most of the party will fly up and out of sight, *wind walking*, invisible or both. The giants will be released to report exactly what happened – that a bunch of little people with magic powers were here tampering with the statue. That should bring Eigomic out to investigate, allowing Dranko the freedom to sneak into his house and search for the tower key, and any passwords that might be necessary for entrance.

"Before you go," says the giant. "I'm... er... pretty hurt, from when you guys were beating me up. I've seen you heal the tiny little guy back to health. Can you give me some of that?"

"Sure!" says Kibi.

"No!" say Aravis and Morningstar at the same time.

"There could still be trouble before the day is out," says Morningstar. "I don't think we can waste our resources on the giant. Besides, it's mostly subdual damage; he'll heal."

"But we hurt him, and he was just doing his job," protests Kibi. "He's not evil. He's been quite helpful, all things considered. If you won't heal him, I'm giving him one of my healing potions."

"That's even worse," says Aravis. "Our potions are non-renewable. If we're going to heal him, we should use a spell."

"I really think it's a bad idea," says Morningstar. "I still say no."

Grey Wolf nods his head in agreement, but Step shakes his head, clearly siding with Kibi. "It's the right thing to do," says Kibi, obstinate. "If you won't heal him, I'm giving him my potion, and that's that."

"Fine," says Morningstar, exasperated. "Tell the giant to ask me for healing, and I'll do it. Better than you waste your potion." She heals the thankful giant, glaring at Kibi as she does so.

"We're leaving now," says Kibi. "You can tell Eigomic everything. We don't want you to get into trouble on our account."

"I hear the other giants coming," says Dranko. "Let's go."

Kibi picks up the dragon card from the ground and the huge red monster winks out of existence. The Company fly up, up and away. Behind them they hear the giant call out to his boxed-in friend, "**Hey Korrin, I'm coming up to help you out of there. You OK?**"

"**Yeah,**" says the trapped giant. "**They tried to trick me into drinking this wine that's probably poisoned, but I was too smart for 'em. We've got to go tell Eigomic what happened.**"

"**Yup. Good idea.**"

QR 80

In the House of Eigomic

Run #148 - ?May, 2003

While Krag and Korrin tell the next shift about their recent adventure, the Company fly on ahead, high above the giantish city. Dranko stays a bit lower to get the lay of the land. He notes right away that the buildings closest to the courtyard and statue are abandoned. Maybe Eigomic has ordered the area cleared? Or maybe it's just giantish superstition?

Once into the town proper, Dranko passes shops, homes, smithies, and a large yard where two dozen giantish children are playing a soccer-like game. After a few (long) blocks he sees Eigomic's house – somewhat larger than a typical giantish dwelling, as big as a large human mansion. It is constructed of wood and stone, with a garden of colorful flowers in bloom despite the cold and snow. A giantish gardener tends to the lawn, pulling up weeds.

While most of the party settle on a rooftop across from Eigomic's house, Dranko flies invisibly in through an open second-floor window. The *telepathic bonds* have recently expired, so the rest of the Company can only pray that Dranko doesn't get into too much trouble on his own.

Dranko finds himself in an enormous bedroom. The bed itself is twenty feet long and almost ten feet wide, covered with furs and cushions. Stout wooden furniture stands along the walls. A dire warg-skin rug covers the center of the stone floor, and several odd-looking masks adorn the walls.

He takes a few quick minutes to scour the room for keys, but finds none. He does discover a hidden pile of silver pieces atop a towering wardrobe. Each piece is the size of a dinner plate, but with work Dranko manages to squeeze one into his *Heward's wide-mouth pouch*. Then he moves to the door and listens.

Satisfied that no one is directly on the other side, he strains against the door and opens it enough to slip through. He's in a wide corridor (a narrow hallway for a giant) that extends for fifty more feet, past two more closed doors, before ending at the top of a stairwell. From the floor below him he hears someone knock outside on the front door. Quickly and quietly he flies to the stairway and goes down, emerging into a spacious living room. Eigomic is greeting two flustered giants at the door.

It must be Eigomic. The "Keeper" is much older than the other giants Dranko has seen, slightly taller and broader at the shoulders. He is dressed in loose leather covered with furs, one of which (Dranko notes with a mixture of fear and respect) is a blood fox pelt. His face is adorned with paint and he wears a feathered headpiece, looking every bit the part of the giantish shaman. Dranko has *comprehend languages* cast and listens in on the meeting from behind a large shelf.

Galfidus: Don't you have to touch the target of a *comprehend languages*?

Sagiro: We, uh, apparently have a house rule that says you don't...

coyote6: I think Galfridus is the one with the house rule. The target for *comprehend languages* is "The Character"; Range: Personal. Assuming Dranko cast the spell, there's nothing wrong.

Sagiro: See, that's the same mistake I made. But if you read the text of the spell description (at least, in the SRD), it says you have to touch the creature whose language you're comprehending.

coyote6: ... Uh, wow. Does it say that in the PHB? Boy, have we messed that one up...

Galfridus: Yeah, it's in the PHB and the SRD. I only know because a player wanted a *helm of comprehend languages and read magic*, and I wondered why it was so darn cheap.

IMO there's design space for a 2nd level "listen only, at range" spell, between *comprehend languages* and *tongues*.

"**Eigomic!**" cries one of the two giants. "**You won't believe what just happened! Krag and I were...**"

The other giant elbows him. "**Oh, right. Keeper, may I call you Eigomic?**"

"**Of course!**" booms the deep voice of the Keeper. "**Why don't you two come inside and sit down, and then tell me what this is all about. Come in. Sit!**" Eigomic ushers the two young giants into the living room and sits them down on a couch large enough to accommodate the entire Company. He himself rests in a huge armchair.

"Now," says Eigomic, smiling. "**Why don't you start at the beginning?**"

"**Sure, sure,**" says Krag. "**Korrin and me were on duty guardin'** that statue in the courtyard. **We were making our rounds like you always say,** going in opposite directions and keeping our eyes out for stuff down below. Well you know nothin' ever happens, but this time it did! All of a sudden there was a big bright flash down by the bottom of the statue, right when me and Korrin were meeting up on our rounds. We looked down for a few seconds, tryin' to see what was up, but there wasn't anything there."

"Then there was a sound like someone talkin' and all of a sudden there were stone walls all around me!" says Korrin. "It must have been magic, it appeared so all-of-a-sudden like. And it was so small, I couldn't get any leverage to get out!"

"It didn't get me though," says Krag. "And that's when I saw this really little guy standin' down near the statue. I mean, this guy was tiny. Smaller than a kid, even. So I jumped down off the balcony to get 'im, 'cause I knew he wasn't supposed to be there."

"Yes," agrees Eigomic. "**And then what happened?**"

"I was gonna get that little guy," continues Krag. "I could see he had a big beard on his chin. But before I could get 'im, another giant came flying over from across the courtyard and tackled me. We started wrestling."

"A giant? Flying?" Eigomic asks.

"Yeah, flying! They had magic, like I said. There turned out to be a bunch of the little guys, and magic zappy stuff came out of 'em, like they were tundra eyes."

"Say, maybe they were tundra eyes?" suggests Korrin. "But shaped like little giants. Like a new spish... a new sheep-sees..."

"Species?" says Eigomic.

"Yeah! Like that!"

"What happened then?" Eigomic prompts.

"I finally started gettin' out of that stone trap," says Korrin, "but when I got my fingers over the lip something stung 'em real hard and I had to let go. A few seconds later I got my head up over the top, and another one of those little guys was standin' there. He had funny tusky teeth like a boar, and he was holdin' a... a... I don't know, like a long strip of leather. I think it was the weapon he hit my fingers with. He shook the weapon at me, lettin' me know that if I tried climbing out, he'd sting me good. So I dropped back down inside and started thinking about a clever escape plan."

"And while he was in there," Krag jumps in, "I was getting the upper hand with that flying giant. I'm a better wrestler than him, and I would've beat him in a fair fight. But while we were fightin', other little people showed up. There was this girl who kept hitting me with a spiky thing that really hurt! And I still might a' won, except that then all of a sudden there was a really, really huge red lizard! It had wings, and smoke and fire was comin' out of its mouth, and it had these... these TEETH that were HUGE! It glared at me like it was gonna eat me, so I thought quick and said 'I surrender' to buy myself some more time."

Eigomic raises his eyebrows and leans back in his chair. Dranko suppresses a snicker. It's clear to him that Eigomic thinks his two underlings are making at least some of this up. "No, really!" says Korrin. "**The big lizard poked its head over my stone box, like it was warning me not to try getting out again.**"

"So then they asked me some questions, but I didn't let on about anything important," says Krag. "Another little guy – and I mean, this one was even littler than the other little one with the beard – he started pokin' around at the bottom of the statue. Then he backed off and the bearded guy did some magicky thing, and the base of the statue and the ground around it got covered with glittery stuff. The teeny little guy went back and started poking the statue again. Then all of a sudden there was a big blast sound, and a bright light, and the teeny guy went flying backward and blood went all over. I figured he was a goner, but some of the other little people rushed over and did some more magicky stuff and healed all his wounds. It was amazing!"

"Ah, good," says Eigomic with a smile. "**I'm not at all surprised. Continue.**"

Krag opens his mouth again, turns red, and mumbles something under his breath.

"Come on," says Eigomic. "**I need to hear what else these small folk did to the... statue.**"

"Er. Well. After that they said that I'd better help them, or... well, there was that big red lizard, and I knew that if it ate me I couldn't come back and tell you everything. So I did what they wanted."

"And what was that?"

"I... er... well, I helped that other giant to, uh, well, you see, I didn't really want to, but... I helped him turn one of those big rocks with glowing blue things inside. We turned it so the blue part was facing into the wall."

Eigomic's smile drops from his face like a heap of bricks. He leans forward and glowers at Krag, who shrinks back in his chair. "You moved the rock," Eigomic says through clenched teeth.

"Yeah. I uh... um... yeah. So, after that the teeny little guy went back and poked at the tower some more. Everyone was crowded around watchin' him, except the big lizard, which was watchin' me. The guy with the tusks was helpin' him, I think. Then all of a sudden there was another big flash of light, and the teeny guy got knocked back again. There was more blood, and the rest of 'em healed him up again."

Eigomic's face unclenches when he hears about Flicker's second failure.

"I asked 'em why they cared so much about the statue that they'd keep letting the littlest guy get hurt so much. The one with the beard said they didn't want to cause any trouble for us giants. They just wanted to save the... uh... the... well, they used some fancy word that meant 'the whole world.'"

"Universe," says Korrin. "I heard him say 'universe.'"

"So," continues Krag, "I told 'em, see, they must have the wrong statue. This one doesn't have anything to do with the 'universe.' They agreed! The one with the beard said they must have picked the wrong town, and that they ought to leave. And they did. They all just kind of flew straight up and vanished into the sky. I went and helped Korrin get out of that stone box, and then when the next shift came, we told 'em what happened and then ran straight here. And... er... uh, here we are."

Eigomic sits back in his chair and closes his eyes, while Dranko watches from his hiding place. Krag and Korrin look nervously at each other, at Eigomic, at their feet.

"**I will go and observe the statue myself,**" says Eigomic, coming suddenly to his feet. "**I will write down a... no, I'm sure you cannot read. Listen carefully. I will list you a dozen names. You will collect those dozen giants, and instruct them to go to the statue straight away for emergency guard duty.**"

He rattles off a dozen giantish names, after which Krag and Korrin can't get out of there fast enough. Eigomic follows them out and then walks briskly down the street toward the courtyard, locking the door behind him with a large iron key.

Dranko slips out the upstairs window and rejoins the others on the nearby roof to report. "A dozen giants?" groans Grey Wolf. "That's just great."

"Hopefully it won't matter," says Aravis. "We don't want to fight any guards. Once we get the key, there's no point in us dallying to fight."

"I still have some *detect thoughts* prepared," says Morningstar. "I want to try to get Eigomic while he's checking things out. Come on."

The Company, still all either invisible or misty, fly high over the city again and alight on the roof of the courtyard buildings. As they expect, the first thing Eigomic does is command the two giants on guard to help him push the swiveled Divination Sink back into alignment. This allows Morningstar, directly above his head on the wooden rooftop, to fire off a *detect thoughts*.

Eigomic resists. Morningstar tries twice more. Eigomic resists again, both times.

Dammit! thinks Morningstar. She motions to the others that her spells didn't work. (Actually they worked fine on the younger giant. *Boy, is this rock heavy, he's thinking.*)

Geoff Watson: Why didn't Eigomic do anything when the spells were cast on him?

Sagiro: Because he didn't know that they were cast. Because they were Silent. Which I guess I should have mentioned.

shilsen: I think what Geoff Watson may have meant is that a creature saving against a spell (as Eigomic did) would realize that a spell had been attempted against it (PHB page 150).

Sagiro: Huh. My knowledge of the rules has clearly eroded significantly over the years. Didn't even occur to me. I'm forced to wonder which of these is true:

- I make significantly more rules gaffes than other Story Hour writers;
- Other writers get picked on just as much as I do for rules violations, but I haven't noticed;
- I'm blessed with a particularly nitpi... er, discerning audience...

P.S.: If it makes you feel better, had Eigomic realized someone was casting on him, he would have looked around suspiciously, seen nothing, and then more or less done exactly what he did anyway. As you'll see when I next post...

P.P.S.: ...which I fear to do, wondering what new rules ignorance I'm about to reveal!

Destil: What, you mean aside from an *antimagic field* only suppressing *access* to extra/non-dimensional spaces (and thus the tundra eyes wouldn't have had the group tumbling out of their *rope tricks*)...

I only tease because I'm in general awe of the story, and the true evilness of that random encounter.

(And because I wish I had thought of that, too...)

Once the Divination Sink is back in place, Eigomic walks down to ground level and stands before the tower. Five giants come jogging up a few seconds later and the Keeper instructs them to stand close guard around the statue. Then he fishes out a large glassy lens from his furs, holds it up to his right eye and takes a good long look at the tower.

The Company, hiding up on a nearby rooftop, duck down low in case Eigomic suddenly turns to look in their direction. For a couple of minutes the Keeper looks only at the tower, up and down, peering through the lens. Evidently he is satisfied. He puts the lens back in his pocket and turns to the fourteen giants now assembled in the courtyard.

"You are all officially placed on statue guard duty. I want you down here, ground level. This shift will last eight hours, after which you will be relieved by a new group." The giants start grumbling, but are quickly cowed to silence by a venomous look from the Keeper.

Leaving the new tower guard, Eigomic strides purposefully out of the courtyard and down the streets toward his home. The Mostly Invisible Flying Wind Brigade follows at height. Step, peering intently down, whispers to the others: "He's evil."

To the Company's surprise, Eigomic walks *past* his house and continues into the center of town, where he eventually stops at the door of a large stone building guarded by military-looking giants. They open the door for him, and close it behind him.

Dranko looks for a chimney on the building; while human chimneys are too small for a half-orc to traverse, giantish ones make for easy "secret entrances." The problem is, the chimney on this new building has smoke coming out of it. Undeterred, Dranko casts *protection from elements: fire* on himself, tells the others, "I'll be back soon," and flies over to the roof of the building. The rest of the party take up a waiting position on a different nearby roof.

"What should we do while he's in there?" asks Flicker.

"Listen for screams," says Aravis with a sigh, "and count the ways things could go wrong."

coyote6: Ah, c'mon. Something go wrong on a Dranko scouting mission? Inconceivable!

So, did you go through the whole giant briefing at the table?

Sagiro: I'm afraid that, yes, I really did make my players listen to three NPCs talk to each other for 5-10 minutes. I can only hope they were more amused than bored.

Sagiro: I must really be in a slump.

Here I am, in the midst of writing up the last session I ran, which I'm more-or-less transcribing from audio tape. There's (and I'm sure this comes as a shock) a combat with some giants. Thanks to the tape I'm able to go turn by turn through the combat and not miss important stuff.

Hmm. That's odd. Why haven't the giants gone yet? <click> <rewind> <playback>

OK... Aravis goes... yes, then Step... mm hm... then Ernie... OK, now it should be the giants' turn...

[Sagiro listens in horror to the tape...]

Surely I missed something. <click> <rewind> <playback>

[Sagiro buries head in hands...]

It's clear what happened. I use index cards to keep track of the initiative order. When a combatant goes, I put their card on the bottom of the pile and read off the new name on top to go next. Works like a charm.

Aravis has readied a *fireball* for when the giants go. The index card saying 'giant' comes to the top. "The giants advance!" I say, putting their card on the bottom. "Wait!" says Aravis's player. "My readied action goes off."

We spend some time rolling dice, making saving throws, decrementing hit points, etc. I put the Aravis card on the bottom of the pile.

I look down at the card on top. It's Dranko's card, so I instinctively say, "Dranko, you're up." Combat continues.

I'm sure you note the omission. If any of my players noticed it, they sure didn't say anything...

And here all this time I thought my campaign's low mortality rate was due to my players being clever, plus all the clerics and the paladin and the wands of *cure serious wounds*. It turns out, my monsters don't get to go!

Someone should revoke my license or something.

nemmerle: Oh, don't be so hard on yourself, Sagiro, old chum... I'm sure if we had recordings of our games we'd all find gaffes – I occasionally come across them in the round-for-round notes one of my players keeps for me for the sake of the Story Hour...

As for your error – well, that's why I use a dry-erase board...

StevenAC: Heh. I use initiative cards too, and they're helpful but certainly not foolproof, what with my players' propensity for delayed and readied actions galore.

I usually wait until the end of a character's action before I move their card to the back of the pack. If they decide to delay or ready, I take the card out of the pack and put it aside. Then, when they finally act, I just pick up their card and put it back on top.

Fajitas: I use index cards, too, which has actually led to me accidentally skipping PCs from time to time. Funnily enough, they're always very good about letting me know when I do that. Skipping baddies, that's harder to get them to double-check for me.

coyote6: Oh, you have no idea how many times I've done that. I turn the cards of readying/delaying people sideways, so they stick out and hopefully Clue Me In to do something with 'em. But I still forget ("Oops, he was supposed to try to interrupt the spellcaster. Dammit!"). Or when I divide the attacking (say) orcs into more than one group for initiative – I'll forget and have them all go at once, or I'll forget to have one group go at all. Gah.

The other GM in our group sometimes turns the cards over as he goes through; end of the deck, flip it over & continue. However, when dealing with an interruption (readied actions, etc.), he has, once or twice, gone back and started going through the "discard pile." Meaning he ends up going through the initiative in reverse. I get dirty looks from other players for reminding the GM, "Hey, the evil wizard didn't go."

Caliber: You think you have it bad! I have a cohort in the party I DM, so when XP is handed out, I divide the total by 17 (8 characters and 1 cohort) then give everyone 2 shares except the cohort.

Except I forgot that a few months ago, and only divided by 9 before handing out 2 shares per person. They were all getting +100% XP!

No wonder a group of 8 characters STILL managed to keep up with the suggested levels of a 4-character party...

Sagiro: It's comforting to know I'm not the only one whose DM-ing is less than foolproof...

Piratecat: [Combat continues.] Gee, would that be the round that my fellow party members tried to kill me, or perhaps the round that my fellow party members tried to kill me?

I missed the game under discussion, only the second or third in 7 years, and my fellow players apparently tried to get out their hostilities by – well, you'll see. But let's just say Dranko went from something like 136 hit points to around -8 in the space of one or two rounds.

That wouldn't be so bad if he had ever gotten hit by a stinkin' giant...

Sagiro: No, that little... incident... occurred near the end of the battle. (At least, it's the last thing Dranko remembers!)

Amazingly enough, nothing goes wrong!

The chimney is smoky and full of rising soot and embers. Dranko floats down toward the fireplace, hoping to catch sounds of Eigomic talking, but all he hears is the roar of the fire. He's about to just fly out and past the fire (and into the room) when he realizes that all the soot will render his *invisibility* rather moot. So, just before exiting the chimney, Dranko casts a *clean* orison on himself, counting on the roaring flames to drown out the sound of his casting. The fire flutters for a moment as Dranko flies into the room, but none of the giants in the place are looking that way.

The room into which Dranko emerges is huge. Almost two dozen giants are there, some of them sparring, some of them sitting at tables, talking and drinking. Racks of giant-sized weapons stand propped up against the walls. He's in the commons of a barracks!

Dranko is not in time to hear what Eigomic is saying to a trio of other giants, but it's soon clear what's going on. The Keeper is obtaining bodyguards.

When Eigomic leaves the building, he has half a dozen strong club-wielding giants in tow. Dranko surreptitiously follows them out the door. He hardly needs to report what he saw; the others can plainly see Eigomic leave the building surrounded by six guards. The troop of them goes back to Eigomic's house.

"Our situation has not improved," notes Step dourly. "Now, not only do they have twelve guards at the tower, but Eigomic, who probably has the key, has guards of his own. What do we do now?"

They cogitate for a few minutes, half-heartedly making plans that won't work.

"Wait," says Ernie, brightening. "Morningstar, you still have some unused spell slots, right? You should fill one with *locate object*. We can find the key with magic."

"It doesn't work that way," explains Dranko. "We've never seen the key. That spell will just find the nearest key to the caster."

"True," says Ernie, grinning. "But how many keys in this giantish city do you think fit into human-sized keyholes? Morningstar can locate 'the nearest human-sized key.' That should at least verify where it is."

Everyone marvels at Ernie's cleverness while Morningstar prays for the spell. She casts, and at once there is in her mind an unerring sense of the direction of the object in question. It's pointing downward and toward Eigomic's house, as expected. For a few moments she waits, sensing. The location does not waver by a single sliver of a degree. "It's not moving," she says. "So either Eigomic has been sedentary, or the key is stored somewhere not on his person."

Morningstar thinks for another minute. She knows the location of the key. She's invisible and *wind walking*... "I'm going to scout," she says. "I know I'm not normally the stealthy one, but it's got to be me right now."

The others agree. Morningstar goes back into vaporous form, flies to Eigomic's house, and wafts in under the door. The living room is empty, but giantish voices sound from upstairs. She concentrates for a moment on the location of the human-sized key. To her surprise the direction is still generally downward, even though she's floating at ground level.

Must be in a basement somewhere, she thinks. The location is also farther back in the house, so she chooses one of two likely doors at random and explores. She finds herself in a giant-sized kitchen, with enormous plates, jugs, pots and pans, and flagons so large Flicker could easily take a bath in one. *The Giant Flagon*, she thinks to herself. *If we ever retire and open an inn, that would be a good name. Maybe we can steal one of these mugs as a centerpiece. Hmm. I'm starting to think like Dranko.*

In fact, the whole experience is giving her some new insight into her fiancé's adventuring angle. It's always one of the rogues who does this sort of reconnoitering. Sneaking around undetected, looking for clues and information – this is new to Morningstar. She finds it oddly exhilarating.

She hears the sounds of giants thumping down the stairs, and since there are no staircases leading downward from the kitchen, she flits back into the living room and then under the second door.

It's a small den. Well, OK, it's a huge den, forty feet on a side, but for a giant it must be small and cozy. There are furs on the wood-paneled floor, including a huge bearskin rug in the center. At one end is a writing desk and chair. Ornamental masks and furs decorate the walls, including another blood fox pelt. She moves into the center of the room, the spell updating the direction of the key. When she stands directly over the bearskin rug, the direction is very nearly straight down.

Morningstar settles her vaporous body into one of the long grooves between the floor's wooden slats. She inches along, sliding under the bearskin. Before too long, she discovers another groove in the wood running perpendicular to hers. *Trapdoor*, she thinks. For a moment, she contemplates pouring through the crack into whatever space is below, but doesn't want to risk setting off any traps or alarms. Morningstar retreats from under the rug, slips back under the door and into the living room. Eigomic is there with all six of his new bodyguards. They can't see her!

And just in case it hasn't been evident enough that Dranko is rubbing off on her, Morningstar raises her misty hands to her head, touches her thumbs to her ears, and waggles her fingers at the giants. Absurdly pleased, she scoots under the front door and out into the street. Moments later she has re-solidified and reported to the others.

The Company retreat to the abandoned neighborhood near the tower courtyard, and after Kay confirms that no one has been inside one of the houses for weeks if not months, Aravis sets up a pair of *rope tricks* for the night. They assume that no tundra eyes will bother them here inside the giantish city. Before going to bed they formulate a plan, which involves luring Eigomic (and his retinue, ideally) out of his house, after which they will storm his house, get through the trapdoor, grab the key, fly to the tower, possibly wall off the giants who stand guard there, and get inside the tower that they all assume must be Het Branoi.

Should be a piece of cake.

LightPhoenix: "Assume"? Foreshadowing?

Aravis pokes his head out of the extradimensional space the next morning and hears the sound of steady sleet drumming on the rooftops. *Bother*, he thinks.

The Company eat a cold breakfast and review the plan of attack. Figuring that a bit more guidance couldn't hurt, Ernie casts *divination*. There is a debate on what the exact question should be; is it more important to ask about their scheme to regain the key, or to learn if the key is what they need in the first place? But the party are pretty sure about that second part, and the first question is more apropos for the spell in question. So Ernie casts his spell, clears his throat, and asks:

"Yondalla, if you wouldn't mind, could you please let us know if we will be successful in our plan to obtain the key?"

There is no response. Ernie is about to announce that his entreaty failed when he hears a voice in his mind. It sounds like it is coming from a long way off, a tinny, echo-y voice much different than what he has heard in the past when casting *augury*. The voice says:

Mind the guards. Mind the alarm. Mind the subterfuge.

"The first two parts seem clear enough," says Morningstar. "I wonder what the subterfuge is?"

They talk about that for a bit. Maybe it simply refers to the trapdoor? Maybe the trapdoor is itself trapped? Or the key is trapped somehow? At Dranko's suggestion, Flicker draws a picture of what he expects the business end of the key will look like, based on his close examination of the keyhole.

Once everyone is packed up and ready to go, the Company cast a battery of prep spells. Ability scores are buffed up, *invisibility*, *fly*, *telepathic bond* and *wind walk* spells are liberally applied, and Aravis includes everyone in a *mass darkvision* for good measure. *This is it*, says Dranko. *Let's go*.

Kay executes the first part of the plan. She borrows Kibi's *deck of illusions*, flies high over the statue courtyard, and lets the top card flutter down through the sleet. Twelve bored and utterly miserable-looking giants are standing around the tower, shivering and drenched.

The appearance of a huge two-headed ettin cures them quickly of their boredom if not the dampness. Immediately the closest giants move to attack it. Kay directs it to run away as fast as possible, postponing the moment when the giants will figure out it's an illusion. After a few seconds of chase one of the giants yells something out and then bolts from the courtyard toward Eigomic's house. Phase One successful!

The Company fly high above the running giant, shadowing his progress through the streets. A couple of times he slips and falls on the icy ground, but before too long he is pounding on Eigomic's door. Moments later he is admitted inside.

This is the part of the plan on which everything depends. Will Eigomic take the bait? A minute passes and no one emerges from the house. Then two. But before the third minute is up Eigomic emerges from his home with four bodyguards, plus the runner who delivered the warning about the ettin. Two of the guards are holding a large animal skin stretched over the Keeper's head, shielding him from the needles of sleet. *What a wimp*, thinks Dranko, watching the giants jog down the street toward the tower. Phase Two successful!

There are still two guards in the house, notes Grey Wolf. *We should be ready*.

Kay, Step and Snokas take up lookout positions on the roof, ready to alert the others via *telepathic bond* if anyone comes back to the house. Kibi casts *locate object*, specifying "the closest key that looks like Flicker's drawing." He senses the direction at once; it's in the same place Morningstar thought it was yesterday. Aravis casts *gaseous form* on Kibi (a part of the plan to which Scree strongly objected), and then on himself. Now everyone who's going in is in mist form. Collectively they stream under Eigomic's front door and into the living room. There is no sign of the other two giants.

Kibi, both invisible and gaseous, goes first into the den with the trapdoor. He pulls up sharply at the sight of two giants, one standing nervously, the other enjoying the Keeper's comfy chair. Over the mind-link, Kibi warns the others, and they have a short impromptu planning session.

There's only two of them, says Ernie. *We can take 'em*.

There will only be five of us, says Morningstar. *Aravis and Kibi should stay gaseous. That leaves Flicker, Ernie, Dranko, Grey Wolf and me*.

You forget, says Flicker, grinning. *I'm a giant-killing machine. Let me at 'em!*

It's settled. When everyone is ready (and solid), Ernie fills himself with the *Strength of Yondalla* and charges into the door. Despite his own small size and the great mass of the wooden door, his strength is enough. The door swings open, and the Company pour in.

The poor giants never have a chance. Flicker is first in, slashing at the standing giant's vulnerable tendons and arteries with his giant-killing shortsword. Dranko follows quickly afterward, snapping his whip into the giant's face. Morningstar fires off a *searing darkness* into the giant's neck. Only Grey Wolf fails to damage the target; he attempts to peg the giant with an *ice knife* but the spell goes wide, shattering harmlessly against the back wall of the room.

So quick and efficient is the assault, the giants hardly even seem to know what's going on before the next wave of attacks is launched. Ernie, with no way to reach the standing giant, charges across the room and hacks the knees of the giant in the armchair. Flicker and Dranko finish off the first giant in short order, delivering brutal sneak attacks.

Only after the first giant is slain does the second even swing his club, but when he does, it jars every bone in Ernie's body, denting his armor and leaving him reeling. Flicker then tumbles nimbly into a flanking position and shears through the giant's calf muscle with his short sword.

Less than ten seconds later it is over; whips, swords, *searing darknesses* and a final crossbow bolt from Grey Wolf leaving the giant bleeding and unconscious. Never having even gotten a chance to move, its body slumps back into the chair.

Feeling a surge of remorse, Dranko uses an orison to heal a single point of damage to the second giant. Unfortunately this brings the giant back to borderline awareness. Dranko rolls his eyes, mutters something about good deeds not going unpunished, and clubs the blinking giant with a sap.

Morningstar checks with Kay via the *telepathic bond*. *Any sign of Eigomic coming back?*

Nope. Visibility's pretty lousy in this sleet, but you're fine for now.

The party drag the bearskin rug off the trapdoor. "Mind the alarm," says Ernie.

Dranko casts *detect magic* and gets a positive around the trapdoor, but he doesn't have the Spellcraft to discern its nature. Grey Wolf casts the same spell and has no such difficulty. "It's an *alarm* spell all right, though there's no way to know if it's the kind that sounds out loud, or in the caster's head. It must be centered in a space about twenty feet below the floor. We're in luck, though. It covers almost the same width as this whole room, but not the very corners. If the room below us is at least the same size as this one, there will be some space one can stand without setting off the alarm."

"Unless that's the subterfuge," says Flicker. "And how can we find out anything about what's down there? If we open the trapdoor, the alarm will go off."

First things first. Ernie tries *dispelling* the alarm, but fails. Morningstar also tries, but she too fails to overcome the magic around the trapdoor.

Aravis drops the *gaseous form* on himself and Kibi. "Looks like we'll have to do it the hard way," he says, holding up his *staff of earth and stone*. The green gem that caps the staff glows brightly as Aravis casts *passwall* through the floor at the corner of the room.

He peers down into the hole he has made. Below the den is what looks like a storeroom. He can see barrels, crates, sacks, planks, buckets and other junk stacked in the corner. It appears that the storeroom is the same dimensions as the den. "Which means someone can go down there and look around," says Grey Wolf, "as long as they stay in the corner. If anyone takes even two steps out into that room, the alarm will go off."

Dranko ties off a rope around a giantish desk and lowers himself down into the storeroom. The whole place, forty feet on a side, is filled with innocuous-looking junk, except for one feature. About ten feet out from one of the far walls is an enormous iron trunk with a thick metal lock. A check with Kibi's sense from the *locate object* spell confirms that the key is in that trunk.

Kay? thinks Morningstar.

You're still good, says Kay over the mind-link. Still no sign of Eigomic. But he must have realized the ettin is just an illusion by now. Don't dawdle.

It takes a couple of tries, but Dranko manages to toss a grappling hook across the room and snag the iron trunk. They run the rope up through the hole left by the *passwall* and they all heave. It doesn't budge; it's too heavy. "We need a new plan," says Morningstar, "and quickly."

It only takes them a minute to devise a new strategy. With misgivings about burning charges, Aravis uses his staff to cast another *passwall* into the floor of the den, directly above the trunk. Then he casts *knock* on the trunk's large iron lock. **Ping!** It pops open.

Grey Wolf casts *mage hand* and guides the grappling hook down to the trunk, securing it onto the lid. They pull the rope and the lid swings up and open. **Twang!** Some small metal object flies out of the trunk, directly through the place where someone would be standing were they opening the trunk by (non-magical) hand. Inside the trunk is a large silk cushion, and on that cushion is a key!

And not just any key. It's made of crystal, and the bow is a black circle. More importantly, the key is sized for a human lock. Grey Wolf examines it with his *detect magic* and finds that it radiates strong enchantment magic. Using another *mage hand*, Aravis lifts the cushion (since the spell doesn't affect magical things) and brings the key out of the storeroom. Success?

Not yet. There are two problems. First, Flicker examines the key and decides in about ten seconds that it's not the right one. "It's a good fake," he says. "The post is the right length, and it's got ward cuts on the bit. But the depths of the bit's side cuts aren't right. This key wouldn't open the lock I was looking at on the tower, I'm sure of it."

"He's right," says Kibi. "I know, because my *locate object* says the key is still in the trunk."

He and Dranko peer down with their darkvision. With the cushion removed, the trunk looks empty. "We need to get that trunk up here," says Dranko.

"I've got one more *mage hand*," says Aravis. "I can get the grappling hook lodged in the underside of the lid."

"It'll still be too heavy to lift," Flicker objects.

"I'll also use a charge from my *wand of levitate*," says Aravis. "The magic's not strong enough to lift the trunk either, but between it and all of us pulling we might have a chance, as long as the hinges hold out."

Using his magic, Aravis sticks the hook into the underside of the trunk's lid, pleased that it finds purchase quite easily. Then he casts *levitate* and everyone heaves again. The trunk tips slightly as its lid becomes centered above it. Slowly the huge iron box rises off the floor... an inch... two inches...

CRACK! The hook pulls out of the lid with a sound like... splintering wood? The trunk crashes back to the stone floor and wooden fragments shower down around it. Clearly mixed with the other sounds is that of a small metal object clattering on stone. There is a second of confused silence. Dranko peers down again.

Ah! There was a hidden space inside the lid, the underside of which was wood but painted to look like iron. The stress from the grappling hook tore the wood away and a key flew out of the hidden compartment. He can see it on the floor amid the pieces of wood. "Mind the subterfuge," he says, grinning.

And mind the giants, warns Kay over the mind-link. *Eigomic's just turned the corner down the street. He's got a bunch of giants with him... maybe eight.*

"Allow me," says Aravis. He *levitates* the key up from the storeroom and hands it to Flicker.

Grey Wolf sees that it radiates strong magic – some enchantment, some abjuration, some evocation, and strands of magic of a type he doesn't even recognize. "Whoa," he says. "Yeah, that's the one."

"My *locate object* agrees," says Kibi.

"Time to leave," urges Morningstar. And they do. With moments to spare the Company take flight through a side window, with flying people carrying invisible people where necessary. While Eigomic and his entourage jog down the street to the house, the Company are flying the other way high above. A minute later they arrive at the huge beholder statue.

There are still obstacles, of course. Eight of them. And they're all wielding really, really big clubs.

Zaruthustran: Bravo to the Company for another team effort! And bravo to Sagiro for that cool, *Mission Impossible*-esque scenario.

Zustiur: When I first read the line "Mind the subterfuge" I was worried. Turns out it was just a hidden compartment. Phew. :-) I was certainly more worried than the party sounded...

Caliber: I expected something like what happened when the party was warned of subterfuge. Good thing Kibi had a *locate object* going.

target: Huh. I expected that they would find that the tower itself was a subterfuge, and that Het Branoi is not actually inside, or not what they need. Which I guess is still possible, but the hidden key seemed to fit the description well.

LightPhoenix: Yeah, I'm not convinced that the statue is actually Het Branoi either.

Question for Sagiro: How high was the statue illusion, and the tower?

Number47: I was thinking that the subterfuge involved Eigomic. I have been thinking that maybe he isn't one of the giants, not really.

Nail: Right, that's what I was thinking. And the tower's gotta be pretty short, to fit inside a statue.

Finally: Doesn't this all feel like the beginning of a long journey into some extra dimensional space, à la that "city in a bottle" we saw a while back? The statue looks like an extradimensional portal, to me.

Sagiro: To address recent questions and supposition: the illusionary beholder statue sits atop an enormous illusionary base, a huge rectangular block of stone slightly over ten feet on a side and a bit over thirty feet tall. (It's actually a frustum, being slightly larger at the base than at the top.) The beholder itself is over ten feet in diameter. The hidden tower is round, ten feet in diameter and thirty feet high. Thus, it fits snugly within the the illusionary block, with the beholder sitting atop both the base and the tower.

As for the interior of the tower, the Company has information from a sage in Djaw that all of the Hets were larger on the inside than on the outside ("dimensionally transcendental," for you *Doctor Who* fans). It's certainly a possibility that it's an extradimensional space (à la *rope trick*) of some kind.

How to Win Friends and Influence People

Run #150 – Sunday, June 8, 2003

Here begins the first session captured on audio tape and transcribed directly. The dialogue you read here is 99% authentic, with only the mildest of cosmetic touch-up.

Where giantish guards and clever decoys did not deter them, the Company are temporarily overcome by an unusual opposing force: indecision. They land on the roof of the courtyard buildings for a what-do-we-do-now debate. The topic at hand is whether or not to storm the tower now, or wait until tomorrow when they'll have more spells available.

"We have no idea what's on the other side of that door, and we have no dispelling magic left," argues Morningstar.

"We have healing at least," says Kibi. "What are we down?"

"*Flies, invisibilities* and *wind walks*," says Morningstar, "plus some attack spells, and our *dispels*."

"If we wait until tomorrow," points out Flicker, "they could have a lot more in place to guard the tower."

"And we'll have cast all our spells again anyway," says Aravis, siding with Flicker. "We have a better chance of getting through with very little injury if we just go now."

"Do we have any *auguries*?" asks Kibi. Ernie and Dranko answer in the negative.

"We know the Black Circle does sneaky, trappy, more thought-related stuff," says Morningstar.

"But they *are* susceptible to *blade barrier*," quips Ernie. "Everyone is."

"I don't have that either," sighs Morningstar.

"It's going to take a lot of boom, and some guile, to get around what's surrounding the tower right now," says Grey Wolf, motioning to the eight giants on the ground.

"We're invisible, and they can't detect us 'cause of the Divination Sinks," says Ernie.

"I've got a lot of spells left," says Kibi.

"Me too," says Aravis. "Well, except for *mage hands*."

Morningstar refuses to back down. "We have no way to get rid of traps, and we know that the Black Circle likes them... a lot."

"In the Black Circle's laboratory, all of the traps were disarmed or set off by Flicker," says Aravis.

"Don't remind me," mutters Flicker.

"Sorry."

"I'm actually thinking of the Bestiary," says Morningstar. Then, under her breath: "I *dispelled* that one. Maybe it was cursed... it's the last thing I remember dispelling successfully."

The sleet continues to come down hard and cold. Those of the Company not *wind walking* are getting soaked through. The giants look even more miserable, water dripping down their hair and faces, their shoulders slumped, some making a token effort to look around and be attentive. Whatever excitement the illusionary ettin might have incited has worn off completely.

"We could try taking out Eigomic tonight, without going for the tower," says Kibi. "He's probably discovering right about now that the key's gone."

"If we just go now, we know we won't have to face him," says Ernie. But to himself he continues, "On the other hand, if we go in the morning, he might not come himself, and then we can get through the door just as fast."

"The question is," says Kibi, "does Eigomic have some way of communicating with whoever's inside the tower?"

"I really feel strongly about waiting," says Morningstar.

"I want to go," says Dranko impatiently.

"I think I want to wait," answers Ernie. While they bicker, Ernie comes out of mist form long enough to heal himself and get thoroughly drenched, and then returns to his gaseous state.

"If we wait, we may have to use even more resources than we already have today, just to reach the point we're at now," says Aravis.

As is their custom when things reach an impasse, the Company have a vote. Snokas and Kay, like Morningstar, want to wait until tomorrow. Ernie and Grey Wolf are on the fence but tend to agree with Morningstar. Flicker, Step, Kibi, Aravis and Dranko just want to get on with it. It's a tie vote, 5 to 5. "We need an odd number of people in the party," says Ernie.

"We *are* guaranteed to have to deal with Eigomic if we wait," concedes Grey Wolf.

"Plus whatever he brings with him," says Kibi.

"And he can put up more defenses overnight," admits Ernie. "We don't know what he's capable of. And we won't be able to detect them because of the Divination Sink."

For another few minutes, the conversation goes around in circles.

"Well, if we wait, I really want to try taking out Eigomic now," says Kibi, tiring of the debate.

"I'm liking that," says Grey Wolf.

"Without him," Kibi continues, "there's not going to be any organization in the defense. It'll make things a lot easier."

"There'll be chaos," says Grey Wolf, smiling.

"Yeah, why not?" says Dranko. "He's kind of a jerk."

"Evil does have degree," says Step. "Eigomic's degree is not strong. He is evil, but he is not diabolical."

"He kicks puppies, but he doesn't conquer worlds?" says Ernie.

"I cannot speculate as to what he does to puppies," says Step.

Kesh: I just love the banter going on through this whole thing.

"Let's just kill everybody!" says Ernie unexpectedly.

"Ernest, that attitude does not become you," says Step.

Ernie manages to look frustrated and embarrassed even in mist form. "Oh, I don't mean it. I just... it's just that I'm tired of it all being so hard!"

"If we really want to destroy everyone, we can just all fly away in different directions and wait for the universe to unravel," says Aravis.

"That would spread some chaos and confusion, all right," says Ernie.

"I was kidding."

"But..."

"No. Just... no, no, no, no. Bad idea. Forget I said it."

"Tell me why it's a bad idea?" cries Ernie, growing more and more frustrated.

Scree starts to roil. *I feel agitated*, says the earth elemental. *Well, it's not really me, if you know what I mean.*

"Hey Eyes," says Kibi, "do you think we should go inside the tower now, or do you think we should wait?"

"I think they're agitated about Ernie's suggestion," says Aravis.

Ernie looks down at Scree and addresses the Eyes of Moirel directly. "You guys dragged us from our happy house, with the... the relaxing, and the fame. You brought us here, to this crazy world which we don't like, and now you won't tell us what to do! Aaaaiee, that's frustrating!"

"Are you *castigating* them?" asks Aravis, smirking.

"No. And I'm pretty sure they can resist my spells," says Ernie.

"I'll bet they don't know what to do," says Aravis.

"That is a frightening thought," says Grey Wolf.

The sleet keeps falling. Seldom have the Company been so paralyzed with indecision and so evenly divided in their opinions. In the end, the decision is made for them.

"Er... hey, guys? What's that?" Kibi is pointing out across the courtyard. Dranko and Morningstar see it too... a dark shape moving through the sleet. And it's somewhat *higher* than they are, even as they stand atop a forty foot building.

"There's something flying toward us," says Kibi. "It's moving slowly."

Morningstar quickly fires off a Silent *detect thoughts*. Kibi, already invisible, casts *improved invisibility* on himself. ("Cause sometimes you just can't be invisible enough," whispers Aravis.)

It's difficult to make out details through the driving sleet, but as the shape moves out over the courtyard it's at least clear that it's roughly spherical and about five feet in diameter. Grey Wolf experiences a sinking feeling in his stomach. "Oh, joy," he says.

A full-sized 'tundra eye' floats slowly into clear view. Water drips from its bloated, purplish body. Ten eyestalks wiggle and writhe above its bulk. Morningstar is unable to read its mind.

Its huge central eye blinks open and stares at them. At once the *wind walkers* become solid, the invisible folk become visible, the flying people stop flying, the *telepathic bond* shuts off, and everyone's magic weapons stop glowing. There's an imperceptible 'plink' as someone's *ioun stone* bounces on the ground.

"Why are you here?" The beholder's voice is wet, grinding, sloppy.

"You have something we want," Ernie pipes up. ("That may not have been the right answer to the question," whispers Aravis.)

"A bauble," continues Ernie, hopefully.

"Who sent you?" burbles the beholder.

"The universe," says Ernie, improvising wildly. "It kind of hates us."

"Oooh, we're all going to die," Grey Wolf predicts sullenly.

"We'd like to take the Eye and go now, please," concludes Ernie.

The beholder looks them over for a few quiet seconds. Then it asks: "Are you the chosen?"

"Er... yes! Yes we are!" says Aravis, figuring that *has* to be the right answer.

"Then you will know the secrets that Dark Words taught. Speak the treasure that none have found."

Uh... what? "The Eye," says Morningstar, trying to make it sound more like an assertion than a guess.

"Are you certain?" asks the beholder.

"That is certainly what we seek," says Aravis.

"Name the prophets who saw the descent," says the beholder.

Ernie's face brightens as if he knows this one. "Oh... oh..." It's just on the tip of his tongue... "Nope," he concludes suddenly. "No idea."

"Well, that just dashed our hopes," says Grey Wolf.

Ernie grasps at straws. "When you say 'descent,' do you mean 'the fall,' or 'the disagreement?'"

The beholder lets out a long gurgling sigh that sounds like: "Hmmmmmmmm..."

Ernie tries one more time. "The Eye belongs to Moirel, but I don't think she saw anything..."

"You are here," says the beholder. "You know what is here, but you are not the chosen."

"Well, we're *often* chosen," says Ernie.

"The penalty is death," concludes the beholder. It closes its large central eye. Magic springs back to life around the Company. Morningstar, Ernie, Flicker and Step are then struck by thin colored rays from the monster's eyestalks. Ernie, Step and Flicker shrug off whatever the effects might have been. Morningstar shakes her head and looks around, slightly dazed.

Kibi glances over in concern. "Are you OK, Morningstar?"

"Yeah. I don't think it affected me." Which is true; she doesn't. On the other hand, she is struck by the revelation that there is no reason for hostilities here; the beholder is just doing its job, and the Company are intruding on its turf. Surely everyone can come to some agreement. Better yet, they can just depart before misunderstandings turn to violence.

Grey Wolf, back in mist form, starts the thirty second process of turning solid. Aravis takes the opportunity to blanket his friends with a *mass haste* spell. Morningstar looks around and sees Kay string her bow. "What are you doing?" she cries. "Let's just get out of here!"

"Where can we go where it won't chase us down?" asks Ernie.

"How about where we were last night?" answers Morningstar. "We ran from the small ones, and this is worse! We shouldn't attack it!"

Ernie flies around to a different side of the courtyard, after which he starts de-misting. Some of the beholder's eyestalks track him as he flies. Below him, the eight giants have finally noticed the commotion. One of them points up at the beholder.

"**Googa Flog!**" it shouts. The others look up. One of them drops his club in surprise. They all begin to back away nervously at the sight of a really, really big tundra eye.

Dranko flies in the opposite direction from Ernie and also starts to de-mist. Kay fires her bow from the rooftop and hits with two out of the four arrows. They stick out of the beholder's body like pins in a cushion. Flicker flies down to ground level right next to the tower (carefully keeping it between him and the eight giants – not that they're paying any attention to him) and like most of the others starts coming out of mist form.

Snokas has his bow drawn but sees that Morningstar is waving frantically at him. "Morningstar, should I shoot it?"

"No! Snokas, stop *her*."

"Who?" asks Snokas, puzzled.

"Kay!" says Morningstar. Isn't it *obvious*? Plinking the beholder with arrows is only going to end in heartbreak.

"Er... OK," says Snokas, sounding unconvinced.

Kibi, ever the straight man, complains: "Morningstar, I know you didn't want to attack, but we *are* democratic... kind of. And it's no good for some of us to attack and some of us not to."

Snokas puts himself between Kay and the beholder. Kay glares at the half-orc, who shrugs his shoulders apologetically.

"This is crazy!" shouts Morningstar. "Attacking it is never going to work!"

"It's certainly not going to work if we're not all pulling together," shoots back Kibi.

"OK, we won't kill it," grumbles Snokas. "I don't know *why* we won't kill it..."

Morningstar throws up her hands in general frustration with Kibi's failure to see reason and starts to de-mist herself. She could end the *wind walk* on everyone with a thought and a gesture, but she feels right now that that would only increase hostilities.

Ignoring Morningstar, the hasted Kibi casts *hold monster* on the beholder. The monster resists. Undeterred, he targets the beast with a *charm monster* but that also fails. He curses his ill-luck and then moves around the courtyard perimeter away from his increasingly less bunched up comrades.

The beholder has identified Kay as the greatest threat. It floats a bit higher to get a good angle on her, tilts to train different eyestalks on her. A new colored ray strikes Kay in the chest. Nothing happens. A second ray strikes her, this one dealing

significant frost damage and covering her body with an icy glaze. With a third contemptuous zap, the creature flicks her with a pale beam that sends her flying backward off the forty foot high roof. It chuckles to itself for a second in satisfaction, but does a floating double take when it sees Kay simply hovering in the air thirty feet back. Kay might have been standing on the roof to shoot, but she also had a *fly* spell active.

A few seconds later the beholder realizes that, while dangerous, Kay might *not* be the greatest threat after all. Aravis waves his arms and utters the arcane syllables that bring forth a *sonic bolt*. **KABOOM!** With its central eye closed, devastating sonic energy rips through its bloated body. Seeing the ragged bits of fleshy pulp sloughing off the monster's form, the *hasted* Aravis fires off a second one. **KABOOM!** The beholder wobbles in the air. Its eyestalks quiver in pain.

Morningstar is shaking her head. The beholder is her friend. But then why was it just attacking her other friends with its magic bolts? Self defense? "No!" she cries in confusion. "Not *sonic bolts*! Stop it!" But Aravis was just reacting to the beholder's attack on Kay, right? It's a monster, and it's attacking them, attacking her friends... her *real* friends... But... but...

Ahhh! It was a trick! "Dammit!" shouts Morningstar, finally clearing her head of the beholder's *charm* attack. "It got into my brain!"

"Hey! That's *my* brain!" shouts Dranko, incensed. "Er, I mean, my fiancée's brain! And if anyone's going to mess with her mind, it's going to be me!"

Kay, hovering, fires another volley of arrows. Three go wide, but the fourth sticks into the monster's mass with a meaty thunk. The force of the arrow spins the weakened beholder around about thirty degrees, such that its front-facing eyestalks are looking directly at Kibi. The dwarf smiles.



A traditionally electrical *lightning bolt* cracks from Kibi's fingers and slams into the beholder. Its eyestalks all go rigid for a second before the monster falls, crashing down to the icy grass like a downed zeppelin.

LightPhoenix: Well, now everyone knows they're there! So much for argument.

nemmerle: I was certain that beholder was gonna kill someone – or turn someone to stone or at least knock someone to negs... especially once Morningstar was *charmed*... but was surprised that they had a pretty easy time of it.

Sagiro: I too was surprised that the beholder went down as easily as it did, though it wasn't quite as deadly as a by-the-book beholder. Because of my personal aversion to save-or-die spells, I changed its *disintegrate* ray to the no-saving-throw cold ray power from *Otiluke's freezing sphere*. I also changed *finger of death* to something else, but I can't remember right now (notes are at home). To partially balance this, I allowed the beholder to use four eyestalks per arc instead of three.

Since the visible PCs were fairly clumped together, the beholder only fired off eight rays before it was killed. One of these was the freeze ray, which did some hefty damage to Kay. Another was the *charm monster* that affected Morningstar. A third was the *telekinesis* used on Kay. And against the remaining five, the PCs made all of their saves (which included two *flesh to stone* rays).

Ah, well. Live and learn. Next time there'll just have to be more beholders!

The giants look at the downed Enormous Tundra Eye, aghast.

"Morningstar!" says Ernie. "Are you OK? Is your brain all there?"

"I think so," says Morningstar. She blinks in the sleet, still unsure of herself. It was in her mind! It burns her inside to have had the tables turned like that.

And speaking of muddled minds, Kibi sees that six of the giants below him are clumped nicely together. He follows up his *lightning bolt* with a *confusion*. The giants look about stupidly.

"So, should we press the attack?" asks Snokas, looking askance at Morningstar, and still not sure what's going on.

"Get down there and get ready to guard Flicker from any giants once we're all solid," she tells her cohort. Snokas looks at her. He looks at the beholder. He looks back at Morningstar.

"I'm sorry," she says. And with a smile and shrug, adds, "It winked its cute little eye at me!" (*Hey now!* thinks Dranko over the mind-link.)

The *wind walkers* all get to ground level (staying near the tower) and prepare for Morningstar to drop the spell. Aravis, still feeling magic energy crackling on his fingertips, lands and readies a *fireball* for the crowd of giants if any of them advance on

the group. He doesn't have to wait long. One of them ambles a few steps closer and Aravis doesn't wait to see if it's aggressive or merely wandering in its *confusion*. A sonic *fireball* explodes around the giants. They wince in pain.

Four more giants, fresh and unconfused, arrive through the northern archway into the courtyard. The only visible enemy they can see is Aravis standing about forty feet away.

Boss? says Pewter, nervously. *You... er... see 'em, right?*

What do you want me to do about them? snaps Aravis.

Zustiur: Yes. It's perfect. I love cats, and Pewter is definitely my favourite character in this whole story. He hasn't had the greatest of roles, especially in the early runs, but his increased vocal activity in recent times is glorious.

All hail Pewter. All hail Sagiro.

The architecture of the archway allows Dranko to land on a wide ledge, just above giantish head-height. He looks down at the backs of the four newly arrived giants, his fingers twitching with anticipation as he waits for the *wind walk* to drop.

From her flying position, Kay fires arrows at one of the new giants. Three of them slam into its body. It looks annoyed.

Kibi spares Aravis a terrible pummeling by laying down a long *wall of force*, separating three of the newly arrived giants from the rest of the battle. Being *hasted*, he then flies down to Flicker and makes the halfling invisible. "There's a *wall of force* up blocking off most of the newcomers!" he shouts in Charagan Common.

Morningstar flies down to join the others on the ground and drops the *wind walk*. She readies a *flame strike* if any of the hedged-out giants make a move to scale the *wall of force*.

Finally solid, Flicker fishes out the iron key from Eigomic's basement. While he starts to feel around for the keyhole, Grey Wolf draws *Bostock* and charges the nearest giant. It takes a swipe at him as he closes but the huge club clangs off his shield. *Bostock* flashes with a flicker of blue light, and the sword speaks into Grey Wolf's mind. *It has been too long*, it hisses.

Aravis doesn't wait for the giants to move again. A number of the confused ones are starting to fix their sights on him, and he knows that if they decide to attack en masse, he's paste. He casts a *cone of cold*, catching all six in the frozen blast. None of them drop. Aravis's face twitches with apprehension. At this very moment there is nothing between him and a world of hurt. Most of them take a step in his direction...

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!" With a wild cry, Step charges the giant closest to Aravis. He chops off one of its legs with a clean high sweep of his sword. Down goes the giant, its blood staining the icy ground.

Ernie charges too but it goes less well for him. He slips on the sleet-slick grass and slides into the feet of his chosen giant. A wild sword swing as he struggles to his feet goes wide, but he has at least gotten the giant's attention. It looks away from Aravis and down at its tiny attacker.

Snokas distracts another giant by swinging his picks at its knees; again, though he fails to penetrate its armor and hide, he steals the giant's focus away from Aravis.

The three giants on the other side of Kibi's *wall of force* see Aravis only a short distance away and charge! **BONK! BONK, BONK!** Three giantish noses are crunched against the invisible barrier. But despite the comedy, these giants are no fools. Realizing that the barrier only comes up to their chests, two of them form cups with their hands and hoist the third over the wall. The thrown giant lands on the slippery grass, his feet go flying out from under him, and he falls on his rear.

At the same time, Eigomic arrives through the arch. Broad and strong and sporting his blood fox pelt, he surveys the combat and barks questions at his fellows. The closest giants clue him in to the existence of the *wall of force*. From Morningstar's point of view his arrival is fortuitous, since he can be included in the *flame strike*. **FOOM!** Giants are singed, though Eigomic doesn't seem much fazed.

Finally, the giants attack. One of them strikes Grey Wolf with two crushing blows from its club. Another charges Morningstar, and although he glances off the *wall of force* and nearly loses his balance, he manages to keep his feet and bludgeon her. The giant looking down at Ernie brings his club down on the halfling's helm, and follows it up with a golf-like swing that sends Ernie skidding back ten feet, knocked onto his back. The fourth giant swats at Snokas, his closest target. Two almost contemptuous swings of the club send the half-orc reeling backward.

The fifth and sixth giants go for Aravis. Down come two huge clubs. *Booooooosssssss!* cries Pewter. **WHAM! WHAM!** Aravis is pummeled, his bones jarred and his teeth rattling. He's still standing after the assault, albeit badly wounded.

Dranko activates his *sash of improved invisibility*. Eigomic hears him speak the trigger word, but when he turns to look back over his head he sees... is that a faint humanoid outline in the sleet?

SNAP! Eigomic catches the tip of Dranko's whip right in the face, and he flinches away in pain.

Kay pulls back her bow and fires at one of the giants menacing Aravis. It's a flawless shot, burying itself in the target's forehead. The giant crumples. She shoots a second arrow into the side of the other of Aravis's attackers. The second giant turns slowly and looks at her, forgetting about Aravis in its *confusion*.

"Got it!" shouts Flicker. He finds the keyhole and slips the key in. Perfect fit. **Snick!** A faint glow shines out from the invisible 'door.' He puts his hand to the glow and pushes. The first thing he notices is that the texture is no longer stone. It's cold and glassy, like pearl, or ceramic.

The second thing he notices is that it doesn't yield. Nope. Not a bit. He pushes with all his might but it might as well still be stone for all the good it does. Using the key itself for as much leverage as possible, he pulls at the door instead. Still nothing. Argh!

Grey Wolf sees that most of the remaining giants are bunched around the northern entrance to the courtyard. He signals to Aravis and Kibi that the time has come to inflict a spell combination that they've been cackling over for days. Then he activates his own *vest of improved invisibility* and shouts for Morningstar to get out of the way. Dranko is also in the likely area of effect, but his roguish reflexes should keep him out of harm's way. "Don't worry about me," he calls. "If you have to get me inside, I can dodge."

One Certain Step steps over the body of the giant he has just slain and moves on to the next one. His bastard sword flashes, and the giant is cut to ribbons. Ernie does the same to the giant that just clobbered him, carving up its shins and ankles until it falls over. Snokas swings his picks, but grumbles jealously when his giant fails to die.

Morningstar vacates the area near the giants; this draws an attack from one of them, but its backswing hits the *wall of force*, causing it to lose its balance and fall to the ground. When she reaches Grey Wolf's side she uses a charge from her *wand of cure serious wounds*, which he desperately needs after his recent pounding.

Then the storm comes. Grey Wolf casts *iron storm*, centered in the midst of the giants a few feet above the *wall of force*. The area fills with whirling iron filings. The giants swat at them, taking minimal damage, while Dranko easily dodges them. Eigomic chuckles as tiny iron bits bounce off him.

Kibi flies up and casts *lightning bolt* toward the area of the *iron storm*; no sooner has the energy left the dwarf's fingertips than it is sucked into the cloud of iron filings, filling its area with crackling electricity. All of the giants roar with pain. One of them explodes into goblets. Aravis follows up immediately with a *chain lightning*, its massive main blast sucked into the *iron storm*. The secondary bolts get caught up as well, intensifying the effect. Another giant explodes. The ones that remain look horribly damaged. Only Eigomic doesn't look near death, but he's obviously had better days than this one. The iron filings aren't quite so funny anymore.

Unfortunately, Dranko is a mess. He has never had to dodge the effect of a charged *iron storm* before, and he fails on both of his first two attempts. "Can you take another one?" shouts Aravis over the sleet.

Dranko looks at Eigomic. "I think I've got the measure of it now," he gasps. "You can get Eigomic with one more! Do it!"

You're the one who wanted to be up there, thinks Morningstar over the *telepathic bond*.

I can't help it, thinks Dranko mischievously. *I like it on top*.

Aravis, *hasted*, fires off a second *chain lightning* into the iron filings. **KABOOM!** More giants are torn apart, limbs and chunks flying everywhere. Eigomic screams in agony and drops to one knee. Dranko topples from his perch and hits the ground, unconscious. His mind drops from the link.

"Congratulations, mages," says Morningstar angrily. "You made a real big boom. Dranko's down."

nemmerle: Please excuse me from being one of those kind of Story Hour posters that comes along and sticks his nose into the business of "playing style" – but I found the idea of casting those *lightning bolt* spells into the *iron storm* area while Dranko was up there was reckless beyond imagining – I guess I couldn't justify knowingly casting a damaging area spell where one of my companions was no matter how much damage it does or how many hit points he had unless there was absolutely no other way and something huge was immediately at stake, i.e. the life of an innocent, the fate of the world, etc...

I guess it pushes at the boundaries of my suspension of disbelief to have someone cast a dangerous and potentially fatal spell at a friend – or at the very least an extremely painful spell. It is one of those things I would probably end up giving my players a raised eyebrow for even suggesting.

Sagiro: A few things to keep in mind:

- With his high Reflex saves and Evasion, this isn't the first time Dranko has voluntarily taken a chance like this one. It's always worked out well in the past. And characters in my game are always consulted before area-effect spells are launched in their vicinity.
- With cat's grace active, his Reflex save in this case was at +14. The chance of him failing all three saves was 1.8%.

(Although they didn't do the math at the table, the odds worked out to:

Make all 3 saves: 36%
Make 2 out of 3 saves: 45%
Make 1 out of 3 saves: 17%
Make no saves: 2%)

- Having rolled well on an endurance, he had 148 hit points at the time, which should have been enough for him to absorb all three spells and stay up, even in the unlikely event that he failed all three saves.

KidCthulhu was playing Dranko that night, and rolled, on three consecutive saves, a 2, a 3, and a 4. And the damage dice for Aravis's second chain lightning were off the charts; something like 65 points of damage on 15d6 (expected total: 53).

Ah well. Live, barely, and learn.

KidCthulhu: Oh, and you can bet I wasn't really happy about this. We thought around the table for a long time about how we were going to make this phone call.

Me: Er, honey... The good news is that the iron storm/chain lightning combination did a ton of damage!

Piratecat: And what's the bad news?

Me: You took it.

Really, nothing worse than killing your husband's character. Then again, staying to evade the area-effect spells is so what Dranko would have done and always does.

And I just want to note that all the rude nasty Dranko dialogue you read here (and many other comments that wouldn't get past Eric's Grandma) are me. Playing Dranko and Ernie at the same time almost broke my little brain.

Piratecat: Let's all hope my next wife has better luck with dice...

Seriously, I knew something was wrong when I got home and called Sagiro's house to find out how the game was going. No one wanted to talk to me. That's never, ever a good sign.

Henry: I do seem to recall a certain Juvenile Old One rolling 4 consecutive 20s sometime last year, in another time and place. So this could be looked at as Corilayna kinda balancing the scales?

Lesson: Never, ever let someone with a lucky streak unbalanced roll dice for you.

Swack-Iron: We've got a couple of characters in our games that are immune to fire damage, and they also occasionally volunteer to have fireballs and flame strikes dropped on their heads. We usually remind them that there's one very bad consequence even to immune characters: they could roll a 1, and if they roll a 1 they have to make saves for their precious magic items.

Only volunteer to get hit by a friendly spell (even if you don't think you'll take any damage) if you're willing to take the chance that you'll lose your favorite magic item!

Plane Sailing: Did anyone remind your DM of the bad consequence that flame strikes are half divine power damage and thus fully applicable to people immune to fire?

Nail: Flame strike, from the SRD:

A flame strike produces a vertical column of divine fire roaring downward. The spell deals 1d6 points of damage per caster level (maximum 15d6). Half the damage is fire damage; the other half results from divine power and is therefore not subject to being reduced by magic or abilities that confer protection from fire.

Eigomic drops his club and raises his hands. “Oom gah gah! Oom gah gah!” he yells. Three of the four giants still alive hear the instructions and surrender on the spot. Their expressions are of profound relief at not having to fight to the death.

The fourth giant doesn't hear his leader over the pounding sleet. He swings his club and slams it into Snokas, springing several ribs and knocking the half-orc flat. Step, the closest to Snokas, sees what is happening. He already has serious misgivings about this battle and the death he has caused. This final giant's life would be spared if only he could see or hear his leader's order to surrender. Step lowers his sword, points at Eigomic, then kneels to Snokas and grants him the healing touch of his goddess Kemma. He is rewarded with a thundering blow to his shoulder.

Meanwhile, Kay has flown over to where Dranko should be, retrieving a healing potion as she goes. Dranko's invisible body is hard to spot, but the sleet makes it possible. She finds Dranko's throat by feel and detects a fluttering pulse.

Flicker has given the glassy door of the tower a swift kick. “There must be a password!” he says. “Black Circle! Eye of Moirel! Seven

StevenAC: I'm sorry, but I'm just going to have to think of the giants as having Cockney accents from now on. I've got this image of them breaking into a slightly adapted musical number from Oliver! at this point:

GIANTS: Oom-gah-gah! Oom-gah-gah!
That's 'ow it goes,
Oom-gah-gah! Oom-gah-gah!
Ev'ryone knows:

EIGOMIC: They all suppose what they want to suppose
When they 'ear oom-gah-gah!

KidCthulhu: I'm sorry Steve, but I'm going to have to kill you now. Please hold still, this will only hurt a lot.

(I played the Dodger in high school. Still fighting the flashbacks.)

StevenAC: *channels Step* Ernest, that attitude does not become you...

KidCthulhu: Ah, but I'm not Ernie. He's just the nice face I put on occasionally. And the death sentence stands. As soon as I can get to Australia... er, singing “Consider Yourself” all the way. AAARRGH.

StevenAC: Looking at an atlas, I don't think I can run much further away. And if I'm already condemned, well...

Dark Words! ..." He rattles off every plot-relevant proper noun he can think of, to no avail.

Ernie, his giant having surrendered, sheathes his sword and casts a healing spell on himself before going to help Flicker. With his greater strength he pushes on the door, but still it doesn't budge.

Snokas, healed by Step, springs to his feet. Step cannot stop him from plunging his picks into the giant's legs. The final giant falls backward into a puddle of rainwater and blood. Step casts his eyes to the ground and prays for forgiveness.

Kay and Aravis help slide the contents of a healing potion down Dranko's throat. He coughs up some water and his breathing becomes regular, but still he is unconscious. Only a foot or two above them the air remains filled with small chunks of flying iron.

"Kibi!" calls Ernie, heaving at the door. "Do you think Scree could help us get through the tower door now?"

"Do you think we want to try getting the door open before we heal up?" asks Morningstar.

"We don't want Eigomic to see that we've gotten in," adds Kibi.

"I agree," says Aravis. "We should only go in if we first dispatch Eigomic."

"Dispatch him?" barks Step, lifting his head. "He surrendered!"

Kibi dismisses his *wall of force* and activates his *ioun stone of tongues*. He moves so that he can see Eigomic, just in case the giantish Keeper tries to flee.

"Eigomic!" calls the dwarf.

"**What's that?**" shouts Eigomic. He cannot see the source of the voice, since Kibi is invisible.

"It's a dwarf," says Kibi, trying to sound menacing. "So don't try to flee."

"I have to get out of this... spell... or I'll die," growls Eigomic, swatting at the iron bits.

"Then come towards my voice," Kibi instructs.

Eigomic limps out of the *iron storm* toward Kibi. Between them, deflated on the ground, is the dead beholder. The Keeper stares at it. "**You... killed it.**" His voice is soft with awe and confusion.

"It attacked us," says Kibi.

"Simplistic," mutters Ernie, "but true."

I am the Very Model of a Halfling Personality (with apologies to Sir W.S. Gilbert)

ERNIE: I am the very model of a halfling personality,
I like to cool and like to eat, for food's my speciality.
I keep the party happily provisioned when we're travelling;
I like to meet new people, so adventuring is just my thing.
I'm three foot tall and three foot wide and plate-mail-clad from head to toe;
I'm not the best at stealth or speed in dangerous places where we go;
Still, when it comes to whupping ass I'm confident I make the grade:
(Pause, then smile.)
My portion size is small but Sunder Kneecap is my stock-in-trade.

THE COMPANY: His portion size is small but Sunder Kneecap is his stock-in-trade,
His portion size is small but Sunder Kneecap is his stock-in-trade,
His portion size is small but Sunder Kneecap is his stock, his stock-in-trade...

ERNIE: I'm cheerful as a rule but can be doughy when I'm roused, you see;
"Gosh darn it all to heck!" I'll swear when things aren't going right for me.
In short (hah!) and despite all of my individuality,
I am the very model of a halfling personality.

THE COMPANY: In short (hah!) and despite all of his individuality,
He is the very model of a halfling personality.

ERNIE: It seems that I'm the Focus 'cos my middle name is "Wilburforce";
I don't know what it means, but I suppose I'll find out in due course.
I've fought against all kinds of things from rats and bats to orcs and men,
I've turned undead and cast my healing magic time and time again.
I told off Solomea's ingrate father in the Crosser's Maze;
With *castigate* I've deafened several enemies and left them dazed.
I took the Stormknights to attack the great Colossus Ventifact,
(Pause, then frown.)
But when I died I had to give the Nifi's flying carpet back.

THE COMPANY: But when he died he had to give the Nifi's flying carpet back,
But when he died he had to give the Nifi's flying carpet back,
But when he died he had to, had to give the Nifi's flying carpet back...

ERNIE: I really, really hate it when a bully beats a little guy;
I'm not a front-line fighter but I can't resist the urge to try;
In short (hah!) and despite all of my individuality,
I am the very model of a halfling personality.

THE COMPANY: In short (hah!) and despite all of his individuality,
He is the very model of a halfling personality.

ERNIE: And now we're in this crazy world where someone's broken history;
The situation's desperate and we have to solve this mystery.
The Eyes tell me the fabric of reality wants us erased
So I must keep the *talisman* at all times belted 'round my waist.
We've followed clues as best we can; to Het Branoi we've come at last;
We think an Eye's inside there past the giants and the lightning blast.
A big beholder wants a password and it looks cantankerous;
(Pause, then sigh.)
It's all so very hard - I think the universe is hating us.

THE COMPANY: It's all so very hard - we think the universe is hating us,
It's all so very hard - we think the universe is hating us,
It's all so very hard - we think the universe is hating us...

ERNIE: But while the party sticks together, we'll get home through thick and thin;
The Sharshun and their Emp'rор, we'll consign them to the rubbish bin.
For still, in spite of all these threats to my congeniality,
I am the very model of a halfling personality!

THE COMPANY: For still, in spite of all these threats to his congeniality,
He is the very model of a halfling personality!

KidCthulhu: [sound of jaw hitting floor] I take it all back. Not only can you live, I'll be sending a case of turtle jerky your way. That was the best!

StevenAC: I'm glad you liked my little parody of G & S, KidC.
The only problem that I seem to have now is a tendency,
No matter what the topic is, to think and write iambic'ly... *thwack*

Oh, no. Could somebody please get this song OUT of my HEAD!!

"Just tell us," says Kibi, "who are the prophets who saw the descent?"

"Who? What are you talking about?" snaps Eigomic.

"Is there a password to get into this... thing?" asks Kibi, pointing to the tower.

"I don't know!" says Eigomic angrily.

Morningstar ducks under the *iron storm* and casts *heal* on Dranko. Her fiancé opens his eyes and sees her kneeling over him. "Baby," he says weakly, "you make everything better."

Morningstar smiles at him, crawls out from under the sphere of filings, and casts *detect thoughts* on Eigomic. To her surprise, it works. She starts reading his surface thoughts, searching for discrepancies as Kibi interrogates him.

"Is there more than one Floating Master, or is that the only one?" asks Kibi, pointing at the dead beholder.

"I only saw it once, but I don't think there is more than one," answers Eigomic.

"So why did you have all the other giants guarding this statue?" asks Kibi.

"It is my solemn duty to guard the statue from anyone," says the Keeper.

"Duty to whom?"

"To the Floating Master."

"The Floating Master told you to guard it?" presses Kibi.

"Well, technically the previous Keeper told me."

"Oh," says Kibi. Morningstar nods her head, indicating that all of this is the truth, so far as she can tell. "So, er," says Kibi, "do you know anything about the key that was in your basement?"

"Ah, the key... which you murdered my people to get," snarls Eigomic.

Kibi is discomfited but presses on. "Do you know what it's for?" he asks.

"No. I was charged to keep it safe. And I thought I had." The Keeper glares at the watery outline of the invisible dwarf before him. **"Why did you come here?"** he cries. **"Why have you killed my folk?"**

"Well... er..." says Kibi at a loss. "We did warn you giants not to engage in fighting with us. I understand you thought it was your duty to protect the statue. But it's our duty to save the universe, and that involves getting inside that statue."

"I saw the bodies in my study," says Eigomic angrily. **"One of them was mutilated, and the other was unconscious and near death, slumped in a chair! You took them by surprise. Did you give them the opportunity to surrender?"**

A light rumble of thunder sounds far overhead. The sleet continues to come down. Kibi, shamed, has no answer for Eigomic. Uncomfortable seconds tick by.

"It seems I have no choice but to get rid of you as soon as possible," says Eigomic wearily. **"What do you need from me?"**

"The password," says Kibi.

"What password?" Morningstar gestures that the Keeper truly doesn't know.

"The Floating Master asked us questions when we wanted to get into the statue," says Kibi.

"I see," sneers Eigomic. **"No doubt you did not answer them, and so were forced to kill him."**

"Do you know what the Chosen Ones are?" asks Kibi doggedly.

"No. The Floating Master did not tell us things we do not need to know. We are to guard the statue of the Great Floating Master."

"What do you get out of this?" asks Kibi. "What's in it for you, to do what the Master asks?"

"The Keepers live to serve!" explodes Eigomic. **"There needs to be nothing in it for me. I do my duty because I must."**

Morningstar picks up an additional surface thought from the giant. He mentally adds: *And because given what a pain those little ones are, a big one could wipe out my whole city if we didn't do as it asks...*

"If we promise to do no more harm to your people, will you promise not to interfere with us entering the statue?" asks Kibi.

"**Entering the statue?**" asks Eigomic, as if he doesn't quite get the concept. "**It's... it's a statue.**"

"Do you promise?" presses Kibi.

"**And what assurances do I have that I won't have twenty more dead fellows tomorrow?**"

Kibi thinks for a moment. "We could kill you now," he points out. "But we are choosing not to."

"**I suggest for your own sake that you don't kill me now,**" says Eigomic. "**When my fellows discover my death, the people of my city will stop at nothing to hunt you down. I know you're powerful. I don't know that you're powerful enough to withstand that!**" Mentally, he adds: *Of course, maybe they are...*

"We're not going to make a first strike against you if you neither hinder us nor attack us," says Kibi.

"**When you enter the statue, is it likely to harm my people or my city?**" *Or myself, more importantly.*

Morningstar shakes her head. "No, not if you're not in this courtyard," promises Kibi.

"**It seems I have no choice,**" says Eigomic. "**How long do you need?**"

"Two days," says Kibi.

"**Fine,**" says Eigomic. He's thinking: *I assume there's only one Floating Master, but if I try to summon him again, maybe another one will come...*

Morningstar shares this thought with Kibi in Charagan Common. "How do you summon the Floating Master?" asks Kibi.

"**I don't summon the Floating Master,**" Eigomic lies. "**He simply knows when there's trouble.**"

Morningstar laughs. "It's not a good idea to lie to us," says Kibi gravely. Eigomic glares at him.

"**I use an amulet,**" he mumbles. "**I don't know how it works. I summoned the Floating Master when you started the trouble.**"

"Don't summon another one," says Kibi. Then he thinks better of this plan, and adds: "And in order for us to be sure you won't, you must leave the amulet with us."

Eigomic reaches under his furs and pulls out a chain with a small attached beholder figurine. He tosses it down near Kibi's feet. He's thinking: *Now I'd better hope there aren't any more, because if there are, I'm in big, big trouble.*

"Is there anything else I should ask him?" says Kibi to the rest of the Company.

"Ask him if he thinks I'm sexy," says Dranko. Kibi wisely ignores him.

"We will take you at your word," says Kibi to the giant. "We will not harm you if you do not interfere with us."

"**May I heal myself?**" asks Eigomic. "**Don't be alarmed. I'm going to cast a spell.**"

"A healing spell?" asks Kibi.

"**Yes.**" Eigomic chants a brief prayer and some of his wounds close up. "**Now, may I bring in others of my kind to carry out the dead?**"

"Yes, of course," says Kibi.

"**I should also bury the Floating Master,**" adds Eigomic.

"You can do that soon," says Kibi, knowing that Morningstar will want to interrogate the corpse.

"**Soon? Soon?**" cries Eigomic. "**You intend to desecrate the body of the Floating Master?**"

"No," says Kibi. "We will not touch the body." At least that last part is true.

"**If you're not going to touch the body,**" says Eigomic, "**I would like to take it for burial.**"

"You can take it for burial in one hour," says Kibi flatly.

"**Will you at least allow us to drag it beneath the balcony so it does not continue to get pelted with sleet?**"

"Yes, of course."

Eigomic barks orders to the surviving giants. “**You! And you! Drag the body of that... that large tundra eye over there, out of the rain.**” They do.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” says the Keeper, “I’ll need to get some workers in here to help take care of my dead.”

OR SO

Half an hour later the courtyard has been cleared of corpses and the Company are left alone with the dead beholder. They discuss what questions they want to put to the corpse. When they are decided, Morningstar casts her spell. The body heaves to ‘life.’ Eyestalks wiggle. The creature slurps a fraudulent breath. “I hate this spell,” says Ernie.

“Floating Master, old buddy,” says Morningstar. “How do we get into the tower?”

“*You need a key,*” says the beholder in its wet, bubbly voice. Then, after a pause, it adds: “*And a password.*”

“What is the password?” asks Morningstar.

“*I cannot remember the password,*” says the beholder. Crap!

“What questions do you ask to determine if people trying to get inside the tower are the Chosen?”

“*I ask: ‘Speak the treasure that none have found.’ I ask: ‘Name the prophets who saw the descent.’ And I ask: ‘Tell the lie that the first god spoke.’*”

“What are the answers to these questions?” demands Morningstar.

“*True enlightenment. Garlang and Zoya. You are free.*”

“Wow, that’s cynical!” comments Ernie.

“What hazards will we encounter within the tower?” Morningstar asks.

“*I have no idea,*” answers the Floating Master. “*I’ve never been inside.*”

With her final question, Morningstar asks: “How can we learn the password?”

The corpse jiggles, like it’s laughing. “*Heh, heh, heh. Ask someone who knows!*”

With a gurgling hiss, the beholder deflates again and lies motionless on the grass.

Redwald: Maybe I’m stupid, but what happened to the Divination Sinks in the courtyard of the Great Floating Master statue?

When the Company first assailed the tower they made a giant turn one around so they had a region where they could use divinations. But when Eigomic showed up, he had the giants turn the stone back around.

How come the company was able to use *Rary’s telepathic bond* and *tongues* spells and spell effects in the courtyard this time? What did I miss? If I recall correctly, in the city (can’t remember the name – the city of perpetual twilight where Grey Wolf nearly died) divinations, including *Rary’s telepathic bond*, were suppressed by the big amplified Divination Sink as if by an *antimagic field*. (Incidentally, I’m not sure why *Rary’s telepathic bond* is any more of a divination than *message* or *magic mouth* are. But that’s an argument for another forum...)

Sagiro: Oops, forgot to mention... After Eigomic surrendered, the Company turned (or had the giants turn) the Sinks around again. (Perhaps one of my players remembers the details; I know at some point they assured me they had gotten them turned around...) As for the *telepathic bond* working during the fight... must have been a glitch in the Matrix. Ah well. In short, you may be stupid, but you’re not as stupid as I am!

Nail: You’ve got no idea what a morale-boost this DM gets out of reading that. Thanks for writing your Story Hour, Sagiro...

Redwald: Ah, that explains it. You’re so busy telling a wonderful story that you, and maybe your players, sometimes forget little details.

That’s perfectly fine with me. It’s been a long time since I had a chance to actually play with people, but I remember making minor mistakes like that. As long as everyone’s having fun, you just keep moving on. Also, if you feel a particularly egregious error was made you could just retcon it for the purposes of the Story Hour. Folks like me wouldn’t mind, I’m sure.

Well, I’ll go back to lurk mode now. I will anxiously await the next installment, and continue to be very, very jealous of your players. I personally wouldn’t trade your creativity and RBDMness for all the rules-meticulousness in the world. Someday maybe we’ll have really good DM’s assistant programs to keep track of the piddly details for us.

OR SO

Speak Friend and Enter

Run #151 – Friday, June 20, 2003

Piratecat: Sagiro is SUCH A RAT BASTARD! What a frikkin’ stinker. After [spoilers], he let us stew in our own juices for hours while we tried and tried to [spoiler]. And after all that, we finally figured out that [spoilers]!

Okay, it sounds less impressive in this form, but let me tell you – we pelted him with objects from across the table and threatened to take away his [spoiler]. Auggh!

Sagiro: Sheesh. To think I’d live to see the day when my players would pelt me with bread loaves...

“Void in the glass, I return to thee!”

“Kai Kin custard!”

“Friend!”

The hidden tower fails to respond.

“How about ‘Open the bloody hell up!’” cries Grey Wolf.

“‘Friend’ is always the password,” grumbles Kibi reproachfully, glaring at the tower through the sleet.

“Not much of a password, is it, if everybody can guess it,” says Ernie. Everyone is beyond soaking wet by now. The courtyard grass has vanished beneath a slick carpet of hard white slush.

“We should do another *passwall* now that the door’s open,” suggests Dranko. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“We all get blasted backward and suffer great pain,” says Ernie.

“Really?” answers Dranko. “I wonder what *that’s* like.”

Grey Wolf rolls his eyes. “You told us you could get out of the way!” he cries. “You’ve jumped out of everything else we’ve thrown at you.”

“So what the hell *are* we going to do?” asks Dranko, looking at no one in particular. “We’re standing here in the rain. There’s exploded giant all over my boots...”

“I think that’s exploded you,” interrupts Ernie.

Flicker is still standing next to the tower, fiddling around with the key. The dead beholder has told them they need a password, but maybe if he can jimmy the lock in *just* the right way, he can spring the door open. That’s the idea, anyway, but he’s not having any luck.

Step is sitting cross-legged on the wet ground, head bowed, praying silently. Ernie watches the paladin, empathizing with the discomfort of icy rivulets running down beneath plate mail.

“Wait a minute!” says Ernie suddenly. He quotes from Step’s poem: “*Light must rive the last of five.*” Step’s how we get in! Hey, Step!”

To Ernie’s disappointment, no one gets excited over his guess. “We’ve already asked him,” says Morningstar. “He doesn’t know the password. None of us know it.”

“He doesn’t know the password,” says Ernie, “but maybe he *is* the password!”

The rest of the Company look at him like he’s crazy. Dranko clears his throat and gestures toward the tower. “Uh, so in other words, every time they want to walk in through the door after running errands, they pull out One Certain Step, and...”

“Maybe it’s some sort of... special... thing...” says Ernie lamely, realizing he’s come to a dead end.

“I die inside,” says Step, lifting his head briefly and looking pointedly at the tower.

“You’re not going to die,” says Ernie. “Nobody’s going to die here.”

“That’s right,” mutters Kibi. “Cause we’re not *getting* inside at this rate.”

Morningstar has been taking a long look at Step, lost in silent prayer. She thinks he looks especially somber, almost morose. Ernie notices the same thing. “Maybe we should cast *commune* to find out what happened to his horse,” he whispers.

“His horse doesn’t exist,” says Grey Wolf, quietly, so that Step cannot hear.

“The giants have horses,” says Dranko “We can take one of the littlest giantish ponies and it’ll be the size of his warhorse...”

The others are staring at him. “Never mind,” he mutters. To change the subject, he turns to Morningstar. “By the way. Remember way back when we were investigating Gohgan’s basement and you guys wanted to *charm* Gohgan and I said, no, being *charmed* is horrible? Er... how was it?”

Morningstar thinks for a second before answering. “Beats being *fireballed*,” she says, smirking.

“Or *lightning bolted*?” asks Dranko.

"Okay, okay!" shouts Grey Wolf. "For the last time, you said you could jump out of the way!"

"But no, it wasn't so good," concludes Morningstar.

"So the problem was," explains Dranko, "I could have dodged the *lightning bolts*, but you *lightning bolted* the cloud, and I didn't know which way the stupid thing was coming from. That was my problem."

"You wanna practice?" says Ernie, smiling innocently. Grey Wolf laughs as well.

"You're healed up again," adds Flicker, grinning.

"Oh, I don't mean now," says Ernie. "But back at the... oh..." His face falls.

"What?" says Dranko.

"I was going to say, you could practice out in the backyard of the Greenhouse but... we don't have a backyard anymore."

"Sure we do," says Kibi.

"It just happens to be in an evil city, on another continent, where we can't get to. No problem," says Dranko.

"We can't *teleport* to it?" asks Kibi.

"It's across the Uncrossable Sea," Ernie reminds him.

The witty banter falters. The sleet doesn't.

"So how *are* we going to figure out the stupid password?" bursts out Dranko angrily.

Morningstar sighs. She knows what the plan is likely to be, as it was the last time they faced this sort of predicament. Kibi has come to the same realization. Morningstar can flood the area around the tower with *thought captures*.

"Hey Morningstar," says Kibi with a wry smile. "What's the password?"

"Hopefully it involves a sneeze, 'cause we're all going to have colds," says Grey Wolf.

Morningstar straightens up, and does some quick counting of her open spell slots for the day. "Hey, Flicker," she says. "Get your thoughts out of there."

Flicker looks up from his picking efforts, momentarily confused. Then he gets it. "Oh... right."

"Or work without thinking," says Ernie.

"I have plenty of *thought captures* I can cast today," says Morningstar.

"Couldn't hurt," says Ernie. "The worst thing that can happen is you end up sharing Flicker's innermost thoughts."

"Ewwwww," says Grey Wolf, making a face.

"Wouldn't be the first time," says Morningstar.

"Must be better than Dranko's thoughts," points out Aravis.

A new idea comes to Kibi. *Hey, Scree*, he thinks.

Yes?

I don't suppose the Eyes feel like telling you the password so we can get into the tower?

I don't suppose either, answers the earth elemental glumly. Kibi shares this failure with the others.

"Can they get their brother to come and open the door?" asks Ernie.

"Yeah, really," says Grey Wolf, pointing to the tower. "The third Eye is in there, right?"

Scree, annoyed, thinks to Kibi, *Maybe I haven't made myself clear enough. I don't know what the Eyes are doing. I don't know what they're thinking. I don't know what they're going to do. I wish you'd all stop asking me.*

Sorry, thinks Kibi.

Kay fidgets. "I wish I knew what the giants out there were up to," she says.

Morningstar casts a *telepathic bond* and connects herself with Kay, Grey Wolf, and Dranko. Kay goes up to the rooftops to keep watch.

"Now you can experience the joy of sharing a mind-link with Dranko," says Flicker to Grey Wolf.

"Mm," says Grey Wolf, concerned. "And you can't wash out your brain."

"What?" says Dranko, pretending to be insulted. Then he leers. He'll give 'em something to wash out... "Oh, for crying out loud," he says. "I promise I won't think a single thing about your tight elven ass."

"*Ick!*" exclaims Ernie, turning red.

"Aaaagghh!" adds Grey Wolf.

"He's a half-elf," points out Flicker. "Does that make him half-assed?"

"That reminds me of a joke I heard once," says Dranko. "How can you tell how old an elf is? Cut him in half and count the rings." Grey Wolf groans.

Ah, yes. Lacking the password and using up their patience, the Company are getting quite punchy. A few minutes later Morningstar has stocked as full a complement of *thought captures* as she can for the day. She stands near the door to the tower and starts to cast.

Aravis: "I thought elves only had three rings..."

The first thought she gleans is Flicker's, something about the length of a post. "Flicker, what's a post?" she asks, curious.

"It's the part at the end of a key that the bit is attached to," answers Flicker.

"Ah."

The second thought is also Flicker's. He's hoping that Dranko's timing is just right when he yanks out a secondary lock-picking tool.

The third thought is yet another from Flicker. He's thinking: *I'll never be able to pull the door open using the key as a handle, but I might as well try.*

"I'm telling you," says Dranko, "we need a magical device that stops Flicker from thinking."

The fourth thought is from Snokas, a feeling of unfocused pain. The fifth is Flicker again, thinking: *Too bright! Too bright!*

The sixth is a giant's thoughts: *I'm getting beaten up by something... little... and... oh, my boots are muddy!*

"That would be *confusion*," says Ernie.

The seventh and eighth thoughts are also giantish and unhelpful. (One is: *I... uh... uh... I... ow!* The other is: *I'm gonna kill that little thing! I'm gonna smash him into the ground! I'm gonna...*)

The ninth is Flicker again. And that's it for today. "I wonder what would happen if I picked up a thought of myself casting *thought capture*," Morningstar muses aloud.

"Your head would explode!" says Ernie.

"I think you're onto something," says Morningstar to Dranko. "A little helmet that would keep Flicker's thoughts from leaking out might be a good thing to have."

Flicker looks incensed. "Don't be angry," says Dranko. "It's nothing personal."

"It's just that we often want to *thought capture* near doors after you've worked on them," says Aravis.

Everyone has by now moved off to one edge of the courtyard, standing under one of the wide balconies. "Anybody hungry?" asks Ernie.

"Yeah, food would be nice," says Grey Wolf.

"Nothing like being electrocuted to give you an appetite," adds Dranko.

Ernie starts preparations for a meal. The others sit down on the damp grass beneath the overhang, chatting. "Do you think we already know the password?" muses Morningstar. "Some word or phrase we've heard before?"

"We might," says Grey Wolf. "It might be something the Eyes have told us."

"Did Eigomic say who gave him the key?" asks Dranko.

"Wasn't it the Keeper before him?" says Aravis.

Several heads nod. Dranko lights a cigar, then motions with it toward the tower. "'Cause if no one's come out of there for some time, that tells us something different than if somebody shows up every few months, or ten years."

"Eigomic, here is your shiny new key," says Ernie in falsetto, pretending to be a Black Circle priest.

"We had to change the lock..." adds Aravis.

"...'Cause some adventuring group got in," finishes Ernie.

"I wonder what Eigomic would do if something like that happened?" says Morningstar.

"He'd summon the beholder," says Kibi. "That's why he was so confused after we killed it. He's lost his purpose."

"I'd guess the password is *not* something Black Circle-related," says Aravis. "Remember, they were trying to hide from the Black Circle as well."

"Let's take a minute to ponder the craziness of what we're saying here," says Ernie. "We want to get into a building that was *too evil* for the Black Circle!"

Talk turns to the plan of Morningstar's *thought captures*. Despite today's failure, there still seems to be no better solution than to repeat the process tomorrow.

"I've got to be honest," says Aravis. "I've got a feeling this plan is doomed to failure. Besides, we've done it before. We can do better!"

"Like what?" says Kibi skeptically.

"How?" adds Ernie. "I'm waiting for suggestions on 'better,' because I'm all out of 'better.' All I've got is 'mediocre.' And some soup."

"You have soup?" asks Grey Wolf, perking up.

"Well, I'm starting the soup. It'll take a while for the jerky to soften."

Another period of silence follows while Ernie stirs the pot. Everyone broods on the problem at hand.

"I can cast *knock* on the tower," says Aravis, without much optimism. Several heads turn to look at Aravis, to see if he's joking or not.

Morningstar snorts. "Not only is the tower concealed, and not only is the door locked, but there were giants guarding it, and the key was concealed, and that wasn't even the real key..."

"If you try it, I'm standing far back," says Ernie.

Aravis gets to his feet and walks carefully to the center of the courtyard. He's fully healed up and further fortified with an *endurance*. At his request Flicker puts the key in the lock and turns it, causing a soft whitish glow to emanate from the invisible doorway. Then Flicker scurries away and Aravis steps forward. With one hand on the key, he casts *knock*.



As when he tried the *passwall*, light floods the area around the tower. Aravis is blown backward, his flesh seared with magical energy. He lands painfully on his back, gasping in pain and choking on the sleet that pours into his mouth.

The tower looks no different. Aravis picks himself up and shuffles back to the group for healing. No one says anything.

More minutes pass. Ernie starts ladling soup into bowls and passing them around.

"Drosh," shouts Dranko at the tower.

“Open sesame!” shouts Kibi. “Abracadabra!”

Aravis says, “Ionarb Teh!”

They pull out some of their written notes on the subject of the Hets while they eat, searching for promising proper names.

“Insulati!” says Kibi.

“Surgoil!” says Dranko. “Last of Five!”

Ernie recites the names of the other four Hets: “Chanob! Kai Kin! Shirfin! Runnel!” Nothing happens.

“The question is,” says Ernie between spoonfuls, “is this Het still sought by the Black Circle? In this alternate timeline, are they still *too evil* for the Black Circle?”

“Hm,” says Aravis. “Hadn’t thought of that.”

“For that matter,” continues Ernie, “The Eye is in Het Branoi in our world...”

“...but the Eye might not even be in there in this one,” finishes Morningstar.

“That would be unacceptable,” says Grey Wolf flatly, and everyone is inclined to agree.

StevenAC: Was everyone looking straight at the DM when Grey Wolf said this?

Next up is a thorough review of Step’s poem from his church in Djaw, in the hope that it will reveal something useful.

“Sharshun!” guesses Kibi.

“Naloric! Naradawk!” shouts Ernie.

“Open the friggin’ door, sock monkey!” tries Dranko.

“I don’t think Edghar likes that kind of talk,” says Ernie, glancing at Grey Wolf.

I can always have the last laugh, thinks Edghar to his master. *He’s not likely to take a poop where I’m sleeping, if you catch my drift.*

Don’t count on it, warns Grey Wolf.

The Company review their recent conversation with the dead beholder. “Garlang!” says Kibi. “Zoya! Garlang and Zoya!”

“We could bang our heads against the tower until it opens,” says Morningstar.

“If only we hadn’t killed the beholder, Morningstar could cast *memory read*,” says Flicker.

“See? I told you we shouldn’t kill it,” says Morningstar, laughing despite her frustration.

“Your judgement was impaired,” Grey Wolf points out.

“I could raise it from the dead,” says Morningstar.

Giants coming, says Kay over the mind-link. *Four of them. Eigomic’s coming back.*

Soon after this warning, Eigomic’s deep voice booms from the northern entrance to the courtyard. “Hello! I’m coming in!”

He marches in with three giants in tow. “**We’ve come for the body of the Floating Master,**” he says gravely.

Morningstar stands up and walks to stand near the dead beholder. Kibi goes with her to act as translator. She looks up at Eigomic. “If it were possible to bring the Floating Master back to life, would you allow it?” she asks.

The giantish Keeper frowns, and gives Morningstar a long, questioning look. “**You can do that?**” he asks.

“I may be able to,” says Morningstar.

“**For what purpose would you bring back the Floating Master?**” asks Eigomic, his eyes narrowing.

“To get into the tower,” says Morningstar simply.

“**What would become of the Floating Master after he had gotten you into the tower?**”

“That would depend on whether he attacked us again or not,” says Morningstar.

"Given that you killed him the last time," says Eigomic, "how would you stop him from trying to attack you when he sees you? It's what I would do if I were him."

"Maybe he'll think, boy, I don't want to die again," says Dranko, walking over to join them.

"He may be smart enough not to fight again," says Morningstar.

"We'd prefer not to kill anyone," adds Ernie.

Eigomic rubs his chin with his hand. The other three giants fidget uncomfortably. "I wish to meditate upon my answer," says Eigomic.

"That is fair," says Morningstar.

"He'll be casting *augury*," mutters Dranko.

"When do you want an answer?" asks Eigomic.

"How many times have you met the Floating Master?" Dranko interrupts.

"I have seen him once," says Eigomic, taken a bit off-guard.

"Did it chat with you?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Never!"

"Did you receive the key from your predecessor?" asks Morningstar.

"Yes," says Eigomic.

"Who did he receive it from?" asks Dranko.

"I assume that the former Keeper received it from the Keeper before him," says Eigomic impatiently. "And so on, back to when the Floating Master gave it to the first Keeper. That was before my birth."

"How long ago was that?" asks Ernie.

"Hundreds of years," rumbles the Keeper.

"Are there any journals or notebooks that the previous Keepers kept?" asks Morningstar.

"No," says Eigomic.

"Any spoken lore passed down from the previous Keepers?" prods Dranko.

"None that involves access to the interior of the statue," growls Eigomic.

"No mystic hoo-hahs, or sayings... that sort of thing?" presses Dranko.

"No!" says Eigomic. "I assume that you are trying to find out yet again if I have the password or not. I told you before that I did not. And if I remember correctly, you were able to detect lies when I said so."

"But you might not have been aware of it, which would mean you weren't lying," says Ernie.

"Not that we're accusing you of lying," adds Dranko hastily.

"And not that it would matter," says Morningstar under her breath. Then, to the giant, she says, "Are there any creatures other than the Floating Master and the previous Keeper that you were supposed to respect or serve?"

"The chieftain of the town," says Eigomic. "Tegmannic. I am beholden only to the words of Tegmannic, and the Floating Master."

"Who never talked to you..." says Dranko.

"Yes," says Eigomic, glowering down at the half-orc. "I think this conversation is at an end."

"There is a spell I can use to keep the Floating Master's body from decaying," says Morningstar. "May I use that?"

“Yes, I will allow that,” says Eigomic. He and his entourage start to leave. But he turns around in the archway and adds: **“If your attempt to bring the Floating Master back from the dead fails, I will take his body for burial. No more games.”**

He strides out of the courtyard. Morningstar casts *gentle repose* on the sopping corpse of the beholder.

Ernie watches the giant depart, then turns to Kibi. “Kibi, you’re the Opener. Can’t you open it?”

“I think Kibi’s ‘Opener’ status refers to something else,” says Aravis.

But Kibi is right fed up by this time with the day’s lack of progress. “Flicker, go turn the key in the lock. Morningstar, I’d like a *shield other*, please.” The others do as he asks.

He stalks out into the center of the courtyard. Making sure he retains constant contact with the ground, he takes a running charge directly at the door.

Bonk!

He bounces off the cold hard surface of the doorway, slips on the slick ground and falls backward. His head strikes the ice with a crack. He’s out cold. “There’s the mighty Opener right there,” says Dranko, wincing.

A few seconds later, Kibi regains consciousness. He struggles to his feet and puts his hands on the door, thinking ‘opening’ thoughts. “Soup’s here!” he shouts at the door. “Reeeeeeeeally good soup! Just on the other side of this door!”

“Knocked himself silly,” says Morningstar, shaking her head.

Dranko has a sudden brainstorm; since *detect magic* works while the Divination Sinks are turned away, perhaps they can now use *find the path* to determine the password. (Previous *find the path* spells may have been foiled by the Sinks...) But then they realize that the location is probably in another plane, which would preclude that particular divination from working. Another idea, shot down in flames.

By nightfall the sleet has finally stopped falling. The Company find some dryish patches beneath the balconies and go to sleep.

OR SO

The next day dawns clear and cold. Morningstar leaves all of her spell slots empty, intending to fill them a few at a time with *thought captures*.

Dranko casts an *augury*: “Will Morningstar’s use of the spell find the path to learn the password into the tower bring us weal or woe?” The answer comes back to him after a long silence, and the one word echoes faintly in his mind:

Irrelevant.

“It means it ain’t gonna work,” says Dranko. “Stupid planar hoo-hah.” In a high whiny voice he adds: “Oh, I have to build my home on another plane. Oh, I’m not good enough for *this* plane. Oh, the universe doesn’t reject me...”

He sees that everyone else is staring at him. “Never mind,” he mumbles.

Ernie casts his own *divination*: “Will we do well if we use thought capture multiple times to find the password?” The answer, again after an unusually long delay:

The answer is Corilayna’s business.

“What the hell?” asks Grey Wolf, when Ernie announces Yondalla’s reply.

“I think that means it will work, with luck,” says Ernie.

“We might as well go for it then,” says Dranko. “I’m out of options, myself. If I can’t pick its pocket, and I can’t whip its eye out, I’m pretty much at a loss.”

“You haven’t tried licking it yet,” points out Flicker.

“Oooh. You know what I haven’t tried yet?” says Dranko. “I haven’t cast *know age* on the tower.”

“You haven’t tried licking it yet,” says Morningstar. “Dranko, that’s great!”

“He’s a recovering lick-o-holic,” says Ernie, smirking.

“I wonder what ancient towers taste like?” Dranko muses out loud.

"I'll bet your tongue would get stuck to it in this cold," says Kibi.

"O-kaaaaaaaay," says Morningstar, walking over to stand before the tower. "Here I go." She starts casting *thought captures*.

The first four pick up thoughts from either Flicker or giants. The fifth thought is of someone thinking, very distinctly: *Knowledge, Power, Eternity*.

Excitedly, Morningstar says this out loud. The illusion of the beholder statue drops, leaving the tower unobscured. There is a Company-wide sigh of disappointment. "Well, that's something," says Grey Wolf.

Flicker tries the key again with the illusion down. There's no difference at all. Dranko utters the phrase a second time and the illusion springs back into being. He tries the words in different orders but nothing else interesting happens. Then he backs away to stop polluting the area with his thoughts.

Morningstar's sixth *thought capture* collects a thought of Dranko thinking: *Eternity, Power, Knowledge. Dang, didn't work*.

Fourteen more *thought captures* reveal nothing new: thoughts of Flicker, thoughts of giants, another thought of the illusion-setting password. But Morningstar's got more where those came from. She prays for fifteen more minutes and starts again.

She gets five more thoughts, four of Flicker, and one of One Certain Step thinking: *Ooof! Those clubs hurt!*

The sixth thought of the new batch is the most maddening of all. She clearly picks up someone thinking: *I cannot remember the password*. So close! She relays this thought to the others. There is a collective groan.

There is a collective pause.

It occurs to Kibi and Aravis at about the same time. As Kibi gets to his feet, Aravis walks over to stand directly next to the tower door and in a clear voice, enunciating every syllable distinctly, he says: "I cannot remember the password."

The invisible door begins to hum. Flicker puts the key in the lock and turns it. A bright reddish glow shines out.

Celebration ensues.

This included players throwing bread rolls at the DM...

thatdarncat: Bread rolls? Not dice? Can't blame them though!

Seule: Okay, that was officially evil. They are way too paranoid.

KidCthulhu: The very worst part was the beholder *telling* us the password, and his little deathly chuckle when we singularly failed to get it.

Sagiro is a bad, bad man.

Kaodi: How long did it take you guys in real time to figure out that the password was, "I cannot remember the password"?

Piratecat: 2-3 hours... and thus the flung bread rolls. Jerk!

StevenAC: *helpless laughing for a full five minutes* Sagiro, in the immortal words of Arnold Rimmer:

"You are a total, total – a word has yet to be invented to describe how totally whatever it is you are, but you are one, and a total, total one at that."

I think I would have thrown dice, not bread rolls. And they would have all been d4s, too.

Having a transcription of the actual dialogue for an episode like this was brilliant – it vividly shows what must have been the satisfying suffering the players went through...

Galfridus: There's nothing as useless as a lock with a voice print...

Sagiro: *goggle* Not only do I get the reference, but this was my original inspiration for the password idea!

(I think the quote, from Cardinal Borusa, was: "There is nothing more useless than a lock with a voice imprint." For those of you not among the cognoscenti, it's a quote from an old *Doctor Who* episode titled "The Invasion of Time.")

StevenAC: Ah yes, the one where the Doctor spearheads an invasion of his own planet by telepathic sheets of tinfoil... ("Even the sonic screwdriver won't get me out of this one...")

(Incidentally, the idea of somebody crafting Flicker a *tinfoil hat of mind shielding* to prevent him messing up Morningstar's *thought captures* is not entirely without merit...)

Galfridus: Mea culpa for insufficiently googling the quote.

I will definitely have to yoink that idea for my game. I am surprised, though, that no one tried "Corilayna's business"...

Zaruthustran: So the question is, did Sagiro have that password prepared beforehand, or did he just choose to use "I forgot the password" when he realized that a simple *speak with dead* was going to foil his plan?

Sagiro: It's the former, I assure you. Just ask Dr. Rictus, with whom I shared my devious plan weeks before the game in question.

In fact (and I know I risk more bread rolls by admitting this), I was kind of hoping they'd cast *speak with dead* for this very reason!

Tallarn: I hereby award Sagiro a full 20 RBDM points for that one. You evil, evil, evil man.

The Worlds of Het Branoi

For a hushed moment, everyone in the Company just stares at the tower. It's been over two years since the Eyes of Moirel first spoke the words 'Het Branoi' through Eddings. Now it stands before them, open at last, beckoning.

"I cannot remember the password," says Dranko. The humming stops and the ruddy glow flips back to a serene white.

Softly, Aravis says, "If I ever find someone involved with the making of this tower, I'm going to beat the *hell* out of them."

Dranko vents his frustration by giving the dead beholder a swift kick. "Thank the gods you thought of that," he says to Aravis.

"Well," says Aravis, "you know, I *am* a wizard. I only had to get hit over the head with the answer three or four times before it came to me."

"It was like a bolt of lightning shot through you, wasn't it?" says Dranko.

"Let it go," says Flicker, shaking his head. "Let it go."

Morningstar takes a few steps back from the glowing doorway. "We're about to go in the tower that's so evil that even the Black Circle kicked them out of the club," she says. "And like I said, we don't *know* for certain that we even need to get in there. We're just assuming."

That leads into a few minutes of discussion about gathering info via a *commune* spell. Most of the party are pretty certain that the Eye of Moirel is within this hidden tower, but Morningstar and some others want to be absolutely sure.

"We can always go through the door, cast *locate object*, and if it's in the building, we'll know," says Ernie. "If not, we come right back out." He scratches his head and takes a bite of bread. "Although it could be weird and multi-planar in there, I guess," he adds.

And *that* kicks off more talk, this time about what the interior of Het Branoi – assuming that's what this is – might be like. Their intelligence from Djaw indicates it's larger on the inside than the outside, which seems eminently logical given its small exterior dimension. But is the interior a demiplane? Or does the doorway simply *teleport* people to somewhere else entirely? There's no way to know without taking the plunge.

Dranko points out idly that no one has entered or exited the tower for decades, as far as the giants know. Morningstar again notes that in the new timeline, the Eye of Moirel may never even have been taken inside. Aravis speculates that the Eyes may not have been affected by the time change, though he admits it's just a theory.

Everyone agrees that they should wait until tomorrow before going inside. "I don't want to go in there with Morningstar only at half strength," says Aravis, noting that most of her spells have been cast as *thought captures*.

"Yeah," says Dranko with a snort. "If she gets *charmed*, she'll barely be able to kill us all."

Everyone laughs. The tension and frustration everyone had felt since the world changed had been building up to an almost intolerable pitch, but with the discovery of the password, much of that has drained away, leaving an air of giddy relief and vague hilarity in its stead. But Morningstar doesn't lose her head, and there's no point in taking chances. She prays for a few minutes for the prayer of *commune* and then she casts it.

It's another few minutes before she feels the connection with the agents of her goddess. The link is faint and tenuous. She asks her first question.

"Do we need to enter the tower in order to complete our mission to restore the universe?"

There is a long delay before each distant answer comes to her mind.

I BELIEVE SO.

"Will we find an Eye of Moirel within the tower?"

I DON'T KNOW.

Realizing that the inherent wards on the tower might be hindering her divination, she changes her wording.

"Is there an Eye of Moirel in the house of Seven Dark Words?"

AGAIN, I DON'T KNOW.

"Is this the house of Seven Dark Words?"

YES.

This answer brings great relief. "Yay for prophecies being correct despite world-changing events!" says Ernie.

"Does the Black Circle know we are entering the tower?"

I DON'T KNOW.

The answers grow more faint, more hollow.

"Have we completed all the steps that are needed to open the tower?"

YES.

"Thank you for your wisdom, Dark Lady," says Morningstar, bowing her head. The thin connection with the heavens is gone.

The rest of the day is spent in discussion of what spells they should collectively prepare for tomorrow's planned excursion. Grey Wolf wants boom, boom, and more boom. Morningstar leans toward trap removal and countermeasures.

"I'm going to prepare to make myself into a combat machine," says Ernie. "I never successfully *dispel* anything, anyway."

That leads the Company to start reminiscing about the Black Circle bestiary, where Morningstar successfully *dispelled* a powerful trap that they all thought was beyond any of their power to destroy. "That was your first adventure with us, wasn't it, Grey Wolf?" says Flicker. Grey Wolf looks pained. "I remember when you cast *flaming sphere* in the methane-filled cave with the big stinkwiggle," Flicker continues.

"And wasn't that where you hit yourself with your own *lightning bolt*?" says Kibi, grinning. Grey Wolf harrumphs and becomes absorbed in his spellbooks.

StevenAC: I can see poor Grey Wolf is going to end up with a nervous twitch every time *lightning bolt* is even mentioned...

The only interruption comes when Eigomic returns around mid-day. He announces that he will not allow the beholder to be raised from the dead. The Company make no attempt to hinder him as he and three other giants haul away the body.



After a hurried breakfast the next morning, everyone is ready for action. Spells are prepared, buffs are applied, and they line up outside the door behind Flicker.

He puts in the key and turns it. He says, "I cannot remember the password."

The door starts to hum, and it glows with a strong blue light.

Blue?

"Knowledge, Power, Eternity," says Dranko. The illusion winks out, but the light is still blue.

"Oh, shit," says Aravis.

They try every possible combination of orderings for putting in the key and uttering the two passwords. Still blue. "Crap!" says Dranko.

"Blue's better than red, isn't it?" says Grey Wolf hopefully.

"Blue is most definitely worse than red," says Dranko bitterly.

"I was happier with red," Aravis agrees.

"Why?" asks Grey Wolf.

"I mean, I was happier with whatever color it was yesterday," says Aravis. Dranko nods. The implication is clear: someone in the tower, realizing it was about to be breached by outsiders, has changed something about the doorway. That can't be a good sign.

Ernie casts a quick *augury*. "Will walking forward into the blue light bring us weal or woe?" he asks. There is no answer.

"Yondalla didn't say anything," says Ernie sullenly.

The glow changes color. In an eyeblink it has gone from blue to a pale spring green. "That could be *prismatic*," says Grey Wolf, pointing at the doorway. "This is not a good thing."

"I don't think it's going in the right order," says Aravis. All three wizards spend some time scrutinizing the glow coming from the doorway. None of them are powerful enough to cast from the set of *prismatics*, but it's a common topic of study at most guilds. They conclude that whatever is going on with the door, it's not a *prismatic wall* or anything like it. Kibi's pretty sure it's some kind of portal.

"Green means go," says Dranko. "Let's just go in."

Flicker takes a deep breath and jumps into the green light. He vanishes. Dranko follows. Then Aravis... It's still the same green color as Ernie, last in line, steps through the doorway.



As each member of the Company crosses the threshold, they feel *pulled* in, as something draws them to a dark, cold void. For a second there is a lurching feeling as if they are traveling a long way in a short time. Flicker stumbles out, into a forest.

A forest?

He's not in a clearing, though the woods are sparse. Behind him, amid the trees and suspended in the air, hangs a shimmering curtain of blue light slightly larger than the tower's doorway. It ripples like cloth in the breeze, sparkling as it moves, with speckles of white light playing along the brilliant blue surface.

Kibi steps out of the curtain, the bottom of which is only about six inches off the ground. He looks around in surprise. One by one the members of the Company emerge from the curtain into the woods, weapons drawn, expecting an ambush.

Birds sing in the trees overhead. Chipmunks scurry through the undergrowth. Around them the forest filters the sunlight into a pale green color like the one seen from the giants' courtyard. The sky through the trees is a faint blue. The sun is orange.

"I wonder," says Kibi, "if we had gone through when the light was blue, if we would have landed in the ocean?" The ground is solid beneath the dwarf's feet. His connection with the earth is solid and strong. A strange feeling starts to come over him.

SSSSSSZZZZZZZ. The blue curtain goes rigid. As the Company watch it glides off to the left, growing narrower as if it's sliding into an invisible slot. In less than three seconds it is gone. Beyond it is more forest, stretching as far as the eye can see. Ernie instinctively marks a nearby rock with a piece of chalk.

Step looks around nervously. "I am going to die here," he says, his voice low.

"No you're not, Step," says Ernie. "We were *supposed* to betray Grey Wolf, and we didn't, and *he* didn't die."

"And it's not like we didn't try," adds Dranko.

"Why do you think you're going to die here?" asks Morningstar.

"I read it in the prophecy. In the poem that led me to you. '*Go with them to your certain doom*,' it said."

"I meant, why do you think you're going to die *here*?" says Morningstar.

"Oh. Well, I don't expect to die in this forest," says Step, smiling in spite of himself.

"I appreciate you're willing to sacrifice so much for the cause," says Ernie, "but we don't want you to die, and we're going to make sure you don't. So don't get all depressed and... and sacrifice-y."

Step nods. "But if I have to," he adds, "I hope you do not try to stop me."

"Well, as long as you don't go trying to sacrifice yourself all the time..." says Ernie.

"I won't look for trouble," promises Step. "I expect it will find me."

Flicker is staring at Kibi. The dwarf is standing very still, feet on the ground, one hand pressed to a tree. There is... power... running all through his body. It's coursing through his being, from the ground, the trees, even from the air around him. To everyone's surprise he tries sprinting into the forest, thinking it might be affecting him physically, but he moves no faster than usual. He comes jogging back, oblivious to the stares of the others. "I like this place," he says.

"Because it makes you run around through the trees?" asks Morningstar, eyebrows raised.

"Don't you feel it?" asks Kibi. "This place is all... hummy, like it's full of energy."

No one else feels a thing. "I've got gas," says Dranko. "Does that count?"

“No,” says Kibi curtly.

Scree sinks into the ground. *I feel... powerful!* he thinks to Kibi. When the earth elemental emerges, its body starts to rattle and vibrate. Its voice... no, the *other* voice... sounds clearly in Kibi’s head.

THIS PLACE IS LIKE THE GREENHOUSE. YOU ARE NO LONGER IN NEED OF OUR PROTECTION.

In his normal voice Scree adds: *Oh my goodness, did you hear that?*

Yes, says Kibi, startled. *That wasn’t you, was it?*

No, says Scree.

“The Eyes just spoke,” Kibi tells the others. “They said this place is like the Greenhouse and we’re no longer in need of their protection.”

“Thank you for protecting us, Eyes,” says Kibi, addressing the body of his familiar.

Ernie keeps the belt on, just in case. “Hey Eyes,” he says, “What color is your brother who’s here?”

They just don’t understand, thinks Scree to Kibi. *The Eyes don’t talk with people. And I’m not them.*

It’s a mild afternoon, the temperature in the 60s, which feels like summer after the days camped in chilly Surgoil. A light breeze whispers through the wood. Squirrels chitter high in the branches. It’s maybe an hour before noon.

Dranko wonders aloud if Eigomic might follow them here. After all, no one stayed behind to lock up. But the blue curtain is gone. Does that mean Eigomic simply closed up the tower and took back the key?

“And maybe the color will have changed again if he tries,” says Kibi.

Kay and Oa-Lyanna cast *fly* and head upward above the treetops, looking for signs of civilization. There are only more trees as far as she can see in all directions. The rest of the group hear a brief twittering of bird noises as Kay casts *speak with animals* and converses with a passing crow. A few minutes later she comes down and reports. “The birds here have seen creatures that look like us. They live in that direction.” She points westward (she thinks) into the woods. “It was hard to get a sense of scale from the bird, but I guess we’re some hours away on foot. I think we should get moving.”

With Kay and Dranko leading the way, the Company tromp off into the forest. High above the trees, the orange sun sends its rays down through the leaves.

KidCthulhu: Ah, a visit to a bucolic forest, full of chirping birds, frolicsome squirrels and dappled sunlight.

You just know something truly horrific is waitin’ for us, don’tcha?

Alomir: I think many of us are *counting* on something truly horrific to be waiting for you, and will be disappointed if it doesn’t rear its cute little head eventually...

Fade: May I suggest you burn it down? Smoke them out before they attack you?

Kaodi: I must say that the colour-changing portal really worries me. I would hate to think that they just stepped into a random setting that may/may not contain what they are searching for. The Eyes saying what they did makes it a little better, but still...



It’s a beautiful afternoon.

Kay is fifty feet out in front, scanning the woods for signs of human habitation. The others trail warily along, full of mistrust despite the gentle breeze and harmless woodland creatures. For four hours they tromp through the trees while the ground rises gently uphill. No one is speaking much. Everyone expects something horrible to happen at any moment.

Something up ahead flashes through the trees, running perpendicular to their route. It’s a deer, bounding and leaping through the light underbrush. In just a few seconds it has disappeared again into the forest. Two human teenagers, one boy and one girl, follow closely in pursuit of the deer. The Company are still a good twenty or thirty feet away from Kay and the hunters don’t even see her, concentrating instead on their prey.

“Hello!” shouts Kibi, obviating any further need to discuss first contact procedures. Morningstar rolls her eyes.

The hunters come to an immediate halt at the sound of the dwarf’s voice. The boy drops into a crouch while the girl draws her bow. The party can see they wear simple homespun clothing. Both have long hair. Even from this distance the surprise on the hunters’ faces is quite clear. They whisper to each other briefly.

Morningstar starts casting *detect thoughts* and Step begins to *detect evil*. After a few seconds the paladin shakes his head and murmurs, “I detect no evil nearby.”

But before Morningstar can start skimming surface thoughts the two hunters stand and dash away into the woods, shouting “Sa Roha! Sa Roha!” loudly as they run. They are soon out of sight, and a few seconds after that the sounds of their cries become swallowed by the forest.

No one moves. Everyone looks at everyone else. “That went well,” says Aravis, shaking his head.

At least now Kay has something to track. The Company set out again following in the direction of the two teenagers. “They’re like the Yuja,” comments Dranko. “Maybe they’re friendly, too.” Everyone hopes so.

The ground continues its upward slope toward the descending orange sun. Another hour passes during which the climb gets more and more steep and strenuous. With maybe an hour still before sunset they crest the hill and find themselves at a steep drop-off, looking down into a lovely valley over a mile across. At the bottom of the valley is a village, dozens of small and simple buildings nestled in among trees and streams. Shaved fields speckle the opposite slope. It looks like between five hundred and a thousand people might live there, though few can be seen at this distance.

No alarm bells are ringing. No armed soldiery is charging up the hill at them, or waiting in any obvious place down below. Taking this as a good sign, the Company start to descend along an actual trail that snakes down into the village along a series of switchbacks.

“It looks like a very nice place,” says Ernie nervously. “I wonder what’s wrong with it? I mean, you know that some kind of terrible soul-sucking evil awaits us.”

Only half joking, Morningstar adds: “Maybe it’s an illusion and there’s a monster waiting down there to eat us.”

Slowly the Company pick their way down to the valley floor. They try to look as non-threatening as possible given that they’re armed to the teeth. Aravis, who carries no weapon, goes in front. A few minutes later they reach the bottom of the hill and walk toward the little town. The path they’ve been following slowly widens into a solid dirt road with cart ruts. Soon they pass buildings off the road – little buildings, houses, something like a general store.

There are no people out in the streets, but the members of the Company spot figures in the windows of homes, peeking out nervously. Other than the clanking of the party’s own metal armor and weapons, the only sounds are of birds crying overhead and some distant noises of livestock. Reaching an unspoken accord, the party come to a slow halt in the middle of the road. Thinking that they look too threatening for anyone to come talk with them, Ernie unbuckles his sword and lets it drop to the ground.

StevenAC: [Ah, a visit to a bucolic forest... You just know something truly horrific is waitin' for us, don'tcha? – KidCthulhu] The Company hasn’t had much luck with forests, have they? Watch out for those weresquirrels...

Still, while they’re waiting for the other shoe to drop, they could always take advantage of this pastoral interlude to review their long list of things to do, like this:

(Having done a song for Ernie, I thought I’d see if I could throw one together that would fit Dranko, and this just... sort of happened...)

We've Got a Little List (*once again, apologies to the ghost of Sir W.S. Gilbert*)

DRANKO: As some day it may happen that we've nothing else to do,
We've got a little list – We've got a little list
Of the foes who've pissed us off and who are evil through and through,
And who never would be missed – who never would be missed!
There's a bestiary of monsters held in boxes near Verdshane,
With tentacles and claws and other things to cause us pain.
In Kivia there's still a great big army of undead,
And Shreen the Fair unnerved us there – he needs to feel some dread.
Toward the Guild of Chains we are emancipationist –
They'd none of 'em be missed – they'd none of 'em be missed!

THE COMPANY: We've got 'em on the list – we've got 'em on the list;
And they'll none of 'em be missed – they'll none of 'em be missed!

DRANKO: There's that blue-winged ogre "Great One" and the others of his race,
Who revere the Bloody Fist – I've got him on the list!
And that frakin' Parthol Runecarver who never shows his face,
He never would be missed – he never would be missed!
Then those extraplanar fighters in red armor have to go,
That's Meledien, Octesian and Tarsos (that we know);
And the irritating Farazil, that bodysnatching pest
(Though for now we have a truce with him that saves him from arrest);
Ah, but with the Evil Baker we just cannot coexist;
I don't think he'll be missed – I'm sure he'll not be missed!

THE COMPANY: We've got him on the list – we've got him on the list;
And we don't think he'll be missed – we're sure he won't be missed!

DRANKO: But before they get their turn we have to fix our history
(For the Sharshun we dismissed – we've moved them up the list!);
Blood foxes and beholders and damned electricity –
They'll none of 'em be missed – they'll none of 'em be missed!
When we've tracked them down and dealt with them – the ones who did this crime,
We'll defeat the hopes of Naradawk a third and final time.
And then it's home to celebrate – with Charagan restored,
It's back to whittling down our foes with magi and the sword;
See, it really doesn't matter how extensive grows the list,
For they'll none of 'em be missed – they'll none of 'em be missed!

THE COMPANY: We shall cross 'em off the list – we shall cross 'em off the list;
And they'll none of 'em be missed – they'll none of 'em be missed!

Fade: [We'll defeat the hopes of Naradawk a third and final time] I wouldn't advise the Company to count on this.

KidCthulhu: StevenAC, you are the very bestest. Can I make a request? How about a setting of “I have a song to sing, O!” from *Yeomen*?

StevenAC: I don't know if I can do it justice (it seems to me it calls for something a bit deeper than simple patter-parody), but I've got an idea that might work. I'll have a shot and we'll see what happens...

dpxd: You do realize you're only stoking the fires for *Sagiro's Story Hour, the Musical*, don't you, Steven? If they're not going to credit you in the playbill, at least insist on complimentary tickets to the opening.

porthos: Oh, I can see it now. Sorta like “Once More, With Feeling,” the *Buffy* musical. Steven, eventually you'll have to release a songbook, CD and DVD special just for the fans!

"You're surrendering?" murmurs Grey Wolf.

"Shhh... look."

From between a farmhouse and a closely built shed, maybe fifty feet off the road, a small girl comes walking out. She looks to be six years old, maybe seven. Still standing by her house she stops and stares at the Company.

Step *detects evil*, and shakes his head.

"Hello there!" calls Ernie. The girl just stands there, a serious and puzzled expression on her face.

Aravis casts *tongues*, but at the sight of his chanting and arm motions the girl turns and flees back behind the house. He shouts "Hello!" after her, but she's gone. In other nearby buildings Dranko can see people by their windows whispering to each other.

"We mean you no harm!" calls Aravis, speaking toward the girl's house.

"Ask if they want any turtle jerky," says Dranko. Flicker elbows him in the leg.

"We seek only information," shouts Aravis.

A small number of people – maybe three or four – appear in the doorways of other houses. They are looking at each other across the road, and at the Company, and in toward the center of town. Their expressions are unreadable. They all look like normal humans.

The young girl walks slowly out of her house (this time emerging from inside) and slowly approaches the Company. She is unarmed, holding nothing, and stares at them with wide, questioning eyes. From another doorway across the street an adult male approaches, though more tentatively than the girl. Other folk of all ages, growing braver, start to emerge from their homes and edge toward them. A teenager bolts from one of the houses and heads toward the heart of the village. Dranko sits down on the road to better express his peaceful intentions.

The girl walks right up to them. "Hi there!" says Ernie cheerfully. "My name's Ernie."

The girl blinks confusedly at him.

"Hello," says Aravis.

The girl's head jerks quickly to face him. "Hello," she says gravely.

Ernie digs out a traveling cake and holds it out to her. "This is tasty and safe," he says.

She looks curiously at him again, and her expression takes on... annoyance? Then she turns back to address Aravis. "Who are you?" she asks.

"We come from a place very, very far away," says Aravis.

"But... how can that be?" says the girl.

"Do you have a concept of magic?" asks Aravis.

"Yes. Elder Tog does some magic."

"We came through a magical doorway," says Aravis.

"There's a doorway? Where?" Her eyes widen. She clearly finds this very interesting.

"It was in the woods," explains Aravis. "Shortly after we came through it, it disappeared."

"We must tell Tog!" exclaims the girl.

The man arrives and nervously says hello. The six-year-old girl looks up at him, and then back to Aravis. "Oh, excuse me," she says, sounding embarrassed. "My manners. We are so unaccustomed to strangers. My name is **Del**. What's yours?"

"I am Aravis. This is Grey Wolf..." Aravis goes through introductions for each member of the Company. Del repeats each name as if committing them to memory. She glares a bit at Dranko, who makes a face at her as he's introduced. "A bit uncouth," says Aravis in a low voice, "but really quite a nice fellow."

"What happened to your eyes?" asks Del.

"I have inside my head a very powerful artifact that affects my eyes and skin," he says simply.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, and I see normally."

"I'm sorry. I did not mean to interrupt."

Aravis finishes up the introductions. Dranko peers at her curiously. "Ask her how old she is," he says to Aravis.

"Do they not speak our language?" asks Del, looking over at Dranko.

"No, they don't," says Aravis.

"But you do."

"When you saw me waving my arms, I was casting a spell that allows me to speak in your tongue."

"Ah," says Del brightly. "Neat." Her eyes twinkle. "We have not had visitors in many years," she says. "Are you part of the Stillness?"

Aravis pauses, wondering to what she refers. "I'm not aware of what the Stillness is," he concedes.

"It is what we're all a part of," Del says as if explaining to a child. "It is part of the test. The examination."

Aravis repeats all of this to the rest of the party. "I didn't study for any test," says Ernie nervously.

"Then we are not in it," Aravis tells Del.

The girl absently scratches her side, mulling over what she has just learned. The Company watch her expectantly.

"You came here through a doorway," says Del. "What is on the other side of it? Does it lead to the rest of Cressella?"

"I don't know the place Cressella," says Aravis.

"You're from beyond?" Her eyes widen again.

"We come from a land of giants, creatures more than twice our size," says Aravis.

"We have to take you to Tog," says Del. "He will understand these mysteries."

The older man has been observing this conversation with interest, but has deferred to Del throughout. Aravis glances at Dranko, at the small crowd that has started to gather nearby. "If you don't mind me asking," he says to Del, "how old are you?"

She grimaces as if she's been expecting this question. "I'll turn eighteen in a month," she says. "It's part of the Stillness."

A larger crowd is approaching from the center of town. At its head is an old man with a tall gnarled walking stick. His dress is reminiscent of Eigomic, with furs, beads and feathers. There are two antlers protruding from the sides of his head, though when he gets closer the Company see that these are part of a headdress and not an actual anatomical feature.

"That's him!" says Del excitedly. "Tog! Strangers!" (When Aravis hears "strangers," the others hear "Sa Roha.")

Aravis bows before him. "Greetings," says **Tog**, his deep voice old but strong. "Are you the leader?"

"For the moment, I speak for us," answers Aravis.

"Tog! Tog!" says Del. "They came through a doorway in the forest!"

Elder Tog's face betrays a rush of emotion at this. But the old man composes himself quickly and asks: "Do you need food? Water?"

"For now we are fine," says Aravis.

The crowd, over a hundred people in all, has formed a rough circle around Tog, Del and the Company. Though much of their attention is bestowed unabashedly on the newcomers, they seem more interested in how Elder Tog is reacting to them. Dranko notices some children nearby and starts playing with a coin, making it dance along his fingers and vanish into his sleeve.

Usually kids find this mesmerizing, but even the youngest children are ignoring him and watching Tog. A six-month-old baby in her mother's arms regards him for a moment with a keen, disturbing gaze.

"I must ask," says Tog to Aravis. "Are... are you from the Antlered God?"

Aravis thinks for a few seconds before answering. "I do not believe so. But I do not rule out the possibility that he has guided our way."

"Tell me, please, how you came to be here," says Tog.

Aravis gives him the condensed version: "We traveled across a land of giants. We came across one of their towns where there was a tower. After fighting against some of the creatures we found the method of opening that tower, and when we stepped through its doorway it took us here. Shortly after we arrived, the door we walked through seemed to disappear."

Tog frowns. "Which direction?" he asks. "Can you point to the doorway?"

Aravis points upward in the direction from which they walked. Tog's frown deepens. "I have walked those woods many times. There is no doorway there."

"And there is none there now," says Aravis.

"There are no doorways!" Tog says loudly, suddenly addressing the crowd as much as Aravis. They have all been listening intently to the exchange, leaning in and giving one another meaningful looks. Now they lean back and murmur among themselves.

"I think I should speak with you in private," says Tog quietly to Aravis. "My people are not used to strangers. We have not had visitors for some time."

Aravis relays this to the rest of the Company. "You want to keep secrets from them," says Dranko, even though Tog can't understand him. "I'm with that." Aravis scowls.

Tog again addresses the throng of townsfolk. "People of Green Valley, I must speak to these strangers alone. Go back to your homes. They pose no threat. I will discover what purpose they serve in the Antlered God's designs. All will be clear. I promise this to you."

He leads the Company through the crowd, which instinctively parts for them. Morningstar stares at the six-month-old baby, who stares back at her with large unblinking eyes. "Just imagine," Morningstar says, half to herself, and as horrified as she is curious. "Not being able to speak, or communicate, trapped in a baby's body..."

The crowd slowly disperses as the Company follow Tog. "My people have not been outside Green Valley," he says as they walk. "It is the will of the Antlered God that they should not stray!" (He says this loudly enough that most of the departing villagers can hear.)

As they walk he gestures to Kay's array of weaponry, and Step's swords, and then vaguely to everyone else. "Do you expect combat?" he asks. "You are heavily armed."

"The land we come from is very dangerous," says Aravis.

"You should not need such things in Green Valley. We are a peaceful folk."

The Company pass by small yards, fields, houses, stores, and many shrines to the Antlered God. Tog's own house is modest and comfortable. Once inside they go through another round of introductions, after which Aravis says: "You should know, it's possible that we will be followed. I don't know for sure."

"By what?" asks Tog.

"There are forces, and some specific individuals, who wish to destroy us," says Aravis matter-of-factly. "They wish to prevent what we need to accomplish."

"We are not warriors," says Tog. "We have hunters, Aravis, for deer, and to make sure the wolves do not menace us. We cannot fend off an army."

"If you do not wish us to stay, we will not," says Aravis.

Tog looks thoughtful. "No, I will not send you off. I need to know where you are in the Antlered God's designs."



Outside Tog's house, the sun has finally set behind the mountains. The ten members of the Company, plus one cat and one monkey, sit closely in the small house. (Scree has remained hidden in the earth, enjoying the saturation of powerful magics there.) The windows are open and a cool wind stirs the air.

Tog pours himself a cup of water from a wooden pitcher and takes a long drink. "Have you... aged?" he asks.

"You mean since we've arrived?" answers Aravis. "We've been here such a short time, we have no way to tell."

"Perhaps it is part of the test," says Tog, switching thoughts. "The Antlered God judges us on how we treat you."

"Why are you being tested?" asks Aravis.

"I don't know."

After a half minute in which no one speaks, but during which Tog seems to be working something out in his head, Aravis asks: "How old are you?"

"I was sixty-eight when the Stillness began. I am nearly eighty now. The Antlered God is watching us, judging us. He created the Stillness to... get a better look at us, I believe. That's what I am calling it: the Stillness. It has been over eleven years since the Stillness was first observed. It has been a trying time. We have not... had traffic from from outside the Valley in all that time."

Tog takes a deep breath. He's made up his mind about something, maybe that the Company is worthy of his trust, or that some hope is close to being fulfilled. "Before I continue, I... there are things my people do not know. There are things that they should not know. That are dangerous to know."

Aravis nods his head, and Elder Tog tells his tale.

Krellic: [It's a beautiful afternoon.] Just as soon as I read that line, somehow I knew that the party were in terrible trouble...

Kid Charlemagne: Even worse. They're polite.

Tallarn: Sagiro, you are really taking your time on this one, aren't you? All this politeness, pleasantness, friendly people... They're going to be screaming for mercy soon.

Phasmus: A perpetually impressive tale of delightful doom, this. Ever are we pleased by Sagiro's Story Hour!

nemmerle: Oh man, you really know how to string us along...

"It is not merely that Time has stopped," says Tog, settling in for his tale and talking slowly. "Green Valley has been cut off from the rest of the Kingdom of Cressella.

"We have been in Green Valley for seventy-five years. That's when we fled. We would not abide by the Lawgiver's decree, so we were exiled. We came here and established our village. It was peaceful. We were not accosted or attacked. Twice a year a peddler would come, bringing pots and pans, spices, exotic foods.

"Eleven years ago he stopped coming. Around that time, we stopped aging. It took some months to realize what happened. One of the women of the village has a five-month-old child, who has been of that size and apparent age all of these past eleven years. No one has aged, not the children, not the adults. When a year had gone by I took a chance and left the valley. It is death for us to go back to Cressella; the Lawgiver's men would kill us. We are a danger to them. They do not revere the Antlered God. In their hearts they fear him, as they should. That is why they sent us away.

"I went on a walkabout into the woods. For many days I traveled. At the edge... I don't know what else to call it... about fifty miles from here, I reached a place where I could walk no further. The forest was still there, it stretched out before me, but my mind could not make my feet walk another step. It was as if there was a wall, for my head." He taps his head meaningfully.

"I took a few steps to the side, and tried again. I could not. It was as if there was a wall stretching through the forest, invisible. I tracked its extent, knowing I might be displeasing the Antlered God. Clearly this was some design of his. I had come to the conclusion some weeks before that the Stillness was a test for us. He wanted to see how we would endure such a state. But I had to know, in case there was danger, which is why I left the village.

"I examined the extent of this boundary. The forest looks no different on the other side, Aravis, but I could not reach it. There was one... anomaly. I followed the boundary for almost three weeks and it was then I found a shimmering square of blue light in the trees, hanging like a windowpane. Beneath it there was a skeleton of some small creature, like one of your smaller friends. Not the size of a grown adult. The skeleton had been stripped bare by insects, gnawed by wolves.

"I was drawn to the blue window. I don't think the Antlered God wanted me to go through, but I had to be sure. I stepped into its light. It was cold, and there was blackness, and I emerged in a cave that was dark, echoing, smelling of stale death and something worse, something horrid and living. There were old bones and dark stains beneath my feet. Some fungus on the walls gave off a faint glow.

"Then there was a growling from back in the cave; I saw lights like eyes but they were too high, twenty feet off the ground. And something massive was moving. I dove back through the curtain. I feared some beast of the Antlered God's making was there to protect something I was not meant to see. I jumped back. There was a crackling sound as if a thunderstorm were following me. Pain like lightning seared my legs as I fell through the curtain back into the forest. I was badly burned, but I lived. I knew healing herbs which I found in the forest, and I tended to myself."

"Did you see what kind of creature it was?" asks Aravis.

"I only saw a great shape, but I could not tell its size or type as it moved in the darkness.

"You must not tell my people that the curtain is there. Some of them would do anything to escape the Stillness. They don't understand that soon the Antlered God will end our test and restore us, perhaps with might and vigor enough to return to the lands of the Lawgiver and retake our place. It has been much to endure. Eleven years of the Stillness. There are some who would risk that cave. They would not survive. I would not have them go to their deaths."

"We came through a similar curtain," says Aravis.

"But there was no beast?" asks Tog.

"No," answers Aravis. "The curtain we came through was green, and it brought us here. When we looked back upon it it was blue. As we watched it, it shifted off to the side and disappeared."

"That is strange," says Tog. "I have returned to that curtain that I saw, three times in the ten years since I first found it. It has been there, in the same place, hanging every time."

"I fear that curtain is where we must go," says Aravis. "I fear that cave is something we must brave."

Tog looks into Aravis's star-filled eyes, considering his words. He licks his lips. "I would urge against it," he says at last. "There is death in that cave."

Aravis sighs. "Our lives are meaningless against that of the world which we are trying to save," he says wearily.

Tog glances around again at the armaments and equipment of the Company. "If you were to slay the beast of the cave," he says, "perhaps our salvation is there. But again, we should not speak of this to the others. I will think of some safe falsehood to tell my people, though it galls me to do that."

At Dranko's urging, Aravis asks about the Lawgivers. "Hrm." Tog makes a noise of disapproval. "They worship a false god of justice. Of punishment. They are strict and controlling, and have made worship of the Antlered God a crime!"

"What is their symbol?" asks Aravis, fearing to learn it's a black circle.

"Three vertical bars across a sword. Symbols for retribution and imprisonment."

"Not our boys," says Dranko. "Tell Tog I'd like to cast a spell on him."

With permission, Dranko casts *know age* on Tog. He's the same eighty years old that he claims to be. "That suggests to me the Black Circle is continuously bringing people in, as they build their tower. If we can free them back to their own reality, we should. And... ooh, you know what I think it is? I think they're trying to find ways of living forever. And this might be their world of guinea pigs, as they work out ways to stop themselves from aging."

Aravis decides not to share that speculation with Tog. "Do you believe this is a test because the Antlered God has told you?" he asks. "Or is it your interpretation of events?"

"The Antlered God does not speak to me," says Tog. "I feel his power in the forest, in the earth, the trees, the air."

"*Our* gods speak to *us*," says Dranko, smirking.

With the interview nearly at an end, Morningstar suggests explaining to Tog about *sending* spells and possibly dream contact. Then Ernie offers to give some of his own spices to the people of Green Valley, since they are no longer visited by their peddler.

"Ask him if he has any souvenirs," says Dranko. "I want something to take home with me. I'm serious! We got those little carvings from the Yuja. I want something from these guys!"

Aravis works out a trade, where Ernie will give Tog some spices in return for a single one of their coins, "as a remembrance of where we've been."

"If there is anything else you want in trade, of fair value, I'm sure we can work out an arrangement," says Tog.

"I suspect the only thing we'll desire from you is directions to the curtain," says Aravis.

"It is many days' journey. When would you like to depart?"

Zaruthustran: Wow! Wow, wow! When they first went through and started talking to folks I was strongly reminded of the City in the Bottle, as well as the Crosser's Maze in general. After that last post (and the speculation about immortality experiments) it sounds like something else – something kind of like *Myst*. Very cool.

Question: if nothing ages/reproduces, then how do the people eat? I'd think that the deer population would have been wiped out pretty quickly. Or does the Stillness affect only humans?

Duncan Haldane: I've wondered whether the Stillness has stopped the seasons from changing – do they still have winter in Green Valley (or wet/dry seasons if they are close to the equator)?

Also, Sagiro, are you planning on changing your campaign to 3.5?

KidCthulhu: As far as we can tell, animals and the regular passage of time are not affected by the Stillness. Seasons pass normally, and time does everything else it's supposed to, except the humans do not age physically.

And how creepy would it be to be an 11-year-old in the body of a 6-month-old infant? That's the part that creeped us out.

RangerWickett: Just hope no one was actually *pregnant* when the magic took effect. In addition to the mom having morning sickness for life, what happens to the... well, I don't want to think about that.

But hey, on the upside, you don't need to get your hair cut or clip your fingernails, so that frees up time.

I wonder... I bet Sagiro only had that whole "change history" thing because he wanted to make it easier to convert to 3.5E...



The Beasts of Aaaaaarrrrgh

Run #152 – Sunday, July 13, 2003

A banterish interlude... I've done a bit of culling and tweaking to make it readable, but this is a decent example of character interplay that goes on between the moments of action, plot and excitement.

Aravis admits that they'd like to stay some weeks, training, praying and studying.

"I have nothing personal against you," says Tog, "but the longer you stay, the more questions it will raise among the people of Green Valley. But, here you are. I will not turn you out of the village. If you wish you may camp outside, or I can find you a barn to stay in. And if you wish to share in our food, we will ask that you perform some labor. It is our way."

The Company think a barn would be ideal, and agree readily to work for their food and lodging. Tog gives them directions to the dwelling of a farmer named **Matt**. "Tell him Tog said you could stay in his barn, unless he has some objection."

The party leave Tog to his meditations and walk into the cool night, headed across town. "I want to start training that six-month-old to be an adventurer," says Dranko idly as they walk. The others look at him like he's crazy.

"He's not strong enough to hold the torch," says Ernie.

"Ah, but he *will* be," says Dranko. "And when time starts moving again, he'll be a kick-ass adventurer by the time he's five."

"Let's just find this man's barn," says Step, frowning.

"Hey, it's like a story I've heard," says Dranko. "I'll bet the farmer has an attractive daughter. The farmer *always* has an attractive daughter. She'll be caught out in the rain and have to take shelter in the barn. She'll come in all soaking wet, and we'll have to... what?"

Morningstar is giving him a withering look. Grey Wolf mutters, "I'm all out of *mage hands*; I'll have to slap him myself."

"It's just a story," says Dranko.

After a few minutes they arrive at the farmhouse, which has a large barn out back and several adjacent fields. There's light coming from the windows in the house so they walk up and knock on the door. Presently they hear footsteps approach, and a middle-aged man with graying hair and thick arms comes to meet them.

"Hello," says Aravis politely. "You are Matt?"

The man looks carefully at Aravis, and then at the other members of the Company. His mouth makes involuntary chewing noises as he sizes them up. "You're them what came down from the woods up yonder," he says with a drawl.

"Yes, we are."

"What can I do for yeh?"

"Elder Tog suggested that if you don't mind, there was a barn here we might be able to use for a few weeks," says Aravis.

"Tell him we'll help with the chores!" chimes in Ernie.

Matt looks down at Ernie, puzzled. "At the moment I am the only one of us who can speak your language," explains Aravis.

"Ah."

"They are making suggestions as I talk. We would be happy to share chores while we're here." Ernie beams, trying to look as trustworthy as possible.

Matt says nothing for a moment. He's staring (rudely, really) into the star-fields that serve Aravis for eyes. "What the hell is that?" he asks eventually.

"I have inside me a magical item, and it... does that to my eyes."

"What, yuh eat it?" asks Matt.

"It more just kind of entered," says Aravis patiently.

"You oughtta be more careful," advises Matt, making some more chewing sounds.

"I know," says Aravis.

"Tog says you could have the barn, huh?"

"If it was all right with you," says Aravis.

"Right neighborly of him," says Matt sourly. "Needs fixin'."

"We'd be happy to work on it," says Aravis.

"You got any skill?" asks Matt. "I mean, you know how to fix a barn?"

Aravis relays all of this to the others. Ernie beams even more, trying so hard to make a good impression that his face is stretched into an alarming rictus. "What's his problem?" asks Matt, glancing down at Ernie.

Aravis looks over at Ernie. "I have no idea," he confesses. "But about your barn, we may need some direction, but we are accomplished laborers."

"Uh huh," says Matt. "Ask me, you look like some strange cross 'twen a travellin' circus and an army. Where'd you come from, anyhows?"

"From a very far away place, that's very hard to get to from here," says Aravis.

"Huh. Came through a door what don't exist no more, is what I hear. Got that right? Awful... convenient."

There's an awkward pause, during which Matt seems like he might say more on this topic, but in the end he clicks his tongue and says: "Yeah, you can have the barn. I'll get some lumber delivered and you guys can do the rest."

StevenAC: [How about a setting of "I have a song to sing, O!" from Yeomen - KidCthulhu] Well, after much frenzied experimentation, perspiration, desperation, and occasionally inspiration... here it is.

I was trying to stick as close to the original as possible (both in the pattern of the words and in the emotional progression of the song), which meant that my 'parody' ended up rather less funny and somewhat more sentimental than I initially expected. But I still like it...

I Have a Song to Sing, O! (as usual, apologies to Sir W.S. Gilbert)

DRANKO: I have a song to sing, O!

MORNİNGSTAR: Sing me your song, O!

DRANKO: It is sung without joy
By a half-orc boy,
Who could not with his kin belong, O!
It's a song of a cleric with roguish cast
Whose face was hard, but whose wits were fast,
Who journeyed far from his painful past,
As he sighed for the life of the lonely.

Heighdy! Heighdy!
Misery me - lack-a-day-dee!
He journeyed far from his painful past,
As he sighed for the life of the lonely.

MORNİNGSTAR: I have a song to sing, O!

DRANKO: Sing me your song, O!

MORNİNGSTAR: It is sung in the light
By a priestess of night,
A Dreamer whose dream was strong, O!
It's the song of an Ellish girl, somewhat shy,
Who was called to walk beneath daylight sky,
Where she met the cleric with roguish cast
Whose face was hard, but whose wits were fast,
Who journeyed far from his painful past,
As he sighed for the life of the lonely.

Heighdy! Heighdy!
Misery me - lack-a-day-dee!
He journeyed far from his painful past,
As he sighed for the life of the lonely.

DRANKO: I have a song to sing, O!

MORNİNGSTAR: Sing me your song, O!

DRANKO: It is sung with the cheer
Of the friendship here
And the feel of righting wrong, O!

It's the song of a Company, heroes all,
Who fought many evils, great and small,
As the Dreaming Ellish girl, now less shy,
Who learned to walk beneath daylight sky,
Came to know the cleric with roguish cast,
Whose face was hard, but whose wits were fast,
Who journeyed far from his painful past,
As he sighed for the life of the lonely.

Heighdy! Heighdy!
Misery me - lack-a-day-dee!
He journeyed far from his painful past,
As he sighed for the life of the lonely.

MORNİNGSTAR: I have a song to sing, O!

DRANKO: Sing me your song, O!

MORNİNGSTAR: It is sung with a smile
And in thanksgiving style
For it tells of a courtship long, O!

It's a song of the Ellish girl, left apart
As the one that she loved was not so smart;
In the midst of the Company, heroes all,
Who fought many evils, great and small,
She was third in a triangle of romance,
But in patience she waited and won her chance
At the love of the cleric with roguish cast
Whose face was hard, but whose wits were fast,
Who journeyed far from his painful past,
As he sighed for the life of the lonely.

Heighdy! Heighdy!
Misery me - lack-a-day-dee!
Resolved to wed, they now look ahead,
'Tis no longer the life of the lonely!
Heighdy! Heighdy!
Misery me - lack-a-day-dee!
Resolved to wed, they now look ahead,
'Tis no longer the life of the lonely!

Aravis relays. Dranko grins and, perhaps feeling like he has to make up for the bit about the farmer's daughter, says, "Tell him if he hits on Morningstar I'll pull out his tongue."

Matt looks over at him, frowning even though he doesn't speak the language. "He's got funny teeth," he says to Aravis.

"He was hit very hard as a young boy, and so he has brain damage," explains Aravis, keeping a remarkably straight face.

"You're telling him I'm good at my job, right?" says Dranko, a bit anxiously.

"Well, you keep him away from sharp things in the barn then," says Matt. The farmer looks around again at the Company. His eyes pause this time on where Flicker and Ernie stand in front of Kibi. "Them little ones," he says, "especially the one with the beard..." He trails off, not exactly sure what's bothering him.

"This one is an excellent chef," says Aravis, motioning to Ernie. "He can make anything you want to eat."

Matt perks up a bit, showing more emotion than he has thus far. "Apple pie?" he asks.

"Ooooh, yes," says Aravis, nodding his head.

"Well, maybe we can work that into the agreement about the barn," says the farmer.

"What's that about?" says Ernie. "Why is he pointing at me?"

"He wants you to milk the bull," says Dranko.

"He'd like you to help with the cooking," says Aravis, shooting Dranko a look. That, of course, makes Ernie's day.

"I guess they're so short from some strange side effect of the Stillness, ain't they?" says Matt.

"Yeah," says Aravis, not really wanting to explain.

"Pity about that," says Matt. "Still don't understand about the beard, though. He... he ain't human, is he."

"No," says Aravis.

"Dangerous?"

"No!"

"I don't want none of them weapons in my house. They stay in the barn. And don't go causin' no trouble on m' property. And I don't want to hear no noises late at night, either."

Aravis agrees to all terms and the Company go to check out the living arrangements. The barn is large and drafty but that's no hardship considering the weather. One of the back corners is rotting out and needs repair, but the rest looks sound enough. There are stalls for cows or horses but they've been long empty. The loft has some stale straw. "We shouldn't stay up late," says Aravis as they settle in. "I promised Matt no loud noises."

"Does that include Dranko's snoring?" asks Kibi hopefully.

"It's no louder than yours," growls Dranko.

"Ernie, he'd like you to help in the kitchen," says Aravis. "He seems to have a fondness for apple pie."

"Got it. I'll cook him an apple pie that'll make his beard curl."

"He's clean shaven," Dranko points out.

"We'll then, it'll grow him a beard and then curl it."

"And no weapons in the house," says Aravis. "He thinks we're weird."

Dranko walks over to examine the rotting walls in the back corner of the barn. "Hey, want me to cast *make hole*?"

He puts his fist through a rotten beam. Kibi looks it up and down. "That was a support post," he comments.

KidCthulhu: Sigh. That was beautiful. If only Dranko could sing.

StevenAC: You're telling me he was never a choirboy in all his years at the Church of Delioch? Clean white robes, freshly scrubbed face, neatly combed hair, tusks nicely polished...

KidCthulhu: While that's quite a mental image, no, I'm pretty sure Dranko skived off during choir. Probably out picking someone's pocket. Darn shame no one told him chicks dig guys who can sing. He might be in the front row of the New Delioch Mistralis right now, instead of off adventuring.

StevenAC: The New Delioch Mistralis? Bah. Bunch of dry windbags. The New Delioch Minstrels, on the other hand...

"If this tips over in the middle of the night, it'll be your fault," says Ernie.

"You'll want to be careful," says Aravis to Dranko. "Matt already thinks you're a little... slow."

"Why does he think I'm slow?" asks Dranko indignantly. "I'm not slow! I'm fast! What are you talking about?"

"You gave him the impression that you were a little..." Aravis taps his head.

Dranko looks outraged. "How did I give him that impression?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was because you kept making nonsense comments while we were talking." Somehow Aravis isn't laughing. He's suddenly thankful that his starry eyes help make his expression unreadable.

"So did Ernie," complains Dranko.

"But he was trying to look friendly and trustworthy."

"Right," mutters Dranko.

"I tried to assure him that you'd be safe," says Aravis.

"I am going to sleep," says Step suddenly, and not appreciating the banter. "Can you talk more quietly?"

Dranko searches around the barn before spending a couple of hours sneaking around the village, mapping it out in his head. The only odd thing he notices is that there aren't many stores and shops, given that the village population looks to be well over five hundred people. Around midnight he comes back, settles into his bedroll, closes his eyes, and tries his best to ignore Kibi's snoring.



Although the barn is soon quiet, One Certain Step does not fall asleep for over an hour. He lies on his back staring up at the wooden rafters. His mind is troubled, his heart heavy, his soul disturbed.

One particular image comes to him unbidden when he closes his eyes. A giant falls forward into the frozen slush at his feet, blood trailing in ribbons from gashes opened up with Step's sword. The scene repeats itself over and over in his mind and he desperately tries to remember what he felt at the time. Satisfaction? Exultation? Even bloodlust? Why was it not until afterward, when Eigomic had spoken, that he had felt shame and remorse?

Had he come to this, where a brutish giant was instructing him in matters of honor? Why did he not speak out, when the rest of his band had rushed the two giants guarding the trapdoor in Eigomic's house? Why had he not put forth a plan of subdual, of non-lethal incapacitation that would have served every bit as well as a quick slaughter?

Step has no good answers. For a long time now he has made his own will subservient to his new friends and their collective quest. But they are not bound by the oaths that he took to Kemma, Goddess of the Sun. Their methods and tactics have long troubled him – while undeniably fighting for Good, they sometimes place facility above honor – but always he has placed the Quest and its success above all other concerns. Wasn't it worth any price to come this far? The holy book said he must keep his appointment with death if Good is to triumph over Evil. Surely so noble and critical an end justifies desperate means?

He knows the answer to that question as soon as it forms: Of course not. It is the paladin's code that *no* end justifies dishonorable means. Not so many years ago he understood that. When he helped cleanse the filthy den of Vinceris worshippers in Djaw, his methods and principles were as uncompromising as his desire to succeed.

The giant falls face first into the bloody snow. Its only crime had been to do as it was told. Just like Step was doing. He considers that Kemma would be justified to remove Her grace from an unworthy vessel.

He falls asleep some time later, having found no peace.



Not much past five o'clock the next morning the Company are woken by roosters lustily greeting the dawn. Step is already up; he stands mutely in the doorway facing the rising sun.

"Remind me to kill the chickens," says Dranko groggily. "Just one snap of the whip and they'd be history."

"I like it here," says Ernie, who has jumped up fresh and ready to cook breakfast. "It reminds me of home."

Grey Wolf nods in agreement. "You can't kill the chickens," he adds.

As Kibi pulls on his robes, Scree comes up out of the ground at his feet. *The earth is full of power!* says the elemental.

I know, says Kibi. I can feel it.

It's not the Eyes of Moirel, either, says Scree. It's me. It's you.

Kibi *does* feel it, coursing through his body like electricity. Magical energy is bubbling within him, suffusing him. *There's not much stone here*, he observes.

True, says Scree. But the energy is coming from everywhere. Even the... the air. I don't understand it.

Ernie walks out of the barn and into the soft pastel dawn. Across the way he sees Matt already hard at work in his fields. He doesn't have *tongues* prepared, but he has a pair of *comprehend languages*, and figures he'll just cast one on himself and one upon the farmer. He casts as he walks, then approaches Matt and taps him lightly on the arm as he offers a cheery "Good morning!"

Our current house rule for *comprehend languages* is that (for spoken words) it works just like *tongues*, but only for understanding, not for speaking; and it can target anyone, not just the caster. I may use the upcoming transition to 3.5 as an opportunity to revert to the book rules, but I haven't decided yet.

Matt looks down and sees the glow of the magic on his body. He jumps back, alarmed. "What the hell? What was that you did?" he exclaims.

"I used some magic on you so you can understand me. Good morning. What needs doing? I'm Ernie, by the way."

Matt looks down at him with a fierce glower on his face. "Well, Ernie, I'll tell you the first thing you can do." Ernie looks eager to help. "You don't cast spells on me when I'm not expecting it, and you haven't said anything about it!" says Matt angrily.

Ernie is quite taken aback. "I'm very sorry, and I apologize. That must be frightening for you. But you see, you can't understand me unless I do!"

"Your friend could understand me yesterday, and I could understand him," says Matt. "What you did just now, well I don't appreciate that."

"I'm sorry," repeats Ernie.

"It's not polite," grumbles Matt.

Ernie gets a bit testy. He's not used to being on the receiving end of this sort of thing. "You've said so, and I apologized," he says curtly. "Now what needs doing?"

Matt glares at him for a few more seconds, then sucks in a breath. "You can fix the barn once the wood shows up. Should be soon," he says.

"We will, don't worry. I just wanted to know if there were any morning chores I could help with before that."

"You can feed the chickens."

"Sure!" says Ernie, back on familiar ground.

"Feed's over behind the house. Don't use too much. You done farming?"

"Yup."

"By the time you're done that, you can get started on the barn."

Ernie sets off to help with the morning's work.



"I think, Grey Wolf, what we should do is, we should build ramparts on this place. Make it defensible, right?"

Grey Wolf looks at Dranko, shakes his head, and walks outside. It's now a few hours after sunrise and a horse-drawn cart is approaching the barn. An old woman drives it, and a dozen planks of wood rattle in the cart's bed. As some of the Company watch, the woman jumps down, walks to the back and hoists four of the large planks onto her shoulders without much effort. Kibi casts *tongues*.

As some of the party help the woman with the wood (not that she needs the help; her old legs are wiry, with bulging calves), Dranko casts *comprehend languages* on himself and jumps down out of the loft, letting his *ring of feather falling* kick in. The woman jumps back in surprise and drops her planks. "What in tarnation?" she cries.

Dranko takes a step toward her. She takes a step back. Dranko deliberately picks up one of the boards and looks meaningfully over at the rotten corner of the barn. "For the barn," he says.

"Does anyone here speak the common tongue?" asks the woman, looking around.

"Hello!" says Kibi. "Excuse me. Thanks for bringing over the wood."

"Ah, good," says the woman. "What's up with him?" She thumbs toward Dranko.

"Oh, he has some trouble speaking," says Kibi. "But he can understand what you say. He's offering to help carry the wood, and he's sorry for giving you a fright. That wasn't very nice of him. He doesn't have very good manners." He taps his head and gives the woman a knowing look.

"Hey!" says Dranko. "I can understand you, you know!"

"He could carry the wood over there, but he probably shouldn't try doing anything tricky with it," says the woman.

Miffed, Dranko waits until the woman is looking and casts *make whole* on the wall. "Is that good?" asks Kibi.

She taps on the mended section a few times, runs her hand over it, inspects it for a minute. "Can he do that to my shed?" she asks Kibi.

"Sure!" Kibi agrees.

"Why don't you bring him over, when you're sure he's under control. Say, a couple of hours after noon?"

"Under control?!" exclaims Dranko. "What the...?"

"We can do that!" says Kibi brightly.



Some time later, Matt comes into the barn to retrieve some tools and put away some others.

"You have breakfast yet?" asks Ernie.

"I've already et. But I was thinkin'. Friend here says you're a good cook."

"I live to cook!" says Ernie.

"Ah. Well my cookin' ain't so good. I've been cooking for myself since m' wife died."

"I'm sorry to hear that," says Ernie. "That your wife died, I mean, not that you cook for yourself."

"Wouldn't be wrong to be sorry about either. Anyways, I got some decent ingredients. Got some apples delivered this morning, if you can make anything out of that." Matt cannot hide the hopeful smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Why don't you show me to the kitchen and we'll see what we can do."

Ernie finds the kitchen serviceable if underused. He tells Matt he'll make a full lunch for everyone, including the Company and Matt's farm-hands.

Around two in the afternoon Matt and three other men (one of whom looks about twelve years old) come in from the fields. Ernie has prepared a feast of sandwiches along with two hot apple pies. Matt spots the repaired corner of the barn and walks over to inspect it. "How did you get that done?" he asks, rapping his knuckles on the mended wood.

Dranko mimes spellcasting. Morningstar casts *tongues*. "We used small amounts of our magic to mend the barn over in that corner. Well, Dranko did," she says.

"Fixed it up with magic, huh? Is that gonna last? You sure? No funny stuff?" He knocks on it again.

"It was a tough spot," she says.

"Well. Hmm. If you don't mind, if you do any more fixin' up that you do, you do it the honest way. Fair enough?"

"Not a problem."

"No more magickin' up my barn. And you make sure he understands that..." – he points at Dranko – "...you know, since he's not all up there." He taps his head again before starting in on his apple pie.

Dranko turns a bright red. "Oh for crying out loud..."

"Great mother earth!" exclaims Matt. "You didn't magic this pie, did yuh?"

"Ernie doesn't use magic," says Morningstar.

Matt wolfs down another bite. "Mmmm. Mmmm. Mmm. I know the Antlered God might strike me down for sayin' this, but... I'm sorry Maude, you never made an apple pie this good."

"Looks like you'll be cooking another one," says Flicker to Ernie.

"Ernie, you're all right," says Matt, quite forgiving him for the morning's incident. "Tell him he's all right. He can make more of these. Uh, if he wants."

"I'll have more farm work for you to do now and then," continues Matt between bites. "But if you don't make a mess in here, and don't go makin' a ruckus, and don't go usin' no magic on m'stuff – or me – (tell him he's forgiven, by the way) – then the barn's yours. Ain't used it much since the cows died. If you need anything, I'll likely be out in the fields. Just watch where you step and don't go trompin' over my crops. 'Specially the dim one."

"God damn it!" says Dranko.



That evening Ernie (with *tongues* cast) wanders back through town to Elder Tog's house. Townsfolk wave to him as he passes, then point and whisper after he's gone. Tog is at home and invites him in. Ernie explains that he wants to throw a big town-wide barbecue later in the week, to thank the folk of Green Valley for letting the Company stay as guests.

Tog doesn't answer right away. After a minute of thought, he says, "I would prefer not."

Ernie is crestfallen. It never occurred to him that Tog would deny his request. He had only come to ask permission as a gesture of politeness. "But... but the people should congregate and be happy. And eat better!"

"They do that on occasion," says Tog. "It is your own presence that worries me. It would invite more questioning and speculation, and there has been too much of that in the village already."

It's a sullen and moping halfling that walks back through the streets of Green Valley to Matt's barn. Everyone looks at him curiously as he sits down heavily on the ground. "Tog won't let me hold the barbecue. I hate this alternate world stuff!"

"You can have a party for us," says Grey Wolf.

"It's not the same. I cook for you guys all the time!"

"And we love it," says Dranko soothingly. "Even if we're a little dim."



Two weeks of training pass. The wizards discover that they're running out of scroll ink and wonder when they might have the opportunity to get more. Dranko sets objects around the loft and practices snaring them with his whip. The clerics pray, the fighters spar, and Step broods silently and unnoticed. One afternoon Dranko tries summoning *Iglat* with his mace, and finds that summoning still works inside(?) the tower of Het Branoi.

The people of Green Valley pretty much leave them to themselves. Even Matt only comes by for meals. A few days into their third week there is a knock on the barn door come evening. Everyone looks over in surprise; Matt just walks in when he needs something. After a few seconds the door starts slowly sliding open, revealing the diminutive Del, six years old in body but (presumably) almost eighteen in mind. She looks around the barn until she spots Aravis, who casts *tongues*.

Del looks furtively back outside, as if she fears she's been followed. Then she struggles against the door and slides it closed.

"Is that the spell that lets you speak our language?" she asks, walking over to Aravis. Aravis nods. "May I... ask you some questions?" she says. Aravis translates for the others.

"Uh oh," mutters Grey Wolf.

"You may ask," says Aravis slowly, "but I might not be able to answer."

"What are your plans?" asks Del. "Are you staying here forever?"

"No. We are only staying long enough to..."

"Then where are you going when you leave?" Del interrupts.

"To be honest, I don't know where we're going. We need to find out where it is we're supposed to be."

"So you're just going to march out into the forest? Are you going back to the cities of Cressella?"

"I'm not sure," says Aravis cautiously.

"Did Tog tell you anything, about what's out in the forest?"

"He told some of what he has seen, yes."

"What *has* he seen?" urges Del.

"You should talk to him about that," answers Aravis.

"Oh, I have. And I'm not the only one." Ernie starts making 'stop talking' motions behind her, where Aravis can see. "Some of us... think Tog is not telling us the whole truth," Del continues.

At Dranko's request, Aravis asks Del if he may cast *comprehend languages* on her. "So I'll understand all of you? Will you answer my questions then?"

"You have to say no!" whispers Ernie.

"I will not lie to you," says Aravis, "but I will not necessarily be able to answer every question you ask. I'm sorry, but I made some promises to Tog."

She nods her head and Dranko casts the spell. "Can you understand me?" asks Dranko.

"Yeah."

"Tog has his shit together," he says bluntly. "There's no doubt you're sick of being here, and you're sick of being in the Stillness."

"Yeah, I'll say."

"Tog's right, though. We don't know how we got here, we don't know where we are, and we don't know where we're gonna go."

"He saw something out there."

"I don't know if he did or not," says Dranko warily.

"Oh, you probably know. Tog probably told you, and made you promise that you wouldn't say anything to the rest of us."

"You're here where you're supposed to be, with your people, with your families," says Ernie.

"Where I'm *supposed* to be is not *stuck* in this village, forbidden to leave, not aging, knowing that there's some way out that we're not allowed to find!"

Ernie looks at her with sympathy. "I'm not sure there is a way out," he says. "And I think that if you tried to get out, you'd be lost, and alone. You have no idea how much that stinks."

Del rolls her eyes. "I wouldn't go myself," she says, exasperated.

"You don't look stupid. Are you stupid?" asks Dranko.

"No!"

"Right. And since you're not stupid, don't you think that if there was a way to get the hell out of here, away from the Stillness, that your people would have taken it?"

"If we were allowed to find out things for ourselves, we might have."

"Use your brain!" cries Dranko.

"Dranko!" says Aravis sharply.

"You're not being very nice to her," says Kibi.

"It's not about being nice!" shouts Dranko.

"No," says Del coldly. "It's about doing what Tog told you to do, isn't it? It's about saying what Tog told you to say, isn't it? I see how it is."

"I don't obey orders very well," snarls Dranko.

"Well, you're doing a good job of it," Del snaps back at him.

They lock eyes with each other, glaring. Aravis breaks the awkward silence. "When we came here, we came through a doorway that disappeared behind us. We intend to go out and find a way that we can leave here."

"Another doorway. Out of the forest," says Del.

"Some. Way," replies Aravis.

"Uh uh," says Del. "Tog has been insisting that there aren't any more doorways. If he's telling the truth, what do you expect to find?"

"We may not find anything. We may be here forever," says Aravis.

"At least you're all in adult bodies," says Del bitterly.

Aravis sighs. "Please. Before you do anything rash, I suggest that those of you who believe that Tog isn't telling you everything, get together and try to convince him to admit whatever it is you think he's holding back."

"Oh, great idea. You think we haven't done that before? Several times?"

Dranko decides to try a different approach – scare tactics. "You know, when we first came here, we expected to get our asses kicked by a giant monster."

"Here in Green Valley?" Del snorts. "You thought there was a monster in Green Valley?"

"There's always a monster," mumbles Ernie.

"We did not know what was here," says Aravis. "We didn't know it was Green Valley at all."

"But you came from the place with the giants, right?"

"Yes," says Aravis. "And according to a prophecy, we're going to face something that's going to kill at least one of us. We expected it to be in Green Valley. If it's not here, it could be in the next place we go. It's probably waiting for us."

Del leaps to her feet. "Yeah, well, there's something that's going to kill us too, and you've met him already. His name is Tog."

She turns her back on the Company and marches toward the door. "You're going to do something you think is incredibly adventurous, but is really pretty stupid," Dranko calls after her.

Del has started to open the barn door, but wheels around as if stung. "If you find a way out of here, are you going to tell us?"

"Make you a deal," says Dranko. "If we can find a way to end the Stillness, we will. Promise."

"All right," says Del. "All right. Good night." She heaves on the door until it opens and scurries into the night.

The Company look at the door for a few seconds. "We should follow her," suggests Dranko.

Grey Wolf casts *invisibility* on Dranko and Flicker and the two rogues slip out into the night. Fortunately Del doesn't try anything stupid, going straight back to her house and slamming the door behind her. *You'd think she was eighteen*, Dranko thinks to himself.

Back at Matt's barn, Dranko says to Aravis, "You want to tell Tog about this in the morning?"

"I don't know if we want to get the girl in trouble," says Grey Wolf.

"I think he probably knows already," says Ernie.

"Well I don't think it's right," says Flicker, causing heads to turn. "Tog shouldn't be keeping secrets from people. They should be free to make up their own minds!"

"Flicker, you're a genius!" says Dranko sarcastically. "We'll just send a whole mob of these people out ahead of us into the cave. The monster will eat them, and get full, and then we can come in and kill it while it sleeps off the meal."

Ernie, on whom sarcasm is occasionally lost, splutters, "Dranko, that's the worst plan you've ever had!"

"I'm aware of that," says Dranko with a sigh. "I'm making a point."

After some debate, the Company agree to visit Tog the next morning and tell him about Del's visit. "He's going to think it's our fault for agitating people," says Ernie, "but she came to us! He needs to know that his people are unhappy."

OR SO

In Tog's house the next day various spells are cast to circumvent the language barrier. "We got a visit from Del yesterday," says Dranko.

"Of course you did," says Tog sagely. "No doubt she pressed you for information. I trust you kept to our agreement and told her nothing? Very headstrong, that one."

"They know something is out there," says Aravis.

"She made some guesses," adds Dranko.

"What guesses?" asks Tog curiously.

"She thinks you know more than you're telling," says Dranko. "She thinks that since we got in, there must be a way out someplace."

Tog nods. "Reasonable assumptions to make."

"She thinks that you saw something out in the woods," says Kibi.

"I think you need to consider that the time is over for protecting them from the truth," says Aravis.

Dranko leans forward in his chair. "If we do our job right, we'll kill the thing in the cave. We're going to try to end the Stillness. I don't know if we'll succeed, but we're going to try."

"You think the answer is in that cave?" asks Tog.

"I think the answer is beyond that cave," answers Dranko. "Maybe another two or three worlds past the cave."

"Worlds beyond..." says Tog, looking puzzled. "I don't understand what you're saying."

"Where we are right here, we think, is a different world than the one we came from. Picture it this way. You know how in a flood a hillock can become an island? When you left your city and came here to Green Valley, we think that someone took this hillock..." he gestures to indicate the whole village – "... and turned it into an island. That's why the Stillness exists." The rest of the Company look impressed at Dranko's metaphor.

"Why would the Antlered God allow such a thing?" Tog asks quietly.

"He works in mysterious ways," says Dranko. "It's not our job to question. But it's possible that the Antlered God sent us to drain the water away. We think we might have to go to another two or three different islands before we find a way to do that."

"And the cave is an island," says Tog. He stays silent for a minute, thinking. "I have had a thought," he continues. "I've toyed with it since I first met you. You are... powerful warriors, clearly. You wear magical gear, have the bearing of seasoned fighters..."

"And we have the scars to prove it!" says Dranko. He lifts his shirt to provide the visual evidence.

"That wasn't necessary," says Kibi, wincing.

"Hey, I didn't drop my pants this time," whispers Dranko.

Tog pretends not to notice. "My people have seen you," he goes on. "They know that even taken all together they could not fight as well as you. There are rumors abounding about you. Heroes from another world. Indestructible. Saviors. Perhaps... perhaps it is time to come clean, now that I can use you. Here is my plan. I will tell you all of it, because you are a part of it.

"I will gather the townsfolk and tell them what I saw, ten years ago. I will endure the backlash. I will explain that there is a doorway and a cave and it would lead to their deaths without question. I will tell them that you are going to go into that cave, and there will be one of two outcomes. If you do not survive, that will be a convincing lesson for the rest of them, that that is not the way to escape from or end the Stillness. Your reputations are such that if you do not succeed, my people will know that they could not succeed. On the other hand, if you defeat the beast in the cave, then the cave and what is beyond becomes open to us. We could escape that way."

"What's beyond that cave might not be any safer," says Ernie.

"But it would be worth exploring, surely," says Tog.

"We could be the scouting party for them, check things out," says Kibi.

Tog sighs. "My people have begun to suspect that I have some ulterior motive for not wanting them to explore, to leave, to look for a way out. I wish to prove to them that that is not the case! The only reason I have withheld information from them is that I don't want them eaten by that thing, or blasted by its lightning! I have no issue with them exploring, looking for ways out. I think the Antlered God would approve of us taking initiative, once it is safe." The Company nod in agreement.

"When will you be ready to go?" asks Tog.

"We need a month," says Dranko.

Ernie perks up. "If you're going to tell them, can I have my party?"

Tog smiles. "It would best to do both on the same night. It would be good to have something cheerful going on when they learn the news."



For a few more weeks the Company train, though Tog requests that they leave Matt's barn and remove themselves to the woods. Their presence in the town fuels too much speculation and Tog doesn't want things coming to a head before he's ready. Dranko practices with his whip. Snokas and Morningstar alternate sparring and praying. The wizards keep their noses in their books for hours on end. Grey Wolf does slip into town one afternoon and pays for the blacksmith to make him a couple of short lengths of chain, which he needs as components for a new spell.

One Certain Step distances himself from the others as much as he can without attracting notice. He often goes for long walks in the forest, finding clearings where the sun shines down to sit cross-legged in the grass. In the weeks since arriving in Green Valley he has still not found peace in his heart. Each morning he wakes to greet the sun, but instead of joy and serenity he feels a deep foreboding, and a fear that Kemma will remove Her grace from him. His silent prayers become mingled with fits of angry self-doubt.

One afternoon in the final week of their training, while sitting in prayer in a forest meadow, Step manages to quell these doubts, not so much by solving them, but by burying them beneath a new resolve to serve even more as a champion and protector of his companions. Regardless of his deeper misgivings, his bravery and fighting prowess have always served him well, and soon they will be facing some horror that has already attacked Tog with no provocation. Instead of brooding on the past, he should be preparing for the upcoming battle.

As he stands and prepares to return to the others, thick clouds blow across the strange orange sun.



On the final day before setting out for the cave, Ernie is in a cooking frenzy. Tonight is the big village-wide party that he's been so looking forward to. The prospect of feeding dozens (if not hundreds) fills his heart with joy. Townsfolk throughout Green Valley are abuzz with anticipation, collectively sensing an important announcement or revelation.

The sky is relatively clear and the air dry and cool, but there is a crack like distant thunder from off in the woods. A few minutes earlier Dranko, Aravis, Flicker and Grey Wolf had headed in that direction with mildly guilty looks on their faces.

"Yondalla's raisin bagels!" Ernie exclaims. "What are they *doing* out there?"

LightPhoenix: I almost snorted pasta out of my nose when I read this. Just thought you'd like to know.

Some townsfolk turn to look curiously in the direction of the noise. Elsewhere, Morningstar's eyes narrow as she listens to the thunderous boom. She has a suspicion, but... no, surely not. All the same, she ought to go check...



The four of them have arrived in a secluded clearing a quarter mile outside of town.

"Morningstar will kill us," notes Aravis. Flicker is perched on a tree limb looking back toward Green Valley.

"I'm ready," says Dranko, gritting his teeth.

Grey Wolf casts *iron storm* around Dranko, and the rogue leaps and dodges the iron filings. The spell is followed up quickly by a *lightning bolt*, and Dranko nimbly avoids the crackling electricity sizzling around inside the *iron storm*'s area.

That's the easy one, thinks Dranko to himself. Now the hard part.

"Here it comes," says Aravis. He casts *chain lightning* at Dranko. In seconds the whole hemisphere of iron bits is filled with a raging storm of electricity. Dranko ducks, weaves, swivels...

AAAAAAAARRGGHHHH!!

...and falls to the ground, horribly burned. He crawls out from the *iron storm* and heals himself up. Fresh scars appear all over his body. "Do you want to stop?" asks Grey Wolf.

"No! I think I almost had it that time. Give me a minute, though." Dranko casts *protection from elements: electricity* on himself this time before going back into the mass of iron filings.

"Ready?" asks Aravis.

"Guys?" calls Flicker from his tree. No one listens to him.

Dranko steels himself, and Aravis casts another *chain lightning*. Dranko is absolutely ready this time – and still can't dodge out of the way. There's too much lightning, no gaps, no places to lunge and turn. The protective spell absorbs all the damage, but his shirt is somewhat seared. "One more time," he insists. "Aravis, you have one more today, right?"

"I do, but..."

Dranko casts *resist elements: electricity* on himself. "That should be enough. Come on, one more."

"Guys, we should..." Flicker is interrupted by Aravis's third *chain lightning*, which burns new patches of skin off Dranko's body. The *resist elements* helps, but not entirely. Again he crawls out from the *iron storm*, and lies on the grass, bleeding.

"Guys!" shouts Flicker.

"What is it?" asks Grey Wolf, finally hearing him.

"Er... Morningstar is here."

Morningstar had crested the closest hill just in time to see Aravis cast his third spell. Now she bursts into the clearing, her face livid. Dranko is lying on the ground, with Aravis and Grey Wolf standing over him. The hair on all three of their heads is standing almost straight out. "What... what are you doing?" she cries. "Aravis, what is going on here? Grey Wolf? Explain!"

Dranko rolls and looks up at his fiancée standing over him. "I'm trying to make sure I survive the next time we want to..."

"Be quiet," snaps Morningstar. She casts *heal* on him. "I... you... I..." Unable to find adequate words for Dranko, she turns on Aravis. "You should know better!" she shouts.

Aravis looks sheepish as Dranko gets to his feet. "If it makes you feel better, I think I've come to the conclusion that I never want to get caught in an *iron storm/chain lightning* again. Grey Wolf's I can dodge, no problem, but Aravis's *chain lightning* I can't get the hang of. It comes from everywhere! It... er, I... uh, yeah."

"This experiment is over," says Morningstar flatly. She turns around and marches back toward town. A few minutes later the other four follow her. By this time there are several spits of meat turning over fires in the town square, where the feast is taking place. Grey Wolf turns to Dranko as they approach. "Smells like something other than you is cooking," he says, grinning.

RangerWickett: Ah, I love combo attacks. Did I ever mention the "Damien throws his spiked chain; the druid casts *entangle*" combo? They called it Quake with Fear, based on an attack from the anime *Ronin Warriors* (also called *Samurai Troopers*). I let the druid come up with a metal-based version of *entangle* so they could use the combo more often. It's good to see that my players aren't the only crazy ones doing this kind of stuff.

Shmoo: Which book is *iron storm* in?

anon: Yes, I am curious too. What book? And how are you letting it interact with *lightning bolt* and/or *chain lightning*?

Sidereal Knight: I believe it's in *Relics and Rituals*.

Sagiro: *Iron storm*, as Sidereal Knight says, is from *Relics and Rituals*. It's a 3rd-level arcane spell that creates a cloud of whirling iron filings in the same area as a *fireball* (20 feet radius). It persists for 1 round/level, doing 1d10 damage per round (Reflex half) to anything inside.

The relevant bit to Dranko's practicing is that any electricity passing within 60 feet of the iron filings gets sucked into the area, doing its damage to anything currently in the *iron storm*. In essence, it lets you cast *lightning bolt* in the shape of a *fireball* at the cost of two spells. But if a *chain lightning* is cast near an *iron storm*, the secondary bolts add an additional 4d6 of damage. So if Aravis (12th level) casts *chain lightning* near an *iron storm*, it does 16d6 (Reflex half) to anyone unlucky or foolish enough to be inside. Aravis has a 25 INT (starting 18, +3 for level increases, +4 for a *headband of intellect* he made for himself). And he has Spell Focus: Evocation. That gives his *chain lightning* a save DC of $10+6+7+2 = 25$. In theory Dranko should make this save about half the time, but his luck has been atrocious.

It is hard to say how much the folk of Green Valley are enjoying the party. On the one hand they are wolfing down everything that Ernie had a hand in preparing. (In fact, within half an hour almost all of his pies, breads, stews and roasts are gone, leaving most people to consume food cooked by others that, while perfectly good, is not quite so *perfect*.) On the other hand, the crowd is anything but jolly. There is no singing or dancing the way there was with the Yuja. The people are clustered into garrulous knots, leaning in and talking earnestly, occasionally throwing ill-hidden glances at the Company and at Tog.

Before much more than an hour has passed, Tog stands up on a platform built for this occasion and waves his arms. In seconds the crowd quiets, since this is what they're really here for. Hundreds of faces are turned to face the village Elder, who clears his throat, mumbles a quick prayer to the Antlered God that he will not be stoned on the spot, and begins to speak.

He tells his people everything, with little preamble and no apologies. When he describes his walkabout of a decade past, and the blue portal deep in the woods, the crowd starts to murmur angrily. When he talks about the horrible monster in the cave and the lightning bolt it hurled at him, he gets angry himself, challenging the men and women before him. "Would you have had me send you to your certain deaths? I know that there are few among you who would refrain from going in there, knowing of its existence. I made the choice of protecting your lives. I am your Elder! I am sworn to the Antlered God to protect you, and by his Godly form I shall!"

The crowd grows quiet again but the looks they give to Tog are unconvinced. The Elder takes another deep breath and continues. "Tomorrow these newcomers will begin the journey to the hidden cave." He gestures toward the Company, and hundreds of heads turn to look at them. Tog keeps talking. "I will go with them, along with a dozen men and women of Green Valley, to stand witness. We will wait outside the cave for three days while these heroes enter and do battle with the Beast. If they have not returned in three days' time, it will be proof enough that they are dead, and that the Beast is too powerful, too dangerous. If they come out victorious, then together we will work out a plan for exploring that cave and whatever might be beyond it."

The assemblage breaks out into dozens of chattering pockets. After about a minute, during which Tog waits patiently, a teenaged boy (in appearance) shouts over the noise. The Company recognize him as **Reyn**, one of the two hunters they saw when they first came to this world. He does not look happy.

"So! Elder Tog!" he calls, and the people stop their talking to listen. "Please excuse my skepticism, but... understand I'm doubtful because we've just learned you haven't been quite forthcoming for this last *decade*."

He sneers as he says 'decade,' and some of the people around him nod. Reyn continues: "But it seems to me that part of this plan could involve you and the newcomers agreeing that they won't come back no matter *what* they find. How can you guarantee that just because they don't come back, that it's too dangerous for us to go in after them?"

"He's right!" someone shouts a man from the back.

"Yeah, what do you say to that?" cries a ten-year-old girl.

Tog turns red. "Are there any among you who would be willing to risk your lives, to test the veracity of what I'm saying?" he shouts back at them. "I'm not talking about some vague theoretical risk. I've told you what is in there. One of you who thinks I am deceiving you, you can go into the cave yourself with a rope around your waist, once the heroes have had their try. We'll wait five minutes and pull you out again. Others of you can see for yourselves what gets pulled out, whether that's a live person with a tale of what they saw, or a corpse! Either way my point shall have been made. If you doubt my word, I'll await a volunteer."

Tog storms off his platform and joins the Company off to the side while the crowd talks animatedly about his challenge. "I don't hold you personally responsible," he says. "But your arrival has unraveled the control I had over my people. Things are coming to head. If I have to throw one life away to save the rest, I will."



The Company wake to a light warm rain. The whole town is out and milling around the town square; there's been plenty of talk overnight, and now it looks like about a hundred people are going to go with them into the forest. Del is (unsurprisingly) among them, wearing a full pack that threatens to topple her six-year-old's body.

She walks over to Aravis, who casts *tongues* as she approaches. "I was right, wasn't I?" she says, grimacing. "About Tog holding out on us all this time."

"Yes," Aravis agrees. "He knows a possible way out. And ten years ago he almost died trying to see where it went, what was there. If he almost died, do you think anyone else in the village would have made it out alive?"

"By themselves? Probably not. I wouldn't have been much use." She looks contemptuously at her own body. "But we have strong men, strong women in the village. How do we know fifty of them, or a hundred, couldn't have killed this beast?"

"Tog believes it wouldn't have helped. Maybe he was wrong in not giving you the choice, but he didn't do it because he was evil. His only desire was to protect you."

"I know." Del lets out a big sigh. "Well, you'll just have to kill it, and come back, and let us know it's safe. And then we'll go looking for our own answers."

Led by Tog and the Company, the hundred people (with a few ponies to carry supplies) march up the muddy ground on the far side of the valley. Dranko makes up a vaguely obscene marching song in Charagan Common and teaches the people of Green Valley to sing it. It's a three day trek through the woods, with the townsfolk trailing out behind and the stragglers catching up by nightfall.

OR SO

On the second night, while the throng is pitching tents and preparing cook fires, Kibi sits down with his back against a mossy boulder. For a month now he has felt the strange power of this world humming in his bones, not knowing what it might mean. But a feeling has been growing in his mind, particularly when he communicates with Scree. Twice now he has suppressed the urge to follow his familiar into the solid ground. During the day's march a wonderful idea had come to him. He had mentioned it to Dranko and Grey Wolf in passing, and had grown more and more certain.

Scree?

Yes, Kibi?

I think I can follow you underground. Go somewhere, and I'll try keeping up.

The earth elemental regards him with its blue gemstone eyes. Kibi gets the feeling that it's grinning at him. Scree flips one of the smaller rocks from its body up at Kibi, where it plinks off the dwarf's shoulder. Kibi looks at his familiar curiously.

Tag! says Scree, a second before sinking into ground. Kibi concentrates for a moment and his body ripples with energy. Then he, too, sinks into the ground.

From achieving 5th level in his Earth Mage prestige class, Kibi can now cast *xorn movement* (from the *Manual of the Planes*) once per day.

Grey Wolf looks up from his spellbook at the sight. "We seem to have lost a wizard," he says, smiling inwardly.

Ernie and Flicker, not privy to the experiment, go running over to where Kibi was and examine the ground. "Kibi! Kibi!"

"Something ate Kibi!" Flicker cries.

"Guess the earth ate him," says Dranko unconcernedly, and heartily enjoying the halflings' panic. "There's only one thing to do now. Divvy up his stuff."

OR SO

It's dark, and Kibi's natural darkvision has no meaning. He almost panics. But after only a few seconds he feels like an otter that has finally learned it can swim. Indeed, the earth and rock flows around his body like water, providing buoyancy when he desires but parting before him in any direction he wishes to move. And he *feels*. He feels vibrations running through the ground. He can tell where the mass of people moves above him on the surface, and where Scree is moving about nearby. Some new sense awakens in him, a sense of solidity, of *density*.

Kibi and Scree play tag. It's good practice. *The Earth tells me everything I could see with my eyes*, thinks Scree. *You don't need your eyes. And there's not much to see. It's all dirt. And some rocks. Watch out for tree roots; you have to go around them or push them aside. Also there are sometimes underground streams.*

After a few minutes, Kibi pops back up near where he started. Dranko is handing out his possessions. "Oh, hey, you're back!" says Dranko, feigning surprise.

"That's my stuff! I can't believe you started giving away my stuff," says Kibi indignantly.

"Next time maybe you could tell someone where you're going," says Dranko.

Before bed that night, Edghar takes the two chains Grey Wolf purchased in Green Valley and drops them at the foot of a tree. Grey Wolf casts his newly learned *dancing chains* spell, and they elongate, stretching up to wrap around a limb a dozen feet

off the ground. As they do, razor-sharp barbs sprout along their lengths. Grey Wolf reaches out and climbs up the chains effortlessly, unhindered and unhurt by the barbs.

No one's going to follow you up that, says the monkey, edging away nervously.

Step thinks only of the Beast in the Cave, and how defending his friends will be the first step on his journey of redemption.

Dr. Rictus: So what did you end up doing about *dancing chains*? I remember you found the spell as it appeared in the *Book of Vile Darkness* problematic. Can it not affect so darn many chains, for example?

Sagiro: I allowed the spell as written, but with the interpretation that the line "making the chains dance and move as she wishes" is flavor text, and not an indication that the chains gain a movement rate. As such, Grey Wolf must first arrange to get the chains to within 15 feet of whatever it is he wants them to attack, whether by placing them himself, throwing them, or having Edghar carry them. I think that will be a sufficient mitigator, though I reserve the right to make further changes if the spell still seems too strong.

QR 80

The morning dawns on the day that Tog expects to find the portal to the cave. The gathered townsfolk are buzzing with anticipation. "They're really excited that we're going off to our deaths," says Aravis dryly.

"They have faith in us," says Ernie.

"Only because they've known us for just a few weeks," says Flicker.

"And they didn't watch Dranko, Grey Wolf and I practicing *chain lightning* out in the woods," adds Aravis.

Long term buff spells are applied and shorter term spell choices are discussed at length. Eventually they set out following Tog, who does his best to get his bearings. It's been about two years since he last visited the blue portal. After a couple of hours marching, Tog comes to a sudden halt and motions for everyone else also to stop. His brows knit in concentration, and then he declares, "We can go no further in this direction."

Dranko strides forward until he's abreast of Tog and discovers that the Elder's statement is the literal truth. He cannot take another step further into the woods. His brain is saying "Feet, go!" but his legs just won't move. "Step, do me a favor and throw me through."

Step walks up and puts his arms against Dranko's back, but finds he cannot muster the will to propel the half-orc forward.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot bring myself to push you," says Step. "Perhaps you can fall through by accident?"

Kibi stands back and throws a rock. It sails beyond the 'barrier' and bounces off a tree. Emboldened, he strides forward himself but meets the same mental resistance as the others. "As interesting as this is, it's not really the point," says Ernie.

"But this might be another exit!" says Flicker. "Isn't it worth being sure that the cave isn't the only way out?"

Kibi casts *detect magic* and sees a continuous wall of dweomercraft stretching out into the forest to the edge of the spell's range. He examines it closely to determine its type, and to his great surprise realizes that it's similar to his own magic. It's not a school of magic *per se*; he thinks it's Earth Magic! Scree sinks into the ground, but like Kibi is unable to cross the barrier.

Flicker looks at some nearby trees and notes that one of them is bending out and across the boundary. And a tree on the other side curves similarly across the barrier to their side. "It's not affecting trees," he says. Grey Wolf peers upward but doesn't see the trees Flicker is talking about.

Step chuck's a rock across. Dranko sees it go right into a knot of a tree. "Nice shot," he comments. Step glares at him.
"What? What's wrong?"

"Nice shot?" snorts Step. "Just because my aim is not as good as yours, is no reason..."

"But you just got it right inside that little hole!"

Step looks at Dranko like he's... well, like he's a little dim. "I missed the tree entirely. I am unused to hurling missiles."

Comprehension dawns on Dranko's face. "It's an illusion! We're all seeing different things! I saw Step's rock do something different..."

"...and Flicker sees trees that I don't see," says Grey Wolf.

"This really must be where the world ends," says Dranko.

"Not again!" says Ernie.

"It's like we're back in the bottle," says Grey Wolf.

"We did not find the edge of the world again," says Aravis. "We found *another* edge of *another* world." He whistles appreciatively. "Those Black Circle guys sure put a lot of work and effort into this. I hope we can rip the whole thing apart and make them sorry for it."

Tog motions to the right and walks parallel to the edge of the world, keeping his hand stretched out so that he can follow the invisible border without 'bumping' into it. The throng follows. Two hours later they see a thin blue line glowing through the trees up ahead, as they approach the hovering blue portal edge on. The people of Green Valley soon see it too. An excited babble springs up among them and someone runs forward.

"Do not approach it!" shouts Tog. A hundred people filter into a rough semicircle around the hanging square of blue light, staying over fifteen feet back. A soft steady hum sounds from it. The Company take up positions directly in front of it, observing it closely. It resembles the portal through which they arrived, though this one does not ripple like a curtain; instead it is fixed in place like a window. It is nine feet tall and four feet wide, its bottom edge six inches off the forest floor.

At Ernie's request, Tog describes his experience again in detail; after a second or two of cold darkness, he felt a pulling sensation as if he were being dragged into the cave by an invisible hand. It's just as the Company felt when going through the door of the beholder statue. "I'll bet these curtains are like the Black Circle's maintenance doors, so they can get to places if anything goes wrong," Ernie speculates.

The Company review the plan for half a minute and then begin their flurry of short term spells. The townsfolk find this absolutely fascinating – half the party are waving their arms and incanting various spells: *protection from evil, improved invisibility, shield other, assassin's senses, bless, prayer, protective wards, mass darkvision...* to name a few. Since Tog was attacked as soon as he stepped through, the Company are expecting the same.

Brimming with enchantment, the Company line up and start marching through the glowing blue portal. Dranko and Aravis take pains to enter at the same time, to maintain the *shield other* spell they share. Kibi and Morningstar do likewise. Behind them the crowd cheers them on with shouted encouragement. "We're counting on you!" shouts Del.

There is the dark, the cold, the sensation of being pulled through the void...

LightPhoenix: Ten bucks says nothing attacks, and Tog kills all the villagers.

coyote6: Tog and the villagers were, all-in-all, fairly polite. Therefore, they must be the bad guys; the monster is then a guardian keeping them locked up.

Kid Charlemagne: I don't know, Tog was just bitter enough to be a good guy.

Caliber: Obviously they all created the Stillness themselves in an attempt to become immortal Commoners of Dooooooooom!!!!!!

cue the ominous music and thunder

OR SO

The Company spill out of a rectangular blue portal into a dark expanse. As Tog warned, they do seem to be inside a large cave – huge, in fact. The ceiling is high enough to be beyond the range of their darkvision, as are any walls in front of them. Here and there are wide columns of stone rising up into the air and vanishing as they extend beyond their sight. There is stone beneath their feet, and something else as well, something lumpy and clanking. Dranko quickly glances down hoping to see a treasure hoard, but it looks as though they are treading on the rotting remains of about four humanoid creatures. There are some coins and glimmers of metal mixed in, but now is not the time for a close examination.

The smell is horrific. It's a combination of rotting death and the stink of a monstrous living creature. Everything is pretty much as Tog warned them it would be – except that there is no beast in sight, and no lightning blasts coming from the darkness. Outside of their own sounds, the cave (if that's what this is) is strangely quiet.

Grey Wolf glances behind him, and sees that the glowing portal is only ten feet in front of the (relative to them) back wall of the cave. That wall stretches out to the left and right as far as they can see. High up, some faintly glowing fungus clings to the stone.

Morningstar casts a *Rary's telepathic bond* connecting her with Dranko, Flicker, Aravis and Kibi. Aravis casts a *mass haste* on everyone. "Spread out," says Grey Wolf. The Company do so, suspecting that somewhere out there is a creature that would love to find them in *lightning bolt* formation.

Ernie activates the *fly* spell on his shield and soars off to the right, hoping to spot the Beast. He sees more columns, numerous stalagmites, and a disappointing absence of enemies given that the clock is ticking on their spells. "Hey monster!" he yells. "Tasty halfling here! Yum, yum!"

Kibi scans the cavern with *see invisibility* as he moves out to the left. Nothing.

Dranko picks up on Ernie's tactic. "Oh woe is me!" he shouts. "Just a poor young orc wandering into this cave. I'm tasty too! And I wish to steal things," he adds as an afterthought.

"And he's a little slow," says Kibi helpfully.

Dranko glowers, stays close to Aravis, and sets his back to a tall stalagmite. "Oh, look!" he shouts, getting even more into the spirit. "I accidentally brought this small tasty goat with me, and a lot of gold!"

Kay hastily looks for tracks as she moves but still can't see any sign of a large beast. No fewmets, no scales, no claw marks – but it's difficult for her to track by the black-and-white translation of the *darkvision*. Step stops to *detect evil* but senses nothing within sixty feet. Kibi, invisible, advances forward a bit further as everyone continues to spread out ...

There is a growl. A low, almost subsonic noise, deep and resonant and echoing through the cavern. It's coming from somewhere back in the darkness beyond their vision

"Woe is me!" calls Dranko. "My elven maidens can barely carry all this gold!"

At the edge of Kibi's vision, a giant shape comes into view. It has two red glowing eyes some fifteen feet off the ground. The front of it (all he can see) has a huge head, enormous tusks, and thick forelegs with sharp claws. "I see something. It's pretty big!"

Lightning flashes without warning from the creature's eyes. The bolt strikes Aravis and then arcs to Morningstar, but their protective spells (*energy buffer* and *resist elements*, respectively) absorb all the damage. Aravis thinks it was a *chain lightning*, but not particularly potent. He and Dranko (still staying close to maintain the *shield other*) move forward towards the beast. Aravis stays back somewhat but Dranko (*improvedly invisible*) gets close enough to see the creature clearly. It's every bit the nightmarish monster they expected, an oversized, hunched behemoth standing twenty feet tall on four thick legs. It looks like a cross between a boar and a giant rat, with rough rocky skin and blazing red eyes. Its tusks are as big as a grown man. Dranko readies his whip to strike.

Aravis lets rip with a sonically-substituted *chain lightning*, unconcerned about the lack of secondary targets. The stale air ripples with the thunderous noise of the spell. Fierce energies play around the body of the Beast.

It's unharmed. Either the creature is immune to sonics, or it resisted his spell outright. It swivels its head to observe Aravis. *Oh, shit*, he thinks over the mind-link.

The Beast lumbers toward Aravis, its claws scraping on the stone floor. But it doesn't reach the wizard, instead pausing as it brushes against Dranko. It sniffs the air for a second, bellows, and spears the half-orc with one of its mighty tusks! Blood splatters the stones, and Dranko sends a thought of pain over the mind-link. But he has the presence of mind to think to Flicker: *I'm on its left, near the front of it, and it knows where I am. Flank!*

Flicker, fortunately close by, dashes around to the other side of the Beast, tumbles into position, and stabs its ankle with his short sword. Tendons and sinews snap, spraying thick black blood. The Beast roars in pain, whipping its head back and forth. Flicker feels the wind as its tusks whoosh over his head. Noxious spittle flies from its mouth.

Morningstar checks over the mind-link that the two rogues aren't near the creature's back end, and then casts a *blade barrier* that overlaps the monster's rump. Dranko and Flicker hear the revolting sound of brutally carved meat from the back of the creature, the roars of which increase in volume.

Step's eyes light up. Here is a fight that makes sense! He grips his broadsword and charges the beast, hardly caring that it rips into him with a tusk as he approaches. He hacks viciously at its lowered jaw beneath the left tusk. Grey Wolf, Kay and Snokas, emboldened by the paladin's rush, also charge forward to attack.

Destroy that beast! the sword *Bostock* says exultantly in its owner's mind, but Grey Wolf is too far away to reach it for now. Kay and Snokas strike the beast with their weapons, and Ernie (still in flight) joins them, slicing its flank with *Beryn Sur*. The beast bellows its pain and frustration, bleeding from its many wounds.

Kibi figures he can end this quickly. Surely this behemoth has a small brain! He casts *hold monster*, but the creature's natural spell resistance foils the spell. He follows it up immediately with *confusion*, but with the same lack of results, and for his troubles he is now visible.

Still, this fearsome beast seems like it will be no real match for the superior numbers of the Company. From the look of its gashed body, it may only be another few seconds before...

ZZZZZZAAAAAP!

Another *chain lightning* comes crackling through the darkness, from somewhere off to the right of the beast. Step, Kay, Snokas, Flicker and Ernie are all caught, though Ernie is completely shielded by a *resist elements* and Flicker evades the blast. But while the Company are relatively unscathed by this new attack, it's a rude revelation that there's a second beast in this cave.

Well, at least for another few seconds there is. Dranko, invisible, takes careful aim at the wounded monster with his magical whip and lashes out with four sneak attacks. The first whips around the tusk already loosened by Step's blade; he yanks back and feels it start to tear from its head. The second lash of the whip nearly pulls the tusk out entirely; it's hanging by some strings of flesh, blood gushing out. The third attack cracks directly into its left eye, bursting it. And the fourth wraps around the other tusk; he yanks with all his might, and its massive head snaps to the side. The Beast wobbles, topples, and crashes to the cavern floor.

Kay and Snokas look like they're about to go charging off after the second monster, but Dranko, guessing the monster's claws and tusks are more deadly than its spells, shouts out, "Let it come to you!" The two warriors pull up short. Aravis takes advantage of the opportunity to put a *stoneskin* onto Kay.

Out of the darkness to their *left* a small red pellet streaks into their midst. Half the party are caught in an exploding *fireball*! Flicker emerges unharmed, Aravis and Kay are burned, and Step is looking very badly off. Dranko, while he managed to dodge the flames, takes some sympathy damage from his *shield other* on Aravis. There's a torrent of babble, half spoken, half thought over the mind-link. A mage is here with the two beasts! Their handler, maybe? And Grey Wolf thinks the spell came from high in the air; the mage is probably flying.

Morningstar advances until the remaining beast comes into view. She fires off a pair of *searing darknesses*, and both of them penetrate its spell resistance. It roars in pain as blood boils out of the wounds.

Grey Wolf activates his *vest of improved invisibility* while Step *lays hands* on himself, bringing his health back to serviceable levels. He grips his broadsword and peers toward the beast, licking his chops. A voice in the back of his head whispers words of caution, words which he stubbornly ignores.

Kay fires off a volley of arrows; two bounce off the thick hide of the monster and a third sticks in unnoticed by its victim.

Kibi moves toward the source of the *fireball*, hoping to catch a glimpse of the enemy mage, but what he sees is a *third* enormous beast! It must have launched the *fireball* from its eyes. He yells his discovery to the others, thinks for a second, and casts a *wall of force* (20 feet high and 50 feet long) to separate the third monster from the rest of the battle. *Hey Scree, let me know if you sense any other big creatures in here!*

Okay. Scree sinks down into the ground.

The group of heroes in the center of the battle, which have been waiting for the beast to charge, are engulfed in a white fog. Has the second beast cast *obscuring mist*? No, not exactly. This mist is hot, roiling, shot through with sheets of orange flames. Flicker, Dranko, Step, Kay and Aravis find themselves not only unable to see, but trapped in the inferno of an *incendiary cloud*. Dranko hears the sound of magical blades whirring nearby; they stir up the fog behind him.

Realizing the creature is just going to hang back and cast spells, Dranko charges out of the fog. He escapes the mist and the smell of hot cinders is replaced by the nauseating odor of the beast. Aravis also sprints from the hot cloud; as soon as he's clear of it he casts another *sonic chain lightning*. For a second time he fails to penetrate its natural resistance to magic. He follows it up with a *cone of cold*, which not only fails to affect the beast, but catches the invisible Dranko in its area. "Excuse me!" shouts Dranko, who fortunately manages to evade the frigid blast.

Flicker and Ernie are next to flee the *incendiary cloud*. Ernie flies in the direction of the third beast and casts *holy smite* on it when it gets within range. His spell strikes the *wall of force* and fizzles harmlessly. "Argh! Kibi! Stupid wizards, you're getting in the way of my smiting!"

"We're going to have to close," shouts Dranko. "It's not coming near us." Step tightens his grip on his sword and smiles.

The third beast snarls at Kibi and charges, slamming into the *wall of force* at an angle and sliding along as it runs. Kibi looks on in alarm as the creature scrabbles along the wall until it reaches its edge, where Kibi is standing. It reaches around the edge of the wall and rakes the dwarf with a mighty claw. His cry causes Morningstar to change targets; she whirls around and brings a *flame strike* down on its head. And where Aravis has had no luck penetrating these beasts' magic resistance, Morningstar has had no problems. **WHOOOMPH!**

Despite the urgent suggestions from *Bostock* (*Charge it! Hack at its flesh!*) Grey Wolf looses the sack of chain from his belt and throws it at the foot of the beast. From a safe distance he casts *dancing chains*; the two chains grow to fifteen feet in length and tear free of the bag, covered with razor barbs and writhing in the air. At Grey Wolf's bidding they scrape against the monster's thick hide.

On the other side of the battlefield, Kibi steps away from his attacker and back behind the wall of force. He casts *Mordenkainen's lucubration* to recall his *wall of force* and brings forth a second *wall*, extending the protective barrier another fifty feet into the darkness.

Step, having emerged from the fiery cloud, charges at the nearer foe. He knows that it will likely attack the first to approach; better it be him. He has convinced himself that he can dodge the tusks this time, having seen them in action once already.

not yet

The voice of doubt sounds again in his head. Is it warning him? *I am redeeming myself*, he tells the voice.

you are fooling yourself

Step charges. He follows the movement of the beast's head as he runs up, planning when to duck, how to avoid the... *Aaaahh!* He skids on a patch of ground made slippery by blood, just as the enormous head of the monster turns to gore him. Its tusk tears into his shoulder. Step doesn't care. He swings his sword and opens an enormous gash in its face. Its red eyes glare down at him. The Company watch as Step and the Beast face each other, both covered in blood. Kay runs up and casts a small healing spell on him, hoping it will be enough.

It isn't. The beast whips its head forward and up, impaling Step on an enormous tusk. It leans back on its hind legs and tears at the paladin with its claws, tearing off chunks and savaging them with its teeth. As the Company look on in horror it roars and shakes its head and spits out pieces of flesh in a spray of messy goblets. As the paladin's torso and head fly through the air they trail a dim smear of soft glow, no brighter than a *light* spell, an afterimage, a last careless brushstroke.

The light of One Certain Step dwindles and goes out.

coyote6: Oof. Somebody should've magicked up a steed for the poor old NPC paladin.

nemmerle: I guess it was time to thin the herd. I love a good death.

coyote6: Was One Certain Step's self-recrimination and doubt the last few posts a little example of post-death retro-continuity, a part of The Plan, or what?

KidCthulhu: We've changed his name from One Certain Step to Many Greasy Chunks.

No, Step's moral questions aren't retroactive. He really was having some problems with the way we've been doing business. And he's not the only one.

Zaruthustran: Wow! Bloody good death. Was Step still an NPC at this point?

Number47: I will continue to call him One Singular Sensation, even in death.

StevenAC: I prefer Once Certain Step – a typo which appeared several times in previous Story Hour posts and now seems sadly appropriate...

Uzumaki: I'm so sad.

anon: But... Morningstar will bring him back... won't she?

Zustiur: I suspect that even if Morningstar takes the time to *resurrect* or *raise dead* One Certain Step, he may feel that by dying when he knew he would, that he has fulfilled his purpose and need not return.

Kosh: RIP, OCS.

Dranko looks agast at Step's bloody remains. "Son of a bitch!" he exclaims. "Aravis, I'm going to move in closer."

Aravis casts a second *cone of cold* at the beast. For a fourth time his spell fails to penetrate its natural resistance to magic, and he wonders aloud if it's only vulnerable to divine magic. But with little else to do he throws up his hands and casts a *fireball*... and it works! The creature is burned and angry.

Flicker and Dranko move in invisibly and attack. After the halfling's blade scores the beast's legs, Dranko snarls, flanks and lands three more expertly placed whip strikes. Teeth, blood and fleshy chunks fly everywhere in a storm of flying leather. When the carnage clears the monster has fallen dead.

The rest of the Company turn to engage the third beast. Kibi shouts a warning that he's put up a twenty foot high *wall of force*. Ernie, who's closest, flies over the wall and aims himself directly at its head. It gores him as he approaches, but he shrugs off the pain and lands a slash to the side of its face. *Any other monsters in here?* thinks Kibi to his familiar.

I don't think so, answers Scree. *The only vibrations I sense are from you humanoid types, and that one large... thing.*

As Snokas starts his charge across the cavern (slowly, knowing there's an invisible wall hanging about), the monster tries to open the tin can that is Ernie. Its right front claw and left tusk scrape off the plate mail but it savages the halfling with its other attacks. Its right tusk pierces clear through Ernie's leg, plate armor and all. Ernie feels his consciousness slipping away, blood pouring from his wounds onto the rocky floor some 25 feet below. It takes all of his effort not to black out.

Morningstar, *hasted*, and with an angle around the *wall of force*, summons an elder xorn, placing it directly next to the huge monster. It immediately senses its conjurer's enemy and takes a large bite out of the beast's leg. *Oooh!* Scree observes. *There's a xorn here. How delightful!*

Dranko kneels down by the largest piece of Step's body, and gently closes the eyes with his hand. "Step, I'm so sorry. May Kemma bless you and guide you home." Then he moves quickly to stay near Aravis, while the wizard aims two *fireballs* over the wall, well away from Ernie. One fails to affect the target, but the other sears its flesh.

Ernie vaguely registers some nearby explosions. Is someone shouting his name? Everything is growing blurry, and sounds buzz in his ears. No, wait! That's Morningstar. She's saying something about healing. What a coincidence; he himself could use some healing! On pure instinct he flies, wobbling, down to where Morningstar stands in the middle of the cavern.

Plane Sailing: Just wanted to say that I loved this unexpected show of tenderness from Dranko – such a change from his normal outward disrespectful personality.

I also love the, dare I say, "realism" of Step agonising about his position and actions, trying to come to terms with it and ultimately almost seeking his death by throwing himself into danger.

(Although I have to ask why Grey Wolf never got around to creating a magical horse for his battles again, especially after it worked so well the first time!)

As the rest of the Company converge on the final target, they watch with horrified fascination as the beast annihilates the xorn. In a fury of claws, tusks and teeth the large earth creature is reduced from full health down to death's door in a handful of bloody seconds.

Kibi drops the *wall of force*. "Wall's down! Have at it!" Then, to Scree: *Still nothing else around?*

Nope, says Scree. *For that matter, I barely sense the xorn anymore.*

Snokas charges, ignoring a goring tusk and piercing it with his heavy pick. Grey Wolf lobs a *fireball* to no effect, which elicits a suggestion from *Bostock*: *Spells are useless against it, but I am not!*

Morningstar casts *heal* on Ernie who has arrived at her feet slumped onto the ground. Then she slams down a *flame strike* on the monster. Kay charges in and smashes it with her hammer. Flicker, who has been sprinting invisibly across the cave floor, closes, jumps, and grabs onto one of its flailing tusks. He plunges his short sword into its massive eye. Vitreous humor spews everywhere. He stirs the sword around in the socket, pulls it out, jams it in again. He rides down the head as it dies.

It's quiet.

Fajitas: And strangely, all I can think while reading this is: Vitreous Humor would make a great name for a band...

OR SO

Dranko looks sadly at Step and punches a nearby stalagmite in anger, not caring that it scrapes skin from his knuckles. Morningstar and Ernie cast healing spells while Grey Wolf and Dranko gather up the various pieces of the felled paladin.

Aravis looks back at the blue curtain of light hanging in the darkness. It's been less than five minutes since they came through from the woods near Green Valley. He nods his head toward the portal and the others nod back at him with their silent assent. Aravis walks to the magical gateway and steps through.

There is the cold, the darkness, the pulling, and then the soft light of the orange sun spilling through the treetops. The collected citizens of Green Valley grow silent as they notice him standing there, covered in blood and gore.

Aravis casts *tongues*. "The three creatures are dead, as well as one of our number," he announces simply.

"Three!" exclaims Tog.

"I think it would be wise for you to show at least some of your people what's inside." He motions to the curtain.

"Are you sure it is safe?" asks Tog.

"I believe it is." Aravis turns his back and steps through the portal, returning to the cave. Two minutes later, Tog stumbles through, followed by six others, including Del.

Dranko casts *light*. The folk of Green Valley look around the cave in wonder. "It's not the forest," breathes Del.

Then they see Step's remains, and one of the bodies of the huge beasts. "Three of them," says Tog, shaking his head. "Now do you see? I would not have had you come in here, thinking it was a doorway to freedom. That man was a seasoned warrior with *nine allies*, all of them more powerful than even the mightiest hunter in our village. Think well upon the sight of that body, the next time you are inclined to curse me." He stops and grows thoughtful. "However. There were three of them, and you have slain them all..."

"We don't know what lies beyond," Aravis points out.

"Is it safe for us to explore the rest of this cave?"

"We have not explored it ourselves yet," says Aravis.

"Look all you want," says Tog to his half dozen villagers. "Tell the others exactly what you've seen here. I'd rather you tell them than me."

Del has gone white at the sight of Step. At Dranko's request, Aravis speaks softly to her. "This is why Dranko raised his voice to you before." Del nods quickly, then runs back through the blue portal followed closely by the others. The Company are again alone in the cave with four corpses.

They search the immediate area and gather the humanoid remains they noticed beneath the portal. Flicker notes several objects that are probably enchanted. Kay goes off to scout further into the cavern with Snokas.

Morningstar raises her head and peers upward toward the high cavern roof. The darkness here is comforting to her now that the dangerous creatures are dispatched. She glances down and her eyes fall on Step's gathered remains. She feels that with prayer this dark cave will be suitable to *hallow*, a necessary step if she is to raise anyone from the dead. "What will it mean to Step to be raised by a cleric of the Goddess of Night?" she muses out loud.

"That's for Step to decide," says Grey Wolf.

"He has said before that if he died before his task was done, he wanted to be brought back," says Dranko.

"And I doubt his task was to get shredded by a huge beast," says Ernie.

Flicker looks down at the corpse. "He wants to die some other way," he says sadly.

QR 50

KidCthulhu: ... All we Sagiro fans will have to sit twiddling our thumbs until the end of November, at least. Sagiro and Kodiak are off on their honeymoon in New Zealand for a month, and we are S.O.L. They will be having a wonderful, frolicsome time, and we'll be pining.

Guilt doesn't seem to be working. Perhaps if we all pack ourselves into their luggage...

thatdarncat: Gawd, New Zealand for a month PLUS all the Sagiro stories I can whine out of him? Dibs on the big suitcase!

StevenAC: Well, in a blatant attempt to keep this Story Hour on the first page where it belongs, let me present another G&S-inspired creation. This time, it's the three mages of the Company, the night before venturing into the Cave of the Beasts, showing off the vocal dexterity that's only attained after years of using tricky verbal spell components...

It Really Doesn't Matter (*yet again, apologies to Sir W.S. Gilbert...*)

GREY WOLF

A pessimist I am in
every awful situation
That we find ourselves involved in –
it's my natural dispensation.
Having faced a doom prophetic
that my comrades would betray me,
I can say with satisfaction that
they didn't get to slay me.

Now I've long outgrown my early days
when spells were somewhat fickle,
And I promise that my *lightning bolts*
do rather more than tickle;
I can also fight in combat, though
my sword is prone to natter,
But we'll prob'ly die tomorrow,
so it really doesn't matter!

So it really doesn't matter,

So it really doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,

KIBI

So it really doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
So it really doesn't matter,

So it really doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter!

ARAVIS

So it really doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
So it really doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,

So it really doesn't matter,
So it really doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,

matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter...

I've spells for all occasions,
from *hold monster* to *confusion*,
And if those don't work there's always
magic missiles in profusion.
When it comes to crafting items
I am perfect to the letter,
For no matter what the others do
a dwarf will do it better.
With the Earth I have achieved an
understanding fundamental,
A connection that I share with
my familiar elemental;
And for those who think a dwarven
mage is naught but foolish chatter,
They had better think again, for
their opinion doesn't matter!

Their opinion doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
Their opinion doesn't matter,

Their opinion doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter...

If they don't it doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
If they don't it doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter!

With a simple invocation
we can cause our foes to scatter
But our firepower means that
if they don't it doesn't matter!
With a simple invocation
we can cause our foes to scatter
But our firepower means that
if they don't it doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter!

Their opinion doesn't matter,

Their opinion doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter...

If they don't it doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
If they don't it doesn't matter!

With a simple invocation
we can cause our foes to scatter
But our firepower means that
if they don't it doesn't matter!
With a simple invocation
we can cause our foes to scatter
But our firepower means that
if they don't it doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter!

matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter...

Their opinion doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
Their opinion doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,

Their opinion doesn't matter,
Their opinion doesn't matter,
matter, matter, mater, matter!

My journeys have induced in me
some changes unexpected,
But at least with starry fields for eyes
you tend to be respected;
Though it sometimes might appear that
I am merely navel-gazing,
I am scouting out the multiverse –
in truth I am a-Maze-ing...

Of the many ways I have
to an opponent's execution,
I am rather fond of *fireballs*
with sonic substitution.
With a simple invocation
we can cause our foes to scatter
But our firepower means that
if they don't it doesn't matter!

With a simple invocation
we can cause our foes to scatter
But our firepower means that
if they don't it doesn't matter!
With a simple invocation
we can cause our foes to scatter
But our firepower means that
if they don't it doesn't matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter, matter, matter,
matter, matter!

Tallarn: *massive round of applause*

KidCthulhu: Ah, Ruddigore. Or *Pirates*. Take your pick.

StevenAC: I definitely had Ruddigore in mind – I didn't realise that there was a practice of sticking this number into *Pirates* as well.

KidCthulhu: Yeah. In the movie version of *Pirates*, starring Kevin Kline, Rex Smith, Angela Lansbury and, Gawd help us, Linda Ronstadt, they steal this number, and even make a tongue-in-cheek reference to it. If you haven't rented this, do. Kline is fabulous as the Pirate King, and Smith is just right as Frederick, which means he's an insufferable prig, thicker than a brick and a tenor (same thing!).

Seule: Hey! I'm a tenor! I protest! Oh, wait, you got me pegged, actually. Sorry, go on, you were right the first time...

StevenAC: But... I thought Nolin was a tenor?

KidCthulhu: Yep, he is. But Nolin is based on an old friend of mine who's a tenor, and I mock him mercilessly about it. I'm an alto, so I speak from generations of tenor bitterness.

Piratecat: Steven, the song is wonderful!

StevenAC: Glad you enjoyed it. Now if I could just get an Original Cast Recording...

The rank stench of dead beast has become commonplace. “Once you’ve smelled a stinkwiggle,” comments Ernie, “nothing else ever really smells bad.”

While Morningstar ponders and prays on the subject of *hallow* and *resurrection* spells, Flicker picks through the congealed loot they saw when they first arrived. “Hey guys, look at this!”

The halfling picks up a small blue cube, prods it, and is instantly surrounded by a ten foot cube of faint, ice blue light. The wizards perk up and examine the effect. Dranko walks through the light with no difficulty; Aravis and Kibi think it’s some kind of *elemental resistance*. Flicker taps the cube again and lowers the field.

Grey Wolf casts *detect magic* on the rest of the pile and finds a number of magical items mixed in with the old remains. There’s a cross-section of petrified tree with a leather strap; a ring of twisted gold and silver wire; a small golden eagle’s claw; a small silver crown set with six rubies and eight clear glass gems; the blue cube; four candles in a cloth bag; a longsword with a skull near the hilt; a faintly glowing halberd; and an empty silver scroll tube.

Dranko motions to the sword. “Grey Wolf, it’s a less evil replacement for your current longsword.”

Kay has been examining the remains; she thinks the loot once belonged to four humanoids, some elvish and some human. Lots of the bones have been ground to dust or chewed up. Her face wrinkles with something akin both to confusion and deep thought. The others watch curiously as she stands after a minute, draws a blade, walks over to the nearest huge beast corpse, and starts carving into the body.

“Whatcha doing, Kay?” asks Morningstar, not entirely certain she wants to know the answer.

“I want to look at its stomach,” says the ranger.

“Er,” says Dranko, “we have a *Leomund’s secure shelter* if you’d rather sleep in that...”

“Do you think it ate an Eye of Moirel?” asks Morningstar.

“No, no... It’s just that, after looking around some, I can’t figure out what they eat. They didn’t live on those four poor people for the past few decades.” She hacks her way in, disappearing into a disgusting mass of bloody viscera.

“The Black Circle certainly has been known to keep things in stasis, and let them out later,” says Morningstar.

“If you need a ‘clean’ cantrip after this, don’t come running to me!” says Dranko.

A while later Kay emerges, covered with gore. She’s no less confused than when she went in. “Huh. As far as I can tell, they weren’t eating *anything*. They must have been awfully hungry. But they seemed strong, not like something that was starving to death. Maybe things can’t starve to death here. Or maybe they just have an incredibly fast and clear digestive system.” She looks doubtful.

nemmerle: Hey, was Kay’s burrowing into the monster’s body one of those curveballs players sometimes throw you and then you have to figure out what the heck to do and if you should run with it?

I mean, were you like, “Oh snap! What did they eat?”

Piratecat: No, Kay’s player wasn’t there that day. I think it was Sagiro making us wonder what the heck they were eating. Sneaky so-and-so.



The Company undertake a methodical search of the caverns. Kibilhathur moves slowly, almost gingerly, wondering at a strange feeling that has come over him. When he first arrived in Green Valley he felt a strange power in the world, running through the trees and rocks and even the air around him. After the battle against the beasts, the power has suffused his being with an energized tingling. He feels taut with it. There is some potential locked in his body that is just waiting for permission to be loosed. He tells the others what he feels. “Maybe you have something like a Yrimpa?” says Morningstar.

I don’t think so! Scree thinks to Kibi with disdain.

Kibi tries to use the power to bring forth what he wants most at that moment: a cask of ale. What he gets instead is a spray of water from behind as Dranko hoses him with the *decanter of endless water*. “Use that thing on Kay,” Kibi growls.

They keep searching. The cavern system is enormous, with huge stalactites and stalagmites. Scales and bits of skin have been scraped here and there on rocky out-juttings. There are a few piles of old, hardened beast droppings, one of which the party

must prevent Dranko from taking as a souvenir. Kay stoops to examine a couple of them, and thinks that they're at least a year old. After some chiseling and more close examination she thinks that, for a short time at least, the beasts consumed their own excrement. "You can *do* that?" asks Dranko, enchanted.

"NO!" comes a resounding chorus of responses. Kay thinks again that the beasts must have been terribly hungry.

After a few hours, having gone for over a mile in various directions, the Company are satisfied that they have explored the entire cave complex. (Dranko has scrawled **Welcome to Blackhole Dungeons** on the walls in a few places.) At the end of a downward-sloping tunnel there is a wide pool of water along with signs that the beasts often visited it. That belies the "beasts were in stasis until recently" theory. Beyond the pool is the 'edge' of the cave, across which, like the end of the forest outside, they cannot pass.

There are no conventional exits or entrances, but they have found another glowing blue portal. Kay finds evidence that the beasts occasionally visited the area around it, though not nearly as often as they frequented either the watering hole or the portal through which the Company entered. This second portal glows blue like the other, a fixed rectangle seven feet high and three feet wide, too small for the beasts to fit through. "It's like the Bestiary, but on a bigger scale," muses Morningstar.

"How do they get new guardian things in here?" wonders Ernie.

"This is creepy," says Morningstar. There is much puzzlement.



With the exploration complete, Morningstar now turns her full attention to the matter of One Certain Step. She starts by casting *speak with dead* on the piece of the body that has the head and some lung. The paladin's dead eyes flicker open.

Morningstar just wants to make this as brief as possible. "Step, this is Morningstar. Would you like to come back?"

Sound bubbles up from Step's open mouth. "Yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeessssssssss."

To be sure, she asks one more time. "We would like to resurrect you. We will bring you back. Have you completed your task?"

The words push themselves out from the lifeless lungs. "*I must come back!*"

"Very well then," says Morningstar. She quickly ends the spell and turns away. Step's eyes close again.

Satisfied, the cleric of Ell maps out a triangular section of a large cave that she will use as an area to *hallow*. At each corner, she places a holy symbol of one of the Company's deities: Yondalla, Delioch, Pikon. She invites Kay, Dranko and Ernie to pray, while she does the same, sitting cross-legged in the center of the triangle as she casts.

While the priests do their work, the wizards set about *identifying* their new-found loot, and then follows discussion about the best way to divvy things up. There's a *ring of protection +3* for Kay, a *small shield +3* for Flicker, and Grey Wolf takes the sword which is a *longsword +3, undead bane* that can also cast *restoration 1/day*. Other goodies include: a *cube of frost resistance* (Morningstar); a *crown of combustion* with six charges remaining, that allows the user to cast a heretofore unknown spell called *paroxysm of fire* (Dranko); a *talisman of arcane extension*, 5 charges, that increases the duration of any spell (Kibi); a *quickscroll tube*, that allows spells on scrolls placed inside to be cast as if Quickened (Ernie). The *halberd +2* will be given to the folk of Green Valley, and the *candles of invocation* tuned to neutral evil are destroyed.

KidCthulhu: Hot diggity. I'd forgotten all about that scroll tube. Tells you how long it's been since we played.

Before bed, Kibi (as he typically does) casts *energy buffer* on himself. As he casts he begins to tremble as the power surges through his body; he feels like all he has to do is 'let go,' and... something... will happen. He doesn't know what. Grey Wolf sees the expression on Kibi's face and takes a step back.

"I'm going to let go, guys!" announces Kibi. Everyone else scampers away. Energy surges from his feet to his head as he casts the spell, a surge both from without and within, but nothing extraordinary happens. The rest of the Company look at him expectantly, but after a few seconds the dwarf just shrugs.

"Oh. Well, never mind. But I'll try again and see what happens." He uses his Earth Mage power of *xorn movement* and again feels the surge of power, but again there is no obvious effect. (Though as he swims effortlessly through the rock, Kibi notes that he can better understand his surroundings through temperature and vibrations. He can sense where the rock is more dense, and where there are air or water pockets, and where his friends are standing on the surface.)

Kibi pops back up to the surface. Whatever he let loose now occurs each time he casts a spell or uses an innate ability. He casts an experimental *mirror image* and this time the power infuses the spell itself; the *mirror image* goes off immediately, as if Quickened. The dwarf is well pleased.

Ernie, with *tongues* cast on him, leaves the caves to talk with the Green Valley villagers still camped outside. To the hunter Reyn he says, “We don’t think there’s anything else monstery in the cave, but we’re going to need some quiet time to pray for the soul of our friend who died in the battle. Would you mind staying away for another couple of days? Then we’re going to explore deeper into the cave. There’s a door...”

“There’s a door?!”

“We don’t know what’s beyond it,” says Ernie hastily.

“Can we investigate? Do you think it’s safe now? Many of us are eager to explore anything that is not our valley.”

“I think it’s reasonably safe, but like I said...”

“Oh, yes, we’ll give you a few days. We’ll stay here. If you come out with news that something has changed, we’ll send someone back to the village to tell Tog.”

As one final matter before bed, Aravis casts *true seeing* and peers closely at the ‘edge of the world’ inside the caverns. He sees it as an opaque dark gray curtain. The blue portals look just the same as they do to normal eyes. “Welcome back to the Bottle,” mutters Grey Wolf.

The Company fall asleep to the soft, distant sound of Morningstar chanting in the darkness.



After an evening’s worth of sleep, the others wake to find Morningstar still in a praying trance. With some hours yet before she finishes, Dranko sets about repairing the many rents in Step’s abused armor. The others spend their time wandering through the caves, or stopping to offer their own prayers near to where Morningstar is casting.

At last, she finishes the *hallow*. The ground within the triangle becomes a black somehow deeper than the general blackness around it. Morningstar uses the *daylight* power of her shield, and to her surprise it lights up the entire *hallowed* area for a moment before shrinking back down to its normal size. She feels a holy comfort, as though she sits in an Ellish temple.

She looks up to find Snokas standing nearby, cradling the head and torso of One Certain Step. “Where do you want him?” her cohort asks.

She motions for him to set down the body in the center of the *hallowed* triangle. Morningstar prepares the components for a *resurrection*, closes her eyes, and offers up two prayers before casting the spell. To Ell, she prays:

Dark Lady, I hope my vision is clear and not clouded by my friendship with the paladin One Certain Step. It seems to me that he is needed for our task and his spirit wishes to return, and that by taking this step I continue in my role as a child of darkness and also of the light. I pray that in this, as in all things, your Grace and my faith will help me to see clearly though I walk in sacred Darkness.

Then to Kemma, Kivian Goddess of the Sun, she offers a second prayer:

I know that your loyal servant One Certain Step had some reservations about being resurrected by a servant of Ell. It was his feeling that if he still had a work to do in your service, he wanted me to try to bring him back.

I am a servant of the Darkness and my heart and soul belong to Ell. Ell has named me a child of the Light as well as a child of the Dark, and I have done my best to be both. Day must follow Night and Night must follow Day. The contrast strengthens both.

One Certain Step has shown me that there is honor in not only enduring Light as a necessary balance to Darkness, but in accepting it. In watching Step’s devotion to you, I have even begun to appreciate the beauty that resides in the Day.

If One Certain Step is needed to continue his work in your name, then I pray you find me an adequate vessel to revive him.

Morningstar spends ten minutes in casting her potent spell, sprinkling the body with holy water and diamond dust. Her own body becomes darker and darker as the magic gathers, while Step’s remains grow increasingly bright. As the spell nears its

end, Morningstar is just a dark silhouette and Step is a form of solid light. His glowing torso elongates into a man's shape. When the glow subsides, Step is whole.

Morningstar expects there will be some delay before Step is awake and conscious, and all are surprised when the paladin of Kemma sits up very suddenly, his eyes wide. "It's okay," says Morningstar soothingly. "You..."

"When I died, what did you see?" interrupts Step, his voice agitated.

Several voices break out at once to describe it. "It was a soft, shimmering, glowing light, that trailed the... pieces of your... corpse."

Dejected but not surprised, Step turns to Morningstar. "I'm afraid I must ask a small amount more from you," he says.

"I can do it," says Morningstar.

"I will need atonement, but now I must pray. Excuse me." And to everyone's further surprise, Step closes his eyes and begins to pray.

Quietly, Morningstar asks, "Do you mean the actual miracle of *atonement*, granted though our gods?"

"I think so," answers Step, his eyes still closed. "I must pray some more. I apologize for being brusque. I owe you my life, obviously."

"Whatever you need," says Morningstar.

Step prays for another hour, almost seeming not to breathe. His eyes open and he speaks to the others, who have not left his side. "I have not followed the code of my Goddess properly." When Kibi attempts to object, Step cuts him off. "I don't wish to discuss the details. But I did learn something in the afterlife. Why I must die here, I think. That is why I need *atonement*, and to better myself."

"Just one statement, and I'll shut up," says Dranko. "If you won't discuss the details, how the hell are we going to help you do things properly?"

"I must do it without your help!" says Step.

"But if it's us that's... you know, leading you down..."

"Have you been led astray?" asks Ernie.

"That is exactly the problem," admits Step.

"That we've led you astray?" asks Kibi.

"No, I did not mean it that way," says Step, reddening slightly and searching for words. "I have... When a holy warrior of Kemma dies, he leaves behind Illumination that he has earned in life, that is equal to how he has comported himself, to how he has followed his code and served his Goddess. I believe there will be a place where that light – my light – will be necessary. What you saw from me will *not* be sufficient."

"Oh. But we feel you're sufficient," says Ernie reassuringly.

"And I thank you. But, meaning no offense, I am held to a higher standard."

"I understand that," says Ernie.

"Well, if you've been stealing party treasure, can we have it back?" says Dranko.

"I did not steal!" Step responds angrily.

"That was a joke! I'm sorry!" says Dranko.

"Dranko," says Ernie, "remember the rule about the recently bereaved? I think it applies in this case."

"Oh, that's right!" says Dranko. "Ernie comforts them. I don't."

"We'll do whatever we can to help," says Morningstar. "Certainly your body glowed very brightly as you were being resurrected."

"Your doing," says Step curtly.

"Maybe Kemma felt you still needed your holy light, and so kept it from all leaking out," Ernie suggests.

Despite himself, Step is amused for a moments and cracks a smile. "Perhaps," he says gently. "But I did go to the afterlife, however briefly. My experiences there I will not discuss. But I have come to a certain understanding as a result. It will be sufficient that I die at the right time, having atoned for my sins."

"When that day comes, will you want to be brought back from the dead again?" asks Morningstar.

"I don't know," Step answers gravely. "If I have restored my soul properly, I expect not."

Preemptively, Ernie pipes up, "No, Dranko, you don't get all of his stuff."

Step stands and smiles, bowing to Morningstar. "While life remains in me I am in your debt."

"Here, have a tusk!" says Dranko, motioning to one of the huge tusks into which he's been carving scrimshaw.

"I do not wish to be reminded," Step grimaces. "The last time I saw that, it was the last thing I saw, as it protruded from my chest!"

"Yeah, I still have nightmares about anvils," says Ernie sympathetically.

Kibi casts *shrink item* on the tusk to make it possible to transport, but the power that surges through him floods the spell with extra power. Instead of reducing the tusk to one-twelfth its size, he shrinks it down to 1/144th, affecting it twice. Now it's only half an inch long!

Finally finished with their business in the cave, the Company march down to the blue glowing portal, prepared to continue their quest for a third Eye of Moirel. They cast some spells, take deep breaths, and plunge through the gateway into a new unknown.

nemmerle: I know I've said it before, but I'll say it again. I get the same feeling reading about Abernathy's Company (if they are still called that) as I did as a kid reading the *Avengers* comic books – and trust me, that was a good feeling; something I had not even been able to recapture by going back and getting those old issues out of storage!

tmaas: Ahhh, an update. I think I was going through withdrawal. I can only imagine how you players must be feeling...

KidCthulhu: Our current feelings: Yay! Where are we? What were we doing? Are we winning yet? That pretty much sums it up.



After an expected second or two of uncomfortable interstitial travel, the Company emerge into a field of tall grass. Behind them stands the glowing blue curtain that would presumably take them back to the beast cave. Almost directly overhead in a cloudless sky shines an enormous yellow sun, over five times bigger than the one they know from Charagan. Closer to the horizon is a *second* sun, somewhat smaller. One Certain Step doesn't know whether to be overjoyed or horrified. Despite a slight breeze that agitates the grasses, it's as hot as a midsummer's day back in Tal Hae.

As they look around and get their bearings, the Company see that there are other portals here. There are eight in all, arrayed in roughly circular fashion in a ring about fifty feet in diameter. They vary slightly in size, with their widths ranging from two to five feet, and their heights from six feet to over ten feet. Six of the portals, including the one through which they have just come, are the familiar blue color. The other two are a dullish gray, shimmering slightly.

Next to each of the blue portals is a crude wooden signpost. The signs themselves show images, not words. The air is clear enough that the sharper-eyed among the Company can make out even the more distant images. The sign for the portal through which they have just emerged shows a skull and crossbones, and two other signs show the same pictogram of warning.

One sign on the far side has a red smear – it's hard to make out any details from this distance. Another sign has an upside-down 'V' painted on it. Finally there is a sign with an unclear yellow design – it could be a sheaf of wheat, or maybe a scimitar. Parked next to this last portal are three carts, strangely long and narrow with long flat beds. They are designed to be pulled by people rather than horses.

Kibi notes that the steady pulse of power through his body is still present in this new world, though it's not as – well, not as pleasing as it was when he was surrounded by the dense stone of the beast caves.

Flicker and Dranko are eager to start exploring, but Morningstar urges the others not to pollute the area with thoughts until she's had a chance to cast some *thought captures*. She sets out in a circuit of the portals, casting a *thought capture* at each one. Some distance behind her walks Kibi, not wanting to lose the benefits of Morningstar's *shield other*. And behind the two of them comes Kay, scanning the ground for tracks.

Morningstar casts her first *thought capture* at the sign with the wheat/scimitar symbol. The thought: *I'm glad it's not this hot on the other side!* Kibi and Kay note that there are cart ruts coming out of that portal that match the wheels on the carts parked nearby. The ruts head off toward the center of the ring of portals.

Next to one of the skull signs, Morningstar gathers the thought: *Yeah, that looks enough like a skull.*

Next to the first gray portal, she picks up a thought of vague curiosity.

Next to the sign with the red smear (which upon closer examination turns out to be just that: a smear of red paint): *I wonder how they figured out what to put on all these signs.*

Morningstar notes to the others at this point that she thinks the thoughts are all from different minds.

By the next sign with a skull and crossbones, she gets a frantic thought of someone who feels they have just escaped from something horrible. “More or less horrible than what we saw in our skull portal?” Ernie wonders aloud.

Finally, by the sign with the inverted ‘V,’ Morningstar gets the thought: *I'll be glad to see Glaring Peak again.*

Behind Morningstar, Kay is plying her trade. She sniffs the air, and runs her fingers through some faint footprints in the hard ground. She looks closely at the signs, and picks bits of fabric and lint from some of the tall grass. The longer she stays at it, the deeper becomes her frown. Finally she turns to the group and says flatly: “Orcs. These are all orcs. Some very recent, some old. All of them are orcish. Almost all of them simply go back and forth between the wheat sign and the inverted-‘V’ sign, as do the cart ruts.” She shows the Company what she found in the bottom of the carts – bits of grains, corn kernels, blades of grass.

“Let’s find the orcs, harm them, ask them what they know, and then finish harming them,” says Ernie. Step glares at him, not sure if the halfling is joking or not. The hot sun beats down on them as they stand and think.

KidCthulhu: Did I say that? That was, er, belligerent of me.

Blood Jester: I’m thinking the things I’ve been told about Ernie are seriously off target.

Plane Sailing: I was expecting that line to come from Kay, and was rather surprised that it was attributed to our Ernie...

“Is this all one big Black Circle experiment?” Morningstar muses.

There’s a few minutes of scattered speculation on that and related topics. Aravis is particularly curious about the gray portals, which aren’t glowing as brightly as the others. Dranko thinks they might be one-way doors. Ernie guesses they’re for maintenance.

Kibi casts *detect magic*, and feels the now expected surge of energy through his body as he casts. All of the portals detect as a complex miasma of magic types: conjuration, with strong enchantment and necromancy, and even stronger Earth Magic of the sort that Kibi himself uses. The gray portals detect the same as the blue, but only about a tenth as strongly. (Kibi notes also that his detection spell lasts twice as long as he expected it would.)

The strong Earth Magic in the portals confuses and excites Kibi; the only other person he’s heard of that uses Earth Magic is Cranchus, but from a previous *commune* spell they know that no Archmage is still existing in this new reality. “Remember though,” says Aravis, “Het Branoi might be immune to the remaking of the world. And keep in mind that whatever was going on in the Hets was so awful that the rest of the Black Circle wanted to destroy them and end their work. Maybe because they were using Earth Magic, and the rest of the Circle wanted nothing to do with that.”

“I want to find these orcs,” says Ernie. “Maybe they know something about what’s going on around here.”

“I want to know what those other skulls are marking,” says Aravis. Ernie blanches at the thought.

“Kay,” says Morningstar, “you say the orcs have been through here recently. How recently?”

“About two hours ago,” says Kay. “And before that, maybe six hours ago.”

“So there’s the plan, then,” says Grey Wolf. “We find a spot. We wait. We pounce. We ask many questions.”

There aren’t any good hiding places, unless they all want to duck down and just hide in the grass. So Aravis casts two *rope tricks*, one just above the entrances to each of the portals seemingly in use by the orcs. Kibi and Dranko each keep their heads sticking out of the extradimensional spaces, just enough to see when orcs come through.

After four hours of tense waiting and cramped muscles in the *rope trick* spaces, during which the large sun has been setting and the smaller one rising, the Company hear a commotion of creatures exiting the portal with the inverted ‘V’ sign. Kibi and Dranko see eight orcs walking through the grass toward the opposite portal. The two in front are armored and wielding swords, while the other six are dressed in light clothing and carry farming implements. Another half dozen orcs follow close on the heels of the first eight, making fourteen in all, four guards and ten farmers.

Kibi starts his *ioun stone of tongues* whirling around his head, and Dranko speaks fluent Orcish. The orcs are talking animatedly on mundane topics – farming, their next meal, the weather. The guards talk with the farmers, making it clear that they are just bodyguards, and not jailers. One orc squints across the hazy field, thinking he sees something up in the air, but shakes his head and keeps talking to the farmer next to him. “It’s a target-rich environment,” whispers Grey Wolf to Aravis.

Step overhears him. “Do not kill them unless we must!” he admonishes angrily.

“You cast the *iron storm*,” whispers Aravis, even more quietly. “And I’ll take on all the bad karma.” He’s kidding, of course.

When the mass of orcs is about halfway across the ring of portals, Dranko drops down from his hiding place, plants himself in front of the curtain, and in Orcish calls out: “Uh, can we sit down and have a little chat for a minute?”

Snokas and Morningstar jump down behind the orcs, in front of the portal through which they’ve just emerged. The rest of the Company quickly follow, taking up positions to prevent any of the orcs from fleeing through their oft-used portals. Before emerging fully from the extradimensional space, Kibi picks one of the armored orcs who might be the leader and casts *charm monster* on him. The orcs are spinning around and babbling chaotically among themselves. There’s lots of pointing, plenty of surprised orcish expressions, and enough shouting to effectively drown out the sound of Kibi’s spellcasting.

Dranko clears his throat. “I’ll repeat myself,” he says over the din. “Stay there in the center of this circle and sit down, and you won’t be hurt.”

There’s more commotion, but not because of Dranko’s command. Another half dozen orcs pop out of the first portal and crash into Morningstar and Snokas. All eight go down in a heap of arms, legs, weapons and farming implements. Of the orcs already through, the armed guards draw their swords and the farmers brandish their hoes and pitchforks. It looks like a melee is inevitable, until the orc targeted by Kibi’s spell shouts out: “Wait! Don’t attack!”

The other orcs look at him doubtfully. “What, you know something?” asks one of the other armed orcs. “Who are these people?”
“They’re all right, I think,” says the charmed orc. “Hold on.”

The orcs tangled with Morningstar and Snokas extricate themselves and move to join their fellows. The rest are extremely alarmed, moving to stand back-to-back and holding out their weapons. Only the orders of Kibi’s orc are holding them back. Various members of the Company prepare to tackle any orc who makes a dash for one of the portals.

Kibi drops down from his hiding place and says in Orcish, “We don’t mean you any harm. We’re new to the area and have some questions.”

“I think he’s telling the truth,” says the charmed orc to his brethren. “We don’t want to start anything with them. They look dangerous.”

“We *are* dangerous,” agrees Kibi. “But only when provoked.”

“So don’t provoke them!” the charmed orc snarls at the rest. The farmers are mostly nodding their heads at this, just as happy not to fight with these strange folk. The armed guards look more disgruntled than anything else, but make no hostile moves.

“Tell us about where you come from,” says Kibi. “Where do these doors go?” (Dranko and Snokas translate for the others so that all can understand the exchange.)

The charmed orc sheathes his weapon and breathes a sigh of relief. He approaches Kibi, smiling. “I’m **Gluk!** Who are you?” he asks affably.

“Kibilhathur Bimson at your service,” says Kibi, bowing slightly. Kay shakes her head.

Gluk grabs Kibi’s head in both hands and greets him with a forceful head-butt. The others wince, but to his credit the dwarf doesn’t even flinch. “So,” says Gluk, “if you don’t mind me askin’, where d’ya come from?” The other orcs crowd around, wanting to hear.

“We came in through that doorway,” says Kibi, pointing to the portal through which the Company arrived.

"The one with the skull?" asks Gluk, awestruck. The other orcs start muttering among themselves. "But..." continues Gluk, his voice rising. "But... isn't there a horrible monster in there?"

"Three monsters, actually."

"*Three* monsters?" echoes Gluk, even more impressed.

One of the farmer orcs pipes up from the back. "We should draw two more skulls on the sign!"

"You made the signs?" asks Kibi.

"Well, not me personally, but yeah." One of the other armored orcs starts to look angry, and pushes his way toward the front of the pack. He stays quiet, but glares at Gluk.

"Are you all orcs here?" asks Kibi.

"Of course!" answers Gluk. "We control everything in this region." He puffs up with pride, as do some of the other orcs.

Kibi keeps up the questions. "Where do these other doors go? There are others with skulls. Do they all have vicious monsters behind them?"

"The ones with the skulls all do," says Gluk. "Those..." he points to a gray portal "...we don't think go anywhere."

The angry orc finally bursts out of the pack and grabs Gluk by the shoulder. "Gluk!" shouts the new orc. "Shut up!"

"Bolg, we can trust 'em," says Gluk casually.

"How do you know?" shouts **Bolg**, incredulous. "We *can't* trust them! They're strangers. They're not orcs!"

"Bolg, believe me, we can trust them. I'm sure of it."

"It doesn't matter if we can trust them!" shouts Bolg. "We're not supposed to talk 'bout certain things. If word gets back to Haugutter, he's gonna eat your guts!"

"Is Haugutter your chief?" asks Kibi.

"Yes," answers Gluk, looking apprehensively at Bolg. "I... I shouldn't say any more. Bolg's right."

"How about the one with the red smear?" asks Kibi, unperturbed. Sensing a possible shift in the dynamics here, the rest of the party have quietly joined together near Kibi.

Bolg speaks up before Gluk can answer. "Gluk, don't tell them about... about anything! You know the rules! We should be reporting to Haugutter right now!"

Morningstar decides that if spoken information is about to dry up, she'll have to switch over to thought information. At the back of the party, she slips up the *rope trick*, casts *detect thoughts*, and climbs back down.

Gluk says, "Look, we need to send someone back to Glaring Peak. I mean..." – he points to the Company – "...you being strangers and all. I'm going to send some runners. Hey you two... and you! Head back through and report this encounter to the chief, all right?" Four of the orcs start to head toward the door.

"Hey!" shouts Kibi. "I'd rather you stay here until we're done talking with you. How do we know you're not sending for a big army that's going to come and attack us or something?"

Some of the orcs start muttering, "Yeah, why *aren't* we getting a big army and attacking them?" Dranko and Snokas glance nervously at each other.

Another orc answers, "Why risk our necks? We're not doing anything to them, and they're not doing anything to us."

"Hold on, hold on," says Gluk. "We're not getting a big army to attack you. I give you my word. I'll tell my men not to come back with a big army. It's just that you're the kind of thing we need to spread the word about. By Gruumsh, we could even recruit you if you wanted."

"What would you recruit us for?" asks Kibi.

"Spreading the Empire of Glaring Peak, of course!" answers Gluk, grinning.

"Ah. So have you fought against things that aren't orcs here?"

“Well, sure! We’ve...”

“GLUK!! SHUT UP!!” shouts Bolg, his voice growing hoarse from all his shouting.

To be safe, Kibi casts a *wall of force* to seal up the portal toward which some of the orcs are edging. “What’s he doing?” cries Bolg in alarm. “He’s doing some sort of magic! We should stop him! Gluk, we should stop him!”

“He’s not going to hurt anyone,” Gluk assures him. “See? He’s finished, with no harm done.”

Morningstar finally starts scanning Bolg’s surface thoughts just as the four orcs bump into Kibi’s invisible *wall of force*.

“Hey!” shouts one of the confounded farmers. “There’s something blocking the way. It’s an invisible wall!”

Inasmuch as an orc can go pale, Bolg does. His eyes go wide and he looks horrified. “Did you just do that?” he stammers at Kibi.

“Er...” says Kibi.

“Take it down!” yells Bolg. “Take it down! For the love of Gruumsh, TAKE IT DOWN!!”

“Why?” asks Kibi calmly.

Morningstar has no trouble with Bolg’s surface thoughts. He’s thinking that something unspeakably horrible will happen if you block off a portal. He doesn’t know what – his superiors never told him. But they’ve impressed upon him for years that sealing a portal is the worst, most idiotic and dangerous thing that an orc could possibly do.

“Just take it down,” pleads – nay, whimpers – Bolg. “I beg you.”

“Will you promise that you’ll all stay here until we’re done talking with you, if I take down the wall?” asks Kibi, still the picture of calm in the face of Bolg’s yammering.

“We can’t make that promise!” shouts another of the orcish guards. “What if they’re just here to pump information from us and then kill us?”

“We’re not going to kill you,” says Kibi with a sigh. “But the wall stays until you promise.”

Morningstar relays to the others in Charagan Common that Bolg is still thinking: *He’s got to take it down. He’s got to take it down! He’s got to...*

Dranko says, “I’d like to point out that we really only need to speak with one of you. So if we were *going* to kill you, we would have *already* killed all of you but one. But all of you are still alive, which means we’re not going to kill any of you.”

Half of the orcs seem impressed by his logic, and the other half bristle with indignation. Morningstar switches her *detect thoughts* to another orc, who’s thinking similar thoughts about the wall. But then he thinks: *I don’t trust him, but they do look pretty well equipped and well armed. They probably could kill us.* Morningstar smiles to herself.

“OK!” shouts Gluk. “Nobody goes through the Ways until I give the word! Understood?” When the orcs nod in (unhappy) agreement, Kibi drops the *wall of force*. “See if it’s down!” barks Gluk. One orc sticks his arm though the glowing blue curtain, but before his whole body is sucked through he yanks the arm back out again. Aravis readies a *chain lightning* just in case any group of orcs decides to make a break for it. Morningstar switches her mind-scan back to Gluk.

“I still can’t tell you anything more,” says Gluk. “It’s more than my life is worth. Bolg is right. We have certain laws about what we’re supposed to tell strangers. I’ve said too much already.” He looks apologetically at Kibi.

“What are those laws?” asks Dranko.

“We don’t talk to strangers, mostly. And we don’t give away secrets,” says Gluk.

“Why not?” asks Dranko.

“Cause we were told not to,” says Gluk, a bit confusedly.

“You shouldn’t even be tellin’ ‘em that!” yells Bolg exasperatedly.

Kibi translates for Aravis, who says, “Presumably you guys don’t go through the doors marked by skulls. So those places aren’t part of your empire. Therefore, anything you know about them won’t be a state secret. So, tell us what you know about those places!”

Gluk scratches his head. “Well, I suppose that makes sense...”

“NO!” shouts Bolg, nearly boiling over. “Don’t fall for that crap!”

Gluk is thinking: *I don’t actually know anything about what’s beyond the skulls, so I don’t know what ‘state secrets’ I could give away...*

“Do you often meet strangers?” asks Ernie via Kibi.

“We don’t meet them *here*, but we do on the other side of Glaring Peak.” Bolg just rolls his eyes at this point, and starts composing the case he’s going to make for having Gluk beheaded at the next tribal council.

“Have you seen any humans there?” asks Kibi.

“You should stop asking me questions,” says Gluk. “It’s only going to get me in trouble.” But he can’t help but think the answer: *Yeah, some humans, yeah.*

“Do you know anything about the Black Circle?” asks Kibi. “Or about the...”

“Please!” Gluk cuts him off. “Don’t ask me any more questions. I can’t answer them!” Morningstar shakes her head. The words ‘Black Circle’ didn’t impinge on his thoughts at all.

Gluk leans in close to Kibi and says conspiratorially, “Look, I know you don’t mean us any harm, but we do things in certain ways, and...” He holds his arms out helplessly. “And if the rest of these guys decide they don’t care what I say, I can’t stop them from attacking you.”

“I’m not trying to get anyone in any trouble, really,” says Kibi. “We were just trying to find out what’s around here. How long have you guys been here? Have you always been here? Who was at Glaring Peak before the orcs?”

Gluk says nothing. He looks annoyed, helpless. Morningstar switches her mind-reading to Bolg, who’s thinking: *We’ve always been at Glaring Peak. Ha! As if anyone could take Glaring Peak...*

“Do you age normally?” continues Kibi doggedly. “Are orcs born, and do they grow old?”

In spite of himself, Bolg thinks: *Hmm... he knows how things work here...*

“I’m not answering any more of your questions, so I’m not sure why we’re still talking,” says Gluk, growing weary of the game.

At Ernie’s request, Dranko asks: “Is Glaring Peak made of pure crystal?”

Bolg and Gluk both look at Dranko like he’s crazy. *I always knew half-breeds were crazy*, thinks Bolg.

Kibi manages to squeeze out one final question. “In your vast empire, have you seen an Eye of Moirel? A glowing crystal rock?”

Bolg thinks: *I don’t know what that is, and I don’t care. We’re not answering their questions, and I’ve had it.*

“Gluk, enough is enough,” says Bolg, stepping forward. “Tell them we’re leaving. Tell them they can go back into their Skull Way and go about their business. If they want an audience with Haugutter, they should drop their weapons and allow themselves to be escorted disarmed!”

“Sorry to have inconvenienced you,” says Kibi.

“No problem at all,” says Gluk. “Good luck in your travels.” Then, to the orcs: “Move out! You four, report back to Haugutter immediately. The rest of you, back to work!” Most of the orcs continue into the wheat-signed portal, while four jump through the Way to Glaring Peak. Kay heaves a heavy sigh of regret and holsters her warhammer.

Dranko examines some crude copper coins and a bit of beef jerky he filched from one of the farmers. One Certain Step looks very pleased, and bows to Kibi. “I’ll bet anything we’ll have to go through another one of those skull doors,” says Dranko, flipping one of his new coppers on his thumb.

“That’s what I figured the moment we arrived here,” says Aravis.

“The orcs must be a major power here, conquering other peoples,” says Kibi idly. “And Haugutter seems to know something – that you shouldn’t block portals, for instance. It would be interesting to know what his secrets are. Maybe we should visit Glaring Peak.”

“If it’s bad to block these things, there must be some kind of energy moving through the portals,” says Dranko. “Maybe this place right here is the nexus.” At his suggestion, Kibi uses his power of *xorn movement* to make sure the Eye isn’t buried at the center of the portal ring. It isn’t.

"I wonder if the Eye of Moirel is what's powering all this," says Ernie.

"Almost certainly not," says Dranko. "Remember that the other Eyes said that 'the canary has caged the cat,' which means that the Eye thought it had this whole area under control, but now the 'canary' controls the Eye."

"Maybe the Eye of Moirel *is* powering the whole thing," muses Aravis, idly petting Pewter, "but it doesn't want to."

There is a long silence after that. The wind stirs the tall yellow grasses, caring not a whit for who controls what.

Carnifex: Great stuff as always. I now really want to find out just what the hell is going on with all these ageless pocket dimensions.

Softwind: ... About what level is everyone? My group is approaching "Name" level (for those of you who remember the previous editions of D&D, otherwise, think "10th"). I'm giving them more stuff to think about than they really want, too, because Sagiro has inspired me. It also keeps me looking for "danglies" in my story, to keep it all tied together. Fun, but challenging! Can't wait for the next installment!

Piratecat: We're 12th to 13th – although we're trying to convince Sagiro to give us XP before next game! Dranko is only 1100 XP away from 14th level...

Softwind: *jaw agape* Whew! The way you guys play, I was sure you were almost to Epic level. Maybe it's just that you have quite a few casters in your group. Most of my group is melee-oriented, not as much magic flying around. Although that is changing as they level up.

Caliber: I think Sagiro's game captures the "Epic" feeling at relatively low levels pretty well. It's been a large source of inspiration (as well as all the other stories on this board) for my campaigns.

coyote6: I think Sagiro's game hit "epic" way before the PCs were out of single digit levels. It's the oaths to get friends *raised*, the mystery-wrapped enigmas, the strange creatures (the Eyes, for example), and the cryptic prophecies, amongst other things.

Softwind: You are probably correct, coyote6. I think my campaign feels like the PCs aren't yet "growed up" enough to handle the big goings-on. Which is a shame, since now that I say that, I realize they really are. My campaign revolves around the loss of the only home the players knew, for reasons the players do not know. Only recently, as they hit 9th, are they coming to find out what's going on (the fact that two of the PCs died, and came back *different* has helped clarify a few things, but has also added a whole slew of questions...).

I'm trying to pour out more information on the party, without overwhelming them. I'm a little narrow-minded though – most of the quests and leads they have are directly related to each other. I like how Sagiro can keep all the threads of the story apart, seemingly unrelated, until suddenly the players see the whole tapestry created, only to notice on the other side the seeming unraveling of it all. And so on. Like discovering the Unified Theory, only to have something else added to the formula that doesn't fit (rambles off on an analogy tangent...).

nemmerle: Sagiro's game is certainly "epic" to me – and more than anything else, reading it has really inspired a lot of things I have done in my own game with various competing factions and a flood of information that the PCs can be overwhelmed by sometimes, but when realization dawns on them they put things together and carry on, realizing in the process that the more they learn the more they realize that they don't know.

When the conversation picks up again, it leads to speculation about what the orcs might do next. Is there a danger that they'll brave the Beast Cave portal and eventually discover the relatively helpless people of Green Valley? Or will their inherent fear of the "skull and crossbones" portals prevent such an excursion? While the Company did indicate which gate they came through, they at least didn't admit to having killed the monsters beyond. Dranko toys with the idea of using their *deck of illusions* to leave a fake monster just on the other side of the portal, but that doesn't get beyond the speculative stage.

Eventually the conversation turns back to the nature of this weird network of mini-worlds, and what the Black Circle might be up to. "If I were the Black Circle guys," says Dranko, idly scratching himself, "I'd make the 'right door' one of the gray gates, that people don't think work. I mean, they're not living with the orcs, or off in some field."

"Didn't the orcs say they didn't think those gates went anywhere?" says Kibi.

"I think we should go back and warn the people of Green Valley – just in case," says Aravis.

"We should go *somewhere*," says Grey Wolf, growing impatient.

"I'm kind of curious about the gate with the red smear," says Kibi.

"Someone slapped a bug on it," says Dranko.

"One horrible gate is just as bad as any other horrible gate," adds Ernie.

The Company fall silent again, looking around at their options. Terrible monsters. Orcish homelands. Staying right where they are doesn't sound so bad, really, despite the heat. An animated and not at all serious discussion breaks out for a few minutes about how the Company could just stay in this new two-suited world, as highwaymen terrorizing all who come through. When moral objections are raised, Aravis suggests the less evil sounding role of "toll collector," though Ernie and Step still thinks that smacks of extortion.

When the jokes finally subside, the Company finally get down to actual business. Aravis casts *true seeing* and looks at the portals, hoping for some insights beyond what he gleaned with *detect magic*. They look pretty much the same, but he thinks that while the blue ones are magical portals, the gray ones are not. Furthermore, when Aravis extends his gaze into the Ethereal plane, he sees magical energy flowing both into and out of the blue gates, but not the gray ones. Morningstar drops into trance and tries going into *Ava Dormo*, but to her great consternation the Dreamscape doesn't exist in this world.

Eventually the Company decide to discover what happens if someone walks through one of the gray portals. Grey Wolf and Ernie volunteer for the job. While Aravis looks on with his *true seeing*, Ernie (with a rope held by Dranko, Kay and Step tied around his waist) walks into the gray hanging rectangle. Grey Wolf casts *see invisibility* and follows on his heels.

From the point of view of the rest of the Company, Ernie and Grey Wolf go in one side of the gray plane and come right out the other side, as if they had simply stepped through a large empty window pane. From Ernie and Grey Wolf's point of view, the journey is a bit different...

They are in space. That's what it feels like. It's like the inside of the Crosser's Maze when they first arrived. But as unsettling as the Crosser's Maze had been, this – place? – is much more disturbing. They feel like the very fabric of existence there is warped and nonsensical, as if either it or they have no business existing at all. It hurts their psyches just being there. Worse, there are – things – out in the space, terrible things, things that also should not, cannot exist. Grey Wolf and Ernie don't actually see these things, but they know... oh yes, they know.

After about ten subjective seconds, the two of them are flung out of that horrid place and back to the relative normalcy of the world with two suns. They stand blinking stupidly in the yellow dusk. Aravis with his *true seeing* sees a strange sort of magic he has never encountered before. It clings to Ernie and Grey Wolf like a damp mist, but it's already boiling away, evaporating into the air and vanishing like smoke.

"Nothing, huh?" says Dranko. "Are you guys OK?"

Ernie blinks again and squints at Dranko before speaking. "We went to a bad nothing place like space, where there were... things. Swimmy things, that shouldn't be. It was like the Maze, but yucky. They shouldn't exist."

Grey Wolf just stands there, a stricken look on his face, vaguely echoing what Ernie is saying. When Ernie is done, he adds: "My head hurts."

When asked what these things looked like, they have no answer, and their feeling is it's just as well they don't know. The rest of the Company are startled to learn that Ernie thinks they were gone for ten seconds.

Dranko points out to the rest that the rope he's holding is still tied to Ernie at the other end. It goes right through the plane of the gate. They untie it and pull it all the way through, and it meets no resistance. Aravis sees that the rope trails the same magic as Ernie and Grey Wolf, though only for a few seconds. (Dranko also tastes the rope on impulse, but there's no special flavor.)

"We could do that with all the portals in this place and turn the whole thing into a huge web!" he says. Morningstar sighs and starts praying for *restoration* prayers, which she uses on Grey Wolf and Ernie to clear their muddled heads.

Ernie says, "Aravis, I don't think you should go in there, but I'm really curious as to what it looks like with the Maze."

"I wish I could use the Maze at all," says Aravis, wistfully.

Well, that was all very interesting, but the Company are no closer to getting anywhere new, let alone finding the Eye of Moirel, so they amble *en masse* over to the portal marked by the red smear. This time it's Dranko, Kibi and Scree who volunteer for scouting duty. They tie a shorter length of rope connecting Kibi and Dranko, and tie a second rope to that one. Step, Grey Wolf and Kay hold the other end of the second rope, ready to pull in an emergency. The three walk through the blue portal.

For a couple of seconds, the rope is expectedly taut. Then (to their obvious consternation) the three holders fall backward, the rope unexpectedly severed. The end of the rope is charred and smoldering! "That's not good," says Ernie.

"We should give them a couple of seconds to come back on their own," says Grey Wolf. "They're not stupid, and we shouldn't be either, so let's not go charging in after them."

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For Dranko, Kibi and Scree, there are the seconds of black void and uncomfortable pulling, and then – heat! It's **HOT!**

Specifically, it's red-hot, and that's no metaphor. They have emerged into a place where the slightly gelatinous ground is red, the smoky air glows red, and that wide river of flowing magma not twenty feet away is certainly red. There are no trees, or rocks, or any normal terrain features to be seen. The air is shot through with bursts of bright orange flame. The only thing besides themselves that isn't red is the blue portal, which looks almost purple in the ruddy ambience.

Their boots start to smolder in about one second. Right around the time that Scree says, *Er... I'm melting*, Dranko and Kibi's clothes burst into flame. "Time to go," gasps Kibi, and they all tumble back through the blue portal.

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When they arrive in the tall grass, they're still on fire. Some of Scree's rocks are glowing orange like hot coals. Dranko fumbles for his *decanter of endless water* and has soon extinguished himself and Kibi, cooled down Scree, and put out two small grass fires. Morningstar and Ernie administer some healing to the burn victims. Once healed, Dranko and Kibi tell the others what they saw.

"Well, we're two for two on sucky gates," mutters Grey Wolf.

RangerWickett: This vaguely reminds me of a Living Greyhawk adventure I ran, where there was a tower full of portals that led to different challenges. The party got there really early, so to add some extra flavor, I added a few more portals, except that these ones led to bland, pointless areas that other folks had cleared out. Only the dangerous portals still had anything interesting.

Of course, the PCs didn't want to go into the dangerous-looking ones, like the portal with the frozen wasteland, or the one that led to the City of Brass on the plane of Fire. So we had about an hour of me having to make up random locations that the PCs looted around in like they thought they'd find something interesting. I mean, I kept giving them stuff to do, and made up some clues that the PCs had managed to avoid by not going through all the stuff before the tower. I tried to make them feel like they'd found the 'secret area' that most groups would miss by going straight for the jugular. Eventually they went into the dangerous portals, and won the day.

Your group is just the opposite. You go out of your way to get yourselves killed by grabbing danger by the balls and butting it in the head.

Liolel: This reminds me of a strange campaign idea that I threw around in my head, but it died before it panned out. It was called the demiplane web, and the world consisted off hundreds of demiplanes including many strange ones with several portals on each one connecting to others forming a huge web.

Piratecat: On the plus side, you'll soon see that we managed to avoid jumping into the gate that leads to the Negative Material plane. Go us!

RingXero: We all know that you ran headlong through the gate, tongue thrust prominently forward and whipping about, trying to taste 'pure concentrated evil.'

Softwind: Hmm. What if the Evil was natural, not made of concentrate? And would tongue-wagging be enough? Shouldn't he look for the source, and directly lick it? Preferably before peeing on it (assuming he still does that? Wouldn't that be evil?).

dpxd: A couple of thoughts: If it's the Black Circle's portal, wouldn't they make it as hard as possible to get back to the real world? So perhaps the right way is through the Plane of Fire, or Negative Energy, or whatever.

In the meantime, I'm not sure that a bunch of orcs, even with a shaman and some character levels, are going to stop Abernathy's Company at full strength from resting and regrouping anywhere they damn well please.

The next portal they try – one of the two remaining skull-marked gateways – isn't quite as grim as the previous two, but still is not promising. It opens into a desert, a vast, sprawling, windswept sea of sand as far as the eye can see. Aravis and Morningstar (the two sent in to investigate) come back a couple minutes later reporting that while they were not attacked, driven mad, or set on fire, there was nothing there that made them want to set off exploring right then.

That leaves one remaining portal – the third and final one with the skull marking on it. Losing patience, the Company just pile through *en masse*, expecting any number of unpleasant possibilities. What they find is – well, boring, really.

They stand on a hard gray plain. A cutting wind blows cold across it, stirring small pebbles and dead twigs. Not much light is getting through a low cover of roiling dark clouds. Thunder rolls ceaselessly across the blasted land. The only interesting feature they can see are some shadowy hills in the distance.

Snokas shivers. It's not so much a cold chill he feels, but more of a something-scary-is-sneaking-up-on-him chill. He looks around to see that he's not the only one who feels it; the others are glancing about nervously. "Step?" says Ernie.

One Certain Step *detects evil*. He frowns, concentrating, and keeps at it for a good two minutes while the others wait for the verdict. "I can't tell," he says. "It's... there *is* evil, I think. There is more evil than 'none,' but not as much as I would expect if even a slightly evil creature were near. That's as well as I can explain it. It's an... indirect evil. But, yes, there is evil here. It's all around us."

The awkward pause that follows this assessment is broken by Dranko, who slaps Step on the back and says heartily: "Well. That sucks! Let's go!"

Kay looks around for any sign of tracks, or other indication of which way they should go, but there's nothing for her to go on. "I hate that thunder," Kibi remarks. He looks up, worried. "Maybe we'll have to fight some kind of air creature."

"Good!" says Dranko. "Kay would be in her element. So to speak. Heh, heh."

No one is amused. "Dranko shouldn't try elemental humor," notes Step gravely.

"I'm not sure I'd classify that as 'humor,'" adds Kibi.

With no better ideas, the Company head at a walk toward the distant hills. Though Kay is confident that she could find her way back to the blue portal, Dranko leaves a trail of copper pieces behind, one every few hundred feet so that the line can be easily followed with a *locate object* spell.

They trudge along keeping a collective eye out in all directions, though it would be tough for anything to sneak up on them out here. The gloom settles heavily on their hearts, and the unnatural chill slowly increases. The cold wind and dull roar of thunder slacken not at all. After three hours of walking, the desert is starting to seem pretty inviting. By this time the hills have drawn much closer. They form a wide arrowhead-shaped valley that looks as though it may narrow to a point or a pass a few miles in. Kay estimates they'll draw even with the closest hills in about half an hour.

After Kibi makes him invisible, and Morningstar gets him on a *telepathic bond*, Ernie uses his shield to *fly* on ahead to scout. He skims along about fifteen feet off the ground, thinking to the others: *Wheeeeeee! I love to fly!*

If we tied a rope to you, you'd be just like a big kite, thinks Dranko.

After ten minutes of flight Ernie reaches the entrance to the valley. The hills are hundreds of feet high, so he goes up to a height of forty feet to get a better look around. He notes that the rocky hillsides of the valley are pocked with holes and cave entrances, ranging in size from snake-holes to caverns large enough for a small giant. *Lots and lots of caves*, he reports over the mind-link.

Any tracks going into them? asks Dranko. Ernie knows he doesn't have much skill in that area, and thinks maybe he should have let Kay volunteer to scout, but he does *so* love to fly. He flies down lower but doesn't see any tracks. The chill has grown significantly worse, though – the hairs on his neck are all standing on end. He flies further in for several minutes until he can see where the valley pinches to a close, maybe half a mile away. At that far end he sees a glint of blue, and some large gray object that he can't identify from this far away. Ernie reports all of this to the others, and then flies back to meet them as they approach.

The whole Company are paranoid about all the holes and caves, but there are far too many to explore. Kay checks a few of them for tracks but finds none. "The ground is so hard and dry here, I don't know that I'd see any tracks," she confesses.

She peers into one low cave and gets a particularly sharp chill. Edghar starts becoming agitated. *Grey Wolf, there's something bad in that cave. She shouldn't go in.*

Pewter is saying something similar to Aravis, though Scree doesn't note anything amiss. "Kay," says Aravis, "stay away from that cave. Pewter senses something."

Step walks up to stand next to Kay, and senses palpable evil emanating from the dark hole. It's only three feet wide, and low enough that the Company would have to crawl into it one at a time, with no guarantee of room to stand beyond the opening. Morningstar casts *detect thoughts* and leans down, but senses no minds within the darkness. "It's mindless evil then," notes Aravis. They press on, leaving that cave behind and passing by dozens more. Goose flesh rises on all of their arms. The chill grows ever more severe.

"Hey, up there!" says Dranko, pointing. About a hundred feet up the sloping hillside to their left is a glowing blue portal.

Heads turn to look at Ernie the Flying Scout. "Er, gosh, how'd I miss that?" he says, sheepishly.

Dranko scrambles up the hillside to check it out. It's a steep climb, but there are crags and handholds, so he makes it up without much difficulty. As he ascends, though, the chill starts to get much, much worse. By fifty feet up it's finally starting to affect him physically – he starts to shiver violently enough that he fears losing his balance. It's both a physical and spiritual sensation, rattling him to the core. He squints up toward the blue doorway above and can see that there are small black spots on its face. *Aravis, he thinks over the mind-link, you know how there was a plane of fire back there? Tell me: is there an elemental plane of evil death and undead cold?*

Er... there's the Negative Material Plane, says Aravis.

Right. That's what's up here. I'm coming down.

How do you know that? asks Ernie.

The blue portal here has black splotches on it, it's draining away my strength, and I'm very, very cold. I'm coming down. Down he comes.

"What is the *point* of this place?" wonders Morningstar out loud.

"To drive us around the bend, as far as I can tell," says Ernie.

"It's like the Crosser's Maze," mutters Morningstar. "Pointless yet dangerous."

The chill eases up a little as they leave the spotty portal behind. The valley gets narrower and narrower, and eventually the party get close enough to see the blue portal at the end. Next to it (off to the side) is an enormous gray portal, thirty feet wide and twenty feet high.

For some reason, this prompts Dranko and Aravis to stop and make a map. They unroll some parchment and draw in all the portal connections they know about so far. Ernie uses this opportunity to prepare a meal, and is unhappy to find that it all tastes funny. "This place is interfering with my enjoyment of food," he says. "I officially hate it."

Finally they come to the end of the valley. The two portals wait there, the smaller blue one and the larger gray one, tilted at a slight angle. On the rocky ground in front of the portals are scattered bones, and directly beneath and around the blue portal are large chunks of worked stone. It looks like some kind of structure had once been built around or next to the portal but has since crumbled or been smashed. Dranko casts *know age* on a piece of stone and learns that it is twelve years old. He also notes that there isn't enough of the stone to account for a whole building, even one only large enough to house the smaller portal and nothing else.

Kay examines the bones. "They're of a number of different types of creatures. There aren't whole skeletons. There are some human bones, some other humanoid bones, some bones I don't recognize." Something looks like the lower jaw bone of a creature, whose whole size would be several times the size of a person. She also finds a rib of something about the size of a bear.

Morningstar shoos everyone away from the blue portal and casts *thought capture*. She picks up a weary sounding thought: *I hope this one gets us out of here*. She casts again. The second thought is of abject terror by someone who's being chewed to death.

Dranko casts *detect magic* and throws his rope through the gray portal. It flops out the other side, and there's faint magic coming off the part of the rope that passed through. After twenty seconds it dissipates. He pulls the rope back through and it acquires more magic. In other words, it acts just like the last gray gate with which they experimented.

Next they fling the rope into the blue portal. A few seconds later they haul it back. It's not burned, cut, magicked, yanked away, chewed, or affected by anything. Since it looks like their choices are now this blue portal, the Negative Material Plane, or the desert, they ready weapons and step through.



There is the blackness, the pulling sensation, and the Company stumble out into... a bedroom.

Er... what?

Yup, it's a bedroom. A large, elegantly appointed bedroom more than thirty feet on a side, with a human-sized four poster bed with yellow silk curtains around it. There's a large bureau, a freestanding wardrobe, and fine paintings and tapestries on the walls. There's a small night-table next to the bed on the far side. "Let's camp here," says Aravis quickly. "Dibs on the bed!"

Ernie opens the closet to find it filled with dresses, gowns and shoes. "Well, she's a lady," says Ernie. "Or a man with very strange tastes."

The walls and floor are stone, though there are luxurious (if a bit dusty) carpets on most of the floor. The walls are a well-tooled gray stone with a bluestone diamond pattern inset. Dranko checks the chamber pot, which hasn't been used in more than months. There's some dust on all the surfaces, but not as much as they expect. The bed has been hastily made. Grey Wolf casts *detect magic* and detects only the blue portal through which they've come. There's one door in the room, a fancy wooden door on the far wall.

Morningstar casts yet another *thought capture*. She picks up a petulant, whiny thought: *I can't wait until he's done and I can leave this horrid place!*

Dranko begins a methodical search of the premises, and the others join in helping him. Ernie listens at the door and hears nothing. Aravis notes that one of the portraits on the wall is of a distinguished man who looks distinctly Djawish.

On the night-table are four objects. Firstly there is a hand mirror, completely round, whose frame is a black circle made of jet. Next there is a small book with a tattered bookmark and a brown cover. The language looks related to Kivian Common; Aravis thinks the title is simply *Poetry*. Thirdly, there's a small kinetic sculpture. It consists of a bent piece of metal shaped like an integral sign, with a black circle at one end and a metal rose at the other end. An attached rod protrudes from the center of the metal piece, where it rests in a metal stand such that the whole thing balances perfectly and can spin around on the rod. Lastly there is a folded up piece of paper that was tucked under the book.

Dranko palms the kinetic toy. The paper is a handwritten letter. Grey Wolf takes it and reads it, translating the archaic turns of phrase into Charagan Common. He editorializes with side comments such as “God, this is *mushy!*” and his reading gets more and more mockingly dramatic. The letter reads:

Dearest Bella,

I know how curious you are about our great project, and how soon we can return to Djaw. You know I will do most anything for you. Not a day goes by when I don't thank the Circle that you decided to come with me, to be by my side as we approach the culmination of our life's work. But please, darling, for your own safety more than anything, please stay out of the rotunda while the experiments are running. The Source has been having instability issues these recent weeks and I would perish of grief if you were swept away to the Abyss because of a power surge. As a lesser matter, Master Invhad has expressed a rather strong preference that the rotunda remain empty during all trials. You know what a grouch he can be! If anything exciting happens I'll make sure you are the first to know. Love you always.

Clouds.

That gets everyone speculating wildly, particularly about the rotunda. Aravis and Grey Wolf think it might be the place with the eight gates where they met the orcs, though Dranko thinks that unlikely. “So this is Bella’s room,” says Grey Wolf. “Morningstar, that would explain the thought you picked up. Her Black Circle boyfriend dragged her here.”

Flicker climbs in the bed. “Ooooh, this is comfy.”

“Flick, you realize you’re taking your life into your own hands?” asks Dranko.

“No. Why?”

“Cause Aravis already said dibs on the bed.”

“There’s room for more than one person here,” Flicker protests.

“True,” says Dranko. “Cannonball!” He jumps on the bed, reaches over to the table, and grabs the brown book. It’s full of mushy poetry, but he can’t find anything raunchy in it. “It’s not very good,” he concludes.

Flicker checks the door, which he declares is neither locked nor trapped. Slowly he pulls it open. Beyond is a dark corridor that vanishes into the shadows. At least, that’s what *he* sees. Dranko thinks the corridor is lit by torches. Morningstar thinks it turns left after only ten feet. Ernie thinks the door opens into a small changing room. And none of the party can actually will themselves to walk through the door at all. Conclusion: it’s the edge of the world, and this entire plane consists of only this bedroom.

Dranko wants to go keep first watch outside, so that nothing can come through the blue portal and surprise everyone. Aravis has some misgivings about anyone being out there alone. “I just want to make sure there aren’t a billion monsters waiting for us on the other side,” says Dranko, laughing. He hops through the portal.

There aren’t a billion monsters waiting on the other side.

There’s just one extremely large one.

Blood Jester: [He hops through the portal.] ... Nice plan.

KidCthulhu: Err. Have ya met Dranko? He’s the Master of Bad Plans.

During a recent session we were discussing the Company’s collection of Nouns, what we call a character’s identification in legend, dream, or prophecy by a single noun epithet. Step is the Light. Morningstar is the Slayer. Ernie is a Wilburforce, whatever that means. Kibi is the Opener. Other party members have had Nouns that they seem to have gotten rid of. Tactics are frequently based on “protect the Noun.”

Dranko has no Noun. Never has. He gets a little snippy about this sometimes. Until last session, when I pointed out to PKitty that Dranko isn’t a Noun, he’s a Verb. He makes the action happen. Sometimes by doing amazingly foolish things, granted. But he keeps things movin’...

Horrible Internal Logic?

The creature is about forty feet away from the portal. It towers some twenty feet high, a huge skeletal body with twelve heads atop twelve long fleshless necks. Dranko doesn't wait to see if the undead monster spots him; he jumps right back into the portal. "Giant monster!" he announces upon his return.

Morningstar, sitting on the edge of the bed, cocks an eye at him. "Yeah, right," she says with a laugh.

"No, no, no, no!" insists Dranko, clearly agitated. "Gi – ant. Mon – ster."

"Your point?" asks Aravis.

"Soft comfy bed," adds Ernie.

"I don't think you get it," says Dranko. "There's a huge monster outside that could *reach through the portal and pluck us out!*" Flicker backs away from the portal.

"I don't think it works that way," says Aravis. "There's no sign that undead have ever been in here. And the monsters back in the beast cave never plucked anyone out. I don't think you can stick just part of yourself through."

"I'm just sayin'. Gi – ant mon – ster. And I would sleep better if we just killed it *now*."

"We *could* just sleep in a *rope trick*," says Aravis.

"I'm soooooo sick of sleeping in stupid *rope tricks!*" Ernie complains.

"And there's a big comfy bed out here!" adds Flicker. "We could just push some furniture in front of the gate if we're worried."

Morningstar clears her throat before offering a more practical reason to wait. "Knowing that we're up against undead when we prepare our spells tomorrow will be very helpful," she says.

Dranko concedes the point. "But I'm going to have terrible nightmares," he says. "Aaaaaand, the only thing that's going to make me sleep better would be that big, comfortable bed..."



Much of the next morning is spent debating spell choices and tactics for fighting a huge undead hydra. Only after many buffing spells are cast does someone bring up the idea of casting *invisibility to undead* and simply flying and/or sneaking past the creature. After all, there's nothing obvious to be gained by fighting it. (But just in case the sneaking plan fails, they don't stop with the buffing spells.) "Maybe it's not there anymore," pipes up Flicker, glancing nervously at the portal.

"Oh, it's there," says Dranko.

"How do you know? Maybe it got bored and went home."

"Flicker, it *is* home."

Another discussion breaks out, this one on the topic of where they should go once they escape the hydra. The Negative Material Plane and the various gray portals are obviously bad ideas. That leaves the desert and the portal leading to Glaring Peak. In they end they postpone that decision until they're back at the two-sun plane.

Finally, Morningstar casts *invisibility to undead* on the group. "Remember," warns Dranko, "if anyone attacks, or even touches an undead, we'll all become visible."

Like most of the portals they've seen, this one is only large enough for five of them to go through in a round. The first team is Dranko, Ernie, Aravis, Flicker and Kay. They jump through, and there's the cold tugging sensation that pulls them through the void between planes.



When they stumble out the other side, it's still gray and cold, with thunder rolling continuously overhead. The enormous skeletal hydra is still there, very close to where Dranko saw it the previous night. To the chagrin of the new arrivals, it has been joined by three more just like it! Collectively the four of them are filling up most of the pass that leads to the distant blue portal and freedom. The Company can hear the clicking and rattling of bones as all those heads sway slightly.

Worse still, there's more than just the hydras. Eight or nine tall humanoid mummies shuffle around, interspersed in front of behind and among the hydras. Waves of horror roll off them, and for the moment four of the five party members are literally paralyzed with fear. Only Ernie can still move. He sees that the hydras haven't noticed any of them, but about half of the mummies see through the spell and start to shamble forward to attack. *Yondalla's rotten potatoes!* Ernie thinks to himself.

One mummy walks right up to Flicker, and clubs the terrified halfling with a bandaged fist. Still paralyzed, Flicker topples over. Ernie winces, wondering if this contact will end the *invisibility to undead* spell. Fortunately, it seems that contact initiated by the undead doesn't disrupt the magic. Three other mummies advance, walking around the hydras. The remaining four watch the first three curiously. Ernie uses his shield to *fly* and moves to hover above Flicker. "I'll save you," he mouths.

Just then the remaining members of the Company come through the portal, to discover that for some reason the first group hasn't cleared out from the landing zone! There's chaos as a lot of people crash into a lot of other people. Aravis and Kibi go sprawling onto the ground. Snokas nearly falls into Kay, and in his attempt to avoid her trips and falls himself. Morningstar, Grey Wolf and One Certain Step manage to lurch around and avoid the others.

Grey Wolf thinks to himself: *Why is the first group still crowded around the entrance?* Then: *Uh oh, they look like they're paralyzed.* Then: *Holy crap! That's not a hydra. That's four hydras and a bunch of mummies! \$#@!*

The mummies' aura of terror washes over the newcomers, but bolstered by the heroic presence of One Certain Step, none of them are paralyzed. (Morningstar is actually terrified, but her *ring of freedom of movement* nullifies the paralysis.) Kay is still paralyzed, but this doesn't prevent her from activating her air-spirit-assisted flight ability. She flies up and out of harm's way.

Kibi struggles to his feet, props up Aravis and gets him balanced. Dranko manages to shake off the crippling fear, and his muscles relax. "Do we go back?" he whispers harshly.

The closest hydra turns a couple of its heads in his direction but still makes no move. *Ah, screw it*, he thinks. One hydra they were prepared for, but this is going to need more planning. Dranko grabs Aravis and leaps back through the portal. A moment later they emerge into the bedroom again.

Morningstar twigs to the plan and does the same, grabbing the nearest paralyzed person (Flicker, in her case) and jumping back to the bedroom. Away from the mummies, Aravis feels the paralysis fade. He swears aloud and casts *shield* on himself.

Alas, the retreat-and-regroup plan is extremely short-lived. A ways back and off to the side of the pass, obscured by both some intervening hydras and a large boulder, something casts a spell. A *wall of stone* appears behind the remaining members of the Company – *entirely sealing off the portal!* From her high vantage point, Kay catches a glimpse of something like a skeletal snake with arms slithering behind the large boulder.

The hydras continue to shuffle, mindlessly aware that something's going on but not seeing anything to kill. One Certain Step itches to attack the mummies, but knows that doing so will allow the hydras to see them. Instead, realizing that there's a spellcaster about, he moves off to the side to get out of "fireball formation." Grey Wolf uses his *wand of flying* on himself and flies straight up.

The four mummies who see targets amble forward. Two of them approach Kibi and punch him solidly. The dwarf can smell a rotting stench coming from beneath their dirty wrappings as they pummel him. The fourth mummy trips on a chunk of rock and stumbles into Snokas. Both of them fall to the ground with the mummy on top. *Oof!* Snokas groans in discomfort and terror. He has no idea if the act of shoving the mummy off him will end the *invisibility* spell or not.

So at this point, my players are giving me a pretty hard time. First there was the multiplying-the-expected-monsters-by-15 trick. Then there was the split-the-party-with-a-wall-of-stone trick. Now I've got Snokas lying on the ground with a filthy, oozing mummy sprawled on top of him, and unable to do anything about it for fear that it will alert the four hydras to their presence. Dranko's player (Piratecat) leaned across the table and said: "I demand my money back." Grey Wolf's player was more direct. "Let's beat him," he suggested, glaring at me.

Tallarn: I think your players had a right to be a little annoyed at this point...

Piratecat: I can't even begin to say how freaked out we were when Velendo started putting out first one giant tile for the one hydra... then another, then another, then ANOTHER. Then a ton more for the mummies. And we were worried about fighting one hydra. Even worse, he said, "Everyone make Spot checks. Okay, what'd you get? Ernie, you got a 14, so you see three figures back amongst the rocks... make three saving throws. Aravis, you got a 16, so you have to make four Will saves. And Dranko, what was your Spot?"

(wincing) "33."

(slight grin) "You see all of them. Make eight saves."

I hate it when he does that. This is what got Dranko petrified when we fought basilisks, too.

Len: Sounds to me like Piratecat was already getting just about what he was owed...

Mort: That's one of the meanest things I've ever seen. I'm definitely stealing it for my next session.

Delemental: Velendo, eh? So your session was being guest-DMed by the famous cleric of Calphas himself? The mind is always the first thing to go...

Vargo: Yep, looks like yours sure is. Mine is still perfectly intact, and I remember that Velendo is played by Sagiro in Piratecat's campaign.

Piratecat: Velendo. Sagiro. Whatever – a rose by any other name would still be a rat bastard.

Sagiro: If that's not the pot calling the kettle a rat bastard, I don't know what is.

shilsen: The praise of the praiseworthy is above all reward (geek points for identifying the reference).

Sagiro: Isn't that what Faramir says to Samwise, after Samwise has praised Faramir for not taking the Ring from Frodo?

shilsen: Bingo!

Plane Sailing: The PCs in my campaign recently entered a room with five mummies, and I have to admit that as a DM I shied away from forcing everyone to make five saves, because I knew that those with high saves would make all of them and those with low saves didn't stand a chance of making every roll. I decided to make the additional mummies make the whole thing more fearsome, so there was just one paralysis/fear save, but the DC was raised by 1 for each extra mummy.

(And if you think I was failing in my duty as a rat bastard, in my defence I'd like to at least mention that my mummies' mummy-rot had both an onset time and a repeat time of 1 minute... and the party all out of remove curse too...)

Dranko, Flicker, Aravis and Morningstar are starting to wonder why the others haven't followed them through the portal. None of the possible explanations are good.

"I'm going to check and see what's going on out there," says Flicker. He jumps through the portal. Two seconds later he comes lurching back out into the bedroom, hands pressed to his face. "Ooooowwwwaaaaauuuugh!" he exclaims. He peeks through his fingers. "Hey, I'm still here! I slammed into something. It was like someone threw me into a wall." He lowers his hands, which are red and sticky. His nose is broken and gushing blood.

"Oh, crap!" says Dranko, his face going pale. "What kind of wall?"

"A solid wall!" says Flicker.

"Force?"

"No, no... I mean a real wall, a physical wall. It wasn't glassy like a force wall. It was probably stone."

"So no splinters," says Dranko. "What did it taste like?"

"What did it TASTE LIKE?!" cries Flicker, his voice shrill. "Why would I have tasted it?"

Liolel: Those two lines are just pure gold. Made me laugh out loud.

Piratecat: If he had to ask, it just wasn't worth explaining.

Aravis thinks out loud. "I could try using my staff, just as I went through the portal. With luck it would target the *wall of stone* with a *passwall*." But no one thinks that would work, including him. The four of them just stare helplessly at the portal, wondering what fate is befalling their friends outside.

Kay flies back to help Step, hovering above him, intending to airlift him out if necessary. She flies close to one of the hydras, and sensing something stirring the air, it idly snaps in Kay's direction with three of its heads. Kibi winces at the bruises left by the mummies' fists, but realizes immediately what needs to be done. Avoiding more attacks from his foes, he casts *stone shape* and parts the stone wall blocking the portal. Having cleared the way, he steps through it. Seconds later he emerges into the bedroom.

Dranko looks at the dwarf in surprise. "Flicker! You weren't just messing with us, were you?"

"Yeah," says Flicker reproachfully, "and my smashed, bloody nose is just an act."

"OK," announces Kibi proudly. "The *wall of stone* is down."

"*Wall of stone*! Oh, for crying out loud!" says Flicker.

"Who cast a *wall of stone*?" asks Morningstar.

"I don't know," Kibi admits. "I didn't see anything."

Morningstar heals Flicker's nose and then steps through the portal, not wanting to be stuck in the bedroom again if another *wall* gets cast. Still inside, Aravis activates his *boots of speed* and Dranko casts *protection from evil* on himself.

Morningstar emerges into the rocky pass. A moment later the lurking bone snake creature casts another spell – a *greater dispelling* that blankets the area around the Company. Ernie loses his *fly* and drops four feet to the ground. Snokas loses his *endurance* spell and feels a bit weaker. Step is divested of his *invisibility to undead*. Forty-eight hydra heads swivel and rattle and stare directly at him.

coyote6: That's a lot of hydra heads. Poor Step – just back from the dead, and look where he's at. Too bad you can't Turn the hydras' heads individually.

One Certain Step can feel the hairs rising on his neck, as he becomes the subject of ninety-six hollow eye sockets' baleful regard. Briefly he is distracted from the skeletal hydras by the groaning of several mummies, who are now pointing at him with wrapped hands. "They see me," he deadpans. "I'm pretty sure of it."

The closest hydra shifts its weight around and leans toward the paladin, preparing to move. "I doubt I can run past them without being attacked," Step continues. Then, with more resolve in his voice: "I know I was brought back to die for a specific cause, but this is not it!" He moves fluidly to the side, putting the large gray portal to his back to minimize the number of enemies that could attack him at once. This brings him near enough to the closest mummy to slash at it with his bastard sword; he cuts deeply into its moldering flesh and oozing bandages. The hydras move in on him, bones a-clatter.

Grey Wolf realizes that there's just as great a danger from the spellcasting skeletal snake. He flies over near to the boulder where he thinks the creature is hiding and plunges that entire area into an *obscuring mist*. At the same time Ernie flies to Snokas and *dimension doors* them both behind a different boulder, shielded from any other spells the creature might cast. Snokas is still shaking from the horrifying experience of having a mummy atop him without being able to fight back.

"Snokas, that was really gross," Ernie commiserates. "And you were really brave!" Snokas manages a weak smile of gratitude.

Several mummies lumber toward Step, entirely ignoring Morningstar as they move past. Three of them flail at him with their pustulant fists. For the most part he fends them off with his shield, but it's of little import when the closest hydra moves in. Twelve long bony necks extend out over the mummies, and twelve toothy skulls snap and rend at the paladin from above. He tries in vain to deflect them all, but many find their way past the shield and through his armor. His friends, watching aghast, have flashbacks to Step's death-by-rending in the Beast Cave. Blood spatters the rocky ground. This time, though, One Certain Step survives. A second hydra tries to join in the savaging, but with Step's back to the dead portal there's no room for it. Realizing that the paladin won't survive another attack like that, Kay (still hovering above) grabs him and airlifts him away, up the side of the hill's near slope and out of harm's reach. The hydras follow his flight, and one of the remaining two knocks a mummy to the ground as it moves in Step's direction.

Back in the bedroom, Flicker scrambles onto Dranko's back as the half-orc prepares to go back through the portal. Kibi casts *xorn movement*, and steps through the blue gateway.

Out of the corner of her eye, Morningstar sees the dwarf emerge and then immediately sink into the ground. She doesn't let it distract her. Channeling her faith through the Ellish holy symbol given her by Abernathy, Morningstar uses her granted ability of Greater Turning. Holy energy bursts forth with a hot white radiance, and the air ripples as ambient positive and negative energy mix and surge against each other. The mummies flinch and shield their faces with their arms against the flash of holy power, but for a moment it seems that the closest creature, one of the hydras, is unaffected. But its heads stop moving, and as the Ellish light subsides, the massive skeletal monster collapses into a heap of fine powdery dust. The next closest hydra turns its heads to regard Morningstar. She smiles grimly at it.

Aravis steps through the portal from the bedroom, surveys the battlefield, and with his expert eye decides just where he wants his sonic *fireballs* to detonate. The battlefield is soon engulfed in a riot of roaring sonic energy, and three mummies are blasted apart while another two are badly shredded. One of the remaining hydras is nearly destroyed, its body cracking and starting to cave in on itself.

Dranko pops out of the portal, Flicker on his back. The half-orc sees that one of the hydras looks about ready to collapse, so he calls upon his Delioch-granted power to cast healing spells at range. But this time he channels his positive energy at the hydra, and the power of his prayer tears at the dark magics holding it together. With a terrible rending sound, the skeletal monstrosity collapses inward, legs snapping and necks disintegrating. In seconds it is nothing more than a great pile of unconnected bones.

The skeletal snake glides out of the *obscuring mist* and spots the small congregation of living beings near the portal. It casts *cone of cold* – twice. Aravis, Morningstar, Dranko and Flicker are caught in the pair of icy blasts. The rogues dance and dodge and evade the damage entirely, but Morningstar and Aravis aren't so lucky. While neither is killed outright (Morningstar feels the buzzing shock of massive damage from the second one but doesn't succumb), both are badly, badly wounded.

Step, held aloft by Kay, channels his faith and Turns. The two closest mummies turn and flee, cowed by the might of the Sun Goddess. Grey Wolf eyes the snake-mage. *Charge them!* urges the sword *Bostock*, speaking telepathically to Grey Wolf. *Wield me, and slaughter those evil creatures!* Grey Wolf starts casting *acid orb*. *Resorting to magic again?* *Bostock* snorts in disgust. A blob of acid flies true and strikes the snake, hissing and bubbling as it burns away layers of bone.

Snokas and Ernie peer through the cloud of bone grit at the snake creature. “Want to help me get that mage?” Ernie asks Snokas. “Er... okay,” replies Snokas, not entirely convinced that’s a good idea.

“I’ll fly us over there. When I drop you off, get ready to attack it if it tries casting anything.”

Before Snokas can answer, Ernie does precisely that. “Get ‘em, Snokas!” shouts Ernie encouragingly, as he drops off Morningstar’s cohort in front of the snake. Snokas swallows and readies his picks, waiting for the creature to try casting again. (He knows that if it tries to back away from him before casting, it will re-enter the mist and lose line of sight on any targets.) Flicker scrambles over to the snake as well, with the same idea.

One of the two remaining hydras, perhaps attracted by the movement, selects Snokas as its target. It shifts its massive body around, lumbers a few feet over, and unleashes a veritable storm of snapping jaws. One head actually lifts him off the ground for a moment, while the other heads take turns rending and biting, fighting over the morsel. When they eventually drop him back down to the ground, he’s horribly shredded.

“Holy toast with marmalade!” shouts Ernie. “Snokas, speak to me!”

“Oooooohhhh,” answers Snokas weakly.

KidCthulhu: And you can just guess how guilty Ernie feels for dropping Snokas off in Downtown Peril without bus fare home. D’oh.

Kay lands, lets go of Step, and heals him with a wand. But she pays for her altruism, as the fourth hydra savages her with its full complement of heads. Bits of her go flying everywhere. She takes an obscene amount of damage, one that would have killed several of her party mates. Somehow she stays on her feet, but at this point several members of the Company are uncomfortably close to death.

Beneath the earth, Kibi senses. He is still learning to read the vibrations from the surface, trying to form a picture in his mind of what is transpiring on the battlefield above. Scree, an expert in such matters, helps him to understand. The dwarf takes his best guess as to where the hydras are, based on the heavy thumping of their massive legs and feet on the ground above. He pops up to the surface to discover he has guessed exactly right. Both remaining hydras are in perfect formation for his Empowered *lightning bolt*. Wild magic surges through his fingertips as the bolt flies, crackling and hissing and shattering both of the remaining hydras into flying bone fragments. One of the nearby mummies is obliterated, and the larger armored mummy also takes damage from the stroke.

Aravis, not to be completely outdone, follows this attack up with another sonic *fireball*. Then, since a few enemies still seem to be standing, he casts a sonic *chain lightning* targeting the bone snake. As the thunderous booms of his spells fade, bits of bone and bandages fall from the sky like snowfall.

Still the snake survives! It stares menacingly at Aravis. Morningstar casts *heal* on her wizard companion, and with the renewed confidence that comes of not being inches from death, Aravis stares back at the snake with his starry eyes. The snake glides back into the fog. They can hear the sound of a spell being cast. Kibi recognizes some of the arcane syllables – it’s fleeing via *dimension door*.

After Kibi flies off and finishes the two Turned mummies with *magic missiles*, and after several rounds go by with no sign of the snake-mage, and after the clerics apply more healing to the wounded, and after Dranko does a bit of flying reconnaissance of the area – only then do the Company decide that the battle has been well and truly won.

drnuncheon: OK... don't know if I'm missing something or not, but... is the Company just kind of randomly charging through a string of portals in the hope that they'll find something interesting, or are they actually following some clue or thread of some sort? Are they assuming that anywhere there are monsters is someplace the Bad Guys™ don't want them to go? It seemed to me that they just kind of picked one of the portals in the 'central ring' and went, and now they're still going, going, going...

Piratecat: How do you think we felt?

It isn't linear, in the sense that there's a multitude of different paths we can take. Nevertheless, we're striving to find the Black Circle's actual lair. We have hints (such as the bedroom) that there was a castle or structure that has been split apart by dimensional chaos. Nevertheless, we're still flying relatively blind at this point, heading into one portal after another as we try to find our goal.

That soon changes, because when you poke around enough you're *bound* to eliminate dead ends and find something useful. This whole place has a horrible internal logic that we just haven't discovered yet. You'll see some explanation in upcoming updates.

KidCthulhu: Horrible internal logic could really be the epithet for Sagiro's entire campaign.

Sagiro: At this point, the Company is in "explore the unknown while looking for clues" stage. There were some clues in the bedroom, though these were more "what's going on?" type clues, and not of the "where do we go next?" variety.

In some sense, they've been systematically eliminating bad choices in this maze of world-bits. The "central ring," as you call it, had eight portals. Two are dead gray ones that don't go anywhere, so those are out. One goes to an essentially unsurvivable plane of fire, so that one's out. (Wouldn't I be a stinker if that were the path to eventual success?) One goes back to Green Valley via the Beast Cave, which they're pretty sure is another dead-end. One goes to a place the Company assumes is just a "farming world" for the orcs. The place they are now seems to lead only to the bedroom, or the Negative Material plane.

So that leaves two choices: (1) Go to Glaring Peak where thousands of orcs await; maybe someone there knows something of the Black Circle designs, or of the Eye of Moire? (2) Try the last remaining portal out of the central ring, the one that opens into a trackless desert. The next chapter of the Story Hour will start with their choice between these two.

Don't worry too much. It won't be long before I start giving the Company some actual leads to follow. (From your point of view, that is. The skeletal hydra battle took place in mid-October of 2003!) But in the meantime I'm just enjoying setting the stage, and giving the party some fun (I hope) exploration and combats.

RangerWickett: This is going to be an ironic question, but I can't recall the name of the thing that makes people forget the names of things, and it's been bugging me all week. It's like the Fading, or something.

Sagiro: You're thinking of the Masking. Of course, what with the Emperor having rewritten history, it was probably never cast!

QR 80

Before I actually write the next installment, I thought I'd share a funny extra. Now that I'm taping the sessions, I can get little scenes like this down verbatim. Background: I've stolen a custom spell from Sepulchrave called *paroxysm of fire* (don't tell my players what it does... they haven't used it yet and don't know!) and put it into a magical crown. Somehow the topic of the crown came up. There followed this amusing exchange:

Dranko: What was that spell called again?

Aravis: *Paroxysm of fire*.

Ernie: A paroxysm is a spasm, right?

Dranko: Yeah... fire spasms! I've suffered from fire spasms before. You know when you have to go to the bathroom *really, really badly...*

Grey Wolf: Oh. I thought it was when I lit you on fire by accident.

Ernie: Dranko?

Dranko: Yeah?

Ernie: For my birthday, I want one day where we do not discuss any of your bodily functions unless it is a medical emergency.

Dranko: Ernie, why do you ask for things you know I can't give you?

Later on, there was also this, whose meaning I will leave as an exercise for the reader:

DM: "There will be no catapulting of pigs at the gaming table." (pause) "I can't believe I had to say that."

Grey Wolf's player: "And we have it on tape!"

Yes, yes we do. Ah, the memories.

Interlude, with Snowshoes

As the Company catch their collective breaths and debate the next move, Kibi feels a sudden and violent chill come over him. Dranko glances over as the dwarf sits down heavily on the stones. *What are those things on his face?* he wonders.

Kibi reaches up to an itchy spot on his cheek and a bit of skin comes away on his hand. Mummy rot!

Fortunately the party clerics have open spell slots, and One Certain Step can cure disease. In only a few minutes Kibi is back to full health. "Let's get out of here," he advises.

As they walk back down the valley (and past the blue portal with the black spots) they discuss their next move. The two best choices would seem to be Glaring Peak and the orcish horde, or the unexplored desert. By the time Kay has led them to the portal back to the grassy eight-ported world, they have decided upon the desert – there will be time enough for the orcs if that avenue proves fruitless.

(Some years earlier the Company had acquired (read: Dranko stole) desert kits for their venture into the Mouth of Nahalm. Since those kits have long been lost to the ogres in Kivia, the Company decide they will make a stop in Green Valley, to make or acquire sandshoes for the upcoming desert trek.)

After an hour or two the party have left the hills behind, and an hour after that they see the glimmer of blue in the distance. The sky is still a dully overcast gray, the constant thunder still rolls, and the faint chill still sets them all on edge. But eager as they are to escape this place, the Company take precautions. They tie a rope around Dranko's waist, and he steps through the portal into the grassy world of two suns.

It's dusk there. The larger sun has set, and the smaller one is down near the horizon. In the seconds it takes for Dranko to get his bearings, he catches a glimpse of a humanoid figure diving through the portal that leads to Glaring Peak. He jumps back through. "They had a scout there waiting," he tells the others. "He dove through the portal to Glaring Peak just as I arrived."

Wasting no time, the rest of the Company leap through the portal. There is no sign of orcs there now, so after a brief check of their map (to make sure they select the right portal-with-skull-sign), they dash the fifty yards through the grass and leap into the Beast Cave. Cold, to warm, to cold. Overcast, to clear dusk, to pitch black. And all in just two minutes!

Holding a lantern in front of her, Kay leads the Company to the exit into Green Valley. Observing scuff marks and muddy prints on the ground, she concludes that several humans have been walking around the caves since they were last there. "Not surprising," she observes. "The people of Green Valley were pretty keen to explore someplace new."

Again Dranko takes point and goes through the portal out of the caves. There are about a dozen townsfolk lounging around the vicinity, armed with spears. Most of them are startled by Dranko's emergence, but they collect themselves quickly and Dranko soon finds a dozen spears pointed his way. Just as quickly the spears are lowered – Dranko's face is well known to them. Isn't he the dim one?

One of the townsfolk starts speaking, but Dranko can't understand them. A few more start to babble. Just as Dranko casts *comprehend languages*, the rest of the Company spill out of the portal and Aravis casts *tongues*.

"Have you finished exploring?" asks a young man. His name is **Davin**, and he looks to be about 18, which means he is probably almost 30.

"We have not finished our explorations," says Aravis, "but beyond the cave we found a place with more of these gates. Going through that place, back and forth between them, are creatures we call 'orc's.'" To demonstrate, Ernie makes a face like an orc.

"Kind of like them," says Aravis, pointing to Dranko and Snokas. "But they're only part orc. The orcs, if they meet you, will try to harm or enslave you."

"It's a good thing they've not come here before then!" exclaims Davin.

"There were monsters guarding it," Aravis points out. "The orcs believe the monsters are still there."

"But there are no monsters now. You killed them!" says Davin in alarm.

"Yes, but like I said, the orcs don't know that. And there are other places through those gates, where there still are monsters." Aravis explains about their fight against the undead hydras and mummies and the naga. The folk of Green Valley listen with excited attention to the tale, gasping at the thought of such danger and heroics.

"So you killed them, just like you killed the beasts..." says Davin at the conclusion of Aravis's tale.

"We did not kill all of them," says Aravis.

"You're telling us that it's not yet safe to explore beyond the cave, aren't you," says Davin dejectedly.

"Yes, that's what I'm saying," answers Aravis.

"How soon do you think it will be before it *is* safe?"

Aravis shakes his head. "I cannot say. It may never be safe."

"These orcs... can they be snuck past? Are there safe places beyond them?"

Kibi by now has also cast *tongues*. "If the orcs find out about you, it will be very bad for you," says the dwarf. "If they figure out there's no beast in this cave, they'll come and try to conquer you. So it's very important that you don't make yourselves known to them."

It's heartbreaking to see the looks of fading hope of the faces of the Green Valley folk. "We will tell all of this to Elder Tog," says Davin. "He has set us here to make sure none of the younger and more foolhardy of the townsfolk do anything rash that would endanger us. We did some exploring of the cave, and found the other blue doorway, but Tog forbade us to go through it."

"Good decision," says Dranko.

As the peasants watch in fascination, Morningstar casts two *glyphs of warding* in front of the portal, set to trigger *searing darkness* on any full-blooded orcs that venture through. She knows that won't slow down a determined invasion force, but it might polish off a scout whose failure to return could prove daunting.

When the townsfolk learn of the Company's plan to explore a desert world, and that they've come back to make sandshoes, they remark that they have snowshoes in town they can barter for. It will only take about a week to walk to town and back.

"I have a way to get us back to town much more quickly," says Aravis. He takes two volunteers from among the natives to accompany him.

"What do we do?" they ask, wondering what Aravis has in mind.

"Stand still."

"But if we stand still, how will we get home?"

"Tell them to think really hard about their village," suggests Dranko. "That way they'll think they're helping."

Aravis smirks at the suggestion, and does so. The villagers scrunch up their faces and concentrate furiously. (So does Aravis, for that matter, trying to envision the spot where he, Dranko and Grey Wolf had their *chain lightning/iron storm* practices.)

A second later, there they are. The townsfolk, unfamiliar with teleportation magic, are astounded. "There's the village!" one of them shouts.

"We have to tell Elder Tog about this!" says the other.

A few minutes later they are standing at Tog's door. One of the townsfolk knocks, and they rush in when invited. "Elder Tog! We were just up at the magical gate, only five minutes ago!"

"You were?" says Tog, raising an eyebrow. "Then how did you... ah. Hello, Aravis. So, you are back! Have you made everything safe for us? May we start exploring?"

Aravis tells Tog all that they have found. By the time he is done, Tog looks as deflated as the guard contingent up by the portal. "These orcs. You say they are extremely numerous. We would have no chance against them?"

"No, I don't think you would," says Aravis.

"It will be difficult for me to keep control of things. Word will be out soon that you're back. I'll tell the people something. I don't know what."

There is a long and uncomfortable silence. "Is there anything I can do for you while you're here?" asks Tog.

"We need snowshoes," says Aravis.

Tog glances outside at the warm sunny afternoon and then back at Aravis, who quickly explains about the desert. Eventually they work out a deal, wherein the Company will give Green Valley their +2 *halberd*, and any seeds Ernie can conjure up with his magic. In return Tog will arrange for ten pairs of snowshoes of the best matching sizes to be gathered up in the next couple of hours.

Zaruthustran: +2 halberd for a bunch of wicker shoes? Now that's what I call inflation!

KidCthulhu: Not inflation. Expediency. We had no need for a halberd, which none of us could wield, and a great need for not sinking up to our necks in sand. Especially Ernie and Flicker, who have less space between feet and neck than some of the others.

Once that has happened, Aravis and his entourage *teleport* back to the portal. Upon hearing the agreement, Ernie prays for and then casts *create food and water*, and Yondalla blesses him with a variety of seed-bearing fruits and some wrapped up bundles of grain. The townsfolk are amazed that food can spontaneously appear.

The Company rest for the remainder of the day. The Green Valley folk keep pestering Aravis and Kibi until their *tongues* spells run out. (Actually, Kibi's spell lasts twice as long as it normally would, powered by a surge of wild magic as he cast it. But, tiring of the constant questions, he pretends that it runs out at the same time as Aravis's spell.)

The night passes. In the morning the party prepare spells and cast long-term buffs. Then they discuss the best way to get past the orcs and into the desert, without tipping the orcs off that they have come from the Beast Cave. They decide they need more information, so after bidding a final adieu to the people of Green Valley, they enter the cave and march to the exit portal. Kibi makes Dranko invisible, and in goes the half-orc.

There are two orcs there, neither of which notices him as he emerges. One stands at the portal leading to Glaring Peak, and the other at the gate to the farming world. Both look bored. Dranko watches them for a minute and then returns to the others.

After a few more minutes they settle on a plan.

Dranko returns to the grassy plane. The same two orcs are there; one of them yawns expansively. Dranko moves stealthily across the field to the portal leading back to the undead plane, and hops through. Meanwhile, back in the beast cave, Ernie is counting out loud. “One Abernathy, two Abernathy, three Abernathy...”

Dranko punches himself to end the *invisibility*, and then hops back to the grassy plane, whistling a jolly tune.

(“Twelve Abernathy, thirteen Abernathy, fourteen Abernathy...”)

The orc standing in front of Glaring Peak jumps through immediately. The other lifts his weapon, but otherwise just stands there, staring at Dranko.

“I would like you to go through that gate,” shouts Dranko, motioning to the portal behind the orc.

“What?”

“I said, I would like you to go through that gate.” Dranko hefts his whip suggestively. (Oh, grow up!)

(“Twenty-five Abernathy, twenty-six Abernathy...”)

“I would like to stand here and watch you!” replies the orc.

Dranko sighs. “I would like you to go through that gate, or I might have to kill you!” he amends.

“I don’t think you want to do that,” shouts the orc, gripping his own sword and pointing it at Dranko.

Dranko decides this exchange isn’t working out, so he simply starts running across the field directly at the other orc. The orc, figuring there’s nothing specifically wrong with changing one’s mind, leaps through the portal.

(“Forty-four Abernathy, forty-five Abernathy...”)

Dranko runs over to the portal to Green Valley and hops through. “Come on, quick!” he urges.

“But I haven’t gotten to sixty!” Ernie protests.

“Ernie!”

The whole Company leap through the portal and start a mad dash across to the desert gate. They are two-thirds of the way across when armed orcs start pouring out of the portal to the farming world. They spot the Company immediately and give chase, but the party have too big a head start. They leap into the portal with the orcs still twenty yards away.

They fall four feet into sand, each of them rolling aside so the next party member doesn’t land on them. They expect that it might start raining orcs any second, but none come through. Morningstar has the presence of mind to cast another *glyph of warding* below the portal, such that any orc falling out will trigger it.

Minutes pass. No orcs.

It’s hot – easily in the mid-nineties. A slightly oversized yellow sun blazes overhead, drawing out sweat almost immediately. The Company struggle to put on their snowshoes and shake some of the sand out of their clothing. Kay looks around and frowns. There are no landmarks to indicate any possible route to anything.

Aravis squints into the distance. “If I were an Eye of Moirel, where in a huge trackless desert would I hide?”

The rasping sand offers no good answer.



“Gruz, you think we should go after ‘em?”

Twenty orcs stand in a rough mob by the gate leading to the desert. The largest of the orcs glowers. “Naw,” says **Gruz**. “There’s a horrible monster in there, right? Let the monster eat ‘em up. No need for us to risk our necks, right?”

“Yeah, good thinking.”

“But...” pipes up a scrawny orc named **Vurg**. “What about that other gate? The one you saw the half-breed come out of. Why didn’t the monster eat him up?”

“Good question,” says Gruz, smiling. “Looks like you just volunteered to go find out. Don’t come back unless you have something worthwhile to tell us.”



Somewhere in a large pocket of the Negative Material plane, a skeletal lion moves through a strange patch of dark blue light. It finds itself suddenly thrust from the soothing negative energy and into a world of gray light and steady thunder. The skeleton rolls helplessly down a steep hillside, bones chipping, until it comes to rest on the valley floor. Cold, healing energy pours from the bright blue patch high above, but the skeleton cannot reach it. Craving darkness, it spies a dark cave on the other side of the valley, large enough for it to squeeze into. But as it crosses the valley, it spies something approaching.

Vurg never does come back.

Kid Charlemagne: And once again, the Orcish gene pool misses a chance to select for intelligence and problem-solving...

target: It seems like there are a lot of specifically placed horrible monsters behind the portals. Has the party considered that the monsters might be placed there for a reason by someone?

If Sagiro likes the scary internal logic, then I would be worried about who could place them, and why they would. Perhaps to keep the orcs in check? Or maybe the orcs are yet another of those monsters...

LightPhoenix: Or maybe the orcs were taken there against their will, but they managed to train and beat their monster, albeit with heavy casualties. They could be as innocent as the humans.

CR 80

Sun, Sand & Squid

“Hey, Eyes.”

Kibi stands before his earth elemental familiar Scree, whose component rocks are flecked with sand. “I know you’re in there,” continues the dwarf in his most polite tones. “If you have any ideas about which way we should go, that would be very helpful.”

Nothing, thinks Scree.

“Oh well.”

The cleric spell *find the path* turns out to be the navigational aid of choice. After much talk of how such a divination might be used, Morningstar casts the spell while naming as the location: *the closest exit from the plane that is not the one we’re standing next to*. Sure enough, she feels in her soul a surety of direction, and no special instructions for getting there beyond a trudge through the sand.

There’s the additional question of how they can best find their way back to this spot in a pinch. Kay notes dourly that the shifting desert will offer no permanent landmarks, and that the sun will have to suffice. The wizards study the spot as best as they can, but knowing that if they have to *teleport* back to here, it probably won’t look much like it does now.

They start walking, with Morningstar in front, led by the magic of her spell. The snowshoes help tremendously, keeping them from sinking to their ankles or knees with every step. But, oh, the sand! It’s not long before the tiny granules have gotten into packs, hair, noses, eyelashes – everything. When they press their teeth together, they can feel the grit crunching.

Hours pass beneath the hot sun. Morningstar’s spell runs out, and Kay does her best to hold the Company to the same course. There are still no landmarks; just the endless up-and-down march along the ever-shifting dunes. Kay announces that from the sun’s rate of travel across the sky, the day here must be well over 24 hours long. So it is that when the party are ready to stop for the day, the sun is only now starting to set.

“What’s that?” One Certain Step points to the horizon opposite the setting sun. There’s something there, some indistinct shape shimmering on the horizon line, fading in and out. It doesn’t seem to be moving, but each member of the Company seems to have a different perspective, and they can’t agree on how close it might be.

Dranko takes Ernie’s *winged shield* and flies straight up for a better look. For a few minutes he stares at it, not understanding what it is, or how close it is. Given its size, it must be practically on top of them, and yet it also looks like it’s still on the horizon. And it continues to shimmer in the heat haze coming off the desert.

Then it hits him. It’s a moon rising up over the desert, a moon taking up almost a full eighth of the horizon. It’s hundreds of times bigger than the moon he’s used to. He flies back down. “So, are we going to be attacked?” asks Grey Wolf.

“It’s a moon,” says Dranko.

“What?” asks Ernie.

“I said, it’s a moon.”

“We’re going to be attacked by a moon?” says Grey Wolf. Dranko rolls his eyes.

For another few minutes the party watch in awe as the monstrous moon heaves itself up into the sky. Dranko, since he’s high up already, does a bit of aerial recon, hoping to spot any sort of distinguishing feature of the desert. The only interesting thing he sees is a black bird flying high above him. “There’s a bird overhead,” he calls down to the others. “Should I go after it and kill it?”

“No!” answers Kay instinctively.

“It’s heading in the same direction as we are. It’s probably a spy going to report on us.” But by then it’s already gone.

“That’s a big moon!” exclaims Ernie. He can’t take his eyes off it. It’s a chalky orange color, with clear bands and dark striations. Craters pock its surface.

“I wonder if anything lives on it?” muses Dranko. Then, turning to Morningstar, he adds, “Just imagine. We can have our wedding ceremony here under the giant moon, after we fix the world.”

“After we fix the world, we’re not coming back here,” Grey Wolf points out.

“Well then, we’ll use illusions to make it look like this.”

Morningstar stares at the moon, trying to glean something of its nature. “I wonder if the Black Circle created it, or if it’s natural, and if it’s holy,” she says.

Step frowns. “If the Black Circle can create something like that...”

“Then we’re f***ed,” Dranko finishes.

Morningstar stares for a few more minutes, and abruptly decides that it’s just a moon like her own, but either much bigger or much closer. It doesn’t feel evil. She smiles, which has the effect of making everyone else feel a bit better.

“This isn’t as bad as the last desert,” Ernie declares. Then he moves over to stand next to Dranko and sheepishly asks: “Can I use your geyser thing?”

“The *decanter*? Sure. Why?”

Red-faced, Ernie whispers: “I’ve... got sand... in my cracks.”

“In your WHAT?” Dranko roars, grinning. Ernie turns a brighter shade of pink.

“I mean in my toes!” he squeaks. “You know... all those crevices!”

“Oh,” says Dranko, clearly disappointed.

“Just throw me the geyser.”

Ernie goes behind a sand dune and hoses off, only to find that when he’s damp, even more sand sticks to him. By the time he rejoins the others he’s as sandy as he was when he left. Dranko smiles at him and casts a *clean* orison on himself; the sand goes flying off him, leaving him grit-free. Then he casts another on Ernie.

“Thanks, Dranko! Whew. I hate chafing.”

“When did this become Ernest Shares Too Much Information Day?” says Dranko.

A breeze picks up as the enormous moon climbs higher. Aravis suggests that they sleep in *rope tricks*.

“A good idea,” agrees Dranko. “Someone spying on us would see it if we used a *secure shelter*.”

“The real advantage of *rope tricks*,” says Aravis, “is that I thought to prepare them today.”

The wizard casts a couple of the spells a few feet off the ground, and the party scramble up the ropes into them. Only Dranko stays out in the sand for a few minutes more, enjoying a blacktallow cigar and watching the moon. Another advantage of the *rope tricks*, he notes. It’s not likely to get very dark tonight.

QR 80

The next morning, Dranko wakes up in his extradimensional pocket. Flicker, Kibi, Grey Wolf and Step share the space. Morningstar, Snokas, Aravis, Kay and Ernie are in the other one. Dranko rolls over and peers out the window in the floor, and

(surprise!) sees sand. He sticks his head out, and only at the last minute does he realize the trick of perspective that's been played upon him. The sand comes right up to the opening! He gets a mouthful of grit as he plunges himself neck deep into the sand, then yanks his head out and starts hacking violently to clear his throat. When he can breathe again, he wakes the others and tells them what's happened – while they slept, the wind-blown dunes shifted, and now their opening is buried!

At Kibi's behest, Scree leaves the space to scout. Abruptly they lose their telepathic link, which bothers Kibi immensely, even knowing it's only for a few seconds. Sure enough, his familiar comes back quickly with a report that the sand goes about six feet higher than the opening to their space.

In the other *rope trick* the rest of the Company are also discovering that they're buried, but without Kibi and Scree they have no way of knowing how far down they're trapped. Morningstar starts praying for her spells a few minutes after Kibi decides to prepare a *passwall*. Scree thinks there's an angle that will allow the tunnel to reach the surface without being too steep to traverse. Kibi reaches out and casts the spell. Sand goes flying, blown down the new tunnel and out into the desert air. Almost immediately the tunnel starts collapsing in on itself.

"Come on! Hurry!" shouts the dwarf, and he dives into the tunnel and starts to scramble for the surface. Behind him, Dranko, Flicker, Step and Grey Wolf do the same. Sand pours in on them, and the whole tunnel collapses while they are still a few feet from freedom. For a harrowing thirty seconds they hold their breaths and dig their way through the loose sand, finally breaking out onto the desert floor gulping lungfuls of air.

After they've caught their breaths and coughed out some sand, Kibi realizes that the dunes have shifted in such a way that he cannot reach the other *rope trick* with his final *passwall*. Time for Plan B! He hands one end of a rope to Dranko, casts *xorn movement*, and dives down into the sand.

Meanwhile, Morningstar has prayed long enough to cast a *summon monster* spell. She casts *tongues* and then summons (of all things) a *xorn*, instructing it to leave the pocket dimension, learn how far it is to the surface, and then come back down to report. Kibi is startled as the *xorn* passes him going the other way as he descends. "**Hello, xorn!**" he says pleasantly.

The *xorn* grumbles a greeting as it burrows upward toward the surface. When it emerges, it stares at those of the Company already there. "I didn't realize *xorn movement* could actually turn you into one!" says Flicker, agog. Likewise, only seconds after the *xorn* has left on Morningstar's errand, Kibi comes popping up to join her and the others. And while Kibi is explaining what's going on, the *xorn* comes back. (Yes, it's like one of those French bedroom farces, with more sand.)

Half an hour later, everyone in the second *rope trick* has been dragged uncomfortably through the sand by those already on the surface. Ernie's starting to think maybe this *is* as bad as the last desert. Morningstar casts *find the path* again, and then a couple of *wind walks* to expedite travel. So much for the snowshoes!

Fifty miles or so later, the flying Company spot something dark on the horizon. There are more birds here, and they are circling above whatever it is. A few minutes later they can see it's an oasis, and Morningstar's spell is leading them straight towards it. The huge moon has almost set.

They slow down a bit and approach the oasis cautiously. It's roughly circular, and about 100 yards in diameter. From their high vantage point they spot a glimmer of blue light in a clearing near the oasis's center. There's also something that looks like white ruins nearby, but as they get even closer and lower down, they resolve into the bleached skeleton of a huge dragon.

Closer yet. There is not one blue portal, but two, side by side, of similar dimensions. The clearing is about thirty yards on a side, with a pool along its edge. Dozens of black birds flit and twitter about the oasis. The dragon skeleton is mostly complete, but is in the process of disintegrating.

Closer still. Dranko spies a small pile of something in front of one of the blue portals. The birds are thick around that pile, and large scarab-like insects crawl over it. Wanting to investigate with minimal risk, Morningstar casts *tongues* and *summons* a celestial eagle. Her instructions: "Please fly down to that pile and investigate."

"Why?" asks the eagle, once it's satisfied that there are no enemies around to attack.

"We want to see what's down there."

"Go look, then," suggests the eagle.

But the eagle does as ordered, flying down to the pile and landing next to it. The other birds scatter in alarm. The eagle pecks at the pile and starts eating something from it. After fifteen seconds of this it flies back to Morningstar. "Fish skeletons," it says. "Some with good meat still on them." Then it vanishes.

"Our stock among the celestial eagles has just gone up," comments Grey Wolf.

"I can just imagine," says Aravis. "In heaven, most celestial eagles probably tell the same story: 'I got summoned, and then immediately attacked some horrible monster that opposed my summoner.' But ours will brag about how his summoner just fed him some fish!"

"Though to be fair," adds Grey Wolf, "the last few celestial eagles we summoned didn't fare so well."

Just as the Company land near the portals and the pile of rotting fish, a living fish pops out of the gate next to the pile and starts flopping about. It is soon savaged by a swarm of birds that swoop down from nearby trees.

"It goes to the Elemental plane of Water!" says Kibi. Ernie takes a step back.

Morningstar walks over to the head of the dragon skeleton and casts *thought capture*. She gets a vague thought of something extremely hungry.

"Any dragon you don't have to kill to get its interesting bits, is a good dragon," says Dranko, breaking off some teeth for souvenirs. Morningstar casts *detect thoughts* to be safe, and finds no minds other than those of the Company.

Time for more scouting! They tie a rope around Dranko's waist. "I'll just go in for a quick look. Then pull me out."

"How many Abernathies?" asks Morningstar.

"Not many. Maybe five."

Dranko leaps through. After the black void and uncomfortable pulling, he emerges near the top of a lush, grassy hill. Flowering bushes surround him, and the air is clean and fresh. Around him stretches a beautiful panoramic view of green hills dotted with colorful flowers and yellow gorse. Half a mile to his right the bucolic landscape is terminated by the straight shoreline of a dazzlingly blue ocean. The sky is a clear cobalt blue, marred only by the one strange thing he sees. Out over the ocean is a small localized thunderstorm. He can hear a distant thunder, and small lightning bolts flicker in its confines. The storm is maybe a hundred feet on a side, but it's hard to be sure of his perspective.

Then he's yanked back into the oasis, where he reports on what he's seen. The others agree that in a place that beautiful, there must be some horrible lurking evil waiting to pounce on them immediately.

shilsen: It just depresses me how cynical PCs are nowadays...

Wasting no time, Dranko gets set to explore the second gate, the one with the fish. He borrows Kibi's *helm of water breathing* and steps through. A few seconds later he is (unsurprisingly) underwater. He slowly starts to sink, the warbling blue frame of the portal rising away from him. It's cold and dark, but he can tell that neither surface nor bottom is within range of his darkvision. Some fish swim by. He pulls himself back up the rope and out, dripping wet.

"I'd like to explore further," he says. They use a longer rope (in fact, the *bag of endless rope*, one of their first magic items, cinched to pay out only a hundred feet or so). "If I'm not back in ninety Abernathies, pull me out," he says, and in he goes.

This time, though, he starts sinking directly out from the gate, as if it's in the "ceiling" relative to him. Gravity has changed! He blows some bubbles, and sure enough they rise back towards the portal. He swims up after them, and when he pops back out in the oasis, he falls sideways onto the pile of fish bones. Aravis explains about subjective gravity while Dranko scratches his head.

Dranko goes in a third time for good measure. Gravity goes sideways this time, but it's still just a cold, dark, salty ocean, with no floor, no surface, and no particularly interesting fish. All the same, Aravis is keen to experience the new plane for himself (planar travel and traits have always been an area of keen academic interest). He takes the *helm* from Dranko, ties the rope around his waist and steps in.

Piratecat: ...Dranko now qualifies for any number of planeshifter prestige classes - he's been to most of the Elemental planes at this point!

It's dark. He has no darkvision. He sinks three feet and is immediately wrapped up in tentacles! His arms are pinned to his sides and he cannot cast spells. He feels something sharp bite at his thigh, but it's turned away by his magical robe.

Back in the oasis, the rope is suddenly pulled taut, and it starts to slide through Step's hands. Instantly he and several of the others grab on and haul Aravis out of the Water plane. He comes out accompanied by a squid nearly as big as he is. It's snapping at him with its beak. Grey Wolf draws *Bostock* and hacks the squid to pieces. There's a shocked silence while Aravis gets to his feet and shakes off some severed tentacles.

"I suppose you'll want this breaded and fried," Ernie sighs.

Krellic: Hilarious! I love the idea of the shifting dunes burying the entrances to the *rope tricks* – inspired!

LightPhoenix: I love that image of fish just popping out of the portal. For some reason, I can't get it out of my head that the sound they make is "Poot!"

Zaruthustran: Dude, what an awesome update. *Sliders* in D&D – love it. Did the huge moon cause tidal movement in the sand?

Spatzimaus: Well, it sounded like the desert was on the moon of a gas giant (so the striped "moon" they saw was actually the Jupiter-like planet they were orbiting around). In which case yes, the tidal forces could easily do that, especially if the entire "planet" is just one big desert; in fact, it'd probably be worse, with near-constant earthquakes.

And, it's not like the characters would have any idea what this implies. Now, a moon probably couldn't easily form in a way that gave it that kind of orbit, atmosphere, etc., but it could be a captured object. But never let the laws of reality get in the way of a good story.

Kay, Unhinged

Grey Wolf, who was against Aravis's unnecessary excursion, lets out a sigh. "Never toss the mage through a portal," he says, exasperated.

"Let's go back to the nice place," says Dranko. Everyone agrees.

They all go through, and after the obligatory seconds of sucking void, they're deposited on the lovely grassy hilltop that Dranko had described moments earlier. Clear blue sky, green grass, yellow and red flowers, and... Dranko points. "Um, guys? That storm is about twice as close as it was a few minutes ago."

"It's moving towards us, too," observes Kay.

A stiff breeze is blowing from the storm, stirring their hair. Dranko does a visual check on the other blue gate he saw. It's two hills away, with over a mile of trackless, steep and folded terrain between them. It would be a good hour's journey, and the storm will be on them in minutes.

"Towards us, and speeding up," amends Kay. "Clearly not natural."

A sharp blast of lightning fires out of the storm as it reaches the shoreline, straight down into the ground. Sand flies up in a cloud, while some is fused instantly to glass. This engenders some hasty planning among the Company. Dranko has a *lightning bolt/iron storm* flashback.

Kay's eyes go wide for a moment. "Oa-Lyanna is extremely worried," she says, trying to keep her own voice calm. "She thinks this creature is a god."

"Aiiieeeeeee!" says Ernie.

"Leaving now," adds Grey Wolf.

In a voice that literally is thunder, and whose meaning is mysteriously conveyed through the throbbing roar of sound, the storm speaks.

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

Aravis shouts into the wind. "To restore our world to its proper state!"

Another bolt of lightning slams down from the storm onto the hillside, a hundred feet below the Company.

Morningstar casts *wind walk* on several members of the party, to allow Aravis to *teleport* the whole party at once. The storm moves closer, and the *wind walkers* start to have trouble standing still.

YOU ARE NOT ABIDING BY THE AGREEMENT!

Another lightning stroke burns the ground, closer this time. In a loud and frantic voice, Dranko answers: "Perhaps you would be so kind as to tell us just what that agreement is!"

The *wind walkers* start to take damage from the violent winds of the storm, which is now nearly upon them.

YOU HAVE AGREED THAT...

But they miss the end of the sentence, as Aravis *teleports* the party to the distant hilltop with the other blue portal. At once the sound of thunder grows quieter, and the wind here is only a gentle breeze. They can see the storm far off, enshrouding the distant hill on which they just stood.

Kibi at once tries to move through this new portal, but discovers that in his misty form he cannot make egress. His vaporous body just splashes against the blue light and flows around the portal's edges. At that, he and the other *wind walkers* start the thirty-second process of becoming solid, while the storm (seemingly aware of their new position) starts to boil towards them. Ernie, solid to start with, jumps through to investigate the place into which they are almost certainly about to flee.

He lands on a solid stone floor, indoors. He glances about and discovers he's in a small room, or a large closet, six feet wide and fifteen feet long. It's lit by a sconce with *continual flame* cast upon it at the far end. The air is stale but breathable, just like the air in the woman's bedroom. In fact, like that boudoir, the walls here are of the same dark gray stone with a bluestone diamond pattern inset.

On the two longer walls are pegs, most of which have cloaks or robes hanging from them. With a last look around to verify that there are no obvious ways in or out other than the portal, Ernie leaps back to the grassy hillside near to the storm.

Meanwhile, said storm has been fast approaching the party. Lightning is crackling angrily down from it, scorching the grass and blasting small trees and bushes into splinters. Ernie sees upon his arrival that it's only about 15 seconds away from them! His fellows look at him expectantly.

"It's a closet," he summarizes.

"Is there another way out of it?" asks Kibi.

"I didn't see any, but I didn't spend any time searching. It's got the same bluestone diamond on the walls, like in that woman's bedroom."

"It's a Black Circle place then," says Morningstar. "We should check it out."

Aravis starts tying a rope around his waist. Another bolt of lightning shoots out of the storm and blasts the ground.

"The bedroom would be better than this!" shouts Grey Wolf above the howling wind.

"I want to stay and talk to it, just a little more," says Aravis. He hands the other end of his rope to Ernie, while Morningstar casts *bear's endurance* on him. Everyone except Aravis leaps through into the cloakroom. Once there, Grey Wolf grabs the rope in Ernie's hands and suggests that everyone else do the same, "in case Aravis becomes a kite out there!"

Inside, the Company look around as they hold the rope. Morningstar turns to Kay. "Why does Oa-Lyanna think that's a god?"

Oa-Lyanna says to Kay in a shaking voice, "It's a living storm! Such beings are... beyond my scope."

Outside, Aravis casts *energy buffer* on himself, just in time for the storm to arrive.

EXPLAIN WHY YOU HAVE BROKEN OUR AGREEMENT

it thunders.
"We didn't make an agreement with you," Aravis explains calmly. "We aren't of the people who created this place. We believe that those people are involved in a horrible magic that has changed our world beyond all recognition. We were told..."

YOU ARE TRAPPED AS I AM rumbles the storm. I WAS PROMISED... SOLITUDE.

A lightning stroke crackles not ten feet from Aravis's head. His robes start flapping wildly in the gusting wind.

I SHOULD SLAY YOU adds the storm.

"We are only here to fix our world," says Aravis. "We are not here to disturb you."

THEN YOU MUST LEAVE IMMEDIATELY AND NOT COME BACK.

Well, okay! Aravis steps through the portal.

Dranko has been listening intently, but hears nothing beyond the breathing of his party mates. After Aravis has returned and told his tale, Morningstar walks to the far end of the room to cast *thought capture* while the others start a more thorough search of the place. The cloaks and robes are mostly black, and of varying quality. Some have black circles embroidered on them. Flicker finds a bag of old spell components in the pockets of one. (With the exception of Kibi and the halflings, everyone takes a Black Circle garment that fits them and stows it with their gear.)

Morningstar's *thought capture* captures a thought of someone musing upon an academic point of indecipherable magical philosophy. She gets the sense that the thinker is pondering a book or scroll he has just read.

There is a doorway out of the room, but it's directly behind the blue portal at one end. The portal is so close that it's practically painted on, and so there's no clear way to make use of the door. Dranko goes back into wind form and manages to slip into the sliver-thin space between portal and door, but it does no good. The door is also the boundary of this plane, and Dranko's brain doesn't allow him to try going further.

"Stupid Black Circle!" blurts Ernie. "Why did they make a world that only consists of a stupid clothes closet! Who builds a hallway that goes nowhere?"

That drives home to Kibi a fact that has been disturbing him. Ordinarily his dwarvish senses can tell how far underground he is. But here, in this little room, he has no sense of the surface. There is none.

Morningstar decides to blanket the far end of the room with more *thought captures*, and sifts through her mental findings. Some are thoughts similar to the first one. Some are more specific, thinking about tasks they have to do or jobs to perform, none of which make sense to Morningstar. There are two thoughts, though, that are very distinct, and nearly identical though they come from two different minds. The gist of these thoughts is that they're worried about "the stability of the rotunda." The rotunda! That was mentioned in the love letter found in the Black Circle boudoir. There's a final thought of: *Why do I have the crappiest cloak?*

Before the subject of "what do we do now" can be raised, Kibi suddenly grows tense. He can sense something odd stirring around him. The air takes on a peculiar vibration that only he seems to feel. "I think something's about to happen," he warns.

"Why?" asks Grey Wolf.

"It feels like there's about to be an earthquake. Can't you feel it?"

Actually, yes, they can. Whatever it is is growing stronger. Could it be the god-storm outside is affecting them? Dranko jumps up and readies his whip. The ground isn't shaking, but somehow reality is. Except for Kibi, each member of the Company feels like they are coming unanchored from space-time, though they might not have thought to phrase it that way. Kibi still feels firmly rooted, as though he is a heavy statue in a rushing wind.

"Fascinating," says Aravis. (Grey Wolf isn't much impressed either. His guts felt worse than this for months!)

Kay's eyes go wide. "Ow! It's painful! Don't you feel it?"

Yes, everyone feels it, but no, no one else is in pain. Her face contorts in a agonized grimace... and that's *before* the phenomenon spikes.

Everyone feels the world blur around them, feels caught in a terrible wrenching turbulence. (Still not Kibi, though. He remains solidly rooted to reality.) Kay and Oa-Lyanna scream as one, a terrible double-voiced cry of pain that is abruptly cut off as their body shifts several feet in a crazy blur before vanishing entirely.

"Kay!" cries Ernie.

"What happened?" shouts Morningstar.

"Holy shit!" says Grey Wolf.

"Bring her back! Bring her back!" Ernie wails, not sure who he's asking.

A few seconds later, whatever it is dies down quickly.

"Kay is gone!" says Ernie, in case everyone hadn't noticed. "Aravis, find her! Use the Maze!"

"I don't think I can," says Aravis, shaking his head.

Morningstar keeps a level head. "Kay, are you here?" she speaks into the room. No answer.

"I wonder what it was?" says Kibi. "It was odd, but I felt fine through the whole thing. What did it feel like to the rest of you?"

"You felt fine?" cries Dranko, incredulous. "Why didn't you tell anyone you felt fine? Maybe Kay could have grabbed onto you and been okay!"

"Eyes?" says Ernie angrily, turning on Scree. "Aren't you supposed to stop this sort of... ooh." He stops, and grows red. "I should have given her my belt!"

Scree rolls over to stand before Kibi, and the sapphire eyes blaze. "Oh, *now* they talk to us," mutters Grey Wolf, disgusted.

KidCthulhu: Uh, Sagiro... Aren't the Eyes green and purple? Did we get a sapphire eye somewhere? 'Cuz if the sapphire eye has been with us all along, like Dorothy's ability to get back to Kansas, I'm so going to kill you.

Sagiro: Scree's eyes are sapphires. When the Eyes speak through Kibi's familiar, it's Scree's eyes that light up. Please don't kill me.

shilsen: Dammit! After I saw KidCthulhu's post, I was so hoping that Sagiro had pulled a RB trick on the Company again. Ah well, I'm sure it'll happen soon!

KidCthulhu: Ah. Thanks for explaining. Now I'm less confused and homicidal. Towards you, at least.

Piratecat: Help me...

"What happened to Kay?" Kibi demands.

SHE IS... PROBABLY SAFE. SHE WAS NOT PROPERLY ANCHORED.
SHE WAS MADE SOMEWHAT OF AIR-STUFF, AND CAME LOOSE.

"Can we find her?" asks Morningstar.

SHE IS OUTSIDE OF HET BRANOI.
SHE CANNOT BE FOUND WHILE WE ARE INSIDE.

Dranko laughs nervously. "If any of us could survive out there on our own, it's her. She can eat moss and drink raindrops or something."

"I hope the universe doesn't decide that it hates her," says Aravis, worried.

SHE IS NOT IN THIS UNIVERSE.

"What?" several voices cry.

SHE IS PROBABLY STILL WITH YOU.

Not comprehending, Ernie starts waving his arms around, as if Kay is merely invisible and might be discovered by touch.

YOU ARE MULTIPLE. INFINITELY. ALL OF YOU ARE.

"So where is she, then?" asks Ernie.

SHE IS WITH OTHERS OF YOU. PROBABLY.

"Does that mean there are two Kays with the other ones of us?" asks Kibi.

IF SO, I AM SURE THEY HAVE MUCH TO DISCUSS.

Scree's gemstone eyes lose their glow. The Eyes of Moirel have finished talking. Ernie wheels on Aravis, his head spinning. "What does that mean?!"

Aravis starts into a halting explanation of parallel world theory, planar offsets and simultaneous cosmic splintering. Dranko gets a twinkle in his eye. "You mean... there are two Morningstars. And they could be together, at the same time?"

"You can't really look at it that way," says Aravis.

"Besides which," says Morningstar, smirking at her fiancé, "at any given time, even if one of us were happy with you, the other would be annoyed at you."

"So I can't win," Dranko complains.

"Well, there's a lot of disagreement about how the universe works, in academic circles..."

"You're making this crap up, aren't you?" says Dranko.

Morningstar stamps her foot. "How could the universe have multiple versions of people? That's ridiculous! When I cast a *sending*, I get you, not multiple versions of you."

"Well, you get the one you're more... anchored to," Aravis explains.

"So we exist in multiple planes?" asks Grey Wolf.

"Like I said, there's some argument about that."

Dranko tries another optimistic angle. "So why don't we get one of the other 'us-es' to fix the world, while we go lie down someplace warm?"

"It doesn't work that way," sighs Aravis. "Those other 'us-es' don't care about our universe. They don't know about it."

"Goddammit!" Dranko spits.

"Is our Kay somewhere where there's another Kay?" asks Morningstar, still not entirely buying it.

"That, I don't know," admits Aravis. "Yes, probably. It sounds like that's what the Eyes think."

Grey Wolf's head hurts. He groans. Morningstar tries *sending* to Kay and gets no answer. It appears that Kay is just gone. No one speaks for a few seconds.

"I have a theory that I'd like to put to the test," says Aravis, tying the rope around his own waist. "I'm going to step through the portal. As soon as I'm gone, I want you to pull me back."

"Are you protected from lightning?" asks Dranko.

"Yeah. *Energy buffer*."

He steps through the portal. He finds himself in the middle of the storm, but before it can do him any harm the others yank him back as instructed. "Well, we didn't move physically, when whatever happened happened."

"I wonder if that sort of thing happens often... like earthquakes," ponders Grey Wolf.

"Or maybe it happened because of the 'instability of the rotunda,'" guesses Morningstar.

"My rotunda's pretty stable," Dranko laughs nervously, patting his own backside. No one else laughs. "Well, okay then," he continues. "I suggest we make camp. It's that, or make a run for it out there."

"Remember what happened last time," says Kibi. "If we camp here for a whole day, tomorrow there'll be five storms waiting out there..."

"And lots of little stormlets?" says Dranko.

Ernie makes a noise of frustration as he prepares his cooking gear. "I want to make a fire, but this room would just fill up with smoke. And I was going to cook Kay's favorite."

"Why?" asks Dranko. "She's not here to enjoy it."

"Dranko!" snaps Grey Wolf, but it's too late. Ernie turns on Dranko, his face florid.

"Because maybe I'm thinking about her!" he yells.

"Sorry, Ernie."

After a cold meal during which no one says much, Ernie says, "I think we should wait it out in here. Remember, the storm wasn't on top of a gate when we came through. It was out over the ocean. Maybe it'll get bored and go back there." The others nod in unenthusiastic agreement.

"So," says Dranko after another awkward pause. "Who wants to play mumblety-peg?"

OR SO

Mutually Assured Paranoia

Things have looked better for our heroes.

They are in a world whose entirety consists of a small cloakroom. The only exit may lead into a misanthropic god-storm. And beyond that, the only known way out leads to a desert. And beyond *that* are a bunch of other sliced-off bits of worlds, all of which are somehow contained in the small stone tower of Het Branoi. Which is in the middle of a giantish town, the citizens of whom will probably be very ill-disposed toward the Company should the heroes emerge. And the town is in a cold northern wasteland where the giants are downright friendly compared to the beholders and blood foxes. And all of that is in a horrid alternate world where the supreme evil being has claimed victory over the good guys, and none of the party's allies have ever even *existed* as far as they can tell. Could be worse, though. Could be raining.

But enough gloomy editorializing!

"You wouldn't have a bedroom in one place and a coatroom in another," says Dranko, speaking between mouthfuls of bread and dried apples. "I think that somehow it all shattered, and the rooms got flung through the other dimensions."

It's a crowded breakfast in the cloakroom. Ernie has done his best without any fire, and the little room is filled with the sounds of contented chewing.

Morningstar nods. "And the 'rotunda' was someplace where they were performing a ritual, and something went wrong, and that's what made it unstable."

Dranko gets up and starts gesturing as he speculates. "Let's imagine that the circle of gates in the grassy field was the 'rotunda.' That's where they did their experiments. Something goes wrong, and reality shatters outward from there, in different directions. Like dropping a rock into a big bowl of milk, and there's splatters in all directions..." The others look up at him, awaiting the stunning conclusion, but Dranko pretty much runs out of steam. "...which is a fascinating theory that doesn't tell us a damn thing," he admits, sitting back down and looking a bit sheepish.

Spell preparation follows breakfast. Morningstar plans to cast another *find the path*, and if all goes well they can avoid the storm entirely. Not that Grey Wolf believes that's likely to happen. "OK... let's go get lit up!" he says once everyone's ready.

They step through the gate, leaving the cloakroom behind. A few seconds later they are back in the lovely wilderness, but while they're not in the midst of the storm, they can see it hovering a short distance away. The sounds of its wind and thunder are quite clear, and while Morningstar casts her *find the path* it starts to swirl in their direction.

Hoping to preempt hostilities, Dranko calls out to it. "Oh great one! We wish to leave and not bother you again! Will you let us?"

WHY HAVE YOU COME BACK? booms the storm.

"That was a dead end!" shouts Dranko, pointing to the blue portal. "There was no other way to go! We want to leave this place and not bother you! We're small and fleshy insects! We'd just like to leave!"

Flicker raises his eyebrows and silently mouths to Dranko: *Small fleshy insects?*

A jagged bolt of lightning strikes the ground not twenty feet from where the Company stand. Dranko tries another tactic. "If we can free you, will you let us?"

Morningstar's spell finishes up, and she gets the direction of another portal out of this world.

ARE YOU PROPOSING SUCH A THING? rumbles the storm.

"We're trying to free everyone!" says Ernie. "To bring an end to the prison that is this place."

The storm agitates and billows for a few seconds, thinking. Then, loudly:

LEAVE! COME BACK WHEN YOU HAVE SOMETHING USEFUL TO DO. AND TELL MERCURY THAT I WILL NO LONGER ABIDE BY THE AGREEMENT WE MADE, SINCE YOU HAVE BROKEN IT.

Lightning starts crashing down all around them. The crackling and thunderous booms are deafening. "Who is Mercury?" shouts Ernie. He gets no response.

"We sense there is a gate that way!" Morningstar calls into the wind. "May we proceed to it?"

AS FAST AS YOU CAN.

Morningstar can only cast *wind walk* on half the group, so after adding a *Rary's telepathic bond*, the party split up. Some fly on quickly ahead in vaporous form, while the rest start an arduous overland march through the overgrown hills. It's hardly fair. After only a few minutes of whooshing over lush, beautiful hills covered with red flowers, the *wind walkers* arrive at another blue portal with enough time to take a refreshing swim in a nearby lake. The walking group sweats and labors through brambles and tall grass, though Kibi casts *xorn movement* when he gets bored, after which he and Scree dive through the hills rather than walk over them. The sight of the dwarven wizard popping up out of the earth and then diving back into it like a frolicking porpoise is at once amusing and surreal.

Without incident, the Company reconvene at the new blue portal some four hours later. The storm has not followed them. An examination of the grass around the portal indicates that it is not regularly used – big surprise there! As usual Dranko wants to go through first, but Aravis (not entirely trusting Dranko's diplomatic skills) wants him to have company. After some haggling they decide that Ernie, Dranko and Aravis will go through the portal, each tied to ropes held by those staying behind. In they go.



The first thing Dranko and Aravis notice upon arrival is that things are brushing against their faces. They ring like small bells or windchimes, which turns out to be exactly what they are, suspended from a wooden contraption like a gallows.

They are outdoors, on a small circular patch of ground ringed by a wide, deep and empty moat. Above them, suspended on a circle of poles on the far side of the moat, is a heavy mesh netting. The only way to walk off the small “island” they’re on would be via a single slender rope bridge, itself also covered by the netting.

On the other side of the moat, near to where the bridge goes, about a dozen figures stir, their attention captured by the ringing of the chimes. A normal-looking sun is setting behind them, making it hard to make out details, especially given that the mesh netting already obscures their line of sight.

“Ernie,” whispers Dranko. “Head back through. We’ll probably need *teleports* and *wind walks* to get through that.” Ernie hops right back through to rejoin the others.

From beyond the moat and the netting, a female voice calls out to them. “Drop your weapons and declare yourselves!”

It’s strange, but what they hear is a fuzzy background noise of someone speaking in a strange language, while (more clearly) they hear the same voice speaking in Charagan Common! Before Aravis can say anything, Dranko shouts back across the moat.

“We’re from the Elemental plane of Water. We’re a little lost!” You couldn’t tell from looking at him, but Aravis rolls his eyes.

“Can you give us directions on how to get back?” adds Dranko.

“To the Elemental plane of Water?” says the woman, sounding a bit confused.

“Yeah,” says Dranko. “Somehow we ended up in a desert.”

Dranko and Aravis become aware that somewhere near the crowd of people, a loud bell has starting to ring in a repeating pattern. “What are your intentions?” shouts the woman.

“To get back... to the Elemental plane... of Wah-ter,” answers Dranko slowly, as if talking to a child. Aravis nearly gives himself eyestrain from all the eye rolling he’s doing by now.

In a similar tone to Dranko (though maybe more peeved), the woman responds, “If you’ve been there before, I suggest you simply retrace your route.”

“There’s something blocking our way,” says Aravis.

“How did you pass the storm?” asks the woman curiously.

“The storm allowed us to pass,” says Aravis. “But it will not allow us to pass back.”

“Say, is there a Mercury here?” asks Dranko, switching gears. “The storm said something about wanting to talk to Mercury.” Aravis thinks to himself that not letting Dranko ply his diplomacy alone still didn’t solve the problem of Dranko simply being there in the first place. He corrects Dranko, amending that the Storm wanted *them* to talk with Mercury.

“Are you prepared to disarm yourselves?” asks the woman, warily.

Although this request is easily granted (Aravis carries no weapons, and Dranko subtly drops his whip into his *handy haversack* before making a show of dropping his non-magical mace), the question sparks another flurry of verbal jousting. But when Dranko starts pressing with more questions, the woman interrupts him. “You will answer our questions first. We need to be assured of your intentions.”

“We’ve told you our intentions,” says Aravis. “You can believe them or not.” *I know I wouldn’t*, he thinks.

“Actually, I have another intention, now that you mention it,” calls Dranko. “If you have an outhouse or something, that would be great.” Someone near the woman starts laughing, and she wheels on him and demands he be quiet.

“How many of you are there?” the woman then demands to know. “There was a third member of your group, who went back through the gate. To get others?”

“It’s standard operating procedure,” explains Dranko cheerily. “Whenever we go for a swim into the unknown, back in the plane of Water, we always make sure there’s one person in... er, what’s the word I’m looking for. Oh, yeah... reserve!”

“Answer the question, please.”

“There is one more of us,” lies Aravis.

"So there are three of you. If he did not go back for others, why did he go?"

"I think you scared him," says Aravis. *Boy, this is getting thin...*

"If we find that you are lying, it will not color our perceptions well."

"How do you color a perception?" asks Dranko. He turns to Aravis and says, "Maybe it's a translation error." Then, back to the woman: "We'll go get him back. I'll stay here with you." Aravis hops back through the portal.

Meanwhile, Ernie has explained the situation to the others. There is a short but furious debate about how much subterfuge they should use – the more of it, the harder it may be to win trust later. Caution wins the day; all the remaining party members are made invisible, and some are already connected with a *telepathic bond*. They can reveal their true numbers once they're assured that things are on the up and up.

Ernie and Aravis remind everyone to duck down as they cross the portal, to avoid setting off the chimes.

Dranko sees that another large group of people has come to join those already on guard, presumably summoned by the (still ringing) bell. Wanting to put them more at ease, Dranko decides to introduce himself properly. "Say, my name's One Slippery Squid. Nice to meet you!"

"Did you say 'Squid?'" asks the woman. There's too much netting in the way to see, but Dranko can hear that her eyebrows are significantly raised.

"Hey, don't make fun of my name!" he says testily. "It's not my fault."

The whole party comes through the portal. Only Ernie and Aravis are visible, and Aravis makes no attempt to avoid the chimes.

"Are you usually the spokesman for the three of you?" asks the woman. Some amusement has crept into her voice, but there's mostly still frustration and impatience.

"No," says Aravis, shaking his head. "It's just that we can't stop him from talking."

There's some more back-and-forth banter, during which neither side earns much trust from the other. Once the rest of the party have taken in their surroundings, Dranko, Ernie and Aravis agree to cross the rope bridge, leaving their (visible) weapons behind. Most of the now twenty or so strangers have bows of various sorts aimed at them as they emerge, though there is a young man without a weapon, standing at the other end of the bridge, observing them intently as they cross. A holy symbol (a small yellow cross) hangs around his neck.

"What god is that?" asks Dranko, pointing to the holy symbol.

The woman interrupts before the man can answer. "The way this is still working is, until we deem you safe, information will flow from you, to us. We mean no offense, of course."

"Speaking of flowing from me to you... outhouse?"

"Piss in the moat," snaps the woman, nearing the end of her patience.

There are yet *more* tiring negotiations. The man with the yellow cross speaks to the woman in a language none of the Company understand. ("They don't detect as evil," he says. "Unfortunately, I cannot detect for derangement.")

Eventually the three of them agree not only to talk, but to have their hands bound, if instead of being taken away for questioning, their "hosts" superiors will come here to talk instead. That's agreeable to the woman, and a runner is sent away across some low grassy hills. It's cool, and the sun has set by now. The people (mostly a mixture of various humanoid types, many of which are unknown to the party) have lit some torches. Kibi has activated his *ioun stone of tongues*, while Morningstar has turned back into vapor and flown up through the netting to keep watch from high above.

Sitting down with his hands tied loosely behind him, Dranko clears his throat. "Just so we get back on the right foot, I'm going to tell you about two lies I just told you."

"Ah," says the woman, looking unsurprised.

"You see, we were afraid you were Black Circle people."

"Black Circle people?"

"Yeah. So, for starters, my name's Dranko."

“Not One Slippery Squid?”

“Naw, I made that up.”

“Ah. And you’re not from the Elemental plane of Water either, are you.”

“No,” admits Dranko. “But we did go there!”

“Ah.”

Morningstar relays via telepathy that there’s another group of people coming their way. Before long they hear the sound of a horse approaching, and moments later a group of six people come around the hill. There is no horse, but one of the newcomers is a large centaur, with a chestnut body and a large bushy beard. A sword hangs from his equine body, in easy reach of his human hands.

“So!” says the centaur in a deep, booming voice. “We have more visitors!” Like the woman, his voice is somehow getting translated (from the Company’s point of view) into Charagan Common.

“Do you often have visitors?” asks Dranko.

“No, not often. What are your names?”

All three names are given honestly. The centaur smiles broadly at them and introduces himself in kind. “Nice to meet you,” he bellows. “My name is **Mercury**

Graywolf-ELM: Ouch, I thought Mercury was going to be a bad guy.

Pyske: Hopefully, he’s going to be a guy who’s chock full of information about what the heck is going on in Het Branoi.

Mishihari Lord II: He’s polite and pleasant (so far). Of course he’s a bad guy.

Graywolf-ELM: Isn’t that always the case.

The Eye of the Storm

Ernie stares up at the centaur standing above him. He looks a bit sheepish. “The storm is mad at you,” he says.

Mercury frowns. “And what cause did I give the storm to be angry?”

“I don’t think you did,” says Ernie, coloring. “But...uh...”

“The storm thinks we’re connected to you somehow,” says Aravis. “We came through its territory.”

“You came from the... fascinating!” says Mercury. “You’ll have to review our map for accuracy!”

Dranko perks up. “You have a map? Sure! We’d love to get a look at it.”

The centaur takes a moment just looking down at Dranko, Ernie and Aravis, sizing them up. He starts up a conversation along the same lines as did the woman – where did they come from, what are their intentions, that sort of thing. When the three from the Company state that they not only came into this maze of planar bits on purpose, but also have an idea of who’s behind it, Mercury’s eyes go wide with interest. Either from hope, or trust, or some combination of the two, he bids that the three of them be set loose.

Aravis clears his throat as he gets to his feet. “And now that we’ve gained your trust... well, we didn’t trust you, either. There are more than just the three of us.”

“And do any of your friends have hostile intent towards us?” asks Mercury, starting intently at the wizard.

“No. But we couldn’t risk exposing the whole group, in case you had hostile intent.”

“I’m just the cannon fodder,” adds Dranko.

Mercury grins at them. “You must adventure for a living,” he says.

“Not so much a living as a calling,” says Aravis.

Jackylhunter: How often do you all play? Also, is Aravis making some sort of check to see if he can use the Crosser’s Maze? If so, what is the check?

Piratecat: We play between once and twice a month; we try for every two weeks. It’s never often enough. We played Friday night, and Sagiro is SUCH A RAT BASTARD. To quote ourselves from back when we tried to disarm a trap by throwing a summoned squid at it, the last game was *not* our finest moment. Luckily, the Story Hour isn’t too far behind at this point.

Aravis makes a Knowledge (planes) check to use the Crosser’s Maze. I think he’s currently at +15.

Jackylhunter: Thanks PC, anyone one have a guess as to when Aravis will be able to use the Maze again? I’m curious what details it shows regarding Het Branoi.

Sagiro: Regarding the Crosser’s Maze, I have a good guess that you’ll find out before too long... I have to disagree with PCat that the last game was “*not* their finest moment.” Thanks to some quick thinking on the part of the PCs, they saved the lives of hundreds of innocents under some pretty extreme pressure.

“And we wish it would stop calling!” pipes up Ernie.

“We can always use more of your type here,” says Mercury. “And it sounds like you have a particularly interesting story to tell. So, where are the rest of you?”

The others have congregated nearby, and now they drop their *invisibility* spells. Morningstar wafts gently down from above. “Ah,” says Mercury. “*Experienced* adventurers.”

Dranko and Ernie suggest that some additional defenses might be good, to protect against the kind of incursion the party managed. Aravis realizes that no matter what the defenders do, there will always be a way around it unless they’re prepared to just wall the portal up. He says as much.

Mercury nods. “Yes, the only sure way would be to block off the Way entirely, but of course we dare not do that.”

This comment piques the party’s curiosity, given the orcs’ terror when Kibi briefly blocked a portal with a *wall of force*. “We’ve heard that before,” says Aravis. But no one follows up on the subject, and the conversation meanders to other things as they head away from the portal.

Of the many people who came running at the bell, a dozen or so walk back in a crowd around them, chattering. The Company can only understand Mercury, except for Kibi who still is under the effect of *tongues*. The dwarf listens in on some of the talk, and finds that (no surprise) they are the topic of conversation. The folk wonder where the party truly came from, and how powerful they are. “They look like strong adventurers,” says one. “It’s always good to get their type, to help defend the Inn.”

The terrain is not as lush as the storm world, or as forested as Green Valley, but it’s pleasant enough. The party spy a small herd of cows on a nearby hill, and a farmer waves down at them. The sun looks more like their own than many they’ve seen, and the air is cool and fragrant with new flowers. Ernie figures it’s late spring. “Are you getting older?” he asks Mercury.

“No, and neither are you, I suspect. But you’ll still be hungry. When we get back, we’ll get you something to eat, and there are plenty of rooms.”

“It’ll be nice to eat something someone else has cooked,” admits Ernie.

“We have an excellent cook!” Mercury says, beaming. “Her name is Spinnizia. She’s been with us seven years or so.”

“I’m a cook too!” says Ernie, unable to help himself. “And I have a bunch of spices to share.”

“I’m sure Spinnizia will appreciate talking with someone else who’s a master of the art. As for the spices, that will be for you and her to discuss. Though once you’ve had some food and drink yourselves, we can all have a good chat about other matters. I’m sure Aristus and Gloriana will be eager to question you about your origins. If you really know what’s causing all of this... well, that’s very exciting!”

“We’re pretty sure we know *who*, if not exactly *what*,” says Morningstar. Then, because she’s curious, she asks, “How many of you are adventurers?”

“If I use the term loosely, maybe... fifteen? There are the three of us who founded the place, and some others have come through over the years. They come and go.”

Dranko smiles and fails to resist the opportunity to boast. “The last time we saw that many together, it was when we fought the dragon during the war.”

“You fought a dragon!” exclaims Mercury, though whether he’s truly impressed or just trying to make Dranko feel good, no one knows for sure.

“Yeah. It was insane,” adds Dranko.

“I’m sure you’ll have many good stories to entertain the common room,” says Mercury.

“How long have you been here?” asks Ernie.

“Fourteen years.”

“You sick of it yet?” asks Dranko.

“Sometimes. How long have you been here?”

“Just a couple of months,” answers Dranko. “And most of that was spent training.”

“Where do people here come from?” asks Ernie.

“There are two main avenues – some come from the Formian areas, and some come from the Demonic Slices. You’re the first to come through the Way from the Slice with the storm.”

“And against whom do you defend your inn?” asks Kibi. “Demons, then?”

“We’ve had numerous encounters over the years. Twice it was demons. Fortunately, they are discomfited by the distance from their home Slices.”

“Why do you call them ‘Slices?’” asks Ernie.

“Aristus calls them that. It seems like what they are – slices of worlds, patched together.”

“I like it!” says Ernie. “It makes me think of food.” Then, blushing a bit: “Okay, I admit, everything makes me think of food.”

There’s a good laugh all around. The group are cresting a final hill, following a cleared footpath that winds its way up via gentle switchbacks. When they reach its top and start to descend the far side, they get their first glimpse of the Inn. It’s huge, as large as a lord’s mansion, if not bigger. From this distance and vantage, the Company can see that there’s a structure at its center that was probably a smaller original building. It’s been added to and expanded in various haphazard architectural styles. It almost looks like a tiny little town with all its buildings mashed together. The last light of the setting sun illuminates it across a flat grassy field, and cheery lights burn in its dozens of windows.

“We’re never going to leave it one piece,” mutters Aravis, shaking his head.

“With that many wings, we’d never destroy all of it!” says Dranko.

“I hope you don’t destroy any of it!” exclaims Mercury.

“Oh, it’s never on purpose,” says Dranko.

“And it’s never our fault,” adds Aravis.

“Don’t you think I know how it is?” laughs Mercury. “I’ve spent most of my adult life adventuring.”

“Did you destroy any inns?” asks Grey Wolf.

“Well, it depends on how you define ‘destroy.’”

“I like this guy!” exclaims Dranko.

For the rest of the walk down the hill, the Company regale their host with the tale of how the furniture in a Kivian tavern came to life and attacked them. There is laughter, and knowing grins, and Mercury asks for all the details of the statue that came to life, and the animated coach that ran over poor Grey Wolf. Telling tales to a fellow campaigner, the Company, for the first time since Green Valley, are truly at ease.

There are plenty of people milling around the vicinity of the inn; they’re doing chores, carrying farming implements, rolling barrels, leading livestock on ropes, that sort of thing. Many are human, and many are not. Most stop to stare at the Company, but typically this is followed by a wave and a smile. Kibi’s nose tells him that a small building across a small street from the larger inn is a distillery. Mercury pokes his head into the door. “How are we doing in there?” he calls.

“Still a couple of days before the next batch is done,” a gruff voice answers, again in that translated Charagan Common.

“Gonna be good stuff, though, when it’s finished.”

“Good, good,” answers Mercury. “We have nine more guests arriving, and a stout lot they are by the look of them. They’re going to be thirsty!” The voice inside laughs a hearty laugh.

A minute later, the Company stand at the wide wooden doors of the sprawling inn. A large painted sign above the doors names the place “Eye of the Storm.” Inside is an enormous commons – the entire original inn, in fact. It’s nearly a hundred feet on a side, supported by thick wooden beams. Dozens of people roam around it, or sit at tables eating and drinking. The smells of good food waft from a kitchen at the back – meats, potatoes, garlic, savory vegetables.

Kibi pinches himself. “Am I dreaming?”

Once the Company are seated, Mercury trots off to find his friends Aristus and Gloriana. Dranko sees that there is a large piece of yellow parchment tacked to the far wall, but before he can even rise to go take a look, a huge creature comes ducking (literally)

out of a nearby side door. It's over eight feet tall, with short brown fur covering its body and two huge curved horns jutting from its bull's head. "A minotaur!" breathes Ernie.

It comes stomping right over to them, rattling the mugs on their table. "Hey there!" bellows the minotaur. "You must be the new guys!" He winks at Morningstar. "And the new gal!" he adds. "Nice to see ya!"

"I'm Ernie! What's your name?"

"I'm **Horny**." Before Dranko can even comment, the minotaur says, "Nooooooo jokes about it, either."

"We're going to get along great!" says Dranko, grinning widely.

"Why would we joke about it?" asks Aravis innocently.

Horny looks down at Aravis and starts laughing uproariously, as if the wizard has just made the funniest joke imaginable. He reaches out to shake Aravis's hand, but pulls back suddenly as he sees the star-field eyesockets. "Woooooaaaaa!" he exclaims. "And who are you?"

"I'm Aravis."

"Aravis, is it safe to shake your hand?"

"I don't know. I don't shake my hand."

"HA! I'll take my chances. Put 'er there!"

CRUNCH! Horny's handshake is finger-bruisingly vigorous. Many hands are crushed in the minotaur's powerful grip. Ernie makes a point of squeezing back, prompting Horny to comment "Whoa! You pack a lot in that little package, don't ya?"

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Horny," says Ernie, just a bit smugly.

With the introductions out of the way, Horny leans over the table and clears his throat. "Now. While you're here, here are the rules. Just one rule, actually. The rule is: don't piss me off, or I'll kick your ass outta here. Got that?"

"What sorts of things would make you mad?" asks Ernie.

"Just use your head. If you think something will tick me off, it probably will."

"Is this your inn?" asks Kibi.

"My inn? Hell, no!" says Horny. "It's Mercury's inn. His, and Gloriana's, and Aristus's."

"A word of advice," says Aravis, grinning. He points at Dranko. "Save yourself the trouble and just kick him out right now."

"All right!" roars Horny. He tromps around the table to where Dranko is sitting, but instead of throwing the half-orc out, he asks, "What do you say to that? You gonna sit there and take that from your pal there? Heh heh heh."

Dranko shrugs his shoulders, then quick as lightning unslings his whip and lashes out, yanking Aravis's chair out from under him. Aravis barely leaps up in time to avoid falling over.

"What the hell is that thing?" asks Horny. "Looks like my tail!"

"He's very good with it," says Ernie. "He very seldom puts his own eye out."

Food and drink is brought to the Company in great quantities. Horny informs them that the Inn doesn't use money; the party will be expected to pay for room and board with services, helping out around the inn with chores, and (most likely) being assigned to guard duty at one of the Ways. In between bites of surprisingly good bread, Ernie asks: "Where are you from, Mr. Horny?"

"I'm from a place called Perrik. Nice place. Least, it was."

"What happened to it?" asks Dranko.

"Well, I'm sure it's still just fine," says Horny. "But my little piece of it got bitten off. Made my way through the formian territory 'til I got here."

"Formians?" asks Grey Wolf.

"Ants," says Horny. "Crazy things. Kind of like Mercury, but instead of being a man and a horse, they're like... well, mostly ant, but with a straight-up torso like you guys."

"That's just wrong," Dranko sympathizes.

"Tell me about it! They're *freaky*! You don't want to piss 'em off, though. I mean, I could pulverize one or two of 'em, but there're a *lot* of 'em. And they're pretty strong. You know how a normal ant can carry around a crumb the size of itself? Imagine if the ant was as big as you!" Horny looks back at Aravis, and abruptly changes the subject. "What *is* that, anyway?"

"It's a magical artifact," Aravis explains simply.

"Right. Well, don't set it off in here." Aravis nods.

"Now, if you fine people will excuse me, I got some other chores to do. There are rooms for you upstairs, one for each of you if you want. It's been a light month, and people are leaving more or less at the same rate they're showing up. Lots of people choose to stay, and others get restless and go off, to try to find out what's going on. Usually through the 'Gate of No Return' – it's like roulette – but some go into the Demon Slices. Well, nice to meet ya!"

As he turns to go, Ernie asks one more question. "Mr. Horny, have you ever seen anyone wearing clothing with black circles on them?"

"Not that I remember," says Horny.

"What about orcs?" asks Kibi. "Have you had trouble with the orcs?"

"Orcs?" asks Horny, scratching his head. Then: "Oh! You must be talking about the orcish hub. No, we ain't seen any orcs. They'd never make it this far. The Storm would eat 'em, right?" And, laughing at this last image, Horny stomps away, leaving the Company with plates full of food, mugs full of ale, and heads full of a hundred questions.

Jackylhunter: Cool stuff, Sagiro... A minotaur named Horny? Now that's funny...

Zaruthustran: Wow. This is so cool. It's always fun, as a player or DM, for the party to encounter other adventurers. Finally, they get to interact with peers. This must have been an awesomely fun session.

ConnorSB: Man... however cool it may seem now, I'm betting it will be just as scary and awful a session later.

shilsen: Two NPCs who are both friendly and nice to the Company? These guys have to be evil!

nemmerle: No. No. No. Don't you know anything about being a Rat Bastard DM? I'm sure they are good and friendly and the kind of folks Abernathy's Company would make fast friends with – thus, when they are forced to kill them to save the world or some other reason it will be that much more heart-wrenchingly painful for them.

shilsen: Hangs head in shame at missing the obvious. Rushes off to reread the RBDM manual.

OR SO

The Way Things Work

Mercury returns a few minutes later with a pair of companions. One is a tall, dark-haired human woman in a flowing dress. She has a book tucked under her arm, and a haughty, slightly displeased expression. The other is a stout gnome, reminiscent of the Yuja, though taller and stockier. He has a red face, blackened hands, and rolled up sleeves.

"Hello, hello!" says the gnome jovially.

"You look like a Yuja!" says Dranko.

"Like a what, now?"

"A people we met back home. Very friendly!" says Ernie.

"Well, my name's Aristus. **Aristus Fuller**. Mind if I sit?"

There are introductions all around. "Why are your hands all smudgy?" Kibi asks Aristus.

"Workin'!" answers the gnome.

"What do you do?"

"Secret project!" Aristus leans over the table and whispers conspiratorially, "Maybe I'll let you see it later on, if I'm feeling charitable."

The woman looks pained, clears her throat, and says, "So. Mercury tells me you may... know something."

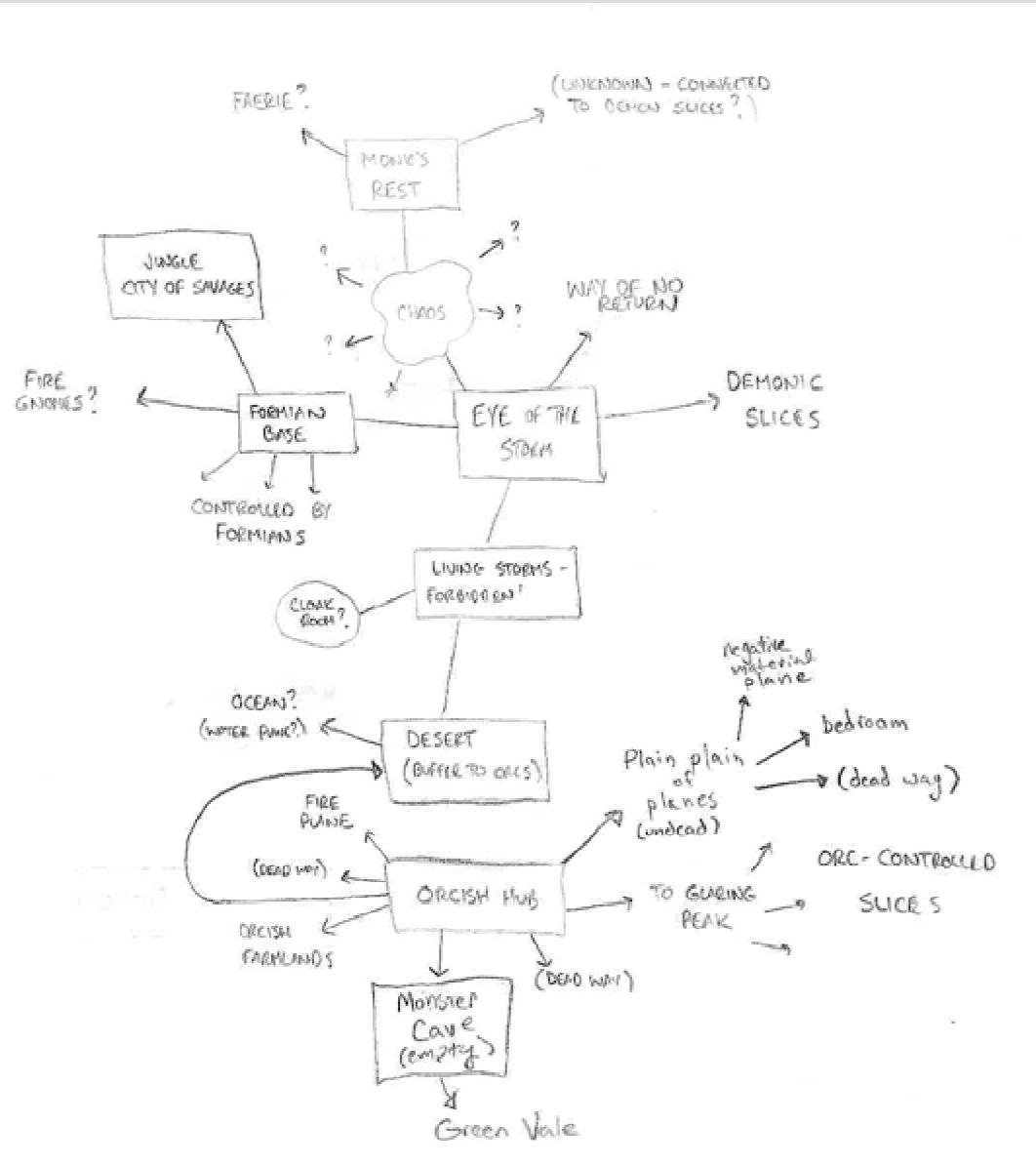
Dranko grins. "Well, yeah. First, a man loves a woman very much. Then he..." Ernie reaches over and cuffs Dranko on the head.

“My name’s Aravis,” the wizard cuts in. “And you are...?”

“Gloriana de Marlough.”

Niceties are again exchanged, and when Gloriana asks where they come from, the Company use this as an excuse to finally get a closer look at the huge map tacked to the wall. Together they go over to show their hosts the Slices through which they have come. And while eventually they get around to actually doing so, their first reaction is a burst of excitement and speculation about what they see.

This version of the map already has the bits that the Company added on themselves. The original had no mention of Green Valley, the Monster Cave, the "Plain Plain of Planes," the Bedroom, or the Negative Material Plane.



“Demon Slices. Huh.”

“Chaos? Ewww.”

"Dead ways must be those gray ones."

"Fire gnomes? What are fire gnomes?"

“Hey look, the ‘Orcish Hub.’ We know that one.”

“City of sausages?”

"No, it says 'savages'!"

After a few minutes of this, and some comparisons with the Company's map, Dranko asks, "Why is the storm forbidden?"

Gloriana answers, "We had to make such an agreement, in order to convince them to let us pass unharmed. They are inscrutable, and they value their solitude."

"They?" Grey Wolf gulps.

"So the agreement is, you leave them alone, and they leave you alone?" asks Kibi.

"In part," says Gloriana. "They have also agreed that if anything looks like an invading army, particularly of orcs, they will... deal with them. I'm glad they let you through."

That sobers everyone up for a minute. "The storm told us we weren't abiding by the agreement, just by being there," says Morningstar. "And we may have stirred up the orcs." If Kibi entertains happy visions of hundreds of orcs getting struck by *lightning bolts*, he doesn't share them with the others.

Aravis looks from the map to his friends and grimaces. "I have a feeling we may have to go through the Way of No Return," he says.

"I don't suggest it!" says Gloriana.

"We're being rude," says Morningstar. "We said we'd tell you our own story, and we haven't."

Gloriana, Aristus and Mercury look at her expectantly, but it's Ernie who speaks. "There were three threats to our world. We stopped two of them. The third one destroyed... everything. It wasn't destroyed by armies, or monsters. Our enemies just... changed time."

Aravis says, "Before our enemies changed the past, we traveled to a faraway land, where we learned about this place. Het Branoi."

"You learned about the Slices?" says Gloriana.

"No," says Ernie. "Not exactly. We learned it was just a tower, where mages pursued knowledge beyond the bounds of reason and sanity."

"It was knowledge so dangerous, other people in their own order tried to kill them before they could succeed," says Dranko.

"And this order was *really, really evil*," says Ernie.

"But this place... Het Branoi... was so well hidden that the others in their order couldn't find it," says Aravis.

"I see," says Gloriana. "So you discovered the tower Het Branoi. And went in. And found yourself here, in the Slices."

"Yes," says Ernie. "In a place called Green Valley." Dranko has been adding the Company's cartographic knowledge to the wall map. He points to where he's added Green Valley.

"A very powerful magical item told us we needed to come here, to find one of its brethren," explains Aravis. "If we find it, we can use it to fix time."

"And doing so might also break up this place," says Morningstar.

None of their hosts even blink at the notion of a magical artifact speaking, or having 'brethren.' Mercury says, "So this object you are seeking could simply be in one of the Slices, and that's why you were sent here? Do you have any proof or suspicions that your item is connected to all the Slices, and what is happening here on a larger scale?"

"These items are powerful controllers of space and time," says Ernie, nodding. "It's quite possible that they're using it – the Eye of Moirel – to power all of this."

"So your quest could strike at the very heart of this whole phenomenon," says Mercury. "Hmm. It was our conjecture that this was all some 'natural' phenomenon that could not be solved or fought, but would have to be waited out."

Morningstar shows them the letter found in the Black Circle boudoir, and talks about what she learned from her *thought captures*. All of that leads them to believe the Slices are an artificial construct made by the Black Circle for some nefarious end. Their hosts listen intently to the story. When she finishes, Gloriana frowns at her. "Are you a mind-reader?" she asks. Morningstar nods.

"We don't have many rules here," says Gloriana, "but this is an important one. People have come here from many worlds, and have many stories. Some wish to share them, and others do not. None of our guests are asked to admit things they wish to

keep secret, and there is absolutely no reading of minds allowed here, nor any sensing of thoughts or emotions. The three of us reserve certain... rights of security... but we will not abuse them."

"Though if you think doing so will help with your investigation into the nature of the Slices, do come and talk to us," says Mercury. "All things are open to negotiation."

Gloriana glowers at the centaur before adding, "The other rule is, we expect polite behavior, and that our guests not cause a fuss. This place is a sanctuary for a wide net of worlds. The penalty for violating the rules – assuming we don't need to kill you to stop you from doing whatever it is you're doing – is summary eviction through the Gate of No Return. We don't know where it goes. We simply know you won't be coming back."

"Right. Clear enough," says Dranko.

"You mean, people go through to different places?" asks Ernie.

"That is a matter of some conjecture," says Gloriana. "It may lead to one specific place like the others, but be one-way. Or it may lead to someplace so perilous that those who go through are instantly killed. But most believe that it simply goes to a new Slice each time it is traversed, because that is how it behaves from the other side. You see, we've had many people come through the Gate of No Return since we founded the Inn, and they've all come from different Slices. Not particularly dangerous Slices, either. But we've had several travelers go out of that Way over the years, promising that they would come back through if they could. No one ever has."

"What happens if you throw a rope through?" asks Dranko.

"The rope can be dragged back, if someone on our side is holding on to it. But it's always been just the rope."

"I strongly advise against it," says Aristus. "Unless you have some specific reason to think it's the right way to go."

"Have you ever tried to divine what's on the other side?" Dranko asks.

"Divinations don't pass between Slices," says Gloriana.

After a brief silence, Aristus turns to Kibi and asks, "What's your name, master dwarf?"

"Kibilhathur Bimson."

Aristus furrows his brow, as if trying to remember something. "Have you heard my name before?" asks Kibi.

"Rings a bell," says the gnome.

"Kibi is famous?" says Grey Wolf. "That's a little frightening."

"Ah, could be someone else," admits Aristus. "Dwarven names tend to sound the same to me."

"So you've seen dwarves before?" asks Kibi.

"We've seen a few. They've come and gone from the inn. They're among the more restless types, I've found; they've all gone out again. Two of them went with one of the largest groups to head out together. Fifteen or so in that bunch, and pretty tough characters. Most of them were adventuring types like yourselves. They headed out into the Demon Slices, sayin' they were gonna find out what was going on."

"Didn't return, huh?" guesses Dranko.

"Nope. Not a one."

"Say, what's 'Monk's Rest'?" asks Dranko, looking at the map again.

"We're not entirely certain," says Gloriana. "We think that there's a monastery out there. Aristus, do you remember who wrote that in?"

"There was a traveler from some time back who mentioned the monastery, I think."

"Are any of you familiar with planar travel?" asks Gloriana. When Aravis nods, she continues, "Then you'll have heard of Limbo. We think that the Chaos is really a Slice or Slices of the outer plane of Limbo."

"Oh, yes, I know all about that," says Aristus.

"You don't *know* about it," says Gloriana. "You've just *read* about it."

"Well, the people who wrote about it, they knew about it, didn't they?" says Aristus testily. "It's practically the same thing. If you stopped spending all of your time learning spells and casting theory, you might learn something interesting!" Gloriana sniffs and looks bored.

"Speaking of spells," says Kibi to Gloriana, "We have a number of spellbooks, and it looks like you probably do as well. Maybe we could swap some..."

"No," says Gloriana curtly. When Kibi looks abashed, she continues: "I'm sorry, but I was... I am a member of an arcane order with strict rules about such things."

Mercury shakes his head. "You should talk with **Chiswick**," he suggests. "He's a little..." (he taps his head) "... far gone, but he's a brilliant wizard. He stays up in his room most of the time. I know that before he arrived here he came by some store of inks and components, and he's been known to trade or sell them, if you can talk a straight word out of him. The Slice he came from has long since been destroyed."

"Destroyed?" echoes Grey Wolf, frowning.

"Ah yes, another rule, which I thought you already knew," says Gloriana. "Do not attempt to wall off any Way, for any reason. Any. Reason."

"What happens if you do?" asks Kibi.

"It attracts the Cleaners."

"What are those?" Aravis asks, intrigued.

Mercury takes a deep breath. "Like so many things here, the Cleaners are speculative. We were lucky, really. When we learned this lesson, it was in a world two Slices out from here. Years ago we were accosted by a sort of elemental creature with electrical properties. It couldn't have been a true elemental creature, or it couldn't have crossed the Ways – perhaps you've noticed that there's a certain magical nature that cannot cross between one Slice and another. But these things managed to come through; we fought them off, and some of us pursued them back to their own world. We slew some more, but because they were so numerous... well, there was an intermediate Slice, and we thought we'd just wall that off. Our spellcasters did their jobs, and sealed it away. Every few days we went to check on it, and all seemed well."

The centaur pauses in his narrative and thinks for a minute before continuing. "Have any of you, out of curiosity, gone through one of the Gray Ways? There is... Gloriana tells me that there are many places that border on the prime planes, like the Astral and the Ethereal. The Slices are bounded in a similar way, but not by those more familiar planes. They are bounded by something... stranger. And in that realm live... things. And these things are attracted by a Way that is not... breathing. By a closed Way. These things devour Slices and everything in them. When the Slice is gone, all of the Ways into it go dead, gray. I pray that none of us ever see them. Aristus did, once. He won't talk about it, so don't ask him." Aristus shudders.

"Wouldn't that be a good way of getting rid of the Demon Slices?" asks Dranko. "Just go in, seal something off, and run for it!"

"If we knew more, we might try it," says Mercury. "But it's possible they wouldn't stop with just the Slice that was walled off. It's not worth the risk. Better not to attract the attention of the Cleaners in the first place."

Dranko gulps, thinking suddenly of the bone snake that temporarily walled off the bedroom. What if...

"Now we know why the orcs were so emphatic," says Aravis.

"No more *walls of force!*!" says Flicker, poking Kibi in the ribs.

A tall, muscular woman approaches the table. "Can I get you anything to drink?" she asks, looking over the Company (particularly the men) with a mischievous expression.

"No, thank you," says Ernie. "But it's all delicious!"

"Anything else? At all?" asks the woman.

"No, really," says Dranko, grinning at her. "Who are you?"

"My name's **Delilah**..." she answers. She starts to lean toward Dranko, promising some flirtatious repartee and maybe a better view of cleavage, but is distracted by Aravis sitting next to him. "Ooooh! That's fascinating! I'll bet woman never tire of staring into those star-fields, do they?"

Vurt: Bwahahaha! Garbage collection?

dravot: My first thought was *The Langoliers* by Stephen King.

Caliber: Me too. I've never read the book, but I've seen the movie. Giant evil pac-men with rotating-circular-saw teeth. Nasty things.

ConnorSB: I was thinking Victor the Cleaner from *La Femme Nikita*.

"I don't know," says Aravis, straight-faced. "I've never had anyone..." Dranko guffaws. "...doing that," Aravis finishes.

"Well, I'm at your disposal," she says, and with a wink she heads back to the kitchen.

Dranko glares at Aravis. "She was looking at *me* until you opened your eyes!"

"Dranko!" says Kibi, shocked. "You're engaged!"

"Oh!" says Aravis, even more shocked. "You mean she was looking at you in that way? Oh... oh!"

"You should be careful with her," warns Aristus, smiling. "She's dangerous."

"Why is she dangerous?" asks Dranko, intrigued.

"Because she can kick your ass, is why! But don't take her too seriously. She enjoys that... sort of thing."

Never one to pick up on the subtleties, Kibi asks, "She enjoys kicking people's asses?"

Forgetting for the moment the offer of real rooms, Ernie instinctively asks Mercury if there's a place on the grounds they can set up tents. "Don't you want rooms?" replies the centaur.

"Ernie usually sets up two of them, but you'll have to excuse him," says Dranko. And then, before anyone can stop him, he adds: "He's two tents."

"Ah, a funny one, aren't you," says Gloriana drily.

"Well, he likes to think so," says Kibi.

"Are you a bard, sir?" Gloriana asks Dranko.

"Oh, yes," says Kibi, before Dranko can answer. "He's barred from lots of places!"

Everyone but Dranko roars with laughter. Now *that's* funny!



A Startling Resemblance

When the laughter has died down a bit, Dranko looks around and gestures toward the Slice map. "It would be good if we could get the Green Valley people here," he muses.

"You'd just have to get them past the Storms..." begins Morningstar.

"...And the Orcish Hub..." adds Ernie.

"And the desert," finishes Grey Wolf.

"Maybe Green Valley connects up through a Way we never found, and they could get here some other way," says Ernie. He also points to the map, and they all consider it for a minute or two.

Gloriana clears her throat. "From the deranged babbling of someone who once came through the Chaos, we think it's possible that this area connects up to the Demonic Slices. But we don't know for certain."

"I still think we're destined for the Gate of No Return," says Aravis, shaking his head.

Dranko perks up. "Which would mean we could be total jerks here... since the punishment would just be to kick us where we were headed anyway!"

After a beat of silence, Flicker says, "Dranko, the jokes are funnier when they're at your expense."

"We should stay here long enough to find out if anyone has seen an Eye of Moirel," says Morningstar, studiously ignoring her betrothed.

"Do you know if it's possible to *teleport* across Slices?" Kibi asks.

"It's not," says Mercury. "Most magics of all kinds don't work across the Ways. Certainly transportations and divinations don't. The only exception I can think of is *summoning* spells. But Gloriana thinks those will only get you a creature that's in another Slice."

The talk turns to ways in which the Company can provide magical support to the Eye of the Storm. Ernie explains about the *iron heart* spell, and Dranko offers to make some magical weapons and armor. Part way through this discussion, as Dranko is

taking the opportunity to extol the virtues of Delioch, Gloriana rises suddenly and excuses herself. The Company look after her, puzzled. Mercury looks down at the table and frowns.

"I apologize for her attitude," he says, his voice somber. "The three of us were actually five when we arrived. We fought our way through the Demon Slices to get here ourselves, from a small Slice of our home world. It opened directly into a Slice of the very Abyss. Gloriana's husband was a priest, of the God Oronthon. Where we come from there is only one God, and Oronthon is that one. The fifth of our number was named Fortilon, a mighty warrior. Only Aristus saw him die. He was taken by the Cleaners." Aristus shudders again.

Knightfall1972: Hey, I know that god! Got some cross-pollinating of Story Hours here. Nice touch, Sagiro!

nemmerle: "Oronthon," huh? Makes me wonder if you have used or plan to use bits from any other Story Hours... It'd be a nice easter egg hunt, and the current circumstances of the campaign can allow for that kind of thing without being cheesy. Good work!

"What do the Cleaners look like?" asks Dranko, oblivious to the gnome's discomfort.

Mercury pauses, glances at his friend, then turns back to Dranko. "I gather there are tentacles involved."

"Riiight," says Dranko, thinking that's all he really wants to know.

"Ugh!" adds Ernie.

"Gloriana was not always as... curt... as she is now, but I don't hold it against her." The party understand.

While the Company don't need healing, what with all the clerics, Mercury tells them that there is a powerful priestess currently at the Inn who has been serving as the medic. Her name is **Medina**.

"Anyone here diseased? Anything she can't handle?" asks Dranko.

Mercury smiles. "There is very little she can't handle in that regard, but we'll consider your healers on call in an emergency. She doesn't talk much about her experiences, but I believe that she came through the Chaos... though sane, unlike most others."

A short, plump human woman comes bouncing out of the kitchen. "So, where's the new cook?" she asks, looking from party member to party member.

Ernie brightens and leaps to his feet. "Ernie Roundhill, at your service!"

"My name's **Spinnizia**. Come on, come on, come on!" She takes Ernie's hand and pretty much drags him into the kitchen, though it's not like he struggles.

"Whatcha got on?" asks the halfling, sniffing the air. "Beef, potatoes, garlic...and sage... and..." He screws up his face, thinking hard.

"One more, one more!" encourages Spinnizia.

"Chervil!" exclaims Ernie at last.

"Excellent!" Spinnizia beams. "I had one other cook who knew something, but he left with some others about a year ago."

"I don't know how long we'll be staying, but I'd love to help however I can!" Ernie's like a pig in good-tasting slop. The kitchen is beautiful and well stocked. He pokes his head out the door. "I'm staying!"

The kitchen is also filled with kids of various ages, chopping and stirring and running errands. Only later does it occur to Ernie that he has no idea how old any of them are, but they're all older than they look.

Since the moment the Company entered the Eye of the Storm, there's been one fellow over in a corner of the commons who's been watching them the whole time. That doesn't make him stand out much from the others, since as the "new guys" everyone's been taking an interest in them. The man is making no effort to hide the fact that he's staring at the Company, and at Kibi in particular. He's dressed entirely in black.

"Who's that?" Grey Wolf asks Mercury.

"Ah. **Omar**. He's what we like to call around here a 'mystery man.' Sometimes people come here but don't want to talk about who they are, what they've done, where they've come from. But I tell you what, he's a mean one with that rapier. He helped fend off the last incursion from the Demon Slices, two years ago. His skills are incredible. He stays, he does his work, and he keeps to himself. I've never had cause to complain."

Kibi gets right to it. He walks straight over to Omar's table, and in a good-natured sort of way remarks, "Hello. I noticed that you were staring at me. How do you do? I'm Kibilhathur Bimson. I take it you're Omar?"

In a strange and exotic accent, translated in the now expected time-delayed fashion, Omar stands and bows. "Yes. It's a pleasure." Omar looks wiry and well muscled, and even his smaller movements have a fluid grace to them.

"I hear you did very well defending the Inn against the demons," continues Kibi affably.

"Yes, thank you. I do my best. And where are you from?"

"Well, it's a long story, but we came through the Storm gate, and before that we were..."

"Have you been to the Slices of Demons?" Omar interrupts.

"No."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Well, you think we'd have noticed. We've fought some big monsters, but I don't think they were demons."

"So, you have not been to the Demon Slices, you say." Omar narrows his eyes a bit.

"Why, have you seen me there?" asks Kibi, chuckling.

"Yes and no."

Thinking he's talking about the multiple-versions-of-people theory that came up when Kay vanished, Kibi asks Omar if he's seen her, and starts describing Kay. Omar soon interrupts the dwarf again. "No, that's not what I mean."

Kibi is a bit taken aback, but Omar's voice still sounds friendly, and he's still smiling. "You were talking for a long time with Mercury, and Gloriana, and Aristus. They must be very curious about you," Omar says, sitting back down.

"That's because we came through the Storm Gate," says Kibi. "I understand not many people do."

"You have plans to stay or go? Do you know where you're going to go?"

"No," says Kibi truthfully.

"Ah."

"You ask a lot of questions!"

"It's because I am curious. You, in particular, make me curious."

"Why is that?" asks Kibi.

"I don't trust you yet enough to tell you. But there is definitely something about you that's interesting. Tell me a bit more then about yourself and then maybe I share with you, eh?"

"Well, I'm a dwarf," begins Kibi.

"Yes, yes, I see that, but..."

"And here's my familiar!"

"Yes... the pile of rocks."

"Scree's not just a pile of rocks. He's my friend!" Scree forms up loyally around Kibi's feet.

"Ah, it's good to have friends, yes?" The others by this time have sauntered over to listen; Omar has noticed but seems unconcerned.

"Maybe you'd like to tell us why you think Kibi's been to the Demon Slices," says Dranko.

Omar looks the lot of them over. "Mercury seems to trust you. Aristus trusts you. I share with you, then. First, I came from the Demon Slices."

"From beyond them, you mean?" asks Dranko.

"Yes, of course. I was not in one, when my world was removed and brought here, but to get here I fought my way through them. I do not wish to discuss the details, but... I took some items from a demon. They carry around things they have taken

from others. I have seen terrible things..." He trails off for a second, but then rummages around in his pouch for a moment. "In the belongings of the demon, I found this."

He reaches into his pouch and puts something into Kibi's hand. It is small but heavy, a stone statuette five inches high. Kibi looks at it and his eyes widen, as do the eyes of the rest of the Company.

Kibi is looking at a perfect likeness, carved in stone, of himself.

Grey Wolf is the first to speak: "Oh my god!" This is soon followed by a few seconds of general babbling, during which Kibi just stares at the figurine. He notes that as part of the statue, around the base, there's a pile of rocks like Scree.

"How long have you had that, sir?" Dranko asks.

Having heard the excited babble, Ernie sticks his head out of the kitchen. "What just happened?"

"I've just been given a statue of myself and Scree," says Kibi.

"I found that about... two and a half years ago, I would guess," says Omar, answering Dranko's question.

"We've only been here about two weeks," says Kibi.

"So tell me then," says Omar slyly, "why would a demon be carrying around a figurine of you?"

"I sure would like to know that!" exclaims Kibi. "Did you find any other statues, of me, or anyone else?" Omar shakes his head.

Aravis speculates that perhaps this has to do with Kibi's earlier summoning into another world, but Kibi claims not to have seen any demons there. Morningstar points out that the Company have been involved in an unusual number of prophecies, all things considered. "Yes, but how would they know what I look like?" asks Kibi.

"Perhaps there is someone out there..." – Omar waves – "...you should ask?"

"Hey, Aristus!" shouts Kibi. "Look what I was just given. Do you know anything about me? You said I looked familiar before..." But it's not ringing any more bells for the gnome, and though there's lots of general speculation about Kibi's statue, the conversation soon turns to other things. Delilah brings by another tray of drinks and winks at Aravis, who blushes.

It turns out there are about a hundred people around the Inn at the moment, most of whom stay in rooms, but some of whom prefer to camp outside. Despite the agreements Mercury, Aristus and Gloriana have with the Storms and the Formians, they prefer to keep good defenders around, particularly with the ever-present threat of demons. Dranko asks why iron grilles aren't put up to block some of the Ways.

"I wouldn't want to find out the hard way that the Cleaners consider that an obstruction," says Mercury. "We err on the side of caution. Also, we get many folk who are fleeing from the Demon Slices. I would not want to keep them out."

Ernie goes back to the kitchen and while discussing local produce learns that the weather doesn't change much. There's good farming, and frost only a couple of days out of the year. The peaches are especially good this time of year.

Dranko and Morningstar go off to find Medina and talk with her. The wizards head upstairs to find the wizard Chiswick. Ernie stays in the kitchen, to the overwhelming joy of Spinnizia, who can't stop talking about cooking now that she has someone to talk about it with. Hours later, they're happily making brandy peach pies.

Fimmtiu: Is that a euphemism?

Fade: It's Ernie. Probably not.

Len: But I bet that not all of the brandy made it into the pies!



Chiswick and Medina

Warning! This update is all talk and no action. Furthermore, it's not even plot-advancing talk. It's just some fun banter, with one or two interesting bits. If you're reading this Story Hour episode hoping for some juicy plot, you'll have to wait for the next write-up. Sorry!

Aravis, Grey Wolf and Kibi stand in the hallway outside room number twenty-three. Aravis knocks three times.

"Eh? What's that? Hello? Hello?" It's the creaky voice of an old man.

“Chiswick?” calls Kibi.

“That’s me! Yes, come in, come in!”

The three wizards enter a small, cluttered room. Shelves on the walls are stacked with papers, bottles and quills. The bed is rumpled and clothes spill out of a tiny closet. A small man is sitting at a cramped desk, drawing.

“How do you do,” says Kibi, bowing as the man cranes his neck to look at them. “We’re travelers just arrived here. We’re mages.”

“Mazes? What?”

“Mages!”

“Oh, mages! Sorry! It’s just that my mind was on...” He holds up his drawing and shows it to them. It’s a maze, a swirling complex design with a clearly marked ‘in’ and ‘out.’ “What do you think?” he asks, beaming. “Keeps the brain sharp!”

Kibi gets right to the point, as usual. “We have some spells we’ve written down in our books in our travels, and we’d be interested in sharing or swapping. And we hear you might have some components and ink for sale, which we’d like to buy.”

“Mmmm,” says Chiswick, thinking. “I’ve got some of that. Ink. Hmm. Ink ink ink ink ink ink. Hmm.” He starts poking around in some of the piles of clutter, doesn’t find any ink, reaches for a large trunk on the floor, then stops. He looks at the three other wizards. “So, how powerful are you? And you, and you?”

They’re all a bit taken aback at the question. Kibi answers first. “Well, I can cast *teleport*,” says the dwarf.

“Ooooooh, fairly well along then,” smiles Chiswick, nodding. “And you, and you?”

“I can’t *teleport* yet, but I can cast *acid orb*,” says Grey Wolf.

“Do you know of a spell called *true seeing*?” asks Aravis.

Chiswick nods again, and answers, “Of course! You cast that on your own, with those weird peepers?”

“No, I still need to cast it the normal way,” answers Aravis.

“Hmm,” says Chiswick, staring intently at Aravis’s eyes. “Quite a magic item you’ve got there... or else that’s one heck of an illusion.”

“It’s no illusion,” Aravis assures him.

“It’s kind of a maze in his head,” says Grey Wolf.

“A maze in your head!” exclaims Chiswick. “Wonderful! So, one eye’s the ‘in’ and one eye’s the ‘out’?”

“If only it were that easy,” Grey Wolf sighs.

“Mind if I look at it?” asks Chiswick.

Aravis nods cautiously, not sure what the old wizard means. Chiswick steps over to his trunk, puts his hand on the lid, concentrates, and opens it up. After some rummaging about inside he produces a shiny glass monocle and holds it up to his eye. He peers at Aravis. “Hmmmm. Mmmmm! Hm! Hmmmhmeeeeeee. Ah!”

“What do you see?” asks Aravis, curious.

“Layers upon layers. You’ve got an entire multiverse in there! Probably dangerous to go visit. Say, can you access the Slices with that thing?”

“No,” admits Aravis. “I injured myself while using it to seal a rift between our world and another, and I haven’t been able to access it since.”

“Ah, well. That’s life. What else can I do for you?”

“Can we give you money for inks or spells?” asks Grey Wolf.

“Money? What would I possibly do with money?”

“Er... well, what of value *could* we give you?” asks Aravis.

"Oh, you know," says Chiswick. "Knowledge. Secrets. Spells. Information. The usual stock-in-trade. Your Maze, for instance. You could tell me about that! Let me get my pen!"

So Aravis does. He shares with the old wizard everything he knows about the Crosser's Maze and how it works, only holding back details about the previous Keepers who still live inside, wanting to preserve their privacy. Chiswick wields a mean quill for such an old guy, and soon has filled up many sheets of parchment with notes. "Where do you think I could get another one?" Chiswick asks abruptly.

"I think mine is the only one," says Aravis.

Chiswick lets out a big sigh. "Well, I'll never have time to make my own. Don't have the proper materials here. And the saddest part is, once this whole thing with the Slices is solved and I go back to my home plane, I'll probably die of old age in about five years."

"How old are you?" asks Grey Wolf.

"I'm ninety-one," says Chiswick with a grin. "This time-standing-still business happened just in time!"

He turns to Kibi. "So, what do you know? Any spells? Good books? Scrolls? Tomes?"

Kibi hands over his spellbooks for Chiswick to look through. "Hm. Mmmmm. Hm. You have a funny accent. Your spellbook, I mean. Your scripting lines. Your notation."

"It's because I'm a dwarf," says Kibi.

"Well, there's nothing here I haven't seen before except *coldfire*, and that's of no particular use to me. What about you?" He swivels his head to look at Grey Wolf.

"It's mostly the same as his," Grey Wolf says, handing over his books. "We share a lot."

"Your book's more normal," says Chiswick, flipping through the pages. "I like the way you write. You write like a warrior. I'll bet you're a swordsman. It's the notation. The way you use terms. Nothing new, though." He tosses Grey Wolf's books back. Aravis hands his own books over without even being asked.

"Hm. Ah." Chiswick points to a page near the middle. "I'll bet this is where you got that Maze thing in your head. Your whole way of writing changes, did you notice?"

"He's very good," mutters Aravis to the others.

"Still, nothing I haven't seen before. Such is life. Got any other interesting items? Magical gizmos?"

"I was just given this," says Kibi, showing Chiswick the statuette of himself.

"Looks like you," says Chiswick.

"Yes, but I'd never seen it before!"

"It's not magic. Who gave it to you?"

"Omar."

"Omar. Omar. Sounds familiar. Do I know him?"

"He's a silent type, downstairs," says Aravis.

"I don't bother much with the people downstairs, unless they come up and visit me. But I like it here." Chiswick pats the big trunk. Then, laughing, he adds, "Don't you get any ideas! You'd never get anything out of this trunk, even if you could open it. Which you can't."

"Not to worry," says Grey Wolf. "We won't try anything. I mean, if you're powerful enough to see what's in his head..."

"I couldn't see *everything*," says Chiswick. "I could only tell the *nature* of what's in his head. I suspect that if I could really see in there, I'd go stark raving mad! And let me tell you, if I went mad, I could kill a lot of people!"

"If you don't mind my asking, what's the most powerful spell you can cast?" Aravis asks Chiswick.

"Are you sure you're ready for that?" Chiswick puts his hand on the trunk, thinks for a moment, then opens it and pulls out a slender volume. "Now, if you open this, and your brain hurts a little bit, just close it," he warns.

Aravis opens it. His brain does hurt slightly, but he reads a bit just the same. Like all wizards Aravis understands that most arcane magic exists at ten different valences, typically referred to as ‘levels.’ And he knows right now that he’s looking at a spell past ninth level, with no idea of what it does. Divination, maybe?

“I see,” says Aravis, snapping the book closed.

“Really? How much do you see?”

“Enough that I doubt now we’d have anything of interest to you, beyond what we’ve told you already.”

“You know what the real pisser is?” asks Chiswick. He taps the title of the book with his finger. “*Chiswick’s Master Divinatory*. And you know what it tells me? Squat, in this stupid place!” He chuckles the book back in the trunk and closes it. “But when I get out of here... oh, the things I’m going to know! Anyhow, I have some other books that might have things more to your liking. You’ve shown me yours, so I show you mine, as they say.”

“Anything you can tell me about this?” asks Grey Wolf, drawing *Bostock* and showing it to the old man.

“An intelligent sword!” exclaims Chiswick, after only a second’s glance. “It has that look about it.”

“My friends all believe that it’s evil,” says Grey Wolf.

Chiswick takes out his glass again, and looks through it for a minute at the glowing blue sword. “I’d say about a 37% suppression breakdown. Well, keep at it, keep at it.”

“What happens when it gets broken down completely?” asks Kibi.

“Whatever’s in there will come out!” says Chiswick happily.

“It’s getting there,” says Grey Wolf. “It started out whispering to me, but now its voice is louder.”

“What’s the breakdown vector?” The three Company wizards stare blankly. “What do you do to make it talk louder?” tries Chiswick.

“Oh, I hit things with it,” says Grey Wolf. “Evil things. It wants to kill evil things.”

“Well, that’s promising. Probably.”

“When whatever it comes out, will it be good or evil?” asks Kibi.

“There’s no way to know until you let it out!”

Kibi abruptly changes the subject. “Do you know anything about wild magic?”

“No, but I’ll bet you do,” answers Chiswick. “Stands to reason. You being a dwarf and all.”

Kibi’s not sure what that has to do with anything, but says, “Where I come from, there’s only one other wizard who’s a dwarf, and he’s an Archmage.”

Chiswick rolls his eyes and goes on a mini-tirade. “Pah! Please. Archmage. Useless title. When someone tells you they’re an Archmage, what does that mean? Nothing! It means nothing! You could call yourself one, right now, and compared to someone who doesn’t do magic... how would they know? Bah!”

Kibi tries again. “Er... since I’ve been here, I’ve felt a strange energy coursing through me, and sometimes it makes my spells stronger. Do you know why that is?”

“Are you a wild mage?” asks Chiswick.

“I don’t know,” says Kibi. “I don’t know much about wild magic either.”

“You say you feel your magic augmented here? Fascinating! You’re the first wizard I’ve talked to who’s said that, and you’re the only dwarven wizard I’ve seen. And I’ve talked to plenty of wizards; they all come to see me, once they find out I’m here. Hmm... You feel it right now? Yes? Really? I don’t feel anything, and I’m much more powerful than you, and I’ve mastered most magical disciplines. But not wild magic. It’s dangerous!”

“Wild magic comes from the earth, you know. Most magic comes out of the air. It permeates space around us, and we manipulate it, focus it. But that’s residual. That’s the run-off. The source, it’s coming from down there.” He points downward.

“From the worlds we’re on. But wizards don’t tap into it directly. They couldn’t control it. That’s why they call it ‘wild magic.’ Right? The only people I’ve ever met who could control it were dwarves! Do you feel it in every Slice?”

"Yes, though it's weaker in some Slices and stronger in others. It was weakest in the Elemental plane of Water." Kibi's head is spinning from the explanation. If he's understanding correctly, Chiswick is saying that Earth Magic and Wild Magic are just two names for the same thing. Which means the Eyes of Moirel..."

"Aaaah," says Chiswick. "Well, that tells me a bit about the nature of the Slices, then. And that's worth something. Here." He tosses some spellbooks around to the wizards. "If you see something you like, let me know, and we'll work something out. You might not be able to glean things right away. My accent's eccentric."

The first thought the Company wizards have when they look at Chiswick's lower-level spellbooks is that they've been had, and that the books aren't spellbooks at all. The notation is crazy. Grey Wolf and Kibi can't make anything of it. Aravis realizes that while they *are* spells, it would take two weeks before he could even start copying them down.

"These are... very interesting," he says. "The problem is, you have a very different way of writing magic. It would take a long time for us to translate them."

"You in a rush? It's not like you're getting any older! Heh heh heh heh."

"Do you know about a place called the rotunda?" asks Kibi.

"Well, my family owned a mansion, back home, and it had a rotunda, full of little statues. The stupid part was, they were all porcelain. Which was stupid because my father also loved parakeets, and they were always flying about and knocking over the statues, and making a mess everywhere. It made my mother furious, but my father loved his parakeets, and refused to... uh... well, I doubt that's what you mean, is it?"

QR 80

According to Mercury, the cleric Medina has been at the Eye of the Storm for over six years, having long since decided to stay and be a healer and general spiritual presence at the inn. She worships a goddess of the heavens called Celian. Apparently she's built a contraption for watching the stars, up on the roof. At this time of night she's likely up there now.

Morningstar walks up the stairs with Snokas in tow, while Dranko goes outside and scales the wall for practice. He sees Medina across the roof, bent over a strange rectangular object. There is a man standing by her with a drawn sword.

"Knock, knock!" Dranko calls, waving. The man instinctively points his sword in the half-orc's direction.

Dranko adds, "As it turns out, if you want to actually attack someone who's way over here, you need a missile weapon. Hi! We're here to speak to Medina, if you don't mind."

In a low, drawling voice, the man answers, "Then why did you climb the wall?"

"I'm out of practice," explains Dranko, starting to walk over.

Morningstar has just emerged from a trapdoor onto the roof. The man adjusts his position slightly so he can see both of the newcomers. Medina doesn't stir. "Greetings," says Morningstar, bowing.

"Ah, hello," says the man. "Nice of you to enter the civilized way."

"This is Morningstar, Priestess of Ell, and I am Dranko, Priest of Delioch," says Dranko formally, as he walks to Morningstar to take her hand.

"You are two of the new group, then," says the man, relaxing. "Mercury has spoken well of you, I hear."

"We're both healers," says Dranko, "so we thought we'd introduce ourselves."

"Medina is in meditation with the skies. Can you wait another ten minutes?"

"Sure. Who are you?" asks Dranko.

"My name is **Fren**. I am Medina's bodyguard."

"This is Snokas, Morningstar's bodyguard." Snokas nods and grunts. For a moment everyone looks at Medina, still seemingly oblivious to the arrivals' presence. Up above them the clear sky is ablaze with stars.

"We came here from a world called Motan, and our kingdom is called Bilik. We traveled through the Chaos to get here, though I remember nothing of that journey. Medina brought me through in some kind of... slumber."

"I'm glad you made it safely," says Dranko. "Do you like it here?"

"I like it here," says Fren. "We've been here for six years, since we ventured out of the house. That was our whole Slice. Three-quarters of our house."

"Good thing you weren't in the outhouse!" exclaims Dranko.

"We often wonder what people back home, our neighbors, think has happened. Is there a great empty space where the Slice used to be? A wall? Or are the Slices merely copies, and back home everything is still the same?"

"And if it's been copied, there are other copies of us running around," says Dranko.

"Yes, I suppose so," agrees Fren. "But if my copy has my judgement, and Medina's copy has her wisdom, then I'm sure they're doing what's right."

"Not running up your bar bill then? I'll bet mine is!"

"How long were you in the house?" asks Morningstar.

"It was about three days, before we decided to venture out."

"Is Medina a very powerful priestess in your world?"

Fren nods. "Does she often look into little tubes sticking out of strange boxes?" asks Dranko, pointing at Medina.

"That 'tube' gives her an expanded look at the heavens!"

"Amazing," says Morningstar.

"Looks like she's looking at her feet," comments Dranko.

"There are mirrors in the box," explains Fren. "She sees closer. She sees what's beyond the stars, when she looks through that device. Perhaps she will let you look, though you may not see what she sees."

"What is beyond the stars?" asks Dranko. "I've heard the stars themselves are diamonds, glittering in the huge embroidered fabric of space."

Fren shakes his head. "No, no. Each star is a sun, like our sun!"

"Get out!" exclaims Dranko.

"No, it's true! You've discovered different Planes of existence, yes? We think each star is another Plane. You see that red one? That could be the Plane of Fire!"

Abruptly, Medina looks up from her telescope. She's human, very plain looking, and somewhere in her forties.

"I'd be honored if you'd let me look through your thingamajig," says Dranko by way of greeting.

Morningstar clears her throat. "Let's try that again. I am Morningstar, a priestess of the Goddess Ell."

"I am Medina Starwatcher, priestess of Celian."

"This is my fiancé..."

"I'm Dranko, priest of Delioch. It's an honor and a pleasure."

"Is Delioch a country?" asks Medina.

"No, he's the God of Healing. The White Hand. He salves the sick and heals the injured."

"And Ell is a Goddess of Night and Darkness," says Morningstar.

"Ah, then we have something in common!" says Medina brightly.

Medina shows them how to use the telescope and invites them to have a look. "Perhaps you can see what's beyond the stars," she offers.

Dranko can see the stars up close, and faintly glowing clouds beyond them. Perhaps that's what she means? It's a spectacular sight, and Dranko can hardly tear himself away. "Wow... wow," he says.

"Beyond all of that is Celian, who spins the world around us."

After Morningstar has also had a look, Medina folds up the telescope and sits down on the roof. "So, you are newly arrived? I'm sorry," she says.

"Don't be. We came here on purpose," says Morningstar.

"You subjected yourself to the Slices? Why?"

Morningstar looks up at the stars as she talks. "We're here looking for a magical artifact that our world is in great need of. And if we find it, it may also free those trapped in the Slices."

Dranko adds, "The people who created this place, this interlocking network of worlds... they used a powerful magic to turn back time and rebuild reality the way they wanted to. We came here because the source of magic that's powering all this can also restore our world to its proper time-stream. To reset the balance in favor of good, instead of evil."

"Good for you," says Medina, nodding.

"We've heard that you came here through the Chaos," says Morningstar.

"Not pleasant, I take it," says Dranko.

"No, it wasn't. Have you ever been?"

"Nope," answers Dranko. "Been to the Elemental plane of Water, though!"

"Not dissimilar," says Medina.

"And we came to the Inn through the Storms," says Morningstar.

"Hmm. It's been a while since I looked at the map," admits Medina. Then: "Oh! Aren't the Storms supposed to kill anyone who crosses their Slice?"

"We're special," says Dranko.

"We talked fast and moved faster," says Morningstar.

"I can tell you about the Chaos, if you're curious. Not for the weak of mind."

When Morningstar and Dranko look attentive, she continues. "You've been to the plane of Water, so you know something of how it works. You know about subjective gravity?"

"Figured it out myself!" says Dranko.

"Well, Limbo is like that. It has subjective gravity, and it has water. It also has earth, and fire, and air, and electricity, and slime, and ooze, and lava... there's nothing in creation it doesn't have."

"Slime and ooze, two different things?" says Dranko, smirking. Morningstar elbows him.

"None of it sounds pleasant," she says. "How do you move through it?"

"Oh, bits of earth, bits of air," says Medina. "It takes extreme concentration. You have to build yourself a way through, from one place to another. You imagine what you need, and hope it coalesces around you."

"It sounds like *Ava Dormo!*" says Morningstar. She explains the Dreaming to Medina.

"What lives in the Chaos? Anything?" asks Dranko.

Medina glowers as she answers. "The frog-men. The slaad."

"Slaad's a scarier name than frog-men," says Dranko.

"There is supposedly a monastery, somewhere in the Chaos, but I certainly didn't see it. I went through three portals on the way. There is something strangely localized about the Chaos Slices, similar to what goes on with the Demonic Slices, from what I gather. One area of Chaos led through a Way into another area of Chaos. There may be nexuses formed where powerful outer planar forces are at work, but I'm only guessing."

"For a long time in my life I was a famous scholar. It's one of the avenues we can take as we ascend through the priesthood of Celian. So I know some of these things. And it's a good thing. If I hadn't known what to do, we both would have perished in Limbo. But I did, so we didn't. We went through several Ways, fought off some of the... frog-men."

"The first thing you have to do when you arrive is make yourself some air, if you don't find yourself in some already. You want to be able to breathe. You must remember the gravity, or else you can fall out of the air and into something worse. I also find it easier to create some solid ground beneath my feet, with some air above it. You can travel that way, like building a road in front of a cart. As the cart travels, you continuously lay the cobblestones on which it will roll. Because you're no longer concentrating on what's passed, the road will vanish behind you."

"And you won't always succeed. You have to be prepared. Bits of other elements will come hurtling through, however well you're doing. We were struck once by a fireball... not like the spell, mind, but more literally. A mass of fire-stuff. That was the worst of it. I almost lost Fren, then. I had to keep him... emptied... to prevent him from going mad. He doesn't quite have the mental wherewithal that I do. He is... new. He could not effectively fight the frog-men. But I could."

"What are the frog-men vulnerable to?" asks Morningstar.

"I simply cast my spells quickly, furiously, and then fled. They are creatures of Chaos, so I'd expect lawful magics to have greater effect."

"We're looking for an item that's Chaos-magic-based. Well, wild-magic, I guess."

"Is there a difference?" asks Medina.

"I don't know."

"I suppose it's possible your item is in the Chaos. I understand that in the actual Plane of Limbo, there's a bit at the center, around which everything else revolves. A little piece of pure Chaos that constantly spawns the maelstrom around it. Perhaps that piece is in one of the Chaos Slices?"

"Isn't Limbo infinite? Then how can it have a center?" asks Dranko.

"It has a center and goes out forever from there in all directions. Thus, infinite."

Dranko looks puzzled. "Don't think about it too hard," says Medina, smiling. Snokas almost cracks wise about Dranko being a bit dim, but wisely holds his tongue.

"We need Aravis for this," mutters Dranko. Then, changing the subject, he says, "We were going to offer our healing services around here, but I hear you've got that covered."

"Well, I suppose so. My healing prayers aren't in much demand except when there have been invasions, and we haven't had one of those for over two years. Fortunately the demons get weaker the farther away from their own Slices they go."

"Are they actual demons? From Hell?" asks Dranko.

"Yes, though they are from the Abyss, not Hell. Devils come from Hell."

"Do demons have a particular look to them?" asks Morningstar.

"Their forms are many, and I don't know them all. But you tend to know when you've seen one. They're unlike anything else."

"Do you have any advice for us, for when we leave this place?" asks Dranko.

"That depends on what you're going to do."

"We may have to head out through the Gate of No Return," says Dranko.

"Or we may need to go through the demons," says Morningstar.

"What? Why?" asks Dranko, looking alarmed. "There could be 8 bajillion Demon Slices full of 8 bajillion demons!"

"Yeah, but one of them had Kibi's face in his pocket," says Morningstar with a nervous laugh.

Dranko briefly explains Omar's statuette to Medina, and then says, "To me that suggests they're saying 'If you see this dwarf, eat him whole!'"

"Or it suggests that one of the demons knows something," says Medina.

"Yeah, they know that they should eat him," says Dranko, still not much liking the thought of going to the Demon Slices.

"Well, I don't suggest you take the Way of No Return," says Medina.

“We’ve heard that before,” says Morningstar.

“Because we couldn’t come back here, right?” says Dranko.

“That’s one reason,” agrees Medina. “But there are others. The Eye of the Storm is a well defended safe haven, and it would be a pity to deny yourselves the option of falling back and regrouping here after you set out. But more to the point, it’s entirely possible that the Way of No Return goes somewhere where people simply die, instantly. There’s no way to know. It may go to various other Slices, or maybe it’s a one-way gate to an innocuous Slice. No one quite understands the full extent of the network of Slices. If it were finite, and you traveled long enough, you might eventually find your way back to something you recognize. But that has not happened to anyone, to my knowledge.”

“We appreciate your advice,” says Dranko.

At Morningstar’s request, Medina agrees to let the Company use her equipment, including lab stuff for making potions. Dranko, though, thinks of more about the telescope. “You know, you could look through windows with this thing. From hundreds of feet away!” Morningstar sighs.

“My telescope is for watching the heavens, not one’s neighbors,” says Medina, shaking her head. Then, to Morningstar, she says, “You’re engaged to him? Hidden depths, no doubt.”

Dranko grins, showing his tusks. “Am I a lucky man, or what?”

Jackylhunter: I love these interludes, like the calm before the storm. Chiswick is a great NPC – the first Epic character the mages have ever met?

carpedavid: Is the reference to spell “valences” another Sepulchrae reference, or is it more common than that?

Jackylhunter: I believe Sepulchrae mentioned that he borrowed the term from a Jack Vance novel (haven’t read any of his books personally) so maybe Sagiro borrowed the term as well. Regardless, it’s a very cool in-character way to refer to a game mechanic...

KidCthulhu: Two hundred geek points to the person who can name the *other* out-of-campaign deity, and where they’re from.

carpedavid: Celian, God of the Heavens, from PC’s campaign. The only reference I could find is that it was his power that was invoked when TomTom activates his *ring of shooting stars* in the battle against the necropede and the undead sniper.

Jackylhunter: Hmm, I was gonna say Mercury, Roman god of commerce. Am I wrong? Did I miss out on 200 geek points?? Dang...

QR 80

Center of Attention

While Aravis and Grey Wolf continue to talk shop with Chiswick, Kibi wanders out of the room and into the hallway. Even from the second floor, he can hear the chatter of dozens coming from the common room below. A small kobold-like creature approaches him from the direction of the stairs, and walks past him smiling and nodding before vanishing around a corner.

Something has been eating at Kibi since earlier in the day. He’s not sure if it’s anything, really, but he can’t get the idea out of his head that the gnome Aristus had given him a funny look, when he thought he recognized Kibi’s name. He tromps down the hallway and then down the stairs to the common room, but Aristus isn’t there. It’s crowded with a menagerie of folk of all kinds. He spots a particularly unusual fellow, nine feet tall with pale blue skin, sharing a drink with a table of humanoid types. Horny is there, roaring at a joke from someone at the bar. Mercury stands near the door chatting with an elven-looking woman.

“Hey Horny!” calls Kibi.

The minotaur breaks off his conversation and stomps over to him. “Yeah? Kibilhathur? Can I get you a drink?”

“I wouldn’t mind a drink,” answers the dwarf. “An ale would be good.”

“Coming up! Two ales!” he bellows at a passing serving man. Soon the drinks arrive, and Horny polishes up his large mug in a single gulp.

“I was looking for Aristus,” says Kibi.

“He was just here,” says Horny, looking around. “Looks like you missed him. Hey, Delilah! What room is Aristus staying in?”

“Twenty-seven, I think,” answers Delilah. “But he’s not there. He went down to the basement to work on that... thing.”

“There you go,” says Horny. “So, are you... oop... hold on... Hey! Stop that!” Horny breaks off his talk with Kibi and heads over to another table, where some patrons are starting to cause trouble.

Kibi heads to the basement door and goes down. It's a wide stairwell lit by magical lights, with a stout wooden door at the bottom. He knocks at the door. When no one answers, he knocks again, louder.

"Who is it?" comes a voice from beyond the door.

"Kibilhathur Bimson!"

"Oh, come in, come in. And close the door behind you!"

Kibi emerges into a large, brightly lit workshop. Tools and materials and blueprints are scattered everywhere. A large stack of wood scraps leans against the near wall. Several large barrels are in various states of being dismantled. Coils of rope hang on the walls, and there are numerous bent iron bars.

From a side room he hears the voice of Aristus calling, heard over a cacophony of clangs, taps, and ratcheting sounds. "In here!" shouts the gnome.

Kibi peers into the side room. A strange contraption is raised up on a short wooden scaffold, and Aristus' legs protrude from underneath it. The contraption itself looks like an enormous barrel with metal insect-like legs sticking out the sides. Whatever it is is obviously not finished; there are large gaps in the sides of the barrel, and bits of metal are everywhere. There's a bright light coming from beneath the barrel, which goes out as Kibi watches. Aristus emerges a few seconds later with his face and hands smeared with something like grease.

"Is this a magic item?" asks Kibi, intrigued.

"It will be when I'm done," says Aristus, smiling and wiping his brow with a dirty cloth.

The gnome looks at Kibi, then walks to the main workshop room and looks around. "You by yourself?" he asks. "Good. Good good good."

Kibi raises his eyebrows. Aristus goes into another side room and comes back holding a large, folded up letter. "I promised that I would only bring this up to you personally," says Aristus, fixing Kibi with a keen stare. "I don't know what it means, but I *had* heard your name before. About four years ago, a woman arrived here from the Chaos. Her name was **Lollys**, and she delivered this to me. She gave me an instruction. 'Some day you will meet a dwarf named Kibilhathur Bimson,' she said. 'Give this to him, and no one else. And do it in private.'

"Lollys was a sorceress, we think, and not a nice person. I'm not sure I would trust her, or trust what she gave me. Worse, about six months after she arrived we caught her trying to read minds in the Inn. She was expelled through the Way of No Return. But as I said, she gave me this to give to you. She never said anything else about it, or about her experiences in Chaos, for that matter."

Aristus hands Kibi the letter, brown paper folded over and wrapped in string. There are some small dark stains – blood, maybe? – on the outside. "Sorry to be so secretive about it," says Aristus. "But a promise is a promise, even to someone I don't like."

"I wonder if I should cast *identify* on it before I open it," muses Kibi.

"Good idea."

Kibi turns the letter over in his hands. It feels like there's some small object inside the paper.

"Hey, while you're here, can you do me a favor?" asks Aristus.

"Sure!"

"OK. I'm going to ask you some questions. Just tell me the answers." The gnome slides himself back under the barrel-like contraption. Kibi hears some strange clanking sounds, and then the right front 'leg' of the machine starts to shake.

"Is the left front leg wiggling?" calls Aristus.

"Nope, just the right leg."

"Really? Strange. Hmm. Hold on." *Clank. Tink, tink. Ow!*"

"Now both front legs are wiggling!" says Kibi.

"No, no!" says Aristus. "That shouldn't be happening. Grab the left leg! Stop it from wiggling!"

Kibi grabs the metal leg, and both legs stop moving. Kibi hears some ratchet-like sounds coming from under the device.

“Cursed machine!” complains Aristus. “I’ve been working on it for two years, and it still... ah, there. Check the middle set of legs now. They should both be wiggling a little bit.”

“Yeah, they are,” says Kibi.

“Good, good. OK. Now, have they stopped?”

“Yup.”

“Well, at least something works. This thing had better stop when you want it to stop!”

“What’s it going to do when you’re all done?” asks Kibi.

“Oh, what *won’t* it do? A transport anywhere, for use in any environment, safely. A fighting machine in a pinch. And you’ll be able to survive in it for days, if necessary. Look inside, near the top.”

Kibi sticks his head into the barrel’s interior, and sees a large bladder stuck near the ceiling of the barrel’s interior. There’s a tube sticking it out of it. “You could fill that with beer!” says Kibi, understanding.

“I was thinking water, but yeah, beer would do.”

“What did this Lollys person look like?” asks Kibi, looking down again at the letter.

“Short. Short cropped blonde hair. Often wore green robes, I recall.”

Suddenly the whole barrel starts to shudder. A metal panel becomes dislodged from the side and clatters to the floor. “Damn it!” cries Aristus. He slides himself out from beneath the machine and stands up.

“When it’s done, I’m going to call it the *apparatus of Aristus*.”



Kibi tucks the letter inside his shirt and goes back upstairs. Ernie and Spinnizia are lounging by the fireplace closest to the kitchen. “Thank you, Yondalla,” murmurs Ernie to himself. “It’s really not so bad here.”

“I hope you can stay,” says Spinnizia, sipping from a wineglass.

“I don’t think I can,” says Ernie, his grin fading. “Back on my world, my parents don’t even exist anymore, and that stinks! We’ve got to fix things. But we’ll stay as long as we can. And if we’re successful, maybe we’ll come back and visit someday.”

Eventually Morningstar goes back to her room, after hours of shop-talk with Medina. There are plenty of rooms, enough that each member of the Company gets their own. (The Inn has had as many as two hundred people staying there at once, though there are only about half that number now.) Kibi goes around and knocks on doors, getting everyone to meet him in his own room. Soon they are all crowded in, sitting on the bed and the floor.

“I was just given something,” he announces. “It was given to Aristus, to give to a dwarf named ‘Kibilhathur Bimson,’ by a human woman who came from the Chaos, and who wasn’t very nice, and got kicked through the Gate of No Return because she was going around reading minds.”

That takes a moment to digest, but Ernie’s first words are: “Black Circle.”

“She was wearing green robes, according to Aristus. Anyway, here’s the package. I do kind of want to know what’s in it.”

Grey Wolf casts *detect magic*, and yes, something inside the package is magical. He then hands it to Flicker, who checks it for traps and finds none. They wait fifteen minutes while Ernie prepares an *augury*, but when he asks about the outcome of opening the letter, he gets no response.

Kibi uses *mage hand* to open the wrapping. A folded up piece of paper falls out of the package, and a small metal disk falls out of the paper. It’s the disk that’s magic – moderate enchantment and transmutation. It’s made of a dark metal, with three wavy lines engraved upon it. No one recognizes the design. The paper is not magical, though the writing is in a strange language. Kibi casts *comprehend languages* and reads the letter silently to himself, while the others look on anxiously. When he’s done, he picks up the disk and stares at it for a moment. One Certain Step detects no evil coming from it.

“It’s a stabilizer,” Kibi says, and then he reads the letter aloud to the others.

Kibilhathur Bimson,

You are trapped like the rest of us, but you are the key that will unlock our prison. In our meditations and prayers we have determined the way in which you can be our salvation. Come through the Chaos to our monastery and we will teach you what you must do. Beware the journey, which is perilous. Our chaos is not your chaos. Its nature and its denizens will try to consume you just as anyone else, particularly the Slaadi. Avoid them or flee from them if possible. Should you come to harm, it may be that our captor will enslave all of creation in this anathema.

With this letter is a Stabilizer. It will help you navigate Chaos, as you concentrate on the air and earth you will need to travel.

Please come quickly, so we might undo what has been done to us.

Gaz Mur

Abbot of Monk's Rest

After a few seconds of silence, Flicker is the first to speak. "Far be it for me to say," says Flicker, "*but could that scream 'TRAP' any more clearly?*"

"We have a plan for that," Ernie points out. "Spring the trap and fight our way out."

QR 80

The next day the Company make some long-term plans. Their intent is to stay at the Eye of the Storm for three months or so, during which time they will train, scribe some spells, and craft a large number of magic items. They work out a schedule with Mercury to earn their keep – mostly taking shifts guarding some of the Ways into the Slice, but also in training others in fighting techniques and making some magic items for the defense of the Inn. Ernie will be spending much of his time in the kitchen with Spinnizia, and Kibi likewise alongside **Gnard**, a barrel-chested man in charge of the distillery.

The Eye of the Storm and its environs are like a big commune, with people coming and going at a slow but steady rate. A week after they arrive, a group of nine humanoids (humans and half-elves, mostly) is escorted in from the Formian territory. Two weeks later, a dozen young would-be adventurers gather in the common room, ready to head out into the Demon Slices. It seems that they had all come from the same Slice, and had left behind a number of their people to explore. They had made their way through the Demon Slices already, and had found the Inn a couple of months before the Company had shown up.

Dranko notices them conferring around a few pushed-together tables and walks over to listen. Eventually he finds an opening to ask about the Demon Slices, but the explanation offered is poor. "Well, um," says a young man who looks to be the leader, "it's pretty bad. There are rivers full of foul stuff, and, and demons, of course. And the Slices all differ. Inhospitable, but different."

"Rivers of foul stuff?" says Dranko. "What does that mean?"

"Er, you know," says the kid. "Hot blood in one, acid we think in another."

"There was one river with molten salt," chimes in one of the others.

"Was the blood river in the place with all the wind?" asks a third.

"No, the windy place was the one with the craters."

"Are you sure?"

Soon the bunch of them are arguing. One of them pulls out an untidy map and slaps it on the table, but it doesn't quell any of the arguments. A lad who looks about sixteen, sitting closest to Dranko, leans over and whispers to the half-orc. "Our map's not so good, 'cause there's a bunch of clusters of Ways, sometimes five or six in one place. We ran through a bunch of 'em while demons were chasing us – little demons with long rubbery arms – and no one can agree on what the map looks like."

Dranko gathers from the others that the Demon Slices aren't exactly teeming with demons, but that there are occasional roving packs of them. If you're smart and keep a good lookout, you can hide from them most of the time. The one who was whispering to Dranko confides that, in his opinion, they were crazy lucky to have reached the Eye of the Storm without being killed, and that if they try to find their way back to their home Slice, they'll never survive. Dranko gives the lad an encouraging smile before returning to the Company's table and muttering in a low voice, "They're doomed."

QR 80

Chiswick turns out to be a wonderful source of magical supplies. His trunk is seemingly full of useful items, and appears to have different stuff in it each time. When Dranko casually asks about it, Chiswick assures him that he couldn't open it. "And you might get hurt if you try."

The Company also, eventually, convince Chiswick to accept money as payment. Dranko finds himself up in the old wizard's room one night, seeking alchemical supplies required for augmenting the magic of his whip. Dranko hands over some small gems as payment, which Chiswick grudgingly accepts. "Someday we might escape from this, and before I die, I guess I could find something to spend it on," says the wizard.

"You're welcome to come adventuring with us when we try to solve it," says Dranko.

"Ah, my adventuring days are long over," says Chiswick with a sigh. "I just like to read, think, scribble. I'm too old, too tired, too... much. No more adventuring for me."

Dranko looks down at his whip, and a thought comes to him. "Say, do you know what it takes to make a magic item intelligent? Where does the intelligence come from?"

"Oh, a bunch of different ways," answers Chiswick. "If you were so inclined, you could suck it out of another living thing. Or it can come from the cosmos itself; that's the most common, since the other ways tend to be... unsavory. That's how I'd do it. Also, there are certain materials that have an innate sub-intelligence in them already, and the process of enchanting them brings that out. Those materials are very expensive, rare, and hard to come by, but it's something you could try."

"What would you use for a whip?" asks Dranko.

"A whip? Never made one of those before. What's it made of? Leather?"

"Yeah. So maybe I should start with a really smart cow?"

"Hm. Interesting. Yes, that might be a good place to start. If it was *really* smart..." Chiswick starts thinking about smart cows, pulls a book from his trunk, and begins to read.

OR SO

A month goes by, and all is going well. The Company have settled into a comfortable routine, made some friends, and had a few inconclusive discussions on where they'll go when they're ready to leave. This particular day has been a long one for Kibi. He spent the morning and early afternoon working on a *headband of intellect*. After a break for lunch, he spent the rest of the day and most of the evening toiling in the brewery. It's hours after sunset that Kibi has dinner with Gnard before heading up to his room to sleep. His bed is comfortable and a cool breeze wafts through his window. With Scree piled up at the foot of the bed, the dwarf is soon slumbering.

He has a dream. In the dream, he's back in the distillery, working hard. Then his *headband of intellect* appears around his head, and with his mind thus expanded he realizes the way to make the perfect beer – beer so good, the gods themselves would come down to drink it if they could. But Scree is distraught about the beer, and Kibi doesn't understand it. Where did Scree come from, anyway? He wasn't in the brewery just now... "What's wrong?" asks Kibi in the dream. "I know you can't drink it, but it's going to be good beer!" But despite his assurances, Scree only becomes more and more agitated. Then, strangely, Scree says, *Kibi, wake up, wake up! Roll out of the way!*

Oh, it's a dream! Kibi wakes up groggily to find that someone is leaning over him. It's a man dressed all in black, with black bandages wrapped around his head and face, leaving only a gap for his eyes. There's something amiss about him physically, Kibi thinks in the moment he wakes. And there's something else, something heavy. Ah! Scree is heavy on his chest, and it seems that the earth elemental familiar has just deflected the knife away from his heart. Knife? Ah, yes, the knife that's now buried into his side. There's a sudden hot burst of pain. Kibi screams.

thatdarncat: Eek!

Knightfall1972: Nice cliffhanger.

coyote6: Ooh, Black Circle ninjas!

Ankalagon: Well, those last few paragraphs were arguments for having a familiar, weren't they!

Jackylhunter: Yep, especially Elemental ones that don't seem to need to sleep.

OR SO

The Importance of Being Kibi**Party in the Dwarf's Room!**

When one is in the adventuring business, one tends to develop an uncanny ability to go from slumberous to battle-ready at even the slightest nearby scream. Dranko hardly realizes he's awake before he finds himself on his feet and grabbing his *Heward's wide-mouth pouch* from his bedside. He listens long enough to discern that the cries are those of a dwarf, and even as he heads for the window (figuring even in his groggy head that the hallway is going to be choked with would-be rescuers), he starts shouting at the top of his lungs: "Wake up! Kibi's under attack!" He slips out the window and quickly shimmies along the outside wall of the Inn toward Kibi's window. He almost bumps into Flicker, who had the same idea and is moving from the other side, a dagger clenched in his teeth.

With Kibi and Dranko both raising a racket, everyone else is up and moving in a matter of seconds. Grey Wolf grabs his sword and shield from the floor even as Edgar snags the spell component bag and hops on his master's shoulder; they burst into the hallway. In his own room Aravis leaps to his feet, and much like Edgar, Pewter grabs the spell components and leaps onto Aravis's back. *Ready, boss!* thinks the cat. Aravis casts *teleport* directly into Kibi's room. He sees the black-clad assassin and Scree on top of Kibi. The assassin has one knee up on the bed, and is pulling a dagger out of the dwarf's body. "I wouldn't do that again," says Aravis angrily.

Morningstar just rolls out of bed and charges into the hallway, dressed only in her nightshirt. She doesn't bother to bring anything from her room; she sleeps with her holy symbol around her neck, and that's all she needs. Kibi's room is directly opposite her own, so she slams her body into the door, sending it flying open. She sees Aravis, and beyond him the dwarf, earth elemental and assassin. The floor around the bed is slick with blood. As she watches, the assassin raises his dagger again, but with Kibi now struggling and Scree still trying to protect his master, the strike goes wide and the blade plunges into the bed right next to Kibi's head.

Thinking that he needs as much help as possible, Kibi tries to *summon* another earth elemental to help protect him (and his Earth Mage powers allow him to perform such a summoning in less time than it would take others). But the struggling of Scree and the assassin on top of him knocks his hands awry as he casts, and the spell fizzles out.

Ernie, Snokas and Step come crashing out of their rooms into the hallway, all armed with grabbed weapons but otherwise just in nightclothes. (Ernie is wearing red footie pajamas with a flap in the back.) Step reacts the fastest and barges into Kibi's room on Morningstar's heels. After a second of assessing the situation, he shoulders past Morningstar and Aravis and leaps onto the assassin, wrapping his arms around the man and trying to wrestle him off the bed. Watching from outside on the wall, Dranko and Flicker suddenly see Step's arm flail against the half-open shutters. Kibi grimaces in pain as the extra weight stresses his wound.

Dranko wrenches the shutters the rest of the way open and gets a good view of the tussle. "Step, duck your head to the left!" he shouts, even as he instantly calls his mace from the *wide-mouth pouch*. Dranko dives halfway into the room and swings the mace, grunting in satisfaction at the impact with the back of the assassin's head. There's a meaty "thump," but not quite the gush of blood he was expecting, and the man in black doesn't even seem to notice.

Aravis decides that enough is enough, and pulls out the big gun – *power word, stun*. "**STOP!**" His allies in the room can feel the ripple of power sweep over them, but Aravis is appalled to see that the assassin isn't fazed in the slightest, and just continues to try wrestling free of Step's grasp.

The hallway outside is starting to fill up, not only with various members of the Company, but also with other guests. Omar is one of the first on the scene, dressed in a sleeping robe and clutching his rapier. He's babbling in a strange tongue – whatever translation effect he was using earlier isn't turned on. Grey Wolf, unable to squeeze into Kibi's room, is standing guard outside, looking for other assassins. When Omar looks at him expectantly, Grey Wolf uses hand gestures to indicate that there could be more hostiles about. Omar nods and moves to the other end of the hall, weaving through other sleepy but curious guests. Snokas goes with him. Ernie realizes he'll do no good either in the hallway or Kibi's room, so he activates the flying ability of his shield and flies back to his own room and out the window. In the light of the moon and some outside torchlight, he starts to scan the grounds for suspicious figures.

Morningstar squeezes toward the bed, intending to use her power of *protective sleep* on Kibi. But luck isn't with her; with her fingers less than an inch from Kibi's shoulder, the scrum atop the bed suddenly shifts position, and the power is dissipated instead into the assassin – again, with no effect. "Sorry, Kibi!" she blurts.

Flicker squeezes into the window next to Dranko and takes a stab with his dagger, but it proves too difficult to strike the assassin while avoiding Step, Kibi and Dranko. The blade goes wide, tears the mattress, and Flicker himself becomes overbalanced. He falls into the room, on top of the bed. Kibi hears the bed start to groan and splinter under the combined weight of five people plus Scree. He's starting to feel light-headed with blood loss. With a flailing grasp he wraps his fingers around his spell component pouch on a small bedside table, and casts *dimension door*. Having seen Morningstar in the room with him, he chooses her room as a destination, guessing it will be empty. The chaos around him vanishes, and in an instant he is lying on the wood floor of the room across the hall, Scree piled up next to him. He rolls onto his back, gasping in pain, and jams his fist into the wound to staunch the bleeding. With his other hand he reaches instinctively for a healing potion, which of course he doesn't have on him.

Back in his room, Step, the assassin, Dranko and Flicker all drop eight inches through the space left by Kibi. That's all for the bed – its legs crack and splay out and the frame breaks in two, dropping them all another three feet. Step continues to grapple the assassin, who can't escape the paladin's determined grip. In Kivian Common, Morningstar cries out, "Kibi just *dim doored* out! Someone find him!"

Dranko doesn't lose focus. He lands two more telling blows with his mace, the second of which knocks a large chunk out of the assassin's neck. He stares, morbidly fascinated, at the hole he made. It's flesh, and some blood, but there are no veins or arteries or muscle showing in the gaping wound.

Aravis makes himself useful by casting *mass haste*. He along with Step, Dranko, Flicker and Morningstar all get hasty. With muscles a-quiver, Morningstar lands three powerful blows with her morningstar. The first opens a gash in the assassin's side. The second shears away a chunk of flesh from its shoulder, which sticks on one of the weapon's spikes. The third smacks it in the head, tearing away the wrappings that cover its face. She recoils instinctively at the sight of a face with no nose, no mouth, no ears – no features at all except the eyes, and from this close view, she can see that the eyes look like they've just been jammed into a head-shaped lump of molded flesh.

Grey Wolf spots movement across the hall. "Found him!" he yells to the others. "Morningstar's room!"

Aristus Fuller finishes pushing his way through the crowd and reaches Grey Wolf in the hall. "What's going on?" he asks breathlessly, his voice translated on time delay into Charagan Common.

"My friend has been attacked!"

"By whom? By what?"

Kibi turns his head and sees Aristus and Grey Wolf. "Aristus! I was attacked by an assassin!" groans the dwarf. "Do you know anything about it?"

"No, of course not!" replies the gnome, affronted, but moving into the room and kneeling with Grey Wolf by Kibi's side.

"No, I didn't mean..." says Kibi.

"Are you going to be OK?" asks Grey Wolf.

"I could use some healing, but I'll live," says Kibi.

Aristus leaps to his feet. "There could be more attackers around. I'm going to go organize search parties." He dashes out into the hallway.

Back in Kibi's room the assassin still struggles in Step's iron grip. "You're not going *anywhere!*" shouts the paladin angrily, as the two roll around atop the bed's wreckage. Dranko calls for 'manacles and leg irons' from his *wide-mouth* pouch. The leg irons will be impossible with all the thrashing, but Step has the assassin's arms clamped in front of his body. With a deft maneuver, Dranko is able to manacle the assassin's wrists together. It turns out to be a moot point, as Aravis fires off a *greater dispelling* followed immediately by a single-target sonic *chain lightning*.

Wa-BOOM!

What's left of the bed shatters, the shutters are blown out of the window, and the assassin explodes. Flesh splatters everywhere, even out the open doorway into the hall. The manacles fall to the ground a second later, still with wrists bound inside them. In the silence that follows, Dranko picks up the manacles. "Look, I disarmed him!"

Morningstar heals Kibi's wounds, but the dwarf still looks weak and feverish. She guesses poison, so Grey Wolf runs to his room and fetches the undead-bane sword that casts *restoration* once per day. Soon Kibi is back to full health.

Morningstar also manages to shoo everyone out of the dwarf's blasted room. She steps gingerly across the threshold, trying not to step on the larger pieces of meat. The smell is horrific; the bits of the assassin are visibly decaying and the stench is nearly overpowering. She blankets the room with *thought captures*, but gets nothing from the assassin. The thoughts she picks up are mostly panicky ones from Kibi. It's now obvious to all that the attacker was some kind of necromantic construct – maybe a flesh golem?

Flicker examines the lock on Kibi's door and concludes that it was expertly picked. He searches for a few minutes in the fleshy muck and finds a set of thieves' tools, as well as a rolled up piece of leather with two small glass vials. The vials contain a dark slimy substance that matches what he finds on the bloody dagger. Yep. Poison, all right.

Aristus's search parties don't turn up any sign of other assassins. After an hour or two, most of the other guests have gone back to bed, the excitement seemingly over. But Aravis decides to cast one more spell before going back to sleep. He casts *vision*, hoping to learn something of the assassin.

ARAVIS'S PLAYER: "Is it considered to be 'at hand'?"

DM: "It's kind of a rotting hand, but yes."

He sits down next to the decaying wrist and hand still clamped inside Dranko's manacles. As he casts the spell, a small portion of his life force escapes through his fingertips and settles into the assassin's remnants. Everything around him grows white, and the vision begins.

The world fades back to near darkness. He's underground. All around him is a chittering, insect-like sound. Is it language? His sight adjusts to the dark. There are many strange creatures around him, ant-centaurs, the formians he has heard about. Their insectoid faces are inscrutable. They are looking down at strange books, and they are sculpting something.

The vision fades, and then refocuses on a different cavern in the dark. Another insect creature is reading from a cracked stone tablet, and chittering at a naked humanoid figure whose only features are human eyes jammed into the flesh-head.

The vision fades, but there is still more. Now Aravis sees a group of creatures, mostly humanoids of various types, and also a small intelligent lizard. There are maybe a dozen people altogether, some of whom he recognizes from the Inn. In his vision there's a space among them, which they all avoid but don't notice, as if there's someone invisible in their midst. There's a blue portal in front of this group, and a formian gestures to it, and the whole bunch moves through the portal.

Aravis's eyes snap open; he finds himself lying on the ground. He sits up, blinks, and recites every detail of his vision to the others while it's still fresh. The Company know that every few weeks, the formians round up people that have stumbled into their territory and send them through the Way that connects to the Inn's Slice. But why would the formians want to kill Kibi? How did they find out about him, if divinations don't cross the Ways, and the Way into the formian-controlled territory is always guarded? Grey Wolf, thinking about Kibi's off-again, on-again excursion (back when he had been *summoned*), speculates that maybe there are prophecies about Kibi in any number of worlds.

They talk with Aristus, Gloriana and Mercury. The formians have never given them any trouble before. Their relationship with the ant-creatures is not exactly congenial, but there have never been hostilities, and the folk expelled from their Slices have always reported good treatment. While some in the Company contemplate a foray into the formian Slices, Ernie points out that it could upset the relationship between the insects and the Inn, which in turn could put more innocent people in jeopardy.

Morningstar admits right away to their hosts that she used *thought captures* in Kibi's room after the attack, and Mercury is forgiving given the circumstances, though Gloriana shakes her head and says nothing. "I'm sorry that our Inn was not secure," says the centaur. "We've never had anything like this happen. Oh, our Slice has come under attack, but always through the Ways, overtly."

"Do formians ever stay here, at the Inn?" asks Morningstar.

"The last time that happened, it was over six years ago," says Mercury.

"It could be the Black Circle," says Morningstar, thinking. "If they knew Kibi was prophesied to ruin their plans, they may have placed safeguards here against him."



The next morning, Dranko decides to have a chat with one of the people who came into the Slice with the assassin. He finds a peasant woman who looks about thirty, with her two-year-old son. He starts to talk and the woman babbles back at him in a foreign tongue, so Dranko casts a pair of *comprehend language* spells to expedite discussion. “You understand me now?”

“Yes, yes!” says the woman.

“You came in with the others, from the place with the formians, right?” The woman nods.

“How many came in with your group?”

“When they sent us through? Twelve, I think. I did not make careful count.”

“How long did the journey take?”

“We passed through four of the portals. Maybe... a week?” She scrunches up her face, trying to remember.

“What do you think the chances were that you had an invisible assassin with you the entire time?” Dranko leans in as he asks the question. The two-year-old son in her arms doesn’t cry, and it occurs to Dranko that the kid could be much older than that.

“Invisible assassin? The assassin was invisible? I heard about what happened! But no, I didn’t see anything...er... invisible.”

“Did you notice anything else odd?” asks Dranko.

“Yes! There was a small talking lizard in the group. Very odd, very odd!”

“Small talking lizard. Who’d he belong to?”

“He didn’t belong to anyone. He was a person, like you or me. And he could talk. If I understand correctly, he decided to go through the Way of No Return.”

“Huh. Fascinating. You know anything about how to fight formians?”

“Fight them? Heavens, no! I make sweaters.” Dranko sighs.

Plane Sailing: I was starting to wonder whether Kibi’s vanishing off to other planes a few years ago might turn up here... It looks as if I’m not the only one that this might have occurred to.

I love the *apparatus of (not)Kwalish* making an appearance – a logical choice for attempting to navigate the Ways.

I wonder if the powerful aged wizard has anything in his little book of divinations that would help in understanding something about the assassin? I guess that anything further than the vision has been blocked by the Ways’ effect.

Duncan Haldane: Phew. Finally caught up again. How far is this last chapter from the in-game action? And what level are the characters now? I assume the time spent at the inn making things and so on is levelling?

Oh, and one more question: Sagiro, have you read Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman*? The inn reminds me of the one in the final section of *Sandman*, where travellers stranded across different times gather.

Sagiro: The characters are now between 12th and 14th level. Yes, time spent at the Inn was “training time” for them. Judging by my tapes, I’m about 8 runs behind right now, soon to become 9, since we run again tomorrow. And yes, Neil Gaiman’s *World’s Edge* was a direct inspiration for the Eye of the Storm, and the centaur physician therein was an inspiration for Mercury. Nice catch... I try to steal from the best!



Srapa

Aravis knocks on the door of Aristus Fuller’s basement laboratory. No one answers, but Aravis can hear sounds coming from inside, so he knocks again, louder. The noises stop. “Wait outside for a minute!” calls Aristus. “Who is it?”

“Aravis.”

“Hold on, hold on!” shouts the gnome.

“No problem, I’ll wait.”

From inside the lab comes a furious cacophony of strange noises: clanking, clattering, a loud hiss of escaping steam, an otherworldly hydraulic sound. Then, after a few seconds of silence, a new noise. It’s a steady *chunk-chunk-chunk*, getting louder, as though something large and heavy is walking toward the door.

“All right! I just need to turn this, and adjust these levers, and...” A metal claw comes smashing through the door, just missing Aravis’s head and sending wood splinters flying. It’s followed immediately by a high-pitched shriek of dismay. “Oops! Stand back!”

Aravis has already done so. He watches as the claw tries to retract, but it's stuck in the door. It shakes and wriggles, while Aristus curses and mutters from the other side. Suddenly the whole door is wrenched from its hinges, pulled free by a metal arm. Aravis peers through the now gaping doorway.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" Aristus is climbing out of his barrel-like machine and looking ruefully at the door. When he's all the way out, the machine tips up, overbalanced by the wooden door dangling from one extended arm.

"Guess I'll have to fix the door again," says Aristus ruefully. "In theory I should be able to turn the handle with either front claw and open the door the proper way. It's just these fiddly bits that are so... so darned... fiddly! What can I do for you?"

"I hear you have a *scrying* mirror," says Aravis, unfazed. He's seen stranger.

"Yeah. I'm borrowing Gloriana's. What you want to scry?"

"I had a vision about the assassin. It was sent by a group of formians, and I want to try to scry them."

"You mean, scry them in the Slice where they are now? Not gonna work."

"You've tried it?"

"Not me personally, but there have been wizards who have tried it. You can't *scry* across Slices. Sorry. You can still borrow the mirror if you want." Aravis figures it can't hurt to try, so he takes it and wrestles it up the stairs.

"Don't break it, or Gloriana will kill me!"



In the days and weeks following, the Company make numerous inquiries about the formians. Ernie asks around about their military capabilities, but none of the current residents of the Inn have ever fought a formian. There are stories about battles against them, and the moral of these stories is "don't try it," not because any individual formian is too dangerous, but because of their numbers, and their ability to fight in groups with perfect coordination. Kibi is more interested in the motives of his would-be assassins, but on this subject no one has even the slightest idea. Even those who occasionally interact with them consider them alien, their thoughts opaque, inscrutable. Mercury and Gloriana opine that perhaps the formians are enjoying the status quo within the Slices, and don't want to see them dispersed. And if Kibi has something to do with the Slices, as the monks from Chaos imply...

Kibi also asks about the talking lizard that came through with the assassin, but no one has much to say about him, except that he apparently told great stories when he was drunk.

Training continues apace. The Company craft magic items (including arrows and potions for the Inn's general supply), help train other Inn residents in fighting techniques, and take turns at guarding the Ways in. Ernie helps make food, and Kibi helps make drink, and in all the party are very popular. Kibi keeps an *alarm* cast on his door, but there are no more attempts on his life. Aravis tries to *scry* the formians, but as expected it doesn't work across Slice boundaries.

The Company also learn that the translation magic some people enjoy comes from specific items. They are small discs worn around the neck on chains – someone in Het Branoi must have made dozens or hundreds of them long ago, an attempt to solve the communication problems inherent in the system. Since then they've become a kind of currency in the Slices. Chiswick had a store of them he picked up somewhere, but he has since sold or given away his supply, and he has no extras.



Another month passes before the next person comes looking for Kibi. Half of the Company are in a bit of the basement that Aristus is letting the Company use as a workshop, an area similar to the party's setup in the Greenhouse. One of the guests working as a table-server pokes his head in. "Kibilhathur? You have a visitor."

Kibi stops what he's doing and looks up. "Are only its eyes showing?" the dwarf asks suspiciously.

"No. I mean yes... er, his whole face is showing, I mean."

"Does it speak?"

"Of course," answers the server, confused. "He asked for you by name. I don't know his name, though he's reptilian. A lizard-man, I think. He said: 'I'm here for Kibilhathur Bimson.' Should I tell him you're here? Tell him you're out?"

"I'd like to have my friends present when I talk to him. But tell him I'll come to meet him soon."

Step has been serving as Kibi's bodyguard since the assassination attempt, and he stands up quickly. Dranko offers to use magic to disguise himself as Kibi and meet the lizard man himself. "That way I'll take the first shot, if there is one," says Dranko.

"No, thanks," says Kibi. "You'll just do something embarrassing and he'll think it was me."

"I was just making the offer," grumbles Dranko.

"You could cast *shield other*, though, if you want to help."

A flurry of spellcasting follows. Dranko casts some protective spells. Morningstar gets a bunch of them on a *telepathic bond*. Grey Wolf makes himself invisible, and also casts *see invisibility* on himself. Dranko casts *detect magic* right before he goes upstairs. Before Kibi and Step come up, the rest of the Company take their places around the common room, ready to intervene if necessary. Dranko notes right away that nothing on the lizard-man is magical, which of course makes him suspicious.

The lizard-man seems normal enough. He's short, not much more than five feet tall. His skin is dark green scales, and he wears a long robe of a similar color. He sits at a table near the center of the commons, drinking from a tall mug. When he sees Kibi he stares immediately, watching the dwarf intently. Kibi walks over, Step at his side. "How do you do? You must be the visitor who asked for me."

"Ahhh... You are Kibilhathur Bimssss-on. A pleasure to meet you at lasssst." The lizard-man's accent is sibilant and drawn out, and a little disturbing.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too," says Kibi affably. "What's your name?"

"I am Sssssrapa," answers the lizard-man.

"How do you know me? I'm sure we've never met."

"I was ssssent to retrieve you."

"Retrieve me?" Kibi's eyebrows go up. Scree grinds two of his rocks together in agitation.

"Invite you to come back with me. To meet my masssss-ter, the Lord of the Rosessss..."

The name's not ringing any bells. "Why?" asks Kibi.

"Because my masssss-ter assssked me to retrieve you. Beyond the demonsssss, he said. And he gave me a figurine of you."

"Ah, may I see it?"

Srapa reaches into a pouch in his belt. Ernie gets tense and grips his sword hilt at the next table over, but the lizard-man does pull out a figurine, made of wood. Like Omar's, it looks just like Kibi, though it's in a slightly different pose. It also has small painted grey rubble at its feet. Kibi convinces Srapa to lend it to him. "Did your master make this for you, so you would know me?" asks Kibi.

"I don't think he made it himssself."

"Oh. Does he have more like it?"

"It's the only one I have sssseen."

"So you came through the Demon Slices just to find me? I'm sorry. That must have been a rough journey."

"Not as rough for me. I have waysssss to keep mysself hidden. It will be rougher for you."

Kibi frowns. "So, um, you're asking me to go through the Demon Slices, to meet some king I've never heard of, or met, for an unknown reason."

If Srapa detects the skepticism, it doesn't show. "Yesssss. He told me to ssssay, that he can tell you how we can all be free, but he needs you."

"Huh. I seem to be hearing that a lot these days," says Kibi under his breath.

"Really?" says Srapa, hearing him and suddenly sitting up straighter. "Who else wantsssss you?"

Kibi pauses, thinking, and decides not to answer the question. After a few silent seconds, he says, "I have a group of friends with whom I travel."

“Yes~~s~~ss. I was told to expect that. They may accompany you. The Lord of the Roses~~s~~ss looks forward to ~~s~~sseeing all of you, but you in particular.”

“How do we know if we can trust you? If we get permission from the owners here, could we cast truth spells on you, to make sure you’re being honest?”

“I do not know the rules~~s~~ss here, but such magics~~s~~ss would not work on me. Nor would I allow it. I must ~~s~~ssimply ask you to trus~~s~~sst me. I have no ill will toward you, but it is very important that I ~~s~~ssucceed in my mission.”

Srapa’s stare is unblinking, and a small forked tongue flickers in and out as he talks. Kibi shifts uncomfortably in his chair. “Can you tell me more about this Lord of the Roses?” he asks.

“Ahhh... I do not know much. He is our mas~~s~~sster. He is very powerful. We cannot ~~s~~ssee him. He is~~s~~ss as bright light when one looks~~s~~ss at him.”

How unhelpful. “Can I have a little while to think about it?” asks Kibi.

“Yes~~s~~ss, but not too long. I will as~~s~~ssk again tomorrow.”

Most of the Company are thinking the same thing at this point. Who is Srapa to give them a timetable? Is that some kind of a threat? “What would happen if I decide to say no?” Kibi asks.

“That would be unfortunate.” Now *that*’s a threat! “If you are content to live out the res~~s~~sst of your life s~~s~~sstuck in this prison...” continues Srapa.

“If you were to, for example, attack me,” Kibi interrupts, “I wouldn’t be able to do whatever it is you need me to...”

“I will not attack you!” says Srapa. “You are too important. I will have to convinc~~c~~cce you.”

Kibi sighs. “I’m amenable to reason. But I’ll need something more than just you asking me to take this all on faith.”

“You should discuss~~s~~ss it with your friends~~s~~ss. I do not wish to compel you, again~~s~~sst your will. I hope you will come with me because it’s the right thing to do. So that you will s~~s~~sspeak with the Lord of the Roses~~s~~ss. ”

Srapa looks as though he’s done with the conversation for now, but as usual Kibi can’t stop trying to wring out every drop of information he can. “Back there, where the Lord of the Roses is, is everyone like you? Reptilian?”

“No, no. There are all kinds~~s~~ss of people. Like here. Eventually people find their way to his cas~~s~~sstle, and he protects~~s~~ss them.”

“This castle,” says Kibi. “It’s on the ground, right? It’s not some kind of floating thing up in the clouds or anything?”

“There’s nothing on the outs~~s~~sside of it. It is its own S~~s~~sslice.”

“Does the Lord of the Roses protect people in other Slices, too?” asks Kibi.

“He protects~~s~~ss those who come to him. He does not leave the cas~~s~~sstle. But the people who find him, they are happy, because they find that they are s~~s~~ssafe.”

“Are they free to leave?”

“Yes~~s~~ss, of course. But they do not leave, because they s~~s~~ssee that he is wise, and good.”

Over the mind-link, Morningstar thinks, *He didn’t send an assassin. He started out talking instead of stabbing. That’s promising. He wants Kibi alive and not dead,* thinks Aravis. *That doesn’t mean he’s any better.*

“How did you know to find me here?” asks Kibi.

“The Lord of the Roses~~s~~ss told me you would be here.”

“Well, how did *he* know?”

“I don’t know. He knows many things~~s~~ss. ”



Later that night, the Company are crowded into Morningstar’s room, discussing their options. Only Kibi and One Certain Step aren’t there – they’re in Kibi’s room, where the dwarf is casting *legend lore* on the wooden statuette. Through mundane expertise and *know age* spells the party have concluded that the two statuettes were made by the same person a couple of hundred years

ago, but twenty-nine years apart. Srapa's wooden one is older, but Omar's is of higher quality, implying that the sculptor got better with age.

After half an hour of casting, Kibi's head snaps up and he speaks aloud the results of the spell:

CARVED BY A MADMAN WHO ONCE WAS KING. HE DID NOT UNDERSTAND THE EYE.

HE WANDERS NOW THE MAZE OF HIS OWN MAKING,

LITTERING HIS CREATION WITH THE IMAGE OF HIS SAVIOR.

IT IS ALL HE HAS LEFT.

A HOPE THAT HIS MIND KNOWS NOT, THOUGH IT IS BURNED THERE.

He and Step join the others, who have been talking among themselves about which of the three likely ways they might go when they finish training. They can go through Chaos to find the monks who sent the letter, or they can go with Srapa to meet the Lord of the Roses, or they can try their luck with the 'Gate of No Return.'

Kibi shares the results of his spell with the others. "So I guess that the guy who created this place is leaving little carvings of me," says Kibi in conclusion.

"Because you're the key to undoing this," says Grey Wolf.

"He's the canary," says Morningstar, referring to the original prophecy from the Eyes of Moirel.

"And his creation broke him," says Ernie.

There's a few minutes of meandering speculation, ranging from talk on old prophecies, to the nature and motives of the 'madman,' to guesses as to how he's scattering statuettes of Kibi. "Just when you thought this couldn't possibly get more complicated," sighs Grey Wolf during a lull.

"Now you understand the world's desire to kick us in the shins," says Ernie.

"I think my shins have been kicked too many times," says Grey Wolf. "I'm starting not to feel it."

"I *did* notice you haven't said 'We're doomed' in a long time," says Ernie.

"I still think we should go through the Gate of No Return," says Aravis.

"But it's the only place from where we haven't gotten a message saying 'Come here, Kibilhathur!'" says Ernie.

"Exactly!" answers Aravis.

"The problem with that is, if we're wrong, that sure leaves us out in the middle of nowhere," says Kibi. "And the monks did send me that nice letter, and a magic item, too."

"And I'd rather deal with Chaos than the Demon Slices," says Dranko. The Company break for dinner and some more information gathering, but it's fruitless. No one at the Inn has heard stories about a crazy guy spewing prophecy, or (except for Srapa) has heard of the Lord of the Roses.

Back upstairs later that evening, the debate continues. "I say 'first come, first served,'" says Dranko, continuing his push for Chaos.

"The woman from Chaos wasn't trustworthy," says Step, "but I don't trust the lizard-man either."

"At least we'd have a guide, though, if we go with Srapa," says Morningstar. "In the Chaos, we'd be on our own."

"Chaos scares me less than demons," says Dranko.

"Let me read that letter from Chaos again," says Morningstar. She scans it, and stops when she gets to a certain phrase.

"'Meditations and Prayers,' say the monks. Our spells to contact our gods don't work. But theirs do? Who are they praying to? They're getting in touch with *somebody*. This place was created by the Black Circle. So who's talking back?"

"And what are Slaadi?" asks Kibi.

"I think Slaadi are big frogs," says Aravis.

"How tough can a big frog be?" asks Dranko.

"How tough could a big turtle be?" says Morningstar.

"That's an awfully good point," says Dranko. "Anyhow, we don't have to decide now," says Dranko. "We should finish training. In the next two weeks, we may get three more offers!"

OR SO

It's the next morning. To test Srapa's failure to detect as magic, Kibi casts *magic mouth* on the statuette before giving it back to Srapa. Dranko casts *detect magic* just before walking in. The party approach Srapa in a group, which Kibi and Step step out from. The lizard-man is sitting at the same table as before, an implacable expression on his scaly face.

"Ah! Have you made your decision?" asks Srapa as the dwarf sits down.

"Kind of. We're in the middle of training, and we have two weeks left before we're ready to journey."

"But in two weeks you will come with me?"

"Well, we decided that since we have to wait here for two weeks, we don't have to decide just now."

Srapa pauses, thinking. At least, Kibi thinks he's thinking. "I will give you two weeks."

"Thank you. Oh, and here's your statue back." Srapa takes the statue, and to Dranko, the magic immediately disappears.

"Would you have any way of protecting us, if we cross the Demon Slices?" asks Kibi.

"I have magics, but I do not know the minds of demons. I hid from them. I have my ways." His forked tongue flicks in and out of his mouth. "Two weeks. I will not wait longer. The Lord of the Roses expressed a need for haste."

"How long has the Lord of the Roses been waiting?" asks Dranko.

"I don't know," admits Srapa.

"I bet it's been a very long time," says Dranko. "So two weeks, not a big deal. We've got other offers. Why should we go with you instead of one of the others?"

"Other offers? Explain!" For the first time, Srapa sounds upset.

"You want us to go with you. Other people want us to go with them," says Dranko.

"I would not trust their motives," says Srapa. Grey Wolf snorts.

"And why should we trust yours?" asks Kibi.

"Because the Lord of the Roses is good," says Srapa, either ignoring or unaware of his own circular logic.

"OK, that's great," says Dranko, "and that's what you say, but we don't know him, so we can't tell. Maybe he's good at eating people. We just don't know."

Srapa makes a strange noise. Laughter? Exasperation? "He does not eat people," he says.

"How many days did it take you to get here?" asks Dranko.

"I traveled for weeks, but I went slowly."

"Well, I was thinking that since we'll be here for a while, you could pop back there and bring him here in person."

"He does not leave his castle," says Srapa.

"How come?"

"I don't know. But it is proper that you come with me," says Srapa.

"Well, thanks for asking," says Dranko. "We'll let you know in a couple of weeks. But let me ask you one more thing. If we decide not to come with you, what are the consequences of that?"

"I don't know," says Srapa again.

"What would you guess?" prompts Dranko.

"I know that the Lord of the Roses would be disappointed if I came back without Kibilhathur Bimson."

"Would you decide to take him by force?" asks Dranko, leaning in.

"I would have to consider. But I do not wish to incur his, or your, enmity..."

"That would certainly be a side effect," mutters Grey Wolf under his breath.

"...so I would be inclined not to," Srapa finishes.



The next two weeks pass quickly. The Company finish up their training, put some final touches on magic items and scribed spells, and engage in yet more debate about where they'll go next. Many in the party are dubious about going to either the Chaos or through the Demon Slices with Srapa. Aravis and Ernie wonder aloud why, if Kibi is so darned important, the monks or this Lord of the Roses person don't come to *them*.

"It's the classic adventure," says Ernie. "With Kibi at the end of it. They should have to go on a long quest through terrible perils to reach their ultimate goal..." He gestures toward Kibi, and then adds, "...and perhaps learn a little something about themselves along the way."

This last utterance by Ernie caused the entire table to collapse into laughter for almost a full minute.

Kid Charlemagne: It had much the same effect here...

Kibi, though, just wants to go. "And if we just go *somewhere*, it will be harder for assassins to track us."

"Another reason to go through the Gate of No Return," says Aravis.

The night before Srapa's deadline, the Company hold a vote. Dranko votes to avoid demons if at all possible, and chooses the Chaos. One Certain Step has changed his mind, and now also prefers the Chaos. "I don't trust the lizard-man," he explains.

"I vote Chaos," says Ernie. "Like Kibi says, they sent us a very nice letter." Aravis and Grey Wolf, not trusting either place, both vote for the Gate of No Return.

Morningstar lets out a frustrated breath when it's her turn to vote. "It's a waste of time. If Kibi's so important, they'd have come here. I abstain."

Flicker is the only person who votes to go with Srapa. Snokas points at Kibi. "I think we should do what he wants to do. His life is more at stake than ours."

Morningstar looks at Snokas, nodding in approval. "I change my abstention to that," she says. "What Kibi decides, I'll vote." Which leaves the deciding vote in Kibi's hands.

"So, given that we don't know much about either, the Chaos monks at least promised me information; the Lord of the Roses just says that he needs me. So I vote Chaos." (Scree agrees, though he's worried that there may be parts of Chaos which don't have any Earth element.)

Aravis thinks they should just leave without telling Srapa they're going, but Ernie insists they should be polite and tell the lizard-man their decision. Everyone is worried about Srapa, and if they'll have to fight him when they decline his offer. Their inability to *detect magic* on him is troublesome. But with their decision made, they drift back to their own rooms one by one.

Flicker, who does much of his training at night, grabs his equipment and his shortsword and heads out into the hall after the others are asleep. Aristus is usually up late, and Flicker wants to borrow one of his tools, thinking to try it out as a lock-picking device. He moves down the hall toward the stairs to the commons, and almost bumps into a human woman coming the other way.

"You're Flicker, aren't you?" asks the woman in a quiet voice, and smiling shyly.

"That's me," says the halfling.

"I hear you have a good eye for valuables," says the woman, digging into a small pouch at her side.

"I might," says Flicker, grinning. "Want me to appraise something for you?"

"Yes, I would," says the woman. "It's a gem, a sapphire I found in a Slice near my home. I think it's valuable, but I'm not sure if it's a fake or not. If you can give me an accurate estimation, I'll let you have some of the profits if I can find a buyer."

"Let me take a look," says Flicker. The woman hands him the sapphire. He pulls out a magnifying lens and takes a good look.

The woman smiles appreciatively.



The next morning the party gather in Ernie's room for the ritual casting of preparatory spells. Part of the plan is to make Aravis magically look like Kibi, in case Srapa tries anything. But about halfway through their casting, they realize that Flicker is not with them. He's probably off training – he often comes home at mid-morning and sleeps until lunch. But Grey Wolf has a feeling in his gut (no, not *that* one).

"Why do I think our lizard friend has kidnapped Flicker?" he says. To put his mind at ease, Morningstar casts a *sending* to the halfling. There's no answer.

Dranko and Snokas go to his room, expecting to find that he's still sleeping, but the room is empty. Most of the stuff he takes out for training isn't there, and there's no sign of a struggle.

"Shit!" exclaims Morningstar when the half-orcs come back. He could be asleep somewhere else, or unconscious, or dead, or in another Slice – there are no good options.

"If he was kidnapped, lizard-guy would have to have left by one of the Ways out," says Dranko. "I'll check 'em out."

After Dranko gets put in a *telepathic bond* with Morningstar and Kibi, he and Snokas dash downstairs. To Dranko's great surprise, Srapa is sitting at his table, looking as calm as ever.

"Hey, you seen the little guy?" asks Dranko, approaching Srapa's table.

"Yes~~ssss~~," answers Srapa with a flick of the tongue.

"Where?" Dranko demands.

"I have him ~~ssss~~afe," says Srapa.

"Oh, you do, huh? You made the wrong decision, my friend."

"No," says Srapa earnestly. "Now that I have your friend, you will come with me to make sure he ~~ssss~~tays ~~ssss~~afe."

"Noooooo," says Dranko slowly. "Now that you have our friend, we're not coming with you." Because he can't resist, Dranko adds, "We were *going* to, but now..."

"You ~~assss~~ked what I would do if you were to ~~ssss~~ay no to me," says Srapa, still sitting. "I thought about it. I dec~~ccc~~ided to make sure that you wouldn't."

Jackylhunter: Sneaky lizard dude. Great update!

Caliber: I was hoping to see some formian action, but some soul-stealing lizards are just as good!



Chase

Dranko and Srapa just stare at each other for second. Dranko is sharing this conversation with some of the others over a *telepathic bond*. Most of the party are still upstairs (having just finished the morning application of buffing spells). Only Snokas is downstairs with him.

"You ~~ssss~~ee," says Srapa matter-of-factly, "I will now go into the Demon Slices. And you will follow, to make sure your friend is ~~ssss~~afe."

"No," repeats Dranko simply. "And now you're going to leave without Kibilhathur Bimson, because of what you just did. What kind of idiots do you think we are? That is *not* how civilized people do business. I'm ashamed of you."

"I am ~~ssss~~orry that you feel that way. You know where the Way is. I ex~~xxx~~pect that you will follow me." Srapa's voice is perfectly calm, his reptilian face still expressionless.

"You're wrong," growls Dranko. "You see, the person that you took is not as important as Master Bimson."

Srapa flicks his tongue. "I have watched your interactions~~ssss~~. The pers~~ssss~~on I have is very important, to all of you. You will not risk his ~~ssss~~afety, even for Kibilhathur Bim~~ssss~~on's ~~ssss~~ake. You will follow me. If you harm me, you will not be able to find him."

"That's possible," grumbles Dranko.

"Yes~~ssss~~. I believe I have found the easiest way to carry out the Lord of the Roses~~ssss~~' wishes~~ssss~~. I will ~~ssss~~ee you beyond the Way to the Demon S~~ssss~~lices."

Dranko nods subtly at Snokas, who takes the hint. In a flash both of Snokas's picks are in his hands, and he swings them hard at Srapa. Blood spills out of two holes in the lizard-man's robe. Srapa stumbles back out of his chair, casts a spell, and vanishes. Dranko stares helplessly at the empty chair, as most of the rest of the Company come crashing down the stairs.

"God damn it!" yells Dranko. He smashes his fists down on a table, then picks up Srapa's chair and flings it across the bar, shattering glass and chair both.

"Dranko!" Ernie shouts at him, as the other guests stare. "I know you're angry. I'm angry. But that doesn't mean you should smash up someone else's bar."

"Do we have some way of finding Flicker now?" asks Kibi. "Srapa's probably still on this Slice." As a result of their spell-casting, Kibi now looks like Aravis, and Aravis looks like Kibi, as a precautionary measure. Kibi has also cast *nondetection* on himself.

Dranko growls, "But Flicker's probably *not* on this Slice. Srapa probably already has him stashed in the next Slice. And our lizard friend has probably *teleported* next to the gate. I bet he's going through right now."

"Then let's go after him!" exhorts Aravis. And wasting no time, he does so. Over the past weeks, he and Kibi have both made a point of studying the ground right in front of every Way out of the Slice, just in case of this sort of emergency. He *teleports* with confidence, and finds himself a split second later standing beneath the heavy netting and hanging chimes before a glowing blue Way. Srapa is not in evidence, but the thirty or so guards who watch the Way are already talking excitedly on the other side of the moat. There's no time to listen; he steps through.

There are two seconds of cold blackness as he is pulled through the Way into the next Slice. Then there is light, a reddish light, as he steps out. He's standing on rough ground and there's a sulfurous smell in the air. Moreover, the place *feels* wrong, permeated as it is by evil and chaos. It's faint but unmistakable – the Abyss.

A few feet away stands Srapa. There is no sign of Flicker. Aravis is desperately hoping that Srapa doesn't *teleport* away again; his hope is that Srapa won't flee in a way that is impossible to follow.

Kibi, Morningstar and Step are still on the stairs. Kibi reaches out and does like Aravis, *teleporting* the three of them to the Way to the Demon Slices. Morningstar and Step charge through the Way and are soon standing next to Aravis (who looks like Kibi) and getting their bearings in this lifeless scrubland. Srapa hisses at them.

Ernie, with no way to *teleport*, activates his shield and flies out the door. "I'm coming, Flick!"

Srapa blinks at the disguised Aravis. "Ah, Kibilhathur Bims~~ssss~~on!" Aravis smiles inwardly. "I ~~s~~ee you have made the wise choice," says the lizard-man. "Are your friends~~ssss~~ coming?"

"No one is going anywhere," says Aravis.

"Ah, I ~~s~~ee. Either way, I will be on the other side of the next Way, with your friend. You will ~~s~~urvive; this S~~ssss~~lice is not dangerous~~ssss~~."



Horny comes stomping out of a storeroom and surveys the damage. Dranko tosses him a small bag of coins. "What happened here?" demands the minotaur.

"The lizard-man just kidnapped our friend and fled to the Demon Slices!" says Dranko angrily.

"Are you serious?" asks Horny, incredulous. "That f***er! Keep the money. It's just a table. And a chair. And some glasses. We'll get some guests to make new ones."

The rest of the Company regroup back at the Inn, and start talking about ways to track Srapa, and what (if any) immediate actions they should take.

During a lull in this discussion, there is the following small exchange:

DM: "So, what's your plan now?"

DRANKO'S PLAYER (Piratecat): "To kill you."

Into a brief silence, Morningstar unexpectedly says, "I don't think we should follow him."

Everyone turns to stare. "Then we abandon Flicker," says Aravis.

"Yes," says Morningstar. Her expression is grim.

"No!" says Ernie angrily. "That is unacceptable! Yondalla put him in my care. I'm not leaving him in the Demon Slices."

"And what will he do to Flicker if he figures out we're not following him?" asks Kibi.

"We should assume that he'll *kill* Flicker," says Aravis.

"We have a mission that's more important," says Morningstar. "I would hope that if I were the one who were captured, you wouldn't waste your time coming after me, but instead stayed focused on the major problem – finding the Eye of Moirel."

"But..." says Dranko.

"He's got us set up," says Morningstar. "We're going to get to the next Slice, and Flicker's not going to be there. We'll have to follow him. And if we keep following him, he'll lead us right to the Lord of the Roses, which we already decided wasn't where we wanted to go."

"Yup," says Dranko.

"Yup," says Kibi.

"Yup," says Grey Wolf.

Morningstar sighs. "I understand I'm the only one who feels that way, so if we're going after him, let's just go."

"Where is he, then?" asks Ernie, his face full of worry.

Aravis explains that Srapa pointed in the direction of the next Way, and that the lizard-man would be waiting on the other side. He puts his hand on the halfling's shoulder. "Flicker is safe, as long as Srapa thinks we're still following him."

Grey Wolf grimaces and grips *Bostock*'s hilt. "As long as we get to lop the lizard's head off, I don't care what else we do. Kill the lizard, get Flicker back."

Ernie glances nervously at One Certain Step. "How do you feel about... killing Srapa?" he asks.

The paladin frowns and thinks for a minute. "I feel we should pursue him," he says at last. "As for Flicker, I don't consider abandoning a friend and companion to be an option. But the lizard has not physically injured Flicker, as far as we know..."

"Then if he surrenders, we won't kill him," says Ernie.

"Acceptable," says Step.

Aravis clears his throat. "I have to point out that drastic force may be required to disable him, before he has a *chance* to surrender. He may not survive."

Step nods. "I said he has not *physically* attacked Flicker, but abduction is still a violation of his person. The giants did nothing to us before we attacked them. With Srapa, that's not the case. He has already invited our wrath, in a very direct way. If he dies in the rescue, so be it."

Ernie bristles. "We can't let him get away with it. If we do, everyone who wants Kibi will start grabbing party members, and we can't set that sort of precedent."

Grey Wolf glances at Step, but his mind is made up. "The lizard dies."



Before long, the entire Company have gone through the first Way and are standing in the first of the Demon Slices. The sky is still an angry red, and the atmosphere vibrates with evil and chaos. Step subconsciously clenches his fists. "Welcome to the Abyss," says Aravis.

They cannot *teleport* effectively, not knowing where it is they're going. They have only Srapa's pointing to give them a direction. "No rush, though," says Dranko. "Srapa's not likely to do anything except wait for us."

"But he can only *teleport* so many times in a day," points out Snokas. "It would be good to get him before he prepares a new day's worth."

They walk briskly as they discuss plans. The sharp rocks chafe their boots, and every few hundred feet or so a geyser goes off nearby. The air reeks of sulfur. "This place stinks... literally," says Ernie.

"I like the smell of sulfur," says Aravis.

"You're an alchemist," Grey Wolf says. "It's a survival trait."

An hour into their march they spy movement on a far-off hilltop. "I hope whatever that is comes and tries to kill us," growls Dranko. "I'm in that kind of mood."

Whatever they are, they're getting closer. Soon they're near enough for Dranko to see them more clearly; there are about a dozen short green-skinned creatures, their overlong arms dragging on the ground. They are babbling and gibbering in a strange tongue, and moving to intercept. The wizards get ready to blast away, but when the pack of demons gets within a hundred feet, one of them starts wailing more loudly and points at the Company. A second later the whole pack turn tail and flee, raising a crazy ruckus.

Soon after that the rocky ground slowly gives way to a muddy swamp. Ernie flies ahead and figures it will be faster for him to ferry his friends across one at a time. Twenty minutes later the bog is behind them and they continue onward. For four more hours they march, and though they occasionally spot what they assume are demons in the distance, nothing comes to mess with them. The only vegetation they've seen in all this time is a field of tough thorn bushes, and the only animals are black birds wheeling high overhead. Finally they spy a speck of blue in the distance, and half an hour later are ready to move through the next Way.

Consensus is that Srapa's probably not right on the other side, so Aravis shouldn't *mass haste* everyone beforehand. Tense and anxious they go through, and upon arrival immediately sink a foot into a revolting reddish-brown mud. The air here is thick and acrid, and the pervading chaos and evil are just a tad more unsettling. A hundred yards away, though a thick haze, is another glowing blue Way. There's no sign of anyone or anything else in this place.

Nothing else for it; they slog through the sucking mud. Soon all of them are stained from the knees down (except for Ernie, who's smeared up to his waist). As they near the far Way, something like a black snake briefly surfaces before diving back into the mud. A moment later Grey Wolf feels something wrap around his ankle. "Aaaaaahhhhhh!"

He lifts his foot slowly out of the mud so the rest of the party can see the snake-like creature twined around his lower leg. Dranko lashes it with his whip and the creature pops like a pustule, spraying green ichor. The rest of the snake-thing slithers back into the mud and isn't seen again. "Grab it, it's good eatin'!" exclaims Dranko. No one laughs, but he gets a few "eww!" looks.

Before going through the Way out of the mud, Morningstar and Kibi decide to fill up some empty spell slots, just in case. Morningstar adds *dimensional anchor* to her repertoire, and Kibi prepares a *Mordenkainen's lucubration*.

The next Demon Slice is dark. The ground is a featureless shiny black, a flat field of dark glassy rock. The only light comes from a large red moon overhead. There is no wind, and a piece of parchment sits on the ground not far away. Kibi casts *comprehend languages*, to read the single word thereon: WAIT.

Morningstar blankets the area around the note with *thought captures*, and is surprised to pick up no thoughts at all. This makes the wizards suspect that the lizard-man is protected by a *mind blank* spell. Heavy stuff! Morningstar then (hoping to get lucky) casts *locate object* on "Flicker's boots." Nothing. Dranko casts *detect magic* and moves out in a spiral pattern, thinking he may detect a nearby *rope trick*. Nothing. So, waiting it is.

Aravis casts a pair of *rope tricks* above and behind the Way, and the Company rest inside them, taking turns peeking out and dangling the Divination Sink out of one. All the rest of the 'day' they spend there, before falling asleep for another eight hours.



While eating a cold breakfast inside his extradimensional space, Kibi receives a *sending*:

Turn left thirty degrees, go twenty miles, go through the middle Way. Beware demons. Dress warmly beyond. If trouble strikes, I will aid you.

He doesn't respond. Outside the *rope tricks* it is still night, and the red moon has moved only slightly in the sky. Kibi renews his *nondetection* and Morningstar gets the whole Company with a pair of *wind walks*. Off they fly, following Srapa's most recent instructions.

It's a short flight, moving as they are at sixty miles per hour. A hundred feet below them the smooth black ground spreads in all directions as far as any of them can see, unblemished by hill, valley or any other feature. There are packs of demons roaming the plain, all (fortunately) seen at a great distance. They pass over one blue Way that comes too soon to be the one Srapa

indicated; a gang of half a dozen demons, led by a towering twelve-foot-tall red beast with huge bat wings, is headed for it. They leave it be. Later they pass almost directly over a huge demonic melee in which about twenty demons of varying sorts are casting spells and tearing each other to pieces. They leave that, too.

"You know," says Dranko as they continue to fly, "when Califax told me that if I didn't behave, when I died I'd go to Hell and demons would devour my soul... I thought he was kidding!"

Aravis decides this isn't the time to explain the difference between Hell and the Abyss. Half an hour later they spot a cluster of five Ways, arranged in a ragged line. The second from the left is gray, the others a familiar blue.

This seems like their big chance to catch Srapa, since if he's in a position close enough to help them fight off demons, he may be near enough to spot and attack. Everyone gets an *endure elements* to ward off the cold, various other buffing spells are applied, and Aravis and Ernie cast *true seeing*. They all step through...

QR 80

Srapa came from a hot country his people called Sthist, and his fame there as a skilled wizard was well known. He was a great reader of books (unusual among the lizard-folk) and his intellect was keen, but his spiritual well-being was of paramount importance to him. To this end, six times in a year he would go on walkabout through the pleasant swamps and marshes of the southlands. An immersion in nature provided him a balance to his weeks of magical study (and incidentally was a fine source of spell components). It was on such a walkabout that a piece of Sthist approximately three-quarters of a mile on a side was torn away from the rest, leaving Srapa isolated with only swamp otters and mosquitoes for company.

It didn't occur to Srapa to panic, or think that his prison had anything to do with him personally. He had no enemies among his people, and among the foreign peoples that might bear him ill-will, none had the means to create such a place. For several days he explored the boundaries of his Slice, cast divinations on the bright blue Way, and asked the otters what they thought was happening. His attempts to escape with *plane shift* and *teleport* met with failure. He gave it a week more, to see if it would pass. The otters cared little as long as there were fish to eat. At last he shouldered his pack and stepped through the Way, having decided it would probably take him somewhere interesting and maybe closer to home.

Srapa was lucky that day. He found himself in a tiny nondescript Slice with two other Ways out, standing side by side. The one on the left led to a para-elemental plane filled with magma, but he chose the one on the right, which merely took him to one of the outer Demon Slices. He could hide from demons. For months he moved about through the Slices, dodging (and occasionally fighting) the Abyssal denizens. By staying invisible, undetectable and *mind blanked*, he was able to listen to the demons converse, and he learned where the Ways were that led out of these pieces of the Abyss. So it was that he found more hospitable lands, and soon after, the magnificent castle of the Lord of the Roses.

Ah, the Lord of the Roses! From the moment Srapa stood before him, he knew he had found his savior. The Lord could not be seen, surrounded as he was by a blinding light, but his majestic thoughts and wishes resounded in Srapa's mind like trumpets of glory. Srapa humbled himself before the Lord of the Roses, and the Lord was kind to him, and fed him, and gave him lodging and happiness and a new purpose. After some time had passed, the Lord of the Roses called the lizard-man before him, and set for him a quest of vital import.

THERE IS A WAY WE CAN BE FREE OF THIS STRANGE PRISON, said the Lord. **BUT I NEED SOMEONE, SOMEONE WHO HAS RECENTLY ARRIVED IN A FAR-OFF CELL. HE IS A DWARF, NAMED KIBILHATHUR BIMSON. BRING HIM TO ME, UNHARMED. IF HE WISHES TO BRING HIS COMPANIONS, BRING THEM AS WELL, ALSO UNHARMED. I WILL PUT IN YOUR MIND HOW TO REACH HIM. YOU ARE POWERFUL AND CLEVER. FIND A WAY TO GET HIM HERE, WILLINGLY IF POSSIBLE, BUT THAT IS NOT NECESSARY. DO NOT CAST SPELLS UPON THE DWARF HIMSELF, OR UPON HIS FAMILIAR, WHO IS AN EARTH ELEMENTAL. BRING KIBILHATHUR BIMSON TO ME, AS SOON AS YOU CAN.**

"But mas~~ssss~~ter," said Srapa. "How will I know what Kibilhathur Bim~~ssss~~on looks like?"

PUT OUT YOUR HAND. Srapa did so, and in it appeared a small wooden statuette of a dwarf, cunningly carved.

THAT IS HIS LIKENESS. THERE MUST BE NO MISTAKE. YOU WILL NOT FAIL ME.

So, back through the Demon Slices went Srapa of Sthist, hiding from the natives as well as he could. It was weeks of slow travel, but his path led through Slices sparsely populated, and ever in his mind was the route to take through the maze of Ways. At last he arrived into the Slice containing the Eye of the Storm, and there he found his quarry, as the Lord of the Roses said he would.

Srapa was surprised when Kibilhathur Bimson didn't assent to the summons right away, but he reminded himself that the dwarf had not experienced the Lord of the Roses' glory first-hand. Furthermore, it seemed that he had competition for Kibilhathur – there were others who wanted the dwarf to go elsewhere. So Srapa observed him and his friends for two weeks and decided he could take no chances. After all, the Lord of the Roses said he would not fail. He kidnapped the easiest prey from among Kibilhathur's companions, knowing that his friends would not abandon him. After that, there were only the logistics of *sendings*

and *teleports* and such to work out, and he could lead them back through safely, one Slice at a time, to the castle. Then he would let Flicker Proudfoot go, and deliver Kibilhathur Bimson to the Lord of the Roses as promised.

There was only one potential trouble spot. A necessary Way opened into an icy Demon Slice that was thick with dangerous frost-demons. They would need to travel down a narrow mountain path in a strong, cold wind; their tactical position would be poor if the frost-demons attacked. Srapa knew that he would have to keep close, ready to assist Kibilhathur and his friends if there was an attack. But he also needed to be prepared to escape, should his charges turn on him. The Lord of the Roses had made it clear that Kibilhathur Bimson, at the very least, must not come to harm.

❖ ❖ ❖

Thus it was that when the Company came through the Way onto the icy mountain, Srapa was high above them, invisible, *mind blanked*, flying and (in case of emergency) *levitating*. He had *true seeing* activated and was staying at the edge of its range, a hundred feet off the ground, just low enough that he could see the Company even if they were invisible. He had an arsenal of Empowered *fireballs* at the ready, in case the frost-demons attacked. (He had seen a pack of them a few hundred feet down the mountain path – combat seemed inevitable.) And he had escape plans. *Teleports*. *Dimension door*. Even a *limited wish* if things got really hairy. He was as ready as he could be...

QR 80

A strong wind greets the Company as they emerge, though they are shielded from the cold by their spells. Beneath their feet is hard, crunchy ice. They are standing on a ledge track on a frozen mountainside – on their left the mountain rises steeply, and on their right is a precipitous drop of unknown length. A few feet in front of them is an arrow made of black liquid poured onto the snow. It indicates downward. Morningstar realizes that the strong wind and swirling snow may make *wind walking* as tough a proposition as just hiking down the icy track.

Ernie and Aravis spend a moment looking around in all directions with *true seeing*. Aravis sees nothing in such limited visibility, but... “Guys, guys!” shouts Ernie. “Magic! Up there!”

They all look upward. Most of the party see nothing, but Aravis sees what Ernie has already noticed: a vague humanoid form barely visible through the blowing snow. It glows with enchantment. High up, Srapa sees right away that he’s been spotted, and decides he should fly upward out of range. He knows he won’t be able to see the party if he gets much higher, but he’ll hear the sounds of battle should it come to that.

Ernie sees the magical form start to rise upward, but before it vanishes from his (true) sight, he raises his hand and casts a spell. A green ray springs from his finger and strikes true. Srapa is *dimensionally anchored*, and now glowing a bright emerald green. “Target,” whispers Grey Wolf to himself.

Morningstar, keeping her priorities in mind, casts *locate object* on Flicker’s boots, but again she detects nothing. Everyone else who can takes a shot at the lizard-man. Dranko slings magical bullets and hits twice, once critically. Kibi peppers him with *magic missiles*. Grey Wolf nails him with *enervation* (goodbye, *limited wish* and *spell turning*). Snokas pegs him with an arrow. And Aravis, taking a guess at the spells on Srapa, casts a *greater dispelling* targeting the *fly* spell on the lizard man. He wins the contested battle of magical power, and the *fly* spell is gone.

Left with only his *levitate* keeping him up, Srapa is blown downward by the gusting winds, slightly closer to the Company. He recognizes the green glow of the *dimensional anchor* and knows he cannot *teleport* away until he gets rid of it. Seriously wounded, his thoughts are now only of escape. If only the cursed winds had blown him upward and out of sight of his attackers’ *true seeing* spells... He *dispels* the *anchor*, and prepares to *teleport* away. He knows this will give the Company a few more seconds to launch attacks, but the only spell that could have saved him in one round, *limited wish*, is now drained from his mind. His only hope is that Kibi and his friends won’t want to kill him while he still has Flicker captive.

Ernie casts *flame strike*. The natural effects of the plane dim its effects somewhat, but Srapa still finds it painful. If he can only survive a few more seconds... “Got him!” yells Ernie. “Morningstar, did you see where I targeted? He’s still right there!”

Morningstar squints up into the bright white sky. Any other sister of Ell would be blinded, but Morningstar’s vision is clear. She can even make out a small wisp of smoke rising from the hovering creature. And Ellish *flame strikes*, delivering cold damage instead of fire, turn out to be magnified by the plane.

WHOOOMPH!!!

There’s a terrible cry on the wind. Srapa’s body appears and instantly plummets. It bounces off the mountainside and falls away downward and out of sight. Dranko gets a *fly* spell from one of the party wizards and flies downward to retrieve the

body. The wind is still strong and makes the going difficult. There are jagged stalagmites of ice and shattered, stubby evergreens jutting up at angles from the rocky face of the mountain. Dranko does his best to avoid getting blown into them.

He only spots Srapa's body because of the blood. The lizard-man is impaled on a snapped-off pine tree that's poking up through the ice, having fallen over two hundred feet. Dranko picks up Srapa's staff, searches briefly for other belongings, and then sets about prising the body off its stake. It's a chore, since the body has slid past downward-pointing branches, and the blood is already starting to freeze. Finally the corpse wrenches free with a gruesome tearing sound; fresh blood gouts out, spilling onto Dranko. "Flicker, I'm doing this for you. There's no *treasure* worth this, that's for sure."

Despite his anger, Dranko gives the body a post mortem shriving and says brief last rites, then hauls the body back up to the others. Once he has dropped off the corpse, he flies Morningstar up to where Srapa had been hovering so she can cast more *thought captures*. Again, nothing, except a stray thought or two from Dranko. Not wishing to stay here longer, they return through the Way to the Slice of black glass before searching the body for clues to Flicker's whereabouts.

There are numerous magic items on the body of the lizard-man wizard. His staff is magical, as is an amulet, a headband, a golden ring, some scrolls in tubes, and two large sapphires. One of these last two is glowing conspicuously, and has something written on it in foreign characters. Kibi casts *comprehend languages* and announces it's Flicker's name scratched into the gem. Aravis peers closely at the sapphire with his *true seeing* and sees a tiny indistinct form in its center.

"Break it!" yells Ernie. "Get him out! Get him out! Is he dead? Is he hurt?"

"He's inside a giant sapphire," says Dranko. "He probably thinks he's died and gone to heaven."

Seule: This story continues to compel. It's still a great example of epic-style play as opposed to epic-level play. Well done.

Jackylhunter: Hmm, good stuff, but they haven't actually gotten Flicker out yet. BTW, what was Flicker's player doing during that game?

Redwald: IIRC, both Flicker and One Certain Step are NPCs.

Len: If it's *trap the soul*, they just have to smash the gem. Hey, but:

[from the SRD:] If the trapped creature is a powerful creature from another plane it can be required to perform a service immediately upon being freed.

Well, Flicker's not from whatever demonic plane they're on now. "Carry my bags until we get out of these darn Slices."

thatdarncat: Uh oh... They just killed their guide and the only help they had. Not good.

Fimmtiu: Actually, it seems pretty good to me. Magical loot, one fewer name on the ass-kicking list, they have Flicker back, they can probably retrace their steps to the Inn, and they've given those frost demons the laugh entirely. Not bad at all!

Man, if Srapa had only used *see invisibility* instead of *true seeing*, he might have made it. Tsk, tsk.

Plane Sailing: Agreed, the cold must have been numbing his brain to have not gone for *see invisibility*. *True seeing* has too short a range and too short a duration to be worth using in most cases. It was definitely bad luck to be tagged by the *enervation* and lose two top spells – it shows the value of *greater globe of invulnerability* in that kind of situation which would have stopped both of those killer attacks cold (GGoI is often overlooked, unfortunately).

It is interesting that Srapa didn't seem like a bad person. After all, he could probably have trapped Kibi's soul and fled back with him if he hadn't been otherwise constrained. It was only his decision to be on hand to help against frost demons that led to him being attacked and killed at this point.

Bad luck, Srapa.

Lord Pendragon: Well, some people would probably consider using *trap the soul* against someone to be harming them. Something the Lord of the Roses specifically forbade.

I agree about Srapa not being evil, though. Nothing so far has indicated that either the Lord of the Roses or the monks are evilly-inclined. They are just both in dire need of Kibi's services... and willing to go to any lengths (it seems) to secure them.

Sagiro: I don't want to start a long debate on Srapa's tactics, which clearly didn't work out so well for him. But regarding the above: Srapa's height above the party was also constrained by simple visibility through the blowing snow. Given that he had to stay relatively low just to see the ground, *true seeing* was a better option, being a superset of *see invisibility* functionally.

(And, as a side-note, Srapa was no tactical genius, regardless. And as a side-side-note, neither am I...)



A Toe in the Water (Also the Earth, Air, and Fire)

The Company cast *shrink item* and *gentle repose* on Srapa's body, fold it up, and stow it in a pack for later questioning. Getting back to the Eye of the Storm is a simple logistical matter, mostly of *wind walks* and *teleports*. Before the day is out they are emerging into the netted enclosure around the Way in/out of the Demon Slices.

"Hello! We're back!" calls Grey Wolf.

"Not demons!" adds Ernie.

Back at the Inn, Horny is the first to greet them. "You get him?" he asks.

Dranko pulls out the sapphire and holds it up to the light. "What's that?" asks the minotaur.

"That's Flicker. He's trapped inside this gem."

"Oh well, yeah, I'm glad you got him back, but what I really meant was, did you get the bastard who kidnapped him?"

"Yeah," says Morningstar. Kibi pulls out the body of Srapa, folded up in its cloth-like state.

"That's just a piece of cloth painted like a lizard," says Horny, scratching his head. "It's neat, but I meant the actual guy who kidnapped your friend."

Slightly affronted, Kibi dismisses the *shrink item* spell, and there's the shrunken body of Srapa lying on the table. "That's disgusting!" exclaims Horny.

"Well, you didn't believe me," complains Kibi.

"So that cloth thing *was* the body!"

"Still is," points out Grey Wolf.

"Magic is a wonderful and glorious thing," says Dranko. "Can we get on with it? Who around here has a hammer and an anvil?"

¤¤

The Company adjourn to a smithy in a distant wing of the Inn. With permission from the blacksmith there, Ernie borrows tongs while Dranko lays down a blanket around the anvil to catch any salvageable shards. Then Dranko fishes out the sapphire and lays it on the anvil. As Ernie holds it steady with the tongs, Dranko hefts a hammer.

"What are you doing?" asks the smith. "That's a big gem. Why you breakin' it?"

"It's magic," says Dranko. "Our friend's trapped inside it."

Not for much longer! Dranko smashes the gem with the hammer, basically pulverizing it into powder. There's a puff of blue smoke, and then there's Flicker, lying face up, arched uncomfortably over the anvil. Dranko impishly raises the hammer again as if to strike another blow, while Ernie grabs Flicker's nose with the tongs.

Nasally, Flicker shouts in alarm. "Dranko! Don't hit me! Ernie! What's going on? Let go with those tongs! Ow! Ow!"

"Have you learned your lesson about taking gems from random strangers?" says Ernie, his voice a shrill reprimand.

Flicker blinks confusedly. "She just wanted to know how much it was worth."

Ernie pauses for a moment and lets go with the tongs. "You did *know* you were trapped inside the gem, right?"

"I kinda guessed," says Flicker. "Everything was all blue."

Dranko clears his throat. "Flicker? I'm not going to yell at you for taking a gem from a stranger. And I'm not going to yell at you for making us chase lizard-boy across the Demon Slices to get you back, or involving us in a horrible fight in mid-air in the middle of a snowstorm. I'll just say this: the gem I had to break to get you out was worth *fifteen thousand gold pieces*."

Flicker blinks again. "Lizard-boy?" Then: "You couldn't get me out with breaking it?"

"That's how it works," says Grey Wolf.

"I considered selling you, then stealing you back later and freeing you then," admits Dranko.

"Good thinking," agrees Flicker. "You should have done that! Why didn't you?"

"You know, the others would have had a bunch of stupid moral objections..."

"Well," says Flicker, "You would have had to tell..."

Ernie grabs Flicker's nose with the tongs again. "Flicker, you ungrateful little..."

"Ow! Let go! That hurts!"

"I don't know," says Ernie. "I'm starting to like this. You are quite possibly the most muddle-headed halfling I ever knew!"

Flicker grows angry himself, and grabs the tongs away. "Why are you all getting on my case? If someone you didn't know walked up to you, showed you a wound, said 'I'm really hurt,' and asked you for healing, wouldn't you do it?"

Ernie is taken aback. "Well, yeah, I suppose I..."

"Or would you ask a lot of questions first and get all paranoid? No, you'd heal them!" Flicker's face is bright red. "And it wasn't the lizard guy! It was some woman. A human woman."

"It was Srapa," says Dranko. "He disguised himself to trick you."

"Well, still..." says Flicker, hands on his hips. "She... he... just came up to me and said, hey, I hear you know a lot about gems. I said, yeah, I'm pretty good, and she said, well, I found this one, and if you appraise it for me, I'll give you a cut when I sell it. Why would I not have? I took the gem from her, and the next thing I knew, everything was all blue."

"All right, all right, I guess you're right," says Ernie with a sigh. "I was just worried about you."

Morningstar steps forward and puts a hand on Flicker's shoulder. "OK. I admit that in this particular instance, what you did wasn't... well, anyway, the next time you go out training, I want to put you in a *telepathic bond*. You don't have to talk to me. You can pretend I'm not there. But that way if people walk up to you and offer things, we'll at least know who you were talking to, and where you were last."

"Don't think I'm not grateful to you for chasing Srapa through the Demon Slices," says Flicker. "What happened to him, anyway?"

"He's dead," says Dranko. "Nothing more to worry about. We don't know that he was evil, but we know he felt it was OK to kidnap you, and he wouldn't give you back unless we followed him all the way to the Lord of the Roses. I'm glad you're back, Flicker. We missed you."

"Gosh. Thanks."

No one says anything for a minute. Then Flicker says, "You know, it was pretty cool in there."

"Did you see Dranko's nose right up close, really really big?" asks Ernie.

"Thankfully, no."

"What did it taste like?" asks Dranko.

"I don't know. I didn't lick it. If you want to find out, get Aravis to magic you into a gem. That is, if you don't mind us cracking open another 15,000gp sapphire to get you out."

¤¤¤

Flicker's kidnapping has only strengthened the Company's desire to go into Chaos, rather than pay a visit to this Lord of the Roses character. (Only Flicker and Dranko now have misgivings, thinking that wherever Srapa came from, maybe valuable sapphires grow like cabbages.) But before they go, they spend an afternoon *identifying* the magical loot taken from Srapa's body.

Kibi comes away with a *staff of abjuration*, an *amulet of proof vs. scrying and detection*, and a scroll with some arcane spells. Dranko takes a gold ring that makes the wearer and everything on him immune to the *detect magic* spell. Grey Wolf upgrades to a *headband of intellect +4*, giving his old +2 version to Morningstar. One Certain Step takes *boots of levitation*.

ERNIE: "I'm not wearing them. I can't dance!" (Bonus points if you recall the reference.)

Plane Sailing: My only thought was that one of the original D&D cursed items appeared like *boots of levitation* but once you put them on you couldn't stop dancing and because of the curse you couldn't take them off. A sort of self-inflicted precursor to Otto's *irresistible dance* if you will. I wonder if that is it?

Piratecat: Give you a hint: anyone remember Sagiro's "death," way back when [see session 42]?

Plane Sailing: He shoots! He scores! The crowd goes wild!

And Aravis gets a pair of higher-powered scrolls with *true seeing*, *prismatic spray*, *protection from spells*, and *mind blank*.

There are also some spellbooks (which the wizards mostly don't fight over) and a handful of unfamiliar coins. And, of course, a hugely valuable sapphire. Flicker spends plenty of time examining it, and is pretty sure his estimate of 15,000gp is accurate. That leads to a quick review of all the party treasure, at the end of which Kibi whistles. "Wow... so that sapphire is the single most valuable piece of non-magical treasure we have."

"That's right," says Dranko.

"I'll carry it," says Flicker. Everyone looks at him skeptically, and Dranko puts out his hand. "Why not?" complains Flicker.

"You had one, and you squandered it," says Dranko, smirking.

"I didn't squander it!" Flicker protests. "In fact, if it weren't for me, we wouldn't even have the one we have. It's true! Think about it! I mean, if the lizard guy hadn't kidnapped me... thanks to me, we have a 15,000gp gem!" Flicker drops it into a pouch, and ten seconds later Dranko has picked his pocket.

Morningstar calls the two rogues over to her, and gives them both *refuge* tokens she's crafted during training. "To use one of these, break it while saying the password: 'don't lick it.' That will cause me to teleport to wherever you are, as long as we're on the same plane. It's basically *summon Morningstar*."

"Cool!" exclaims Flicker. "Can we try it out?"

"You can only use it once, so no. And it cost me 1,500gp to make."

"That's only 10% of the cost of the sapphire Dranko just stole from me," points out Flicker.

"And don't lose it," continues Morningstar. "If someone else finds it and *identifies* it, they could summon me."

Len: And you just gave one to an NPC...

OR SO

The next morning, Morningstar casts *speak with dead* on Srapa's corpse, but the spell fails. There's much debate afterward on whether or not they should carry the lizard-man's body around for another week in order to try again. Most are in favor, though the thought makes Ernie and Step uncomfortable. Snokas snorts, "I feel bad about the body, but not *that* bad. The guy kidnapped Flicker!"

"We can just bless the body before we pack it away again," Flicker adds, supporting the idea. "Heck, we could get a box, bless *that*, and keep the body folded up inside. Then we wouldn't feel as guilty."

"You're attempting to finesse," accuses Step.

"If we're carrying around unburied bodies, we *should* feel guilty about it!" cries Ernie. But the corpse-carrying advocates win the day; Kibi casts *shrink item* again, folds up the body, and stows it.

With nothing left to do, the Company bid a fond farewell to the Eye of the Storm and their hosts before marching out to their chosen Way. The Way itself is not heavily guarded, since no one has come out of it for years. There's a gnome in charge of the defense today, with about a dozen others lounging around. "You leavin'?" asks the gnome. "Through here? You know where it goes, right? Straight into Chaos."

"Yeah, we know," says Dranko.

"It's not like the Demon Slices," says the gnome. "No mild buffer Slices. You're just dumped right in."

Kibi takes out the Stabilizer and examines it, then reads the note that came with it. There are no instructions. After a bit more debate the Company tie a rope around Kibi's waist. The plan is for him to go in alone and try to stabilize the Chaos, just to see if it works. They'll pull him out again after thirty seconds no matter what, in case something goes horribly awry. Kibi gets a battery of buffing spells and puts on his *helm of water breathing*.

"And watch out for Slubs," warns Morningstar.

"Slaadi. It's Slaadi," corrects Aravis.

"Whatever," says Morningstar. "Big frog guys."

"Here I go!" says Kibi. "Got my Stabilizer. My safety rope. My helmet. My familiar. All set."

"If you don't survive this..." Dranko starts, but Kibi has jumped through.

OR SO

There's the familiar black void, pulling him through to the next Slice. Seconds later he is ejected...

It's wet! Kibi finds himself completely immersed, with nothing solid beneath his feet, but able to breathe because of his helmet. It's generally dark, though he can make out some details with his darkvision, and there are flashes of reddish light off to one side, illuminating the water in bursts. Some strange-looking fish swim near his feet. A large boulder rolls slowly through the water some fifteen feet away, trailing air bubbles as it tumbles.

Kibi notices that while he feels no gravity, he's getting pulled slowly along by a current. A few seconds later he stops, as his friends notice the rope paying out and grab it to stop whatever's pulling him. He looks around one more time, grasps the Stabilizer and concentrates, trying to make himself an enclosed room. The water agitates and swiftly transmutes to a cube of air around him, while a stone slab forms beneath his feet.

He continues to float, hovering above his new floor, until he imagines gravity. He drops. He tries to imagine walls, and though he only gets about four feet high all around, it feels like a moderate success. He's stabilized the elements out to about fifteen feet, creating a pocket of air that ends in a wall of water still sliding past. That tells him his fixed region of Chaos is just that – fixed in space, while the rest of Chaos surges around him. Somewhere (presumably) beyond the water, a fireball streaks past, lighting up the liquid with an orange glow.

His time is almost up. The Way in, also fixed in the Chaos, is up near the top of his airy sanctuary. He changes his gravity so he falls upward toward it, popping out at a jaunty angle and falling onto the ground. The rest of the party stare at his dripping body. "Well, that was interesting," he says.

QR 80

Chaos

Ernie is the first to speak. "What happened?"

Kibi takes a deep breath and shakes some water from his beard. "Well, I went through there and it was all wet, but I had my helmet so that was all right. And there was fire, and a boulder rolling along, and there was no gravity, and there was a current, and then I started thinking about good solid ground under my feet, and air to breathe, and it worked! And I thought about gravity, and that worked. It was fine. I had a nice little pocket of survivable space. And then I figured I should come back out and tell you guys it was all good, and that we should go."

Okay, then. There's a bit of discussion after that regarding the Stabilizer, and whether it's specially tuned to Kibi, or if anyone can use it. "'Cause Morningstar has a whole lot more experience doing that sort of thing," says Ernie. "You know. In Dream."

"We should test it out with other people, regardless," says Morningstar. "In case Kibi goes unconscious for some reason."

As a next step, Kibi goes back with Morningstar and Aravis, all anchored with ropes held by the others. This time there is no water, just a fortuitous pocket of air in which they find themselves floating. Kibi concentrates and instantiates a large rectangular stone floor a few inches below their feet, then imagines gravity to match. He drops to the stone, and then the other two follow suit.

Kibi, what's that? Up there, thinks Scree to his master. Above them, a sheet (or maybe a block, it's hard to tell) of flames is descending toward them. It will be upon them in about ten seconds. Kibi's first attempt to make a ceiling fails; he gets some large pebbles which float loosely in the air. Morningstar and Aravis also try and fail to create shelter.

But with a few seconds still to go, and the heat starting to beat at them, Kibi wills into existence walls and an arched ceiling to go with his floor. (This creates something like a small hangar, a wide stone hallway open at both ends, with a round arched ceiling.) They can hear the roaring of the flames as it breaks upon the stone enclosure, hear it all around them as they wait, holding their breaths, in their pocket of airy safety. Then they see the flames through the open ends of their hangar, sliding past and downward. A minute later it has passed, and the three of them remain standing in Kibi's enclosure, unharmed.

Morningstar takes the Stabilizer to experiment. She concentrates on changing Kibi's dark stone to a lighter shade, and succeeds in altering it to a different type of stone altogether. For her next trick she lowers the temperature around them by twenty degrees, and after that (to make sure magic is working properly) she casts *bull's strength* on Kibi.

A few seconds later (and unconnected to her efforts) a mass of water hits the hangar end on; water tries to spray into Kibi's air, and breaks into droplets, pelting them with sideways rain. And a few seconds after *that* their hangar is spun around as a large mass of earth and rock thumps into it from above. Through the far open end of the hangar they see the rock pass by, and that it has a stand of huge trees growing out of it. The ragged island drifts by, and after the treetops have slid past their field of vision, only empty air remains.

As a last experiment, Aravis casts a *rope trick* and climbs up into it. "Not chaotic in here," he announces, sticking his head out. "And it's fixed in space," notes Kibi. And with that, the three of them exit the hangar, adjust their gravity, and fall into the Way leading back to the others. (Kibi, having done it once before, slows himself at the last minute and manages to step out gracefully. Aravis and Morningstar go sprawling on the grass.) The three of them deliver a full report.

"This'll be a piece of cake!" says Dranko. "What could possibly go wrong?" Ernie smacks him.

"Here's a plan," continues Dranko. "We'll all tie ourselves together with rope. Morningstar can cast *find the path* and set her personal gravity in that direction, while we all just float behind. We'll plummet at hundreds of miles per hour toward the next Way while Morningstar clears us a path by turning everything to air in front of us!"

The thing is, no one is quite sure if he's kidding. "Er, except that you can only stabilize things in about a fifteen-foot radius," says Kibi. "And it takes a few seconds to do."

"Oh. Well then," says Dranko, disappointed.

"Hey! Everything all right in there?" shouts one of the guards. The locals who guard this Way have been watching, fascinated, as the Company have sent scouting parties into the Chaos.

"We're still working out the details," calls back Ernie.

"You go in yet?" asks the guard.

"We tried a couple of times, yeah," says Ernie.

"It's hell, ain't it?" chuckles the guard.

"No, the Demon Slices are in Hell," says Dranko. "This is more like formless chaos." Aravis, as usual, doesn't bother correcting him.

"Well, don't make anything in there mad enough to come out here," says the guard.

Morningstar manages to get everyone coordinated, makes sure there's planned redundancy in their stabilizing of the Chaos, and points out that an attack could come from any direction. Dranko oversees the ropes as they tie themselves together, and shows the others how best not to get tangled. Right around the time Dranko starts to speculate on how they could swing the plate-mail-clad Ernie around like a flail using gravity tricks, Kibi declares that they've waited long enough, and that it's time to go in.

They each experience the cold black pulling of the Ways, and then are deposited into the Chaos, and specifically into a roaring fire. Morningstar, Flicker and Dranko avoid getting burned, and Kibi's *energy buffer* is triggered, but the others are somewhat burned. Everyone immediately tries to recreate the immediate space into more friendly elements, and Kibi has the most success, re-establishing his hangar at a scale large enough to comfortably accommodate everyone. Nearby fire and lightning illuminate the interior with an orange glow. Hissing sounds fill the air as fire and water collide in the outside maelstrom, and these mix with the grinding sounds of stone on stone, blending into a dim cacophony.

When it's clear that Kibi's shelter is holding, Ernie tries to create chocolate chip cookies. Unfortunately, cookies not being an element *per se*, it fails. Dranko then tries to re-sculpt the stone into images of naked women. That fails too, though no one (except Dranko) finds that unfortunate.

The hangar is sound but rough, with a few ragged holes in the walls that turn out fortuitously to serve as windows. Some of the party look out of these, enjoying the light show. Ernie's too short to use any of the holes, so he walks to one of the open ends of the hangar and looks out. He does a double take, and squints. It looks like something enormous is coming toward them. It's another block of dirt and rock, and it's large enough that he can't see its full extent – only the leading edge, lit up here and there by (relatively) small flashes of fire and lightning. He guesses it's about a quarter mile across. "Uh... guys?"

The others look out and see the problem. "Just concentrate on air on the other side of our wall!" exclaims Dranko.

"Can't I change its gravity?" cries Ernie.

"No, that won't work," says Aravis calmly.

"Make a hole when it gets close enough!" says Morningstar

The gargantuan boulder drifts inexorably closer. It's not coming fast, but it won't need to. In the last few seconds before impact Ernie concentrates furiously on manifesting air in a fixed area relative to their own position, just outside their hangar. The others do likewise. Sure enough, when the rock mass reaches them, the continuously generated air starts to carve out a divot, and it seems for a moment as if they'll simply "tunnel" their way through. But the chunk of earth is also rotating, and it's simply much too big. It collides with the hangar, but because of its rotation it doesn't just push the Company along in front of it. Instead, the hangar starts to rotate around its long axis and spin along the face of the huge boulder. At first they each try to keep adjusting their own gravity to keep up with the floor, but after a few seconds no one can concentrate that well, and it

becomes a nauseating minute-long exercise in trying to maintain equilibrium. When the hangar finally skitters off the rounded edge of the boulder, and finishes revolving a minute later, everyone falls in a different direction.

"My gut hasn't felt like that since back when I was almost killed by the Black Circle," groans Grey Wolf.

"And I was about to say this was sort of fun..." says Morningstar, holding her stomach.

Flicker looks out one of the hangar's open ends. He sees the blue glow of the Way in, now well over fifty feet away, and at a crazy angle relative to their new 'down.'

Morningstar casts *find the path* to the Monastery, but it's not on the same Slice and so the spell fails. She casts the spell a second time, this one to "*the nearest Way that's not the closest one*," and this gives her a direction to travel. It's down, directly through the floor of the hangar at its current pitch and yaw.

So now something else becomes evident. The Company have no way to actually move the hangar. Rather, it has to be constantly remade in a new place. Kibi tries to reform it facing the right direction, but he's still queasy and can't concentrate. Everyone else tries, but only Grey Wolf, who has some experience with staying sharp while nauseated, is able to make it happen. He reforms the hangar to face the desired direction, while everyone else has to constantly readjust their gravity to stay on the floor, and not fall into Grey Wolf's newly formed walls. Step looks as though he's going to be sick.

"Just think about the floor," suggests Ernie.

"I am thinking about the floor," says Step. "That, and not throwing up."

'Moving' the hangar now has to operate in the same way. They have no way to physically propel the stone, so someone has to keep creating more tunnel ahead of them, in the direction they want to go. Behind them, the tunnel they no longer need (and on which no one is concentrating) slowly gets eaten away by chaotic forces, crumbling into pebbles and rocks that float in the void or get blasted by other elements. At one point, they watch as a huge, fast moving boulder smashes apart a length of tunnel left some fifty feet behind them. "The place cleans itself up after us," says Grey Wolf nervously.

They consider other, simpler structures, but the hangar provides cover from most directions, while they can keep a look out for trouble through cracks and holes in the walls. Together they settle into a rhythm, moving their tunnel forward. With several of them concentrating on the task, someone is always succeeding. Still, it's mentally draining.

Half an hour later the hangar lurches to one side and tilts, sending everyone scrambling to adjust their gravities. They see a wall of water sliding past the edges of the hangar, and it starts to push its way in, spraying them with droplets. The water mass soon passes, but it leaves a fish behind, hovering in midair at the far end of the hangar. Ernie thinks it might make for a good meal, but when he reaches it he discovers that it has twelve eyes and six fins arrayed evenly around its body.

"Cool!" says Dranko. "A Chaos Fish. It's adapted to the Chaos!"

"And there are enough eyeballs for everyone," says Grey Wolf.

"Someone can have my eyeball," says Ernie, looking a bit queasy.

A few minutes later they see that they're heading into a meteor shower of fireballs. Worried about the structural integrity of the hangar, they halt their progress and wait for the shower to pass. It lasts for a good fifteen minutes – a spectacular sight, thousands of fireballs streaking through the chaos, illuminating clods of earth, and colliding with water masses in hissing explosions of steam.

When the hail of fireballs has ceased, they continue their journey through the chaos, toward the Way out. The next half hour is (relatively) uneventful. Then someone spies another huge chunk of earth tumbling through space, maybe three quarters of a mile off, generally in the direction they're heading. A large fortress has been built onto its surface; it sticks out of the top of the rock mass like a growth. It's hard to see detail since it's only visible in brief flashes of fire or lightning, but it looks abandoned. Aravis shares his belief that beings with enough experience can make semi-permanent structures in the chaos, that don't need constant mental upkeep. It's a rare talent.

The rock with the tower is roughly spherical, about a hundred yards in diameter. It's swiveling as it moves, so that by the time they've closed to within a few hundred yards, the tower is pointing almost directly at them. As the tower starts to drift past them, its boulder suddenly slows to a halt, and swivels to keep the tower pointed at them. Morningstar keeps them moving, past the rock with its tower, and soon it moves out of easy sight, though they can still keep an eye on it through the "windows" in the walls.

Grey Wolf is the first to see the smaller boulder. A second chunk of rock, this one only about twenty feet in diameter, has detached itself from the tower rock and is tumbling toward them. The whole Company moves to that side of the hangar to take a look. They can see creatures moving about on the smaller boulder, as it moves ever closer, and faster than they themselves can ‘move’ their hangar. “Boarding party!” shouts Grey Wolf.

Someone: Hmm... Chaos pirates?

Dherys Thal: Could it be... Monks? It would sort of fit – some building with isolated order around it – who knows?

LightPhoenix: Screw Chaos pirates... Chaos Fish Attack!!



Softeners

Quickly, the Company untie the ropes that have heretofore connected them in a loose web. They peer at the approaching spheroid, getting a decent view every few seconds as nearby flashes of elemental energy light it up. The things crawling on the rock are quadruped, not humanoid. Dranko has the sharpest eyes and gets the best look – they look a bit like lions, between five and ten feet long, and covered with... spiky fur? They’re not slaadi, whatever they may be. Dranko estimates it’ll be about thirty seconds before the boulder makes contact with their hangar.

With a battle now seeming imminent, the party fire off preparatory spells: *magic circles vs. chaos, bless, a fire shield* for Morningstar, and a *stoneskin* for Step, among others. Aravis casts *haste* and *fly* on himself. Morningstar casts *speak with animals* and Dranko casts *comprehend languages* in the hope of hearing something useful.

The rock rotates slowly as it moves through space, revealing more of the creatures; Dranko ups his estimate of their number to fifteen. They’re crouching and milling about on the surface of the boulder like anxious pack animals, though they stay on its curve without effort, adjusting their gravity with ease. Dranko sees that what he thought was spiky fur is a ruff of quills like a mane, and that most of the things’ bodies are hairless. Their jaws are full of sharp, jagged teeth.

In the final ten seconds before impact the Company suddenly start to argue about whether it would be better to dissolve their hangar entirely for more maneuverability, or keep (and strengthen) it for more protection. They don’t come to a consensus, but Kibi’s will wins out, and he hardens the rock around them in anticipation of the...



There’s a crunching stone-on-stone impact as the creatures’ boulder slams into the center of the hangar’s roof. Now the party can hear growling and snarls, unintelligible even to the translation spells. Dranko looks out one end of the hangar and sees the near curve of the boulder. (He also gets hit in the face with a cold splash of ambient water, which he ignores.) Two or three of the creatures are moving down it towards him, so with some deft manipulations of gravity he gets himself up onto the hangar’s roof and then onto the boulder itself. He lashes out with his whip and curls the end around one of the nearest creature’s mane-quills, then bends it back until it snaps out of the thing’s neck. Blood spews out of the wound and forms into floating red-black globules. The monster glares at him, then opens its jaws, which seem to unhinge and gape unnaturally wide. It makes a horrible growling noise, and then it and the two creatures near it lunge to attack. Before Dranko can react all three have scored painful bites, and now it’s his own blood that fills the air with spheroid droplets. “Holy crap!” he exclaims.

The other beasts start to move from their boulder onto and into the hangar. One comes in from the other side along the ceiling, then drops down and takes a bite out of Step. Three more scramble in right behind it and spot Ernie, the smallest and therefore (to their animal minds) easiest target. They gnaw at him, but two of the three are foiled by his plate mail. “Bad chaos doggies!” chides Ernie. “Down!”

A fourth chaos doggie skitters in along the ceiling, and bites at Morningstar’s head from above. It only succeeds in scorching itself on Morningstar’s *fire shield* and yelping in dismay. The general din of the monsters is horrible, a cacophony of yowling, growling, and snarling mixed with a low guttural roar.

Flicker jumps into the fray, flanks one of the monsters with Ernie, and proceeds to carve. Despite dishing out prodigious damage Flicker doesn't kill it, though blood sprays out of two gaping wounds and fills the air around it with a floating reddish mist.

Ernie steps back and tries to cast a *flame strike*, while imagining a gravity that would cause it to strike sideways relative to himself. Alas, it's a bit too much for Ernie to get his head around and the spell fails to go off at all, resulting in no damage but plenty of un-Ernie-like swearing.

Step hacks a monster with his sword, Snokas pierces another with his pick, and Morningstar pegs one with a *searing darkness*; now the blood in the air is starting to become a real distraction, and for all the damage the party has dealt, none of the monsters have died. Grey Wolf casts *assassin's senses* on himself; his eyes glow red. *Bostock* approves.

Up above, more of the quilled creatures come at Dranko from around the curve of the boarding boulder. This time he's ready, dodging and weaving while effecting subtle changes to his personal gravity. Wide leonine jaws snap fruitlessly.

Just as the Company are getting fully set against the monsters inside the hangar, a large section of rock ceiling ripples and turns to air. Four more chaos doggies scramble down through the hole, dropping into their midst and launching attacks against Kibi, Aravis and Ernie. Aravis wrestles a bleeding arm out of a snarling maw, glares, and introduces the lot of them to a sonic *chain lightning*. Air and stone vibrate as the sonic boom blasts through the hangar. The monster previously sliced up by Flicker breaks into bits, and there is a great howling of pain and anger from the pack. Broken off quills start to float through the air, mixed in with the general gore. Kibi follows this up with an Empowered *lightning bolt*, after which he backs away up the near wall (adjusting his personal gravity on the fly).

Above on the boulder Dranko activates his vest (becoming *improvedly invisible*) and taunts the chaos doggies. His plan backfires, as the creatures don't stick around to fight an invisible opponent. Instead, most of them abandon him, hopping down onto the hangar to join the general melee, and Dranko is afforded only a single whip-snap of opportunity as they leave him behind. He shouts after them in frustration. "No! Come back! Stay here! God DAMN IT!"

They drop down into the hole they've made in the hangar roof. One delivers a vicious bite upon Morningstar, then pulls back yelping as it burns its tongue on her *fire shield*. Two more lunge at Ernie, and not only do they deliver nasty bites, but also leave behind long barbed quills sticking into the halfling's flesh.

The Company continue to battle through an increasingly opaque cloud of blood droplets, smashed quills, and mixed-race viscera. The creatures are surprisingly tough and enjoy an annoying facility with the local gravity. Two more learn the hard way that biting Morningstar is a painful experience. Grey Wolf has unsheathed *Bostock* for close-quarters swordplay, and the glowing blue blade utters encouragement into his mind. When his first swing goes over his foe's head, the sword hisses: *No! Lower! Swing lower!* Grey Wolf's next swing cuts a bloody gash in the lion-thing's neck, and as blood pours out in a weightless stream, *Bostock* flares with a sapphire light. *Thank you!* it says to Grey Wolf. *I am much closer now! Keep using me. I must be free! I can almost remember who I am. And I am still in your debt.*

Grey Wolf feels the sword become lighter and more potent in his hand – its magic increases, and it now enjoys the abilities of a *defending* weapon. He doesn't have much time to enjoy it, though, as a hole is torn open in the hangar floor and more chaos-lions start snapping at his legs from below. They tear the flesh from his shins and one leaves a quill sticking from his leg. Others renew their assault, and Aravis finds himself in dire straits. He flees straight upward, out of the hole his enemies have made.

The fight rages on, with both sides slowly getting whittled down. Morningstar kills a chaos-lion with a *searing darkness*, and Kibi blasts another two to bits with a powerful second *lightning bolt* (so powerful, in fact, that it turns patches of the stone floor into pure electricity, which spiral downward in little whorls to join the maelstrom).

The beasts then crowd around Ernie, snarling and snapping; he practically disappears beneath the pile of them. There's a loud clattering of teeth, claws and quills grinding against plate mail, and Ernie is left a bleeding pincushion. Other monsters keep Snokas and Grey Wolf occupied with frenzied attacks.

Dranko, on the boarding rock, finds only one monster left, sniffing around suspiciously. Dranko vents his anger on it, lashing out with a full round of whip sneak attacks and tearing chunks of the monster's body away. As its jawbone twirls into the chaos and gets broadsided by a small passing boulder, Dranko heaves out a sigh. "This makes me long for the pastoral splendor of the Abyss," he says plaintively.

Ernie manages to heal himself with a *heal* scroll in his *quickscroll tube*, which gives him enough time to slay a chaos doggie with a *searing light*. Step heals up Grey Wolf, while Snokas eviscerates another beast with his picks. Flicker, standing sideways on the wall in order to flank, kills yet another with his short sword. It's a grinding, ugly battle that continues on for another ten

seconds or more. Morningstar does her best to keep everyone healed up, the wizards maneuver to find optimal firing paths for *lightning bolts* and *cones of sonic* and *chain lightnings*. Step, Flicker, Ernie, Snokas and Grey Wolf just keep hacking away, through a chunky mist so thick now that every weapon swing leaves a trail of parted gore.

At last it seems over. All of the chaos-lions are slain, their bodies drifting and bouncing off the walls. Most of the Company stand in the hangar, bleeding from wounds, punctured with quills and panting for breath. Kibi and Morningstar concentrate on shoring up the structure. Only Dranko isn't with them. He has killed a second beast with his whip, and is pursuing a third which is now fleeing around the curve of the boarding boulder. But something makes him pull up short. His shoulders sag for a moment, and then he starts running back to the others.

The rest are doing their best to push the floating chaos-lion bodies back into the Chaos when Dranko comes swinging back into the hangar. "It's not over yet," he announces grimly. "There are slaadi on that rock. At least six or seven – I don't think they saw me, since I just saw the tops of their heads. I think we'd better heal up now, while we can."

"That's what I was afraid of," says Morningstar, shaking her head. "Those lion things were just to soften us up."

Dawn: What?! No taste test on the chaos doggies? Must have been too much fun swinging that whip!

KidCthulhu: I should mention the extra sucky thing about the chaos doggies. Every quill they left in the flesh was something like -2 to your DEX. They were big quills, and we were getting turned into pincushions. Stupid chaos doggies. No biscuit.

Plane Sailing: Sounds like howlers from the MM. In a big enough pack I imagine the attrition effect of the quills could be pretty alarming. Was the blood floating in the air flavour for the write-up, or did Sagiro start giving concealment from baddie body chunks?

QR 80

Tossed Slaad

It's not long before things get ugly. Ernie and Morningstar have time to cast some quick healing spells, Aravis casts *endurance* on himself, Kibi makes himself *improvedly invisible*, and Grey Wolf pulls one of the quills out of his leg. Droplets of blood drip out of the wound, joining the red cloud in the hangar.

"Come on!" urges Dranko. "Let's move while we've still got our combat spells active!"

"We don't have to try talking to them, do we?" asks Morningstar sarcastically.

"Nah. Just kill 'em," says Dranko with a wink.

Snokas, Step and Flicker try concentrating on the holes in the hangar, hoping to seal them up, but none of them can muster the wherewithal. It turns out not to matter. The hangar vanishes from around them, replaced by a whirling storm of elements. All in the Company are caught in a jumble of shooting flames and tumbling boulders, which they desperately try to dodge. "Sweet Yondalla's sticky buns!" yells Ernie, though his exclamation is lost in the din.

Dranko, being Dranko, reacts quickly. Not seeing any slaad through the storm, he concentrates for a second to clear himself some space. Then he adjusts his gravity to fall toward the slaadi's boarding boulder, and when his feet touch the stone he starts running toward where he remembers seeing the monsters. He sees them, all right – two greenish frog-men, and three with a bluish cast. Invisible himself, he hopes they don't see him. Morningstar instantiates a slab of rock under everyone's feet, and then runs up the boulder herself. Though not following Dranko's precise line, she also stops when she sees the slaadi. "They're up here! Five of them!"

In the midst of everyone else there is a thunderous sound and the elements become even more agitated, as two *chaos hammers* go off. Everyone is damaged and some are left staggered. Kibi, still wounded from the previous battle, takes the full brunt of the spells and is in particularly bad shape.

Ernie and Grey Wolf both see two more slaadi, these a sickly grayish color. Ernie shouts a warning, casts a *healing circle* on everyone nearby, and then moves out into space away from the others. Kibi, staggered from the *chaos hammers*, tries and fails to instantiate a wall for cover against the slaadi, and settles for drinking a healing potion instead. Aravis moves away from the clustered group, casts *shield* on himself, and also fails to manifest a covering wall. Snokas goes charging up the boulder, taking a different arc from Morningstar.

Grey Wolf takes aim at one of the gray slaadi and pegs it directly with a *sonic orb*, but to his dismay it seems to have no effect on the frog-beast. It opens its jaws in an evil grin, illuminated by a passing fireball. But this bit of unfortunate immunity is immediately balanced out as the three blue slaadi all croak spells at Morningstar. She feels her muscles starting to tighten just a bit... but her *ring of freedom of movement* quickly overcomes the effect of *hold person* spells.

One of the green slaadi continues the trend. It casts a spell and moves directly at Dranko (whom it can apparently see), enduring a whip-snap in order to cast *dispel law*. It entirely fails to affect the non-lawful Dranko's invisibility. The other green slaad casts more *chaos hammers*, striking both Dranko and Morningstar.

Flicker and Step both fall towards one of the gray slaadi, as if they had just jumped off a building. They end up flanking, which is the idea. Flicker sizes up the creature, waiting for the right moment to strike.

From out in the depths of the Chaos, a loud croak reverberates even above the cacophony. Another slaad, unseen by any, casts a spell. One Certain Step vanishes, to Flicker's great unhappiness, but he's the only one who notices. His warning shouts go unheard, drowned out by the sounds of clashing elements.

Dranko, wanting to take advantage of his invisibility, ignores the gray slaad for the moment. He moves a short distance and unloads a full flurry of whip-snaps on the closest blue slaad, badly injuring it. With *comprehend languages* up, he hears its panicked croaking. "Augh! What's that? What's that? What's that?"

Morningstar casts *darkbeam* and sends the first ray at the nearest green slaad. It dodges enough to avoid being blinded, as the spell sears its arm.

One of the gray slaadi lets out a particularly loud croak; Grey Wolf finds himself stunned by the *power word*; he reflexively lets go of *Bostock*, which floats in the chaos next to him. The other gray slaad, now facing down only Flicker, tears into the halfling with its sharp claws. Ernie sees Flicker's predicament, extends *Beryn Sur* out in front of himself point first, and uses gravity to fall into the Gray Slaad. The thing's big froggy eyes go wide as it's pierced by the sword. Ouch!

Kibi starts to cast a *summoning* spell, and as he does so he feels wild magic surging into him, effectively Maximizing its effect. Aravis turns the tables on the gray slaad attacking Flicker, administering his own *power word: stun*. As the slaad's eyes defocus, Aravis shouts: "OK, Flicker, take him out!"

Snokas falls toward the nearest blue slaad and smacks it with his pick. He's never seen a slaad before today, but he's guessing from all the blood that it's close to death.

Grey Wolf, stunned, thinks it would be nice to sit down, if only there were something to sit upon.

The blue slaad victimized by Dranko's whip croaks out a command to its fellows, which only Dranko understands. "Target me!" it yells. Four *chaos hammers* go off, centered on the slaad. Dranko and the unfortunate Snokas are caught in the area of all four. A green slaad follows suit, and when the *hammers* clear, both half-orcs are badly wounded. Snokas is staggered and barely conscious.

Flicker figures out just how to best approach the stunned gray slaad floating in front of him. Getting a full attack plus another for being *hasted*, Flicker carves up the frog-beast like a turkey. But he doesn't get any time to gloat over his kill; a moment later he is struck by a *power word* cast by the still unseen slaad out in the Chaos. "Ahhh!" cries Flicker. "I'm blind! I can't see anything! Help! Help!"

Dranko whips at the blue slaad closest to Snokas, and with a clean shot he snaps the creature's neck. There's still another one menacing Snokas, so Dranko changes his gravity and falls toward his comrade, bumping him out of the way and making himself the easiest target instead.

Morningstar fires off her second *darkbeam* at another blue slaad. This one fails to dodge and gets the blinding ray right in the eyes. It starts croaking a stream of profanities. The surviving gray slaad launches a full attack of claws and teeth at Ernie, all of which are foiled by Ernie's plate mail. The slaad speaks telepathically into Ernie's mind. *Next time, you...*

"I am protected by Yondalla's righteous shield," interrupts Ernie. "And you're an icky disgusting frog thing," he adds. Then he smacks the slaad with a solid shot from *Beryn Sur*. *That all you've got?* thinks the slaad into Ernie's mind. *Heh heh heh...*

Kibi's *summon* spell finishes. He had considered summoning his favorite – an earth elemental – but this seems like the right environment for a type of creature he hasn't tried before. A rift appears in space near the slaadi, and several tentacles come out. They grab the edges of the rift and pull the body through, a blobby mass of barbs, eyes, mouths, teeth and more tentacles. Because of the wild magic surge on the spell, it's a particularly large and impressive example of its species – chaos beast!

The summoned creature rolls through space toward a green slaad. The frog-creature's eyes go wide with terror. "Chaos beast!" it shouts at the top of its voice. "CHAOS BEEEEEEEAST!" It flies into a panic. Happy with the results, Kibi pulls out his *deck of illusions* and flips the top card out in front of him. It pops and is replaced with an exquisitely realistic ogre. He moves it a few feet toward some of the slaadi, and instructs it to act menacing. It raises its club and lets out a roar.

Aravis flies upward to get into spellcasting position, though he gets struck in the face by a passing blob of hot mud as he goes. Shaking it off, he casts a *cone of cold*, striking four slaadi, and unfortunately the chaos beast as well. One slaad is immediately frozen to death and the other three (including the surviving grey slaad) are badly injured. The ogre, oddly enough, seems unaffected and unfazed.

Snokas, pushed out of harm's way by Dranko, guzzles a much-needed healing potion. And just in time, too, as the blinded blue slaad casts *chaos hammer* at its own feet, catching both half-orcs. Neither are staggered, but Dranko is as wounded as he can remember being in a long, long time.

One of the blue slaadi flees into the maelstrom, yelling "Chaos beeeeeast!" all the while. A second blue slaad follows it. A third launches a vicious flurry of claws and teeth at the ogre. Kibi smiles as the creature croaks confusedly.

Another *chaos hammer* – this one from a green slaad – strikes Aravis. Flicker, blinded, fumbles out a potion he hopes is *cure serious wounds* and quaffs it. (He's right, fortunately.)

The still invisible slaad spellcaster floating out in the Chaos has identified a new primary target. It unleashes a massive *chain lightning* targeted at the chaos beast, and also catching Aravis and the ogre (ha!). To the great relief of the surviving slaadi, the chaos beast explodes into a shower of chunks and loose tentacles.

Dranko uses a wand to heal himself, and then moves so that he and Snokas are flanking the blinded blue slaad. Morningstar, still with *darkbeams* left, pegs and blinds a green slaad, which starts cursing in frustration. Things seem to be turning generally in the Company's favor, until the surviving gray slaad, facing down Ernie, floats back five feet and casts *power word: stun* on the halfling. Then it instantiates a shell of rock around both itself and Ernie. Aravis points to the rocky sphere and shouts in alarm, "Ernie's trapped in there with one of the gray ones, and he's probably stunned!"

Kibi focuses his will on the sphere and concentrates for all he's worth. His intellect and chaos-savvy overwhelm the mind of the slaad, and he tears away most of the near half of the rocky sphere, replacing it with air. (He's now looking through what looks like a stone puppet-theatre box, watching the "Ernie and slaad" show.) Ernie is clearly stunned; his sword floats next to him. Kibi falls toward Ernie, moves through the hole in the stone sphere, touches both halfling and sword, and casts *dimension door*, removing them both to the (relative) safety of the far side of the boarding boulder. Aravis finishes the tide-turning by casting *power word: stun* himself on the gray slaad.

The battle rages on for a short while longer. Some more *chaos hammers* get dropped, another slaad or two gets cut down by the Company, and some healing spells go off. No one ever catches a glimpse of the death slaad casting spells from the edges of the combat. There's still no sign of One Certain Step. The battle is set up for a stirring conclusion...

Jackylhunter: ...does Dranko have *comprehend languages* up all the time? Is it an item he owns, or did he go and have it made permanent?

Piratecat: I think I had cast it in the (hah!) assumption that we'd be able to bargain with them. It was a vicious fight; multiple *chaos hammers*, even when you're only taking partial damage, are still extremely painful. Having the fight in variable gravity was even more exciting.

Seule: Don't you have to be touching something to *comprehend* it?

Piratecat: Er... if you actually read the damn rules, yeah. I think we house-ruled this after we did it "wrong" so for long.

Sagiro: Piratecat is correct. For a long time we treated *comprehend languages* as a one-way *tongues*, and when we discovered the rule-as-written, decided to stick with how we'd been doing it.

Dawn: I'm interested in the variable gravity combat. Do you take into consideration those pesky Newtonian laws or just run the combat as if airborne or under water?

Sagiro: Dawn, running a 3-D combat is tricky enough without worrying about equal and opposite reactions. I assumed that people adjusted their gravity subconsciously on the fly, so as not to go sailing away every time they connected with a weapon or cast a forceful spell. So, yeah, I just treated the combat as if everyone were flying.

QR 80

Ocean's Nine

To a hypothetical outside observer, it would have been a fascinating conclusion to a hard-fought battle. The Company seemed to have the upper hand, with slaadi variously blinded, wounded and killed, not to mention outnumbered. But the party too were quite injured, and one should never count out a death slaad in Limbo. Alas for the hypothetical watcher that victory was achieved by neither side in the end. The battle, you see, was interrupted by an ocean...

The actors involved are so preoccupied with their life-and-death struggle, they fail to notice that water is starting to become a more prevalent element in the general maelstrom. What floating globules there are, are larger and more numerous, and they herald the arrival of the ocean by about ten seconds. Only the death slaad notices, and even for it, it's too last-second for an escape.

Miles across and moving at over fifty miles per hour, the body of water known to planar scholars as the Transient Sea of Limbo comes crashing through the battle, a dark inexorable tide breaking around the slaadi boulder and sweeping all and sundry away with it. It snuffs out bits of fire and electricity, engulfs chunks of earth and stone, and pushes the air in front of its enormous leading edge. The party are at first (for a few seconds) sent hurtling along with the ocean's border, but soon they become swallowed up, after which they slow down and eventually seem to stop moving at all, all things being relative.

Each member of the Company finds him or herself alone in submerged darkness, unable to see, unable to breathe. Kibi immediately dons his *helm of water breathing*. Grey Wolf draws *Bostock*, since while gripping the hilt he has no need of air. Most of the rest, with concentration that only seasoned adventurers could muster in such straits, make for themselves pockets of air in which to survive. Flicker, not exactly a bulwark of wisdom, can't manage it. He tries for a few seconds to make some air, but succeeds only in making little clusters of bubbles that disperse unhelpfully around his head. For a few seconds after that, he panics. Soon after he calms down a bit and wonders what drowning will be like.

Then he sees light. The halfling adjusts his gravity towards it, and with a good thirty seconds left before asphyxiation, falls into Dranko's air bubble. The half-orc has lit a lantern, intending it as a beacon for the others to find him.

"Whew. Thanks!" exclaims Flicker, floating in the air pocket. "I thought I was a goner!"

It takes some time and coordination, but enough of the party create light that everyone is soon congregated in one large bubble of air. (Morningstar, having activated the *daylight* power of her holy shield, is the easiest to spot.) Kibi makes a stone slab near the bottom of the bubble so people can stand or sit more naturally. Step is the last to join; he emerged from the death slaad's *maze* to find himself completely submerged, and far removed from the rest of the Company. He only learns what happened through a *sending* from Morningstar, and eventually he spots the bright but distant light of the Company's air pocket.

Morningstar casts a second *sending*, this time to the invisible slaad that had clearly been the most powerful of the bunch:

We strongly suggest that you stay away from us. There is no reason for us to fight, and we are leaving your territory.

The response:

Exit as quickly as possible. You are ten. We are legion.

OR SO

So there they all are, in a big bubble of air. The 'walls' show a warbling reflection of themselves; Dranko spits at it and watches the air/water border ripple. "So," he says to no one in particular. "Here we are, in a tiny little shard of eternal Chaos, trapped inside a bubble, trapped inside an ocean. It doesn't get any weirder than this."

"Morningstar agreed to marry you," Ernie points out. The others nod. Yeah, that's weird.

"I never thought I'd get married," says Morningstar, looking at Dranko and smiling.

"Me neither," says Dranko. "Or at least, I thought if I did get married, it would be to a bar-room trollop who was drunk at the time. And blind." Morningstar raises her eyebrows at him, and Ernie clears his throat. Realizing he may be heading in the wrong direction, Dranko adds, "And now I'm marrying so far above my station, it's not even funny!"

An unlucky fish swims into the bubble and flops around on the stone. Dranko mentions that maybe Kay could talk with it, and that gets everyone to thinking about Kay and what happened to her. "I miss her," says Ernie.

"Me too," says Snokas. "She was the only one who knew which direction we were going."

Plane Sailing: What did happen to Kay? I forgot!

thatdarncat: I don't believe Kay made it when the world changed.

Piratecat: Nope. When we were cowering in the small room and readying to fight the mummies and skeletal hydras and bone naga, Kay got sucked out of our universe and into a parallel one; something to do with the wild magic and her natural Yrimpa-ness.

In truth, Kay's player moved to Connecticut and had two kids. But you know how it is.

Sagiro: You're close! It was actually when you were cowering in a small room (a cloakroom) hoping to wait out a hostile living storm. The room before the undead fight was the woman's bedroom, and Kay was still with you during the battle.

There was a tremor of wild-magic instability throughout all of Het Branoi, and Kay, being bonded with an elemental creature of Air, was torn out of reality and into a parallel dimension. (Heck, if the tremor had been any stronger, it might have done the same thing to the living storm. Ah, well.)

Plane Sailing: Thanks for the reminder, all. Bye-bye Kay, hope you ended up in a better world than the Slices. (Mind you, breaking with tradition a bit, isn't it? I thought players tended to move to the other side of the country? Connecticut is only spitting distance in comparison.)

thatdarncat: The left coast thing is for arcane spellcasters and divine agents. Obviously lowly rangers are immune.

After the brutal fight against the slaadi and their minions, the Company need to rest and get their spells back. After some discussion of the logistics, Aravis casts a *secure shelter* on the stone slab, and *rope tricks* inside the shelter. Only Ernie remains outside, wearing Step's magic ring that reduces the need for sleep. He also gets the Stabilizer, and he ties one of the *rope trick* ropes around his waist.

Ernie has a bit of trouble keeping the stone slab and the air bubble intact by himself, but he finds that it gets easier as the time wears on. Still, it's a tedious and difficult eight hours. The only excitement comes in the last half hour, as a rain of small boulders rolls through the water around him. A few come right into the air bubble, mostly bouncing off the sides of the shelter. Ernie has to dodge one or two.

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Step wakes, drops out of his extradimensional pocket, and laments the absence of sun. (He declines Grey Wolf's offer of standing atop the shelter and casting *body of the sun*.)

"I can give you a moon," says Dranko, grinning.

"Having learned now what you mean," says Step, "I can safely say I don't want to see that again. Ever."

Over breakfast, Kibi announces that he can disguise the entire party for twelve hours if they desire, by casting *veil*. They decide to look like slaadi, thinking that will help scare off potential trouble, and other slaadi will be less likely to attack on sight.

Hey, does anyone notice it's getting a bit warm in the air bubble?

While they cast daily buffing spells, the air continues to grow warmer, and slightly humid. Step puts his hand out into the ocean and it's definitely warmer than it was the night before, but there's no sign of what's causing it. Hmm. Morningstar casts *find the path* to reestablish the direction toward the closest Way. Kibi casts his *veil*, and it's mighty disturbing (for a few seconds, anyway) to see everyone else looking like big frog-beasts. The dwarf can't help having a bit of fun, and makes Dranko look like a gray slaad with pinkish polka dots.

I don't need to look like a slaad, says Scree to his master. *I have an instant disguise*. The earth elemental spreads out in zero-g, his component rocks looking mostly like any other cluster of stones in Limbo. "Your Eyes of Moirel are showing," notes Flicker.

When everyone's ready, they start moving the slab-and-air-bubble in the direction indicated by Morningstar's spell. As the minutes pass, it continues to grow warmer in the bubble. Thin vapors of steam appear around them, and then over the course of a minute, the water out in the ocean starts to bubble and boil. The water is also starting to glow orange, and the glow is rapidly getting brighter. "Maybe we should..." begins Aravis.



There's a big flash of blinding steam, and then the water outside of their air pocket is replaced with roaring flame! The steam vanishes, but now the Company are effectively in an oven, and they realize that in a few seconds they'll start to cook for real. Everyone starts concentrating frantically not just on the air around them, but on the temperature of that air – a heretofore irrelevant detail. Morningstar exerts the most control, and it's enough. The air cools inside, and fog immediately forms all around the border of their air bubble. Fortunately the mass of fire is nowhere near the size of the Transient Sea, and after twenty more minutes it moves off, leaving them once more in the "normal" maelstrom of Limbo.

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Two and half hours later, with Morningstar on her second *find the path*, and having fended off a lightning storm that knocked chunks out of their reformed hangar, they spot a twinkle of blue light in the distance. After another half hour they reach it: a large Way, fifteen feet on a side. There's nothing around it, and no sign of slaadi or other creatures. From their talk with Medina back at the Eye of the Storm, they presume that it leads to another Slice of Limbo.

At this point, for some reason, my players got sidetracked into a long discussion regarding a hypothetical "Leomund's Secure Latrine," and how it might work, and the perils of using it in conjunction with *disintegration fields* or *teleportation circles*. It was just one of those things. You had to be there, I guess.

Ernie volunteers to be the first one through. They tie a rope to him, and he hops through the Way. There's the familiar empty blackness, the unnatural pulling, and... **WHAM!** There's a huge piece of earth just on the other side, less than a foot from the Way. It knocks Ernie right back through, back to the waiting Company. He's rubbing a bump on his head.

They wait a few minutes, and Kibi goes next. Before he goes he uses his Earth Mage ability to cast *xorn movement*, just in case. He grabs the rope and jumps through. Sure enough the huge rock is still there, but Kibi phases cleanly into it. The only problem is the rope, which he is forced to let go since it can't move through stone with him.

This is a nice place, comments Scree, as the two of them go swimming through the enormous chunk of earth. *High quality stuff they've got here in Limbo. Oooh, look. Rubies. We could tell Flicker and Dranko, but there's no good way to get them out.*

Scree discovers the edge of the mass, does some calculations, and deduces it will clear the Way in another five or ten minutes. Having figured that out, Kibi and his familiar head back to the Way to rejoin the others.

They find the rest of the party looking worried. Dranko and Aravis look like they're in pain. "What's wrong?" asks the dwarf.

"Kibi!" says Ernie. "We thought you might be dead, or squished!"

"Oh, sorry," says Kibi. "We got caught up examining the rock. It's good solid stone, and there are some rubies deep inside it. Scree figured out how much longer it would be – about five minutes and you'll all be able to get through."

"Why didn't you come out and tell us that?" asks Aravis, holding his jaw.

"I did, once we knew. If I'd come back sooner, we wouldn't know how long the wait was."

"While you were gone," says Morningstar, "Aravis and Dranko tried going through to see if you were okay."

"That wasn't very smart," says Kibi. "There's a big rock over there!"

"You let go of the rope!" says Dranko, exasperated. "That's the signal for 'I've been eaten!' What did you expect us to do?"

"I couldn't very well come back without Scree," Kibi protests. "I'm sorry if I made you guys worry." He doesn't look *that* sorry, but since no un-healable harm was done, the matter is soon dropped.

A few minutes later the entire Company are safely through the Way, in yet another Slice of swirling Chaos. Morningstar again tries to locate the monastery using *find the path*, but it's not in this Slice either, so they settle for heading toward the next Way. It's disheartening; for all they know there could be dozens of Slices between them and the monastery that sent Kibi his invitation. Dranko looks out into the morass of seething elements and grumbles, "I don't see why they spent all that effort hiding the damned tower. It's not like anyone can actually *do* anything once they get here."

Happily, he's proven wrong. Only a couple of hours into their trek through the new Slice, they spot a movement in the distance that's clearly a living creature. Dranko gets a decent glimpse of it, and thinks it looks like a big spider. Then he loses track of it as a shower of water blobs moves between them.

"What if whatever that was hates slaadi? That's what we look like," reminds Kibi.

"If that's the case, you can just drop the illusion," says Aravis.

"Yeah," says Kibi, rolling his eyes. "And it'll see a bunch of slaadi suddenly looking like something else, and think, 'Those slaadi are trying to disguise themselves with an illusion.'"

The hangar creeps forward; the arachnid creature was almost directly in their path. The party cast some preparatory spells just in case (including a *telepathic bond* among Dranko, Ernie, Flicker and Morningstar), and Dranko crawls up onto the roof of the hangar to get a better look. Somewhere beyond the spot he thought he saw the spider creature, he catches a brief glimpse of blue – which is then covered as a wall of fire leaps up.

I think it's guarding the Way, thinks Dranko over the mind-link. *And given that whatever it is probably hates slaadi, I also think we should drop the disguises.*

Kibi looks skeptical. *I don't know that it would do any harm,* continues Dranko. *And it might help. Kibi, you're pretty intimidating just being yourself. I mean, you're a bad-ass dwarf with a walking rock behind you!*

"And everyone knows that spiders are traditionally afraid of dwarven wizards," says Kibi dryly.

"They will be," says Dranko.

Everyone's afraid of rocks, adds Scree. Who wants to get hit with a rock?

Kibi dismisses the *veil*, and they move the hangar closer to the wall of fire. Dranko spots a small object floating by off to the left, heading in their direction. Kibi casts *see invisibility* and *detect magic*, but neither spell registers anything interesting. A few seconds later the shape comes close enough for everyone to see that it's a slaad head with a sharp wooden stake driven through it. *Good thing we dropped the disguise, huh?* thinks Dranko.

The natural ebb and flow of elements gives Dranko a better view for a few seconds, and he sees that the wall of fire is actually a sphere, probably surrounding the Way. There are also many of the spider creatures – maybe fifteen in all – moving around nearby. They're very large, with bodies the size of human torsos, and long spider legs extending outward. They're like enormous daddy-longlegs. Some of them just float in the Chaos, while others stand on small stone platforms that move with them. Kibi activates his *ioun stone of tongues* and joins Dranko on the roof of the hangar, where the half-orc is waving a piece of white cloth to indicate their peaceful intentions. One of the spiders leaves the group and drifts toward them, stopping about thirty feet away. The space around it stays clear of all elements but air.

"Hello!" calls Kibi. "Will you please let us pass? We mean you no harm."

Graywolf-ELM: Ah yes. Parley, we hardly new ye...

OR SO

Land of the Vree

The large arachnid makes some clicking sounds, that Kibi's *tongues* translates as: Hmmmmm...

Then: *Yoooouuuuuuuuuuuuuuu shouldn't beeeeeeee heeeeeeeeeeeeeerrre.*

That's what it sounds like to Kibi. The translation comes to his ears in a musical sing-songy voice that tends to elongate various words and syllables. To the others, it's a disturbing combination of clicks, chitters, burbles and hisses.

"We're trying to find a monastery, and avoid slaadi," says Kibi.

Whooooooooo arrrrrrrrre youuuuuuuuuuu?

"My name is Kibilhathur Bimson."

Though it gets lost in the din of chaos, those close by can hear the sound of Dranko slapping his forehead. How can anyone be so smart and yet so... so *trusting* at the same time? It's not like Kibi has *assassins* after him or anything...

The arachnid starts chittering excitedly. *Yoooouuuuuuuu are Kibilhathur Bimmmmmmmmsonnnnnnn? In that case, you arrrrre most welllllllcommme. Youuu and your frriendszzzzzz, commmmme with meeeeeeeeeeee.*

The creature stands on six of its eight long spider legs. On closer examination, the party see it has two additional limbs, like smaller arms jutting out of the front of its body. These end in multi-jointed clawed hands.

"What is your name?" asks Kibi.

I am Gullllllll Trezzzzzzzzz. I am of the Veeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

"Nice to meet you."

Gazzzzz Murrrrrrrrrr will be most pleazzzzzzed that you have commmmme. Our waiting is ovvvvvvvverrrrrr.

"What do you know of me?" asks Kibi.

You are one the Chaos said would come to free the Veeeeeeeeeee.

"Did it say anything about how I might do that?"

Gazzzzz Murrrrrrrr knowzzzzzzz. He can tellllll youuuuuuu.

Gul Trez turns to the other Vree guarding the Way. *Kibilhathur Bimmmmmmsonnnnnnn!* he exclaims, and the other Vree start chittering happily. Step confirms that this one, at least, is not evil.

Kibi clears his throat. "The last time somebody recognized me, he tried to kidnap me and kill me," says the dwarf.

I am glad they did not succeeeeeeeeeeeeeeed.

"What I'm trying to say is, we don't know that we can trust you. Would you mind if one of our spellcasters used a spell to find out your intentions?"

Our intention is that youuuuuu will help us, says Gul Trez affably. Freeeeee us, return us. So says Gazzzzz Murrrrr.

Gul Trez assents to *detect thoughts*, but its surface thoughts are too alien for Morningstar to comprehend. She says as much in Common.

"Why are you protecting that blue portal?" Kibi asks.

One of the other Vree makes some quick gestures with its arms. Gul Trez looks Kibi over before speaking again.

I am tooooooooooooooo trussssting. You may not beeeeeeee Kibilhathur Bimmmmmmmsonnnnnnnn. Maybe you killed him and are now preeeeeending to be himmmmmm? What proof can you offer of whoooooo you arrrrrrrr?

Kibi explains this to the others. Dranko takes out the little statuette of Kibi and shows it to the Vree.

You havvvve a friend who izzzzz a sculptor, says Gul Trez. Dranko scowls.

It will be dannnnnnngerous for maaaaaaaaaa to allow you innnnn without knooooooooowing.

"What proof do you want?" asks Kibi.

That's a stumper. Hmmm. Mmmmmmm. Hmmmm. Youuuu must wait here. I will confirmmmmm with the Abbot, Gazzzzz Murrrrr.

Abbot? The light goes on. They've found the monastery! "Kibi!" says Ernie. "Doesn't your letter have the name of the Abbot on it? Is it Gaz Mur?"

"The letter, of course!" says Grey Wolf. "Show him the letter."

Kibi fishes out the letter that had been delivered to him back at the Eye of the Storm, and shows it to Gul Trez. The Vree reaches out with one of the smaller arms and takes it, waving it in front of its many eyes.

Wait here, pleazzzzze. He goes back to the sphere of fire, a patch of which irises open to allow the Vree to enter. The party catch another glimpse of blue inside, confirming their suspicion that the Vree are using the fire to guard the Way.

An hour passes. The Company observe the remaining Vree with curiosity and from a respectful distance. They note with interest that the Vree standing on personal stone discs are moving them about via telekinesis, rather than a constant recreation. Also, while they don't carry any weapons, their bodies and legs are covered with chitinous black plates, and the legs end in sharp claws. There's no doubt they'd be fearsome opponents, if it came to that.

Gul Trez returns, appearing as another hole opens in the fiery sphere. His two front arms are waving around excitedly as he approaches the hangar. It izzzzz youuuuuuuuuuu! he exclaims. Kibilhathur Bimmmmmsonnnnnn, and your friends, come with us, come with ussssssss.

The Vree floats back toward the sphere, and again it opens. Gul Trez motions for the Company to follow him in. Whennnn you go throouuuuuugh, do not touch anythinnnnnnnn. Just followwww usssssssss.

Kibi, translating for the party, says to Dranko: "Don't lick anything when you go through the portal."

Therrrrre will be time for that for youuuuuuuuuuuu, later onnnnnn, continues Gul Trez, speaking to Kibi. By the wayyyyy, what are yourrrrrr foooooood needs? Dooooo youuuuu have anyyyyyyyy?

"That depends on what you have," says Kibi. "Water and bread and nice beef stew would go well. But we have our own food too, so don't worry too much about it."

We have fruit and vegggetables. That's what we growwwwwwwwww...

"Vegetables aren't food," Dranko scoffs. "That's what food eats."

As the party fall slowly toward the Way, they see that the spiked slaad head they saw was one of many; there are dozens, forming a loose spherical perimeter around the portal. It would be hard to approach without getting the hint. "I'm very impressed with all the slaadi that you've killed," Kibi comments. Gul Trez chitters happily.

The Company go through the Way, accompanied by Gul Trez and an escort of six other Vree. After the usual transition between Slices, the party emerge into a place that both is and is not chaotic. That is, they think they're still in Limbo, but there's no raging Chaos to be seen, no frenzy of elemental forces. There's a soft, constant ambient light with no visible source. And they

are inside a pair of large, concentric spheres. The inner sphere, about fifty feet in diameter, is not an enclosed solid. Rather, it is made of wooden and metal stakes tied together with ropes, such that the whole forms a loose skeleton of a sphere. A strange red energy plays along the ropes, and the whole makes a faint buzzing sound. The gaps between the ropes are large enough that they could easily leave the sphere without touching the red energy.

The outer sphere is over two hundred feet in diameter, and is solidly enclosed. It's a patchwork of metal, wood and multicolored stone. Way up near the top is a round hatch like a large hobbit-hole door. The Way through which they've come is off-center in both spheres. Something else occupies the very center – a cage, made of metal and wood, sized for a large humanoid.

Six Vree accompany the party out of the inner sphere, and up to the distant hatch on the outer sphere. Gravity works the same as in the previous Slice, and it's liberating to be able to move about without worrying about fireballs, boulders, oceans and lightning storms. Gul Trez taps on the hatch, and it swings outward.

Outside is a city unlike anything they've ever seen. Its buildings are large spheres floating in the air, all around an area more than a mile on a side. The spheres are made of solid wood, metal and stone, like smaller versions of the one from which they're emerging. They have windows in them, and round hatches for doors. In some places multiple spheres are pressed together in multi-dwelling units, while other spheres stand alone.

Sweeping in majestic curves all around the city, connecting the many buildings, are beautiful stone walkways (despite the fact that the Vree can effectively fly). Streams of water, like rivers without banks or beds, flow through the city like a second network of roads; almost every building has at least one window past which this river flows.

Everywhere are the Vree, dozens of them, maybe hundreds. Some walk upon the stone pathways, while others fall freely or flit around on personal stone discs. In the distance, the Company can see large clods of earth gently floating and tilting in the air. As these islands tilt toward them, they see Vree farmers tilling earth with their claws, and plants and trees growing in abundance. Everything is lit with a rich, uniform glow that seems to come from everywhere and everything. The Vree have truly mastered the Chaos, and their monastery is a thing of wonder.

Yoooooooooo may walk or flyyyyy... whatevvvver makes you commmmfotablllllile, says Gul Trez to Kibi. And your serrrvantzzzzzz may join youuuuuuuuuuuu.

"You guys can stay with me," translates Kibi, trying not to smile.

The Chaos sayzzzz that youuuuu will not be hostile to ussssssss, but in case the Chaos is wronnnnnng, I should warrrrrm youuuuu not to be hostile if you wishhhhhh to livvvvve.

"We won't be hostile if you won't be," says Kibi.

We would not! Youuuuu are our saaaaaaaaaaviorrrrrr! Thisssssss wayyy.

Gul Trez gestures toward a single distant sphere, with many sphere clusters around it. As they approach it, they see that it's larger than most of the others, and its pattern is very chaotic, with haphazard windows and swirling water spiraling around it. As they watch, an arachnid arm reaches out a window with a container, fills it from the stream running past, and withdraws.

Gul Trez knocks on the ornate front door. **Commeeee innnnnnnn!** says a deep voice from within.

The door has a keyhole, meant to accommodate a Vree claw. Gul Trez inserts the end of one of his legs into it; there's a click, and the door swings open to reveal a large circular room. It's filled with a confusing jumble of strange objects that might be furniture, or art, or have some unknown utility to the Vree.

High up near the (relative) ceiling is a large Vree floating near something that might be a desk. Papers float about it in loose array, and the Vree snatches these out of the air, presses them to the desk, and writes upon them using one of his front arms. (The eight main legs are useful for grabbing things, while the front legs are as good as human hands for fine tasks.) All the many eyes of the Vree swivel to regard the Company, and Kibi in particular.

Kibilhathur Bimmmmmsonnnnnnn! booms the Vree. **The Chaossss told us you would commmmmmmmme.**

"Well, I got a letter..." says Kibi.

A letter written by meeeeeeeeeee, many yearzzzzzz ago. Aaaaahhh. Our salvaaaaation is at hand. We are veryyyyy happyyyyyy that you have decided to commmmmmme. Did you have difffffficultiezzzzzz?

So this is **Gaz Mur**, the abbot of the monastery.

“We killed ten slaadi on the way,” says Kibi. “They ambushed us with some lion-y creatures out in front.”

Hmmmmmmmmmm. A stannnnnnndard cowardly slaad tactic. Send in those beasssssssssts for the dirty work, cleannnnnnnn up afterwarrrrrrrd.

The Vree seems to remember something. **Excuzzzzze me, but are you thirrrrrrsty?**

“Well, yes,” says the dwarf.

Nezzzzzz! Water for the guessssts!

There’s a clattering from an adjacent room, and a Vree comes floating in. It stands on four of its legs, with the other legs holding buckets. When **Nez** reaches the party he concentrates for a moment, and then releases the buckets so adroitly that they don’t tilt on their own.

However you creaturesssss drink, you may do so, says Gaz Mur.

While Kibi drinks straight from the nearest bucket, Dranko pulls out a jeweled goblet and dips it into the water. **Your servant’zzzz cup is fine,** says Gaz Mur. **Why do youuuuu drink from the bucket?**

Kibi can’t suppress a smile as he turns to Dranko and says, “Gaz Mur says you should give me the cup.”

Dranko hands it over with no small amount of suspicion. Aravis, suspecting something’s up, casts *tongues* himself.

Gaz Mur waits while the party drink. Then, almost off-handedly, he says, **Weee will need to cast spellzzzz upon you to finish the machiiiiiine. Izzzzzz that okay?**

Everyone looks up, alarmed, and none more than Kibi. “What machine? What does it do?” asks the dwarf.

The Chaossssss said we would neeeeeeeeeeee you, Kibilhathurrrr Bimmmmsonn.

“To do what?”

Youuuuuu will fix the uuuuuuniverse. You will restore these sliced-off bits of worlds, including ourzzzzz. Then we will be returnnnnnnned to the grannnnnnn Chaos, not this pale imitation.

“So everyone would go back to the Slices they came from?”

Yesssss. It is proper.

“How will this be achieved?”

Weeeee will put you innn the machinnnnnnne...

Yeah. About that... “I’d like to take a good look at it first, to make sure it’s up to, uh, good engineering standards,” says Kibi.

“And that it doesn’t involve rotating knives,” adds Ernie under his breath.

It should not hurrrrt you, assures Gaz Mur.

“Still,” says Kibi, trying not to betray his nervousness, “I’d like to take a look at it, to understand how it works.”

Quietly, Aravis says to the others, “What if this Chaos, that speaks to the Abbot, is the Black Circle?”

It’s a disturbing thought, and not far-fetched. “We can’t cast *commune* or even *augury* in the Slices, but something is speaking to the Vree,” says Ernie.

“Did the Chaos speak to you before you were in this place?” asks Kibi.

An astute queszzzztion. You are not of the Chaos. Yesssss, the Chaos spoke to us in our lonnnnnng years of meditation and work. Then it stopped. You must know, Kibilhathurrrr Bimmmmsonn, how all this workzzzzz. Bits of worlds, strung together. It is most unnnnnnnatural. We were separated from our God, that which spawns the Chaos. Mmmmm. Several yearzzzzzz with no God, no guidance. But the Chaossssss spawned a new God, for it cannnot abide without a sourccccce for long. It has done its best. It strings the sliced-away bits of chaos together, trying to reformmmmm the pure Chaos of our birth. MMmmmm. But it cannot. We fear that perhaps the Chaos cannnot survive. It fears that, too. Thus, we must be returned. Our God, the new Chaos, is young, but it speaks to us, and its wizzzzzzdom is still abunnnnnndant.

“Do you know that this new God is a real Chaos god?” asks Kibi.

Ovvvvv course! We know our own God! It can reach through and see beyond to other bitssssss of worlds. It knew of youuuuuuuu, didn't it? We meditate to the new God. It ssssssppeaks to us. It is young, its thoughts ill-formed, but... the imporrrrrtant bits of its messssssssage were clear. Is your name not Kibilhathurrrrr Bimmmmsonnnnn?

Kibi nods, and thinks for a moment before continuing. "Do you know anything about some crazy guy traveling around with statues of me?" he asks the Abbot.

Gaz Mur wonders for a moment if he's understood correctly. **Nooooo... the Chaosssss has not spokennnn of a demented person carrying your likenessssssss.**

Kibi shows Gaz Mur the statue. **It looks just like youuuuuu**, says the Abbot. **Someonnnnnnnnnnne is making thezzzzze for youuuuu?**

"Not for me. One was found on the body of a demon."

Dranko takes the statuette, spits on it, and starts to polish it on his shirt.

Kibilhathurrrrr Bimmmmsonnnnn, your servant should treat your likenessssss with more rezzzzzpect!

"He says to treat the statue with more respect," Kibi tells Dranko.

"He thinks you're Kibi's servant," adds Aravis, grinning at the two of them.

"He WHAT?" Dranko roars. He turns a bright red. It was bad enough being the 'dim one' back in Green Valley.

Kibi has the grace to look sheepish. "Give me that cup back," Dranko grumbles.

It was nice while it lasted, says Scree to his master.

Fajitas: Can I just express my utmost admiration for the monastery full of giant spiders? Superb!

Hammerhead: Why is it that whenever only one party member is able to speak with the locals, the other ones end up being servants or assistants?

Piratecat: 'Cause Kibi is prejudiced against half-orcs. *sniff*

Poor Dranko – no parents, no one loves him, mocked at every turn, abused by dwarves, made to work his poor fingers to the bone...

Enkhidu: You sure that Kibi's prejudice doesn't come from something else? Maybe something not in the Story Hour? I bet Dranko licked him.

RangerWickett: His wife loves him. And... and, though it might break her heart to hear this... I love him too. Because, deep down, don't we all have a little Dranko in us? *shifty eyes*

Uzumaki: Future wife, anyway... Are there any wedding plans for them? They're in a monastery after all, though a spider wedding would probably be a rather bloody affair. "I now pronounce you husband and wife... You may now eat the groom."

Plane Sailing: ROFLMAO!

QR 80

Machina Ex Dei

...click... click hiss click burble slurp clickclick...

Or, as Kibi hears it: **Areee any of youuuuuuuu hunnnnnnnnngry?**

Gaz Mur, Abbot of the Vree Monastery, regards his guests with numerous multifaceted eyes. There is general agreement among the party that yes, some food would not go amiss.

Weeeee will have fooooooood brought to youuuuuuuu, says Gaz Mur.

"That would be very much appreciated," says Kibi. Gaz Mur waves three of his arms toward a waiting servant in the back of his spacious round office, and the second Vree flies out through a hatch.

"So," says Kibi. "What will happen to me in this Machine? Do you know how it works, or were you just following instructions?"

Mmmmmmm... weeeeeeee believe that your magic will go baaaack through the Portal, and be uuuuuuuuuused to sunder the unnnnnnnnatural connections that bind all the Slices togetherrrrrrrrrr.

Kibi frowns at the notion of sundering. "Will it... will it harm me?"

Pruzzzz Flit says noooooooooo, answers the Abbot. **He is most knowledgeable about the Machiiiiiiine. He is the master of mindzzzzz, and the most immmmmmmimportant person in the monastery, excluding myzzzzzzself.**

"The 'master of minds'?" asks Kibi. "What does that mean?"

Look about you! says the Abbot, motioning to the closest window. **We are innnnnn the Chaos, yet everything izzz stable, yezzzzz?**
Thaaaaaat does not happen by itself, you knowwww. He coordinatezzzzzz the effort to keep thingzzzzz stable at the monastery.

At Morningstar's urging, Kibi asks, "Have you ever heard of the Eyes of Moirel?"

Eyezzzzz of what? No. Are they imporrrrrrrrrrrtant to you?

"Well... yes," says Kibi.

I can have sommmmmme of my people read through old scrollllllls and bookzzzzz and see if there is mention of themmmmmmm.

"I'd appreciate that," says Kibi. "Did Pruz Flit build the Machine himself?"

Pruz Flit, yes. Very busy, Pruz Flit. Uzzzzzzually his job is full timmmmmme, but he was able to leave the mmmmmmm maintenance of the monastery to his key servants while he oversaw the building of the Machiiiiiiine.

The Vree servant comes back into the office with large baskets hanging from all of its legs. Each basket is filled with an assortment of unrecognized fruits. There's a basket for each of them, filled with more food than each of them would normally consume in a week – easily twenty pounds.

Before any of the Company can even decide which fruit to try first, Gaz Mur plunges his head into his own basket, from which comes a truly horrific sound of gobbling and slurping. They can see the bulges of food swelling the Abbot's throat as he eats; it's one of the least appetizing spectacles they've ever witnessed.

"Kibi," asks Morningstar, "Could you ask the Abbot if he'd object to me casting *detect poison* on the fruits, just in case?"

Kibi does so. Gaz Mur lifts his head out of his meal. Strands of thick saliva trail from his mandibles back into his basket of (now mushy) fruit. Perhaps mindful of his manners, he slurps them into his hairy mouth. It's all the members of the Company can do not to get sick right on the spot.

Pleazzzz, by all means, says Gaz Mur. **We have assumed the foooooood is safe for you, but we cannot be surrrrrre.**

It turns out to be a good idea; some of the fruits register as poison. Morningstar warns that the small green ones could be dangerous.

Through Kibi, Aravis asks Gaz Mur if the Vree came up with the idea for the Machine in the first place.

It came from the Source, explains the Abbot. **We prayyyyyed for a way to end this imprizzzzzonment, and the Chaotic Source put into our minds the Machinnnnnnnne, and the name of Kibilhathurrrr Bimmmmsonnnn.**

There are mixed feelings among the Company about the Vree and their Machine. They debate it back and forth for a minute or two, while Gaz Mur finishes his meal.

"We could go to one of the other places where people are looking for Kibi," says Morningstar. "There's the Lord of the Roses, and those ant-creatures that sent the assassin."

"I wonder if they have Kibi Machines too," says Ernie.

"Even if they do," says Aravis, "We still won't know if it's all a Black Circle plot, or a legitimate way that someone is trying to fix the Slices."

"And there's the crazy Black Circle guy making statues of Kibi," adds Ernie. "Maybe we could find him."

But no one really wants to commit to leaving the Chaos without at least having *tried* something. In the end, they leave it up to Kibi.

Would you like any dezzzzzzzzzert? asks Gaz Mur.

Strangely enough, no one is hungry, and that's before the servant brings in the dessert basket, full to the brim with squirming white maggots. Gaz Mur sticks in his proboscis and slurps some out. Between gulps, he says to Kibi, **Pruzzzz Flit will need to speeeeeak with youuuuuu. There are some calibrationzzz that still neeeeeeed to be done on the Machinnnnnnnnnne, for which youuuuuuuuu are nezzzzzessaryyy.**

"And they have to fit you to the shackles," says Ernie jokingly under his breath.

With the meal and interview over, Gaz Mur asks about the bipeds' preferred sleeping arrangements, and says it will all be taken care of. Pruz Flit will likely want to speak with Kibi as soon as possible, but the rest of the party are free to go where they wish until they want to sleep.

"Is there anywhere we shouldn't go?" asks Grey Wolf.

If youuuuu go too farrrrrr, you will leave the boundzzzzz of the stability, so beware. Alzzzzzo, there is another one of the Bluuuuuuue Portalzzzz out of here. You may go through if you wish; it should be safer for youuuuuu. It goes to a place where all is air and bluuuuue.

"That sounds terrible!" says Kibi.

"An elemental plane I haven't been to yet!" says Dranko. "It'll be another notch on my belt."

Aravis, Dranko, Step, Snokas and Grey Wolf are curious about this place of air and blue, and head that way. Before they go, Morningstar casts a *telepathic bond* on Dranko, Aravis, Grey Wolf and Kibi.

Kibi, says Scree, *let's not go there under any circumstances.*

Kibi nods. *So what do you think about this Machine?* he asks his familiar.

I don't think I trust it, says Scree. *We don't know anything about it. Perhaps we should go take a look.*

Since this Pruz Flit fellow wants to talk to them anyway, that sounds like a good plan. The four of them leave Gaz Mur and head back across the monastery. It takes some practice to use the walkways, since they bend and twist like pieces of disconnected Moebius strip. They constantly have to adjust their personal gravity to stay upright.

OR SO

Meanwhile, the others find Gul Trez waiting for them nearby. Helllo, he says. Do you neeeeeed me to guide you about?

"Yes," says Aravis. "We'd like to see the portal that goes to the plane of Air."

Gul Trez makes some agitated chattering sounds. Mmmmm... caaaaaan you survive there? Weeeeeeee cannot.

"Why not?" asks Aravis. "Is it dangerous?"

It izzzzz not Chaosssss, explains Gul Trez. We loooozzzze our life energyyyy when removvvved frommmmm the Chaosssss. It izzzzz part of usssssssss.

"We can survive," says Aravis, nodding. "Don't worry."

Then followww meehee, says Gul Trez, falling away backward like a plummeting tour guide. Gul Trez leads the five of them to the blue Way; it's larger than most they've seen, over ten feet on a side. What catches their eye, though, is about fifty yards beyond it: the border of the monastery. It's not a sharp dividing line, but the light slowly fades into a great blackness, and out in the depths they can see distant flashes of red and orange light of fire and lightning in the vastness. It's a sobering reminder that they're still in the heart of Limbo, albeit in a safe oasis. Dranko gazes out at the turbulent morass, then looks over his shoulder at the floating spheres of the monastery. "You know," he says, "when we succeed, which with luck and Delioch's blessing we will, we're going to go home to our own world... and it's going to be so frikin' boring!"

"Oh, come on," says Aravis. "We'll get into some sort of trouble before too long."

"And if we don't, it'll come looking for us," adds Grey Wolf, nodding. Dranko perks up at the thought.

Grey Wolf, Snokas and Step hold the ropes tied to Dranko and Aravis, and those two jump through into the Way. After the transition they find themselves hanging in empty air, and since their minds instinctively decide on an "up," they start to plummet. Their ropes pay out rapidly until they readjust their gravity. There are no clouds, no local fauna, and no geographic features of any kind – just a uniform pale blue light and empty air in every direction. Only the Way itself offers a frame of reference.

Dranko practices some corkscrew maneuvers while flying, and is clearly getting the hang of it before he is stopped cold. It's not that he slams into anything, but rather he comes to a sudden halt, like he's settled into an invisible cushion that's stolen all of his momentum.

"Did you do that?" he calls out to Aravis. The wizard shakes his head. Dranko realigns his gravity to fall back toward the Way, and that works just fine.

"I bet I know what's going on," says Aravis. "We must be in a very small Slice, and you just found the edge."

To confirm his belief, he casts *true seeing*, which makes Slice boundaries appear as opaque gray ‘walls.’ He sees that this Slice is actually shaped like a tall elevator shaft, not much more than fifty yards across, but extending both ‘up’ and ‘down’ as far as he can see. Dranko falls back into one of the Slice borders and lounges there, staring across at the glowing Way as if reclining on a perfect feather bed.

¤¤

Kibi and the others set out along the curling stone walkways toward the Machine. Flicker prefers to fall/fly, but Kibi and Ernie have a strong preference for solid ground beneath their feet. A Vree coming the other way scuttles around to the (relative) underside of the path to let them pass. Others wave at them; in all they seem a very friendly and polite people.

Halfway to their destination, they pass a large floating stone platform that had been empty on their way in. Now there are fifteen Vree upon it, performing gymnastic combat drills. The Vree leading the exercises spots them, gets a subordinate to take over, and falls to greet them.

Helloooooooooooooo, says the Vree in a low, grumbly voice. *Is one of you Kibilhathurrrr Bimmmmsonn*?

“Yes, I am,” Kibi answers. “Your drills are very impressive.”

Thank youuuuuuuu. The Vree turns to Ernie. *What is yourrr name?*

“Ernest Roundhill, at your service and your families’.”

And you? he asks Morningstar.

“Morningstar, Shield of Ell.”

What is an Ell??????? asks the Vree.

“It’s her god,” says Kibi. “Like the Chaos is for you.”

You have your ownnnnnn Chaosssss? asks the Vree, impressed. *And do youuuu protect it, Shield?*

“Yes,” says Morningstar.

Good. Verrry good. My name is Tizzzzzz Mot; I am the masssssster of Clawzzzzzz. I must keep the troooooops in shape, so we can best fight the slaaaaaaaaaadi.

“We fought against the slaadi ourselves,” says Kibi, a bit proudly.

Szzzzzzzo I have heard. Howwwww many did you kill?????

“Eight or nine,” answers the dwarf. “And a dozen of those spiky lion-things.”

Where are you going? asks Tiz Mot, changing the subject.

“We’re going to take a look at the Machine,” says Kibi.

Mmmmmmmmm. Tiz Mot’s forelegs twitch nervously. The Machine, hey? Have you szzzzztudied it?

“No,” admits Kibi.

In a softer voice, Tiz Mot says, *I don’t truszzzzzt the Machinnnne.*

That’s discomfiting! “You don’t?” asks Kibi. “Why not?”

Hmmmm... I say this to you in confidence, Kibilhathurrrr Bimmmmsonn. I don’t think that Pruzzzz Flit properly understandzzz it. I’d be warrrry if I were youuuuuuu.

“What do you think the Machine does?” asks Kibi.

I don’t knnnnnnow, answers Tiz Mot. *The problem izzzzz, I don’t think Pruzzzzz Flit knowzzzzzz either.*

“They want me to go in it,” says Kibi nervously.

Of courszzzzze. We alllllll hope it workzzzzzzzz.

Morningstar asks, “When the Chaos talks to Gaz Mur, are the things it says usually right?”

Yesssss. But the newwwww Chaosssss has not been tessssted over timmmmmme.

“And when you worship the Chaos,” she continues, “do you have rituals?”

The Chaosssssss permeatezzzs us. It sometimezzzz speaks; only Gazzzzzz Mur understands its meaning, but it commmmmmfors all of us. We can feeeeeeee the trepidationnnnn of the new Chaosssss. It knowszzzzzz the universe musssssst be healed, or it will perishhhhhh.

Tiz Mot looks around again, and then starts to drift back to the stone platform. *Iiiiii must go back to my drillzzzzz; I juszzzzzzt wanted to introduuuuuuce myselfff.*

When he has gone out of earshot, Ernie remarks, “It’s interesting to know that not everyone thinks the Machine is a good idea.”

“Hmph,” says Kibi, frowning. “I had been leaning toward using the Machine, since we have no better options, but now I’m not sure.”

OR SO

Soon, the four of them reach the Machine Sphere. There are two Vree guarding the Hatch. *Pruzzzz Flit was hoping youuuuuu would stop byyyyyy,* says one of them. It opens the hatch and lets them in.

The Machine is not a thing of gears and cogs; it’s just a ring of floating wooden and metal stakes. (Imagine a large ball with a bunch of toothpicks stuck edgewise to it, all over its surface. Now take away the ball, and connect the toothpicks with ropes. That’s the Machine.) Its only other ‘features’ are the red energy playing along the ropes, and the metal cage in the center. Several Vree busy themselves around the Machine, and it’s clear that one of them is in charge.

“Hello!” calls Kibi. “Are you Pruz Flit?”

Mmmmmmmmm... yessss, I am Pruzzzz Flit. And who are youuuuuuuuuuu?

Pruz Flit, Master of Minds, is ecstatic to learn that Kibilhathur Bimson has arrived. *Thank youuuuuuuuuuu for coming!* he says loudly. *We will neeeeeed you!*

“Would you mind if we cast some spells to look at the Machine?” Kibi asks.

Pleazzze do. Just don’t harmmmm it, or interfere with it.

“May I touch it?” asks Kibi.

Only where I innndicate it’s safffffie, warns Pruz Flit. *Come over and I will showwwwww you.*

They wait while Ernie and Morningstar spend a few minutes praying for new spells. Kibi warns Pruz Flit that his *tongues* will run out soon, but that Ernie will be able to talk to him instead.

It’s uzzzzzeful to have servantzzzz, izzz it not? says Pruz Flit.

“Oh, they’re my friends, not servants,” says Kibi. If it’s not Dranko as the presumed servant, it’s just not as fun a pretense!

Morningstar casts *true seeing*, Ernie casts *tongues*, and Kibi casts *detect magic*. Looking with *true seeing*, Morningstar doesn’t see any difference – there’s nothing invisible, or illusionary, or disguised. The Vree themselves are not magic, either. *Detect magic* shows Kibi that the Machine is indeed highly magical. He senses varying types of magic on the Machine – some transmutation, some enchantment, a small amount of necromancy, and a significant amount of abjuration. It’s a very complicated thing, thaumaturgically speaking.

“If I go into the Machine,” asks Kibi, “and it seems to be malfunctioning, or it hurts me in some way, and I’m forced to *teleport* out, would that cause any extra problems?”

If it wazzz in the middle of worrrrrrrrking, and youuuu were suddenly remoooooved from it, I don’t know what would happen, but it would not be goooooood, I imagine. Howeverrrrr, if you find you are in painnnnnn, or are sure it is malfunctioning, I suggest you leeeeeeeeave it. Weeeeeee would not want anything to happen to youuuuuuuu. We would neeeeeeee to rebuild the Machinnnnnne and try again. And we would neeeeeed you alive and healthy for thaaaaat.

Pruz Flit pokes one of his legs at one of the stakes. *Hold that,* he instructs. Kibi starts to reach, but stops.

“First, could you explain exactly how this works, and what it does?” he asks.

Yesssszzz, says Pruz Flit. *I can speak of what happenzzzzz. The Chaosssssss has talked to meeeeeee.*

“Oh! The Chaos speaks to you?”

Yesssss... to me, and to Gazzzzz Murrrrrr. The Abbot is more spirrrrrritual, but I understand magiczzzzzz better, so the Chaosssss speaks to me... in more technical termzzzzzz.

“So what does it do?” presses Kibi.

You will go into that Chammmmmber, says Pruz Flit, pointing to the cage with a claw. It will analyzzzzze and amplify your essssssence, and project it back throuuuuuuugh the Portal, where it will intermingle with the interstices betweeeeeeen the Slices. There will be feedback... controllllled, safe feedback; it will sunder the various linkssssss and restore all of our worldzzzz to their proper placezzzzzz.

“How do you know that breaking the links will restore the worlds?” asks Kibi.

Becauzzzzz the Chaosssssss says so, says Pruz Flit patiently.

“And how does the Chaos knows how all this works?”

The Chaosssssss is a god, says Pruz Flit. It knowzzzzzz more than I.

This exchange isn’t doing much for Kibi’s confidence. “Has the Chaos looked at your Machine and approved it for use?” he asks.

The Chaosssssss is happy with our progressssssss, answers Pruz Flit.

“It’s going to take my Essence?”

No. It will uzzzzze your Essssssence, but not take it frommmmmmm youuuuu.

“What’s so special about my Essence? Why me?”

You are infuzzzzed with the same kind of magic that is rezzzzponsible for all of thiessss, says Pruz Flit, waving two of his arms around vaguely.

“But you didn’t use that magic in making the Machine,” says Kibi.

I do not havvvvvve that magic, says the Vree. If I had it, perhapssss I could be in the Machinnnnnne. Now, there are some calibrationzzzzzz that have to be done firsssst.

Ernie asks, “What happens to us when everything gets sundered? Do we go back to our own world, or would we be stuck here?”

Hmmmmmm, ponders Pruz Flit. You’d probably szzzzzztay here. Do you have meanzzzzz to travel from the Chaosssssss back to your home?

“I think we could,” says Kibi.

At Pruz Flit’s direction, Kibi grabs one of the metal posts, and some of the red energy is attracted to his hands. He feels a mild tingle run up his arms. Pruz Flit rests a claw on Kibi’s hand. *Pleazzzzzz keep your hand there for ten minutezzzzz, while I pray to the Chaosssssss.*

While Pruz Flit does whatever it he’s doing, the others talk it over.

“I’d like to get out of the Slices as much as anyone,” says Morningstar, “But shouldn’t we try to get the Eye first?”

“Yeah,” says Kibi, a bit distractedly. “The question is, is the Eye of Moirel physically in a Slice, or is it ‘behind the curtain’ somehow, and we can only get it by breaking up the Slices first. If only you could still talk to Ell.”

Dranko (who has been listening in via the *telepathic bond*), thinks: *Maybe when we break everything apart, the rooms of the original tower – like the bedroom, and that cloak closet – will just go back to being in the tower again. And the Eye will probably be in one of those rooms.*

So we’ll want to be in one of those rooms when everything breaks apart, thinks Aravis.

Excuuuuuuzzzzee meeaaaa, interrupts Pruz Flit. Could you get inside the Chamberrr, pleazzzzze?

The door to the central cage is already open, so Kibi adjusts his gravity to fall slowly into it. It’s quite spacious, big enough to hold three or four creatures Kibi’s size. The tingling feeling intensifies and spreads out through his body. It gets stronger as time goes by, feeling to him as if, were he to think of his body as a vessel for his life energy, that someone has dipped a rod into it and is now vigorously stirring. Pruz Flit walks around on the outside of the cage, taking measurements, praying to the Chaos, or both.

After a few minutes of this, the Vree announces, *You may leeeeeave nowwwww. I think I will beeee readyyyyy in another day or twooooooo, but I would like youuuu to be available to meeeeeee in the meantime.*

Aravis has been thinking about what breaking up the Slices will mean, and now speculates that if Het Branoi is still bigger on the inside than the outside, it would be its own demiplane, and thus they could *plane shift* into it. Once there they could *teleport* to any part of it they'd already seen. So at least they have something of a plan, if everything else goes well.

"What does the Chaos tell you, generally?" asks Kibi.

Despite the fact that Ernie is now the one translating, Pruz Flit still talks directly to Kibi. *It has told ussss that we were saffffffffe. Sometimezzzzz it helpssss direct us against the slaaaaaaaaadi.*

That's not exactly what Kibi was getting at, but Pruz Flit becomes distracted by some of his servants and wanders off. They head out of the Machine Sphere, still arguing over whether to have Kibi brave the Machine, and whether this is all a big Black Circle plot, and what the chances are that Pruz Flit really knows what's going to happen. They all meet up back outside the Abbot's house, where one of the Vree tells them that a house has been prepared for them to sleep.

Tomorrow's going to be a busy day.

Hammerhead: Poor Dranko. Ironically though, he seems to be the only one in Het Branoi who is actually *enjoying* his experiences.

Enkhidu: Methinks Dranko has Horizon Walker in his level-up future.

Piratecat: Oh, yeah... Dranko's having a blast. He's with his friends, and *anywhere* is better than Tal Boring or Verdshane. He'd rather lick one of the Cleaners than go back to those hellholes.

(Not the janitor. The things that supposedly destroy the Slices when someone closes up a portal, or so we've been told. Important distinction.)

Plane Sailing: Analogous to the Langoliers?

Graywolf-ELM: That's what I imagined when they were mentioned.

Fimmtiu: Perhaps a better analogy might be to a celestial garbage-collection thread.

Piratecat: Of course, in retrospect, he'd have to get his own world back before he *could* go back to Tal Boring or Verdshane. But you know what I mean. In comparison at least Limbo is exciting, and getting to bed down on the Elemental plane of Air is downright fun. Just think, when he's an old reprobate leering at serving girls in his palace, he can bore stuffy old nobles by launching into improbable stories about things they'll think never actually happened. (For those of you who have read George MacDonald Fraser's novels, Dranko and Flashman have a lot in common in this regard.)



And now, one of my favorite runs of the whole campaign...

Taken to the Cleaners

When Gaz Mur had inquired as to the Company's preferred sleeping arrangements, they had specified "something soft." Such things are in short supply in the Monastery, but the Vree are nothing if not resourceful. When the party enter the sphere given over to them for the 'night,' they find nine floating wooden slabs of just the right size – each covered in a squishy layer of fruit. "Makes it easier to have a midnight snack," says Flicker. After the Vree servants leave them, the Company start to clear off the fruit (which still floats around the sphere) and lay out their bedrolls.

"I'm actually thinking about going back to the Elemental plane of Air to sleep," says Dranko, half seriously.

"Bad idea," says Grey Wolf.

"I'll go with you," offers Flicker, who is quite jealous of those who went there.

"Worse idea," says Aravis. When Flicker whines, Aravis continues, "There could be hostile air elementals we just didn't happen to run into."

"And we did have that squid problem in the Elemental plane of Water," Dranko points out.

"What could possibly go wrong?" asks Flicker, who hasn't really been listening as he cleans the fruit from his bed.

"Flicker," says Aravis, "were you paying any attention to what we just said?"

"Of course I have! And I sincerely doubt there's going to be a giant squid on the Elemental plane of Air."

"Air elementals," says Aravis, wondering why he's bothering. "We said air elementals."

Flicker knows it's pointless, but can't stop from trying. "Air elementals are friendly, like Oa-Lyanna," he says.

"Right," says Morningstar. "And no air creatures have ever tried to hurt us. Like that death mist in God's Thorn. Or that living storm we ran away from before we found the Inn."

"Besides," says Aravis, "Oa-Lyanna is an air *spirit*. I'm worried about the actual *elementals*."

"Air this, air that," says Flicker. "I want to try it! I didn't get to try it!"

"Take a look around you," says Morningstar, motioning to the floating beds and drifting fruit. "Have you ever tried *this*?"

"Well, the beds are pretty tasty," admits Flicker. "Oh, all right, fine. But I'm gonna try the plane of Air tomorrow."

Eager to change the subject, Kibi asks, "How do people feel about me getting in that Machine and trying to blow the world apart? Any yeas or nays?"

"Nay," says Ernie, but he's the only one to offer an immediate opinion.

"Maybe we should all get in the Machine with you," Dranko offers.

"I vote a big 'nay' on that one," says Aravis. "I have a bad feeling about this, but I don't see that we have any choice."

"We could always try the Lord of the Roses," says Dranko. But no one else cares for that idea, after their experience with Srapa.

"We don't just want to go from Slice to Slice forever," Dranko continues. "If Kibi goes into the Machine, it's not likely to make things any worse than they are now."

On that thought, they sleep.



The next day the Company are left to their own devices, though Kibi is told to be 'on call' in case Pruz Flit needs him. The Vree are a friendly folk, and among them there is a growing excitement as word spreads that Pruz Flit will soon be activating the Machine, returning them to the true unbounded Chaos. The party meet two more Vree Masters – **Poz Gar** and **Haraz Lum**. Poz Gar is the Master of Stores, whose job it is to keep the monastery provisioned. He can't quite hide the fact that he finds the humanoids rather repulsive to look at, but is perfectly polite all the same. Haraz Lum, Master of Prayers, is the only Vree the Company find unfriendly, coming across as a snooty xenophobe.

Plane Sailing: [The Vree are a friendly folk] Pretty much doomed them then, eh?

Thornir Alekeg: Actually I thought that friendly folk ended up being evil – or was that just people you liked?

Part way through the day Tiz Mot, Master of Claws, finds Kibi again. *Have youuuuuu decided to go into the machiiiiiiine?* he asks. It's clear right away that he still has doubts.

"We don't have any better ideas," Kibi answers. "It's a shame we can't test it first, before Pruz Flit turns it on for real."

Ernie spends some time with Tiz Mot as well, hoping to pick up some fighting tips if they run into more slaadi. It's not a total waste of time, though Vree combat maneuvers aren't generally applicable to bipeds.

Flicker has a blast flying around in the plane of Air, and no native creatures show themselves to cause trouble. All of them eat more fruit and wander around the Monastery. Kibi spends some time with Pruz Flit as he calibrates the Machine, while Scree, who hates floating and falling, stays safely inside his master's extrdimensional *familiar pocket*.



By the end of the 'day,' Pruz Flit announces that he should be ready for full activation first thing tomorrow. Kibi thinks to ask if having a *telepathic bond* cast upon him could mess up the Machine. Pruz Flit thinks it should be harmless, and is in favor of the idea. *Onnnnn the off chance that something doezzzzz go amiss, it would be uuuuuuuuseful to be in telepathic comuuuunicationnnnn with people who could helllllllllp youuuuuuuuuuu.*

Fade: If this is a Black Circle plot (which certainly doesn't seem impossible) we have to ask ourselves what it's a plot to *do*. They've already won; they don't need to bring the planes into alignment any more because they've always been on Charagan. Their available actions at the moment would seem to be defensive (foil the Company's plots) rather than proactive.

KidCthulhu: Actually, the Black Circle (at least in our "real world") haven't won. They were one of the two groups we shut down. The Sharshun are the ones who changed the timeline around.

The Black Circle, however, are up to no good in Het Branoi, I can assure you. I think the party's concern is that when all the clerics in the Slices have lost access to their deities, you've got to wonder where these "divine messages" are coming from. It's not that we don't trust the Vree, we just don't trust their information source.

nemmerle: Personally, if I were playing in this game I would feel as trapped and frustrated as if I were playing in my own game... Travel between the Slices just seems so harrowing and there are so many other possibilities and areas to check out (or that I would want to check out) before risking the Machine – but the logistics of traveling here and there to do it are just so weighty...

Good work, Sagiro! Way to make them sweat!

Mishihari Lord: You know, it just occurred to me that about a year (?) ago the Company essentially switched roles with the Black Circle. The Circle was described as a group of mostly nice, polite, conscientious types who were working very hard to bring about the end of the world. This also seems to describe the Company at present since the universe they're in will presumably end when they set things right.

Does this sound right or am I just imagining things?

Sagiro: Mishihari, you're mostly right. On Kivia, the Black Circle practitioners are thought of as benign, if mysterious. It's not clear how eeeeevil they are. On Charagan, the Black Circle was considered an eeeeeevil cult, and was thought eradicated some hundreds of years ago. Clearly, as Mokad demonstrated, "eradicated" was something of an overstatement.

That leads to talk about imbuing Scree with spellcasting ability in case Kibi becomes incapacitated, which in turn leads to the question about where Scree will be when the Machine is turned on.

"Can Scree come with me?" asks Kibi. "He's my familiar, and we share the same essence."

"I'm sure the Eyes of Moirel won't mess anything up," says Dranko under his breath.

“Maybe you should calibrate the Machine with Scree inside,” suggests Ernie.

Pruz Flit thinks that's a fine idea. After Morningstar casts a *telepathic bond*, the Vree invites Kibi and Scree into the cage at the center of the Machine, while instructing the others (now gathered nearby) to float a ways back so as not to interfere. Scree is extremely unhappy with the arrangement, since he has no choice but to float around Kibi. Adrift in the Chaos, the earth elemental panics for a moment and 'clings' to Kibi, which is to say that Kibi finds himself covered with rocks.

Now just wait a minnnnnnute, says Pruz Flit. *Things should be finnnnnne. Pleazzzzzzze hold on to the Chammmmmmberrrrrrrrr.*

Kibi grasps the bars of the cage, and as it has on all previous calibrations, the red energy is drawn to his hands. It's warm, but not at all painful. Pruz Flit busies himself at the surface of the Machine's sphere.

After two minutes of recalibration, there is a sudden and violent surge of the energy, flowing down Kibi's arms and directly into Scree. In seconds the familiar is glowing a bright, vibrant red, and seconds after that there are two bright flashes of light from inside Scree's body – one green, and one purple. The red energy playing along the Machine's latticework starts to mix with green and purple light. A thick, continuous bolt of red energy fires out of the cage and strikes the nearby blue Way.

"Is that supposed to happen yet?" Dranko yells down to Pruz Flit. Pruz Flit starts to make high-pitched whimpering sounds.

The energy beam flowing from the Machine to the Way gets brighter and more intense over the next few seconds. The Machine's sphere starts to glow an almost opaque red and the others can barely make out Kibi's shape inside it.

Kibi himself finds (to his horror) that his hands are stuck fast to the bars of the cage. *I can't let go!* he thinks urgently to the others in the telepathic bond.

Pruz Flit is still scrambling around on the Machine. *Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm... What'zzzzzzzz going onnnnnn?!* he cries. The red energy stream is now pouring into the Way, and it's quite clear to everyone that this calibration exercise has officially gotten out of hand.

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From the Way there comes a horrible tearing sound. Ten feet above and a bit to the left of the glowing blue portal, a gash is rent in the fabric of space. Looking through that jagged rift, the Company see a blackness dotted with stars, the sight of which is faintly nauseating. It instantly reminds Grey Wolf and Ernie of their brief trip through one of the gray ‘burned out’ Ways.

Flashback:

Mercury, the centaur owner of The Eye of the Storm, speaks: "Have any of you, out of curiosity, gone through one of the gray Ways? There are many places that border on the Prime planes, like the Astral and the Ethereal. The Slices are bounded in a similar way, but not by those more familiar planes. They are bounded by something... stranger. And in that realm live... things. And these things are attracted by a Way that is not... breathing. By a closed Way. These things devour Slices and everything in them. When the Slice is gone, all of the Ways into it go dead, gray. I pray that none of us ever see them. Aristus did, once. He won't talk about it, so don't ask him."

Through that rift comes a mottled green-brown tentacle. It's three feet in diameter, at least fifteen feet long, and it flails about spasmodically. As it does so, the tear in space gets wider.

"Kibi, make it stop!" shouts Ernie.

Pruz Flit wails in his alien voice that only Kibi understands. *What'zzzzzz going onnnnnnn? What'zzzzz happeninnnnnnnnng?*

I can't move! thinks Kibi again. Someone help me!

Pruz Flit's servants are fleeing rapidly toward the hatch in the larger spherical room that houses the Machine. Kibi can barely hear the sound of Pruz Flit now above the humming din around him. *Something'zzzz gone horrrribly wronnnnnnnnnnnnna.*

Wronnnnnnnnnnnnnnng!

"I guess this answers our question about whether we should use the Machine," says Dranko hoarsely.

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All of this has happened in less than fifteen seconds. Now that it's clear that the calibration has become a disaster, the Company spring into action. Grey Wolf falls toward the Machine, and when he reaches the shell of pulsing red energy, tentatively reaches out his hand to touch it. It's a tingly, electrical feeling, but not damaging or painful, and it doesn't impede his progress. "We can get through this!" he shouts back.

That's all the others need to hear. Snokas falls through the Machine's exterior sphere, smashing aside ropes and stakes on his way to Kibi's aid. Ernie and Step are right behind him. Dranko grabs his whip, falls to within fifteen feet of the tentacle, and lashes. He strikes true, but the weapon doesn't leave a mark, and the thrashing of the tentacle doesn't lessen. Morningstar follows up by casting *chill seeds* and hurling an acorn at the tentacle. It impacts and bursts in a blast of cold fire, but when the explosion clears it hardly seems to have damaged the thing at all.

Aravis thinks of the Maze. Each time he has tried to use it since the Battle of Verdshane, he has failed. The effort he exerted had injured the parts of his brain that interfaced with the Maze; trying to access it has since resulted in a fuzzy pain in his head. Nevertheless, he thinks that if the Maze can seal planar boundaries, maybe he can use it to close off this rift in space. He concentrates and tries to enter its reality.

He fails again, feeling a twanging pain in his head, but for the first time he feels like it's a localized pain. If it were his leg, he'd say that the swelling had finally gone down, but the muscle was still pulled or torn. Interesting...

KKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKRRRRRRRRRKKKKKKKK!

Four more tentacles come tearing through space around the Way, all whipping around in a frenzy. They're tearing the world apart as they move, leaving more gaping rents through which the nauseating star-field can be seen. Red energy continues to pour out of Kibi and the Machine and into the Way itself, which is now glowing a bright purple as the red energy mixes with its usual blue color. "Cleaners!" Dranko shouts, understanding now what's happening. "We've got to get everyone out through the other portal!"

It's a sure bet that no one's going out through this one; a huge tentacle, thick as a barrel and long as a barn is tall, comes bursting out directly through the Way. The glowing portal fades quickly from its purple color to a sickly gray. One of the smaller tentacles whips out at Dranko, smacking him in the chest and sending him reeling backward toward the others.

With the Way effectively dead, the energy flow out of the Machine abruptly stops, and Kibi's hands are released from the bars of the cage. He and Scree flee through the cage door, now clustered with incoming would-be rescuers. All of them adjust their gravity and fall straight for the hatch, away from the Cleaners.

Ernie shouts at Kibi, "Tell them it's the Cleaners!" but the Vree have by this time fled out of the larger sphere. Behind them they hear more terrible ripping sounds as more gashes are torn into the Slice.

Aravis looks back and sees that the various smaller tears are starting to merge into larger ones, as if the plane is being replaced, or perhaps erased, by the unnatural void. He guesses that they have at least a few minutes before the Cleaners subsume the large sphere that houses the Machine, though it's possible that their rate of unmaking will increase. As they approach the exit hatch, Aravis shares his thoughts about the Maze injury with Morningstar and Ernie. They agree that *restoration* or *greater restoration* might help.

Pruz Flit is waiting for them just outside the hatch. *Are youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu okaaaayyyyyy?* he asks fearfully.

"Do you have a way to escape other than through that portal?" asks Kibi, pointing back toward the now dead Way.

Only the plane of Air, and weeee will dieeeee theeeee, bemoans the Vree.

"Is there anything beyond that plane?"

We havvvvve not explorrrred theeeee, says Pruz Flit.

"Once we're through," says Morningstar, "I'll *find the path* to the closest Way out, and we'll try getting the Vree to someplace where they can survive."

"We have no other option," says Dranko, listening to the increasingly loud sounds of Cleaners shredding the fabric of space. "This plane is going to be destroyed."

Ernie casts *tongues*, and he and Kibi (along with Pruz Flit) start to fly around the monastery, telling all they see what has happened, that the Vree should gather what food they can carry and meet at the Way to the plane of Air. The word quickly

spreads. Dranko, Flicker and Step head toward their quarters to gather the party's gear, while Grey Wolf uses his backup magic sword to cast *restoration* on Aravis. It doesn't help, though Aravis feels like it was the right idea – just not strong enough.

Ernie asks Pruz Flit how long the Vree can survive in the plane of Air, and is told that while no one is sure, he'd guess two or three hours. "Good, good," says Ernie. "We don't think it's a very big Slice, and we can probably get you all to the next one in that time."

But izzzz there Chaossssss beyonnnnnnd? asks Pruz Flit.

"We don't know," admits Ernie.

"It's a better chance than you've got staying here," says Morningstar. The sounds of tearing reality from inside the Machine's outer sphere grow louder all the time.

Whyyyy did the Chaosss let this haaaappennnnnnnn? laments Pruz Flit.

"I'm not sure it was the Chaos," says Ernie, thinking still of the Black Circle.

But the Chaosss spoke to meeeeeeeeeeee!

Ernie answers, "Sometimes when you want something very very much, you hear what you want to hear."

Morningstar uses her *gem of recall* to fill an empty spell slot with *greater restoration*. Even though it will take ten minutes for her to cast it, they should have that long before the Cleaners reach the remaining working Way. The Vree as a whole are staying remarkably calm and organized, and soon are all gathered in the vicinity of the Way. Aravis explains that if things go well, he might need to draw on Vree life-force using the Maze, and the arachnids seem to understand.

There's a terrible sound of splintering wood and shattering metal as the huge sphere that once surrounded the Machine is destroyed. Dozens upon dozens of tentacles burst out; the whole of what once was the interior is now starry void. The Vree mill around nervously as Morningstar casts her spell on Aravis, while the deadly work of the Cleaners draws ever closer.



Ten minutes later she touches Aravis's head and effects a *greater restoration*. The Cleaners have erased about half the Monastery and there are now hundreds of tentacles ripping and shredding their way through the Slice. Some of them are over twenty feet in diameter and over a hundred feet long. It's hard to get any sense of visual perspective where normal space has been expunged, and Dranko thanks Delioch that he was bludgeoned and not erased when the tentacle struck his chest. He thinks back to when the Company *summoned* a squid to set off a Black Circle trap, and wonders if this is not some kind of cosmic justice being applied.

The Vree are huddled closer around the Way into Air, but are holding off going through as long as they dare. Tiz Mot is staring at Pruz Flit in what the party guess is extreme disappointment. It's loud, as the sound of chittering Vree mixes with the increasingly less distant sounds of disintegrating universe.

Aravis feels a tingle in his mind, and then a soothing wash of healing energy. Having cast her spell, Morningstar leaps through the Way and casts *find the path* as soon as she's on the other side. She immediately senses the direction of a second Way, more or less straight "down" the elevator-shaft-shaped Slice.

With waves of unease now washing over the Company in sickening pulses, and the sound of Cleaners drowning out almost all else, Aravis instructs Pewter to take his body through the Way should anything happen. Then he drops into the Crosser's Maze.

It takes more effort than he remembers, but that's not surprising – Aravis is out of practice. With fierce concentration he finds himself perched in the high metaphorical window of the Maze. Behind him is the "inner world," where Solomea Pirenne once dwelt and where King Vhadish XXIII dwells still, but that is not his concern. In front of him should be the Maze's map of the cosmos, but he hasn't yet mustered the mental strength to see it as he usually does. He can only sense abstractions of abstractions. The universe, he can tell, is very small, and getting smaller. Makes perfect sense. He thinks he should be able to see the other Slices, but at the moment he can only sense the one he's in. Desperately, he thinks... thinks...

"I hope he thinks of something," says Flicker, looking at Aravis's body. It's floating lazily in place, with Pewter perched on his shoulder. The tentacles, far away but terribly loud, are eating their way inexorably through the Slice. The Company guess they have about fifteen or twenty minutes before the wave of Cleaners reaches them.



Aravis concentrates, and his facility with the Maze starts to return in earnest. Now he can see a vague map of the Slices, or at least the ones nearest to the one he himself is in. He can see the nearby plane of Air, and a bright dot that indicates the Way he's standing next to. Overall, there's – well, it's not exactly a pattern, but a consistency to how the Slices are arrayed. There is always distance between them, even between two that are connected by Ways.

But here, in the Chaos, it's different. All of the Slices of Limbo have been "pushed together" somehow; even Slices that aren't connected by portals are practically adjacent to one another, like stories of a single building that have no stairways between them. It must have taken something, or someone, of immense power to change the structure of the Slices like that. Even where his body is right now isn't that far from the nearest border to another Slice of Chaos, where the two Slices are pushed right up against one another...

That's it. He can tear open a new portal into an adjoining Slice of Limbo! And, he thinks grimly, if he can close it right away, it might not even attract more Cleaners. Mustering every ounce of concentration he has, he sets to work. Immediately he understands that some life energy will be required, so he reaches out to the Vree. Having been warned, and possessing the mental discipline one expects of monks, every one of the Vree gives up life force willingly. Aravis thinks with satisfaction that, as a result, no single Vree will be severely taxed. He starts to peel away the planar fabric between the Slices, and finds it simple. It's almost as if the two Slices of Limbo *want* to be joined.

Almost as an afterthought, he wonders how much time he has left.

"Remember when I said I'd be bored back in Tal Hae?" says Dranko, sweating. "I take it back. I take it all back."

The feeling of pure *wrongness* is now like a strong wind buffeting their psyches. Hundreds of tentacles slash through reality, erasing as they sweep. They have... five minutes? Maybe ten? It's clear that they can't wait any longer for Aravis to...

R R R R R R R R R R R R I I I I P P P P!

A hole tears open in space right next to Ernie, and he jumps back in terror, expecting a tentacle to come out. Instead he sees just a large hole, and on the other side isn't mind-wrecking nothingness, but rather a roiling mass of Chaos – mostly fire and boulders at the moment. He shouts, and the others turn to look. Kibi understands immediately.

"Go through! Go through the hole!" he shouts at the Vree. Not needing to be told twice, they start leaping through as fast as they possibly can. It's going to be close – the Vree can only go through at about one arachnid per second, and there are more than 300 of them.

"I'm sorry about all this," says Kibi to Pruz Flit, as behind them Vree leap through Aravis's portal in a constant stream.

No, no, it is myyyyyyy fault, says Pruz Flit. *I did not aaaaaanticipate your... your... well, I did not accounnnnnnnnnnnnnt for that. But next time I will||||||| – I will build a better Machinnnnnnnnnnnnnnne! The Chaos will have learrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrned from its mistakes.*

"I guess you can send me another note when you're ready," says Kibi. "The Chaos will know where I am. And you'll be okay in there?"

It izzzz the Chaosssss, which izzz our home, says Pruz Flit. *We will build a newwwwww monasteryyyyyyyyyy.*

The party have a quick discussion about whether to follow the Vree through Aravis's portal, but decide to take their chances with the plane of Air. Besides, they figure Aravis might have to stay on this side to seal the portal closed, and it's not worth the risk.

Dranko suddenly gets an idea in his head. He quickly fishes out a pen and some parchment and writes **Dranko was here** on a small scrap. Then he stuffs the paper scrap into an empty potion bottle, plugs in the stopper, and flings it at the onrushing Cleaners. The odds that it will avoid the tentacles seem to be minuscule, but somehow the bottle avoids them and disappears into the void beyond. Ernie looks at him like he's mad.

At last only Gaz Mur, Tiz Mot and Pruz Flit remain. **We are sorry, Kibilhathur Bimmmmmmmon**, says Gaz Mur. **This izzz not what weeeee expected to happennnnnnn.**

"Be safe!" says Ernie, as the final three Vree jump through. In the Maze, Aravis sees the last of the tiny points of light that are the Vree depart, and immediately starts patching up the hole. Snokas, Step and Morningstar are already in the plane of Air. Ernie jumps through to tell them what's happening, leaving Dranko, Flicker, Kibi and Grey Wolf to guard Aravis's body. They all feel the pull at their life energy, and give it. The Cleaners have now destroyed everything in sight save a patch of Chaos about eighty yards on a side. Seventy yards. Sixty.

Ernie arrives in the plane of Air and excitedly announces, “No more Vree!”

“They’re all dead?” asks Morningstar, aghast.

“No! Aravis managed to open up a new portal to another Slice of Chaos and the Vree all escaped into it. It’s just us now. And we’ve decided we won’t stick around for whatsisname to make another *maaaaaaa-chinnnnnnne*.”

For Aravis, fixing up the hole is child’s play compared to rebuilding the spatial fabric between Volpos and Abernia. Only as he finishes up does he become aware that Pewter has been digging in his claws for several seconds. *Boss! Time to go!*

With a good fifteen or twenty seconds to spare, Aravis comes out of the Maze and looks around. *Whoa.* He immediately adjusts his gravity and falls into the Way. Dranko, Grey Wolf and Flicker follow right on his heels.

Only Kibi is left now, staring slack-jawed at an advancing world of tentacles and horror. The nearest Cleaner can practically touch him...

Kibi leaps into the Way. A moment later he has joined the others in the Elemental plane of Air. For five anxious seconds they all look back at the blue portal hanging in the air.

In an eyeblink, it goes gray.

dravot: Fantastic! It's the Langoliers!

Plane Sailing: Fantastic update.

Fade: Now, did the Cleaners come because of the action of the Machine, or did they come because the Machine would have been successful and someone sent the Cleaners to stop it?

Graywolf-ELM: It sounds like whatever the “Cleaners” are, they were talking to the Vree, to get them to make a way into the Slice. If that is the case, it makes me wonder about the true goals of those creatures.

Piratecat: We don’t think so. We didn’t realize that the very existence of the Slices is based on wild magic, and we didn’t consider the fact that Scree has two Eyes of Moirel in him... and Eyes of Moirel are vast sources of wild magic. As far as we can tell, it was like taking an AA battery pocket flashlight and hooking it up to a 220-volt power line. The machine was calibrated for Kibi, not Kibi and two freakin’ artifacts, and the surge in power through the Way drew the Cleaners like moths to a flame.

You should have seen Sagiro’s face as he realized the consequences of what Kibi was doing. It’s fair to say that this wasn’t how he expected the run to go!

Those things were *creepy*. We were all pretty horrified when we realized that we’d just doomed all the Vree. We were astonished when Aravis figured a way out of the problem by thinking laterally. If we had taken the Vree into the plane of Air, it’s not much of a spoiler to say that they’d probably all have died.

Somewhere in the Far Realms is a bottle floating around with Dranko’s name in it. Nothing is cooler than interplanar graffiti.

Fajitas: So, are we then to assume that the Eye of Moirel in Het Branoi is the red one? Or is this just a chromatic coincidence? Is it possible that the voice of the Chaos was actually the voice of the Eye of Moirel?

Plane Sailing: Ooooh, nice thinking.

LightPhoenix: Ohhh, and along those same lines, don’t they need three stones to travel nowhere, or something like that? I wonder if the three stones tried to open the portal, hence the attraction to the Way. But it doesn’t quite work in Het Branoi, since it’s all planarily mucked up.

Piratecat: When we first saw the door into Het Branoi [back on page 62], it was glowing with a strong red light. The next morning when we actually entered, the doorway’s light had turned to blue.

Chromatic coincidence, my butt. It’s Sagiro; all this stuff ties together, *but you can’t figure out how until it’s too late.*

Hammerhead: Actually, IIRC, the doorway was green. I believe that Dranko said “Green means go.” It could be that the colors of the doorway lead into where the PCs would have ended up, since when they walked into the green doorway they ended up in a nice pastoral land with trees.

Piratecat: Whoops, you’re right. I’ve got no idea what’s up with *that*.

Sagiro: Hammerhead is correct. I am flattered by (and, let’s face it, encourage) Piratecat’s belief that every detail of my game is a lovingly handcrafted puzzle-piece that fits seamlessly into an incredibly complex puzzle. But while I do my share of foreshadowing and long-term planning, I’m also like a runaway puzzle-piece factory that continuously churns out pieces, some of which can be later made to *appear* to fit together as if by pre-planned design.

In this case, the changing colors of the door into Het Branoi had nothing to do with any specific Eye of Moirel, and instead, as Hammerhead notes, reflected the strongest colors of the Slice on the other side. (Peek behind the curtain: had they gone in when it was red, they would have found themselves in a Mars-like Slice, albeit with more oxygen. Had they gone in while it was blue, they would have landed on a tiny deserted island in the middle of an ocean.) In hindsight, reading the speculation on this thread, I missed a cool foreshadowing opportunity there.

At this point in the story, the Company have been assuming that the Eye in Het Branoi was blue, since that’s the color of all the Ways once you get inside.

Fajitas: Well, in the absence of further, as yet unrevealed information to the contrary, I’ll stand by my analysis. After all, there may be many examples of colored things in Het Branoi, but so far only one of them has exploded out of control when combined with two Eyes of Moirel..

Lightning

"I never thought I'd be so happy to be in the Elemental plane of Air," says Kibi. The dwarf, together with the rest of the Company, reclines against the edge of the world and looks up at the now gray Way.

"That was close," says Aravis, still panting. His head throbs with the after-ache of heavy Maze use.

"Whaddya mean, close?" asks Dranko. "We had a good twenty seconds to spare!"

"In the future," says Ernie, "I vote we don't plug Kibi into any strange machines."

"At the very least we should have a rule about not destroying Slices," says Morningstar.

"We knew there was a rule about blocking off Ways," says Aravis. "Now we know the same thing applies to pouring energy into them. An overload is as bad as a blockage."

"I'm glad the Vree got away," says Kibi. "I liked them."

The air is clean and fresh – almost too fresh, really. It feels in their throats and lungs as if the air is extremely cold, though in fact it's barely cool. "It's just more airy than normal air," observes Ernie. Flicker and Dranko light up Blacktallow cigars, and the smoke hovers in clouds around their heads, dispersing slowly. Ernie wrinkles his nose. "Do we have a plan?" he asks.

"The Lord of the Roses, I guess," says Kibi, though it's anyone's guess how they'll find him now.

Since the clock is ticking on Morningstar's *find the path*, the group adjust their gravity and plummet 'downward' through the air. They soon reach terminal velocity, but not long after that they see something white coming up fast. A quick reversal of gravities slows them up before they reach it, and they are relieved to see it's only a puffy cloud. Even though it doesn't rumble or threaten them, most of the party choose to go around it. Only Dranko goes through, and he ends up soaked but unharmed. Sometimes a cloud is just a cloud.

A few minutes later they slow down again, as they approach a small flock of strange birds. One of the things, the size of a large hawk, comes whizzing up toward and then past them. It's not natural, with four wings evenly spaced around its body. Its beak is similarly divided into quadrants. The rest of the flock follow it, buzzing the Company but then fading into specks again as they fly away.



After almost two more hours of falling, they see a patch far below that's a darker blue than the ambient color of the Slice. Sure enough it's a glowing blue Way, facing relatively upwards; they could fall through it like a trapdoor if they so chose, but instead they slow down and come to a halt by falling into the nearest planar edge.

Feeling confident, Dranko ties a rope around his waist, hands it to the others, and jumps into the Way for a quick scout.

When he emerges, his first thought is that he has arrived in an *iron storm/chain lightning* field. An electrical storm rages all about him, and though he tries to twist and dodge the bolts, there are just too many. Even before the others have reached their count of five Abernathies, Dranko comes popping out of the Way, screaming and smoking. The rope is nearly burned through.

"It's the Elemental plane of Electricity, or something," he reports as Morningstar casts a healing spell. His fiancée then casts another *find the path*, figuring there must be a better exit than this one – and finds that there is none. With the Way back to the Vree destroyed by Cleaners, the only way out of here is through the electrical storm.

"Oh, crap," says Aravis. The others express similar sentiments.

For a few minutes they discuss various elemental protection spells. *Energy immunity* is the best bet, but they don't have enough for everyone. *Energy buffer* only goes off once. *Protection from elements* would be used up in less than a minute. They wonder if they could stuff someone into their *bag of holding*, or have Kibi and Aravis *polymorph* into something immune to electricity.

Thinking that maybe the lightning storm was just a localized and passing phenomenon, Morningstar leaps in to make sure all this discussion isn't a waste of time. A few seconds later she too pops back out with clothes and skin blackened. Now she and Dranko are a matched pair of smoldering adventurers. "How cute," says Grey Wolf dryly.

"Not a good look for the wedding, though," says Flicker.

"It's a good thing Aravis's Maze manipulations worked out," says Morningstar as she now applies the healing to herself. "Otherwise this would have been the last march of the Vree."

As they seem in no danger here in the plane of Air, they decide to wait until the next day, when Morningstar can pray for the *energy buffers* she needs, and the wizards can be properly loaded with *teleports*. For the rest of the day they fly around, polish their armor, munch on travel rations and play cards. Weird native birds fly by unconcerned, and puffy white clouds drift up and down the long, narrow Slice.



Dranko wakes the next 'morning,' sobbing and sweating. His head is pounding with ache. He doesn't remember the details of the nightmare, just that he had one, and that it involved tentacles. He groans and mops his brow. The others are up before him, and staring. "Did anyone else have bad dreams?" he asks, gulping for air and reaching for his waterskin.

"I didn't sleep very well," says Kibi, motioning vaguely to the complete lack of ground anywhere. "But no, no nightmares."

"I slept like a baby," says Aravis, stretching. Everyone else shakes their heads, and Dranko frowns.

"Well, yesterday was a horrible, horrible day," says Kibi.

"I wonder if it's because of the bottle I threw," says Dranko to himself.

Aravis overhears. "What bottle?" he asks, startled.

"I, uh, I threw a message in a bottle into where the Cleaners were," admits Dranko.

"Oh, gods," moans Aravis. "What was the message?"

"Um. 'Dranko was here.'" Aravis just buries his face in his hands.

"It's like what you do on a ship in the ocean," says Dranko defensively. "There was a big ocean out there, figuratively speaking, and I had an extra empty bottle..."

"What I do on the ocean is throw up a lot," says Ernie.

"Don't do that in the Black Circle's ocean!" says Aravis to Dranko.

"I guess not," Dranko concedes. "It felt like someone was stomping through my dreams with spiked boots."

Morningstar prays and puts her hands on her fiancée's head, trying to get a sense of what his dreams had been about. She senses nothing specific, but it's very, very disturbing.

"Do I have any magic lingering on me?" asks Dranko to the wizards. He strips himself of all his magic items, and Aravis casts *detect magic*. Yes, he has some magic on him, but its type is very strange. With nothing else to do about it, Dranko and the other spellcasters start to prepare their arsenals for the day. But when Dranko tries to pray, he feels something disturbing in his head. It almost feels like a tentacle is writhing behind his eyes. To his horror he realizes that he can't achieve the serenity he needs to regain any spells. "Maybe I'm cursed?" he asks the others.

Aravis tries casting a *greater dispelling* on him, but it does not remove the strange magic the half-orc is radiating. Kibi, though, looking again with *detect magic*, notices now that the magic is stronger in a thick stripe extending diagonally from Dranko's upper chest, down to his left knee. It's exactly where the Cleaner struck him. "*Restoration* might work," suggests Aravis.

Grey Wolf uses the undead-bane sword to cast the spell on Dranko; it clears Dranko's head, but the magic is still there. Ernie examines Dranko's body and determines that it's not a physical ailment, while Grey Wolf speculates that they'll have to restore him every day. Maybe *greater restoration* would work? At least now, albeit with difficulty, Dranko is able to reach the calm necessary to renew his spells.

An hour later, heads full of prayers and dweomercraft, the Company are ready to execute their plan. Kibi, Ernie, Morningstar and Aravis all get *energy immunity: lightning* from Morningstar, along with some *endurances*, just in case. They leap through the Way, and are soon floating in the violent electrical storm. It's just like Morningstar remembers it from the day before, though with less burning pain. Instead it feels like she's being softly punched from all directions. She casts *find the path* to the nearest exit. "This is cool!" exclaims Aravis, looking around and grinning.

"That way," says Morningstar. She points in a random-seeming direction, since there are no landmarks of any kind, and no visual clues to offer any sense of perspective at all. With the Ellish priestess in the lead, they change their gravities and plummet through the storm.

They can't see very far in front of them, and the ambient blue-white light here isn't very distinct from the glowing blue of the Ways. So it is that after a mere thirty seconds, the Way out comes upon them in a flash! Morningstar spots it soonest and is just able to alter her gravitational direction, and so avoids falling in, but her warning to the others is lost in the crackling din. Ernie, Kibi and Aravis go shooting right into the Way, and the sucking blackness between the Slices.

QR 80

In hindsight, it's a darn good thing that one's momentum is cancelled out on a trip through the Ways. The three of them pop out of a horizontal-facing Way hovering twenty feet in the air and fall unceremoniously onto hard packed dirt. Aravis ends up on his back looking up, feeling bruises forming and hearing the empathic complaints of the somewhat squashed Pewter. Twenty feet above him is the Way, like a stage trapdoor through which he's just tripped.

They spend a few seconds looking around and getting their bearings. Around them is a partly ruined oval coliseum; they lie at one end. There are tall, cracked stone pillars standing in rows near the center. Rising up around them are rings of carved stone steps, which could have seated thousands of spectators on a good day. Above them a huge sun, over twenty times larger than their sun back on Charagan, hangs yellow in a gray sky. Nevertheless, the air around them is cool.

Just as the three adventurers get to their feet, they hear a sound from the other end of the coliseum floor. A couple of hundred feet away something is moving, a large reptilian creature, over fifteen feet long, with a dark, translucent blue body. It starts to unwrap itself from one of the pillars with a scaly, rasping sound.

Ernie activates the *flying* ability of his shield, grabs Kibi, and hauls the dwarf straight up. They touch the plane of the Way and are sucked back into the plane of lightning. Morningstar has 'flown' back around in the lightning plane and is just about to go in after her friends, when Ernie and Kibi come popping out of it.

Aravis casts *gaseous form* on himself and flies slowly upward, only remembering when he gets to the Way that creatures made all of vapor (*wind walkers*, specifically) cannot travel through the portals. It turns out he can't, either.

The blue lizard makes some sniffing noises in his direction, and then starts moving towards him, gracefully, purposefully, and (thank goodness) slowly. There's a strange clanking sound behind it as it moves, but Aravis doesn't spend any time wondering about that. He flies back to the ground, dismisses his *gaseous form*, and casts *rope trick* such that the opening is right next to the Way out. As he starts to climb the lizard gains speed, now charging in his direction, though still more slowly than it looks like it should.

Aravis makes it halfway up the rope, slips, and falls back down to the ground with a thud. Fearfully he cranes his neck to see the lizard, and notes with relief that he still has a few more seconds before it reaches him. His mood changes, though, as the air around him seems to drop a hundred degrees for a second, chilling him to the core. What's more upsetting is that something also *dispels* his *rope trick*.

Enough is enough. Aravis decides to stand, fight, and spare no expense. He targets the lizard with *power word: stun*. Alas, this spell turns out instead to be *power word: discover the enemy has more than 150 hit points*. The lizard is unimpressed.

"Oh, CRAP!" exclaims Aravis.

Back in the plane of lightning, it's become clear to Morningstar, Ernie and Kibi that Aravis has either not picked up on the "we're fleeing now" plan, or something has happened to him that will require a rescue. Kibi *teleports* back to the Way to the plane of Air and falls through it, while Ernie grabs hold of Morningstar (so she doesn't fall twenty feet on arrival) and the two of them plunge into the Way close at hand.

The blue lizard (once called a Lumbrese by the cheering fans who watched it freeze and devour criminals) lumbers toward Aravis. The clanking sound is coming from a pair of thick chains attached to an iron collar around its neck, which once tethered it to one of the pillars. They trail behind it in the dirt, slowing it down. Still a round away, the lizard freezes the air around Aravis a second time, and with a flash of its icy eyes it *dispels* his *endurance*. Aravis targets it with a *disintegrate* spell but the lizard shrugs it off, taking only minimal damage. The monster finally reaches Aravis, freezes him a third time, rips into him with its two front claws, and for good measure chomps down with a mouth full of icicle-like teeth. The wizard finds himself stuck in the creature's jaws, feeling its icy breath all around him, burning his skin.

The back end of the lizard is engulfed in a pillar of holy Yondallan fire. The front end is struck and blinded by an Ellish *darkbeam*. Aravis can just see, through a haze of cold and freezing blood, the forms of his friends come to save him.

QR 80

Kibi emerges into the plane of Air. "Guys, quick, come through! Aravis needs our help! He's probably getting eaten by a dragon! Quick! I can *teleport* all of you but one. You'll have to survive in the lightning for just a second, but we've got to hurry!"

Flicker volunteers to stay behind, and the rest follow Kibi back into the lightning storm.



Aravis, finding himself pinned and having no desire to spend a second more as a chew toy, *teleports* out of the ice lizard's jaws, landing next to Morningstar. "I think it's blind," says Morningstar approvingly, noting its lack of focus.

The lizard fires off a point-blank *greater dispelling*, not realizing that its blindness isn't caused by magic, but by honest-to-goodness burned out eyeballs. (It does at least manage to dispel Ernie's *fly* and the remainder of Morningstar's *darkbeam*.) It thrashes around, starts to head off in a wrong direction, and bumps its head into a pillar before picking up the enemy's scent and pegging all three with another freezing attack. Ernie notes that when it does so, its wounds seem to heal. The halfling steps to the side and hacks twice with *Beryn Sur*, but the lizard's hard icy hide deflects both sword strokes. Morningstar gives Aravis some much-needed healing.

The rest of the party fall out of the Way. Grey Wolf tumbles gracefully and Dranko *feather falls*, leaving Snokas, Step and Kibi to fall in a clumsy heap. **THUMP. THUMP THUMP.** *Ouch!*

Aravis looks over at Grey Wolf. "Grey Wolf, I'd like to request an *iron storm* around that creature's back end."

"I can do that," answers Grey Wolf.

"We think cold damage will just heal it," warns Ernie.

"And we think it's blind," says Morningstar.

"And we think it's got pretty thick skin," says Snokas, as both of his picks fail to penetrate its scales. Dranko lashes with his whip, but also fails to damage the creature. Step has better luck, stepping forward and slashing between rows of scales with his bastard sword. Blood fountains out, and the lizard hisses and splutters. Its blind frustration is evident as it whips its head back and forth.

Grey Wolf lays down the *iron storm*, and Aravis delivers the pain. His *chain lightning* is sucked into the sphere of iron filings, creating a crackling ball of deadly electricity that essentially causes the lizard to explode into icy chunks. Dranko winces in sympathy, knowing how that feels. Grey Wolf ducks as a piece of chain whistles past his head.

Dranko looks down at the mutilated head and neck of the Lumbrese. "I'm so glad I hurried here so I could save the day," he mutters.



Ignis Ex Machina

Kibi *teleports* a couple more times to retrieve Flicker and get him past the lightning plane. Dranko pries a fang out of the ice-dragon's mouth. "How did it end up in so many pieces?" asks Flicker.

"*Iron storm/chain lightning*," say many voices.

The party start to explore the coliseum, noting that the temperature is warming up without the lizard around. Behind one of the pillars, Ernie finds the remains of something like a smashed machine. It's vaguely reminiscent of the thing Aristus was working on. It's a lump of gears and chains and tubes and wheels and spouts, jumbled together and smashed. "Hey wizards," he calls. "What do you think this is?"

"Is it loot?" asks Dranko.

"It's mechanical-looking," says Ernie.

"Dragons should have hoards," says Dranko.

Some bits might almost have been meant as feet, to assist movement where its wheels wouldn't work. There's no indication about its purpose. There's no blood, but there's some black oily liquid on some nearby rocks. Nothing about it is magic.

Further searching reveals the skeletal remains of several halfling-sized creatures. Morningstar shoos the others away and casts *thought capture*, and (not surprisingly) picks up a fearful thought of someone about to be eaten. A second such spell cast near the machinery reveals a thought of powerful hunger.

"I hate hungry machinery," says Dranko.

"I think that's the dragon's thought," points out Aravis.

"Yeah. I knew that."

"It's still getting warmer," notes Step, and it's true. With the cold lizard dead the temperature has risen steadily, while the enormous sun glares brightly in the sky.

"I think the dragon broke its chain a long time ago, and not just to fight us," says Flicker, examining one of the tethers. Meanwhile, Dranko and Ernie examine the most intact of the skeletons and conclude it belonged to a winged humanoid, though there are no signs of wings.

There's not much more to scout. The Slice turns out to encompass little more than the arena itself. Fortunately there's a second blue Way in the far entryway (in addition to a gray one high up in the seats), so it's clear which way they're headed next.

"You know," says Dranko to Aravis. "I always imagined I'd be fighting in a coliseum someday against a terrible draconic beast. But no, it had to be you, didn't it? You had to steal my glory."

"I'm not sure I'd call that fighting," says Morningstar, shaking her head at the holes in Aravis's clothes.

"Sure it was," says Dranko. "Aravis, you were attacking from inside. You got inside its defenses."

"Inside its toothy maw, you mean," says Flicker. "But Dranko, if you want, one of our magic types can summon a monster for you to fight."

Step jokingly volunteers to be *polymorphed* into a dragon. "Here's the problem with that," explains Dranko. "Years from now when I'm telling the story about the fight with the evil monster, people will ask, 'So what kind of monster was it?' And I'll say, 'A paladin.' And they'll say 'Oh, so *you* were the evil monster.'"

There are no magic items among the remains, and no reason to stay any longer. They finish healing up from the fight and head for the glowing blue exit. Dranko goes in first, rope tied around his waist and the rest counting out the standard five Abernathies.

OR SO

There's black sucking void, followed soon after by forest. It's darker than Green Valley, shaggy, old, and mossy. The air is filled with the sounds of birds. Dranko quickly looks around himself but sees only thick trees and vegetation. The undulating ground is covered with leaves and mossy rocks. And the...

Yoink. Five Abernathies are up and the others pull him back.

"It's a very attractive old forest full of carnivorous birds and evil druids," Dranko tells them.

"You saw all that?" asks Aravis skeptically.

"Well, I heard the birds. And it was definitely an old forest."

"Carnivorous?" asks Grey Wolf.

"Evil druids?" asks Morningstar,

"Well... no. But I thought there might be."

A minute later the whole Company stand on the mossy carpet of the forest. There's no sign of intelligent life besides themselves, though admittedly they can't see very far in any particular direction. There are no signs, no trail, no tracks, just dense, dark green woods.

Dranko scampers up a tree with unexpected difficulty. The tree trunks are slick with moss and moisture, and the lower branches are few and weak. While he struggles, Grey Wolf's monkey familiar Edghar clammers up Dranko's back and hops into the treetops. When Dranko reaches the top a few minutes later and pokes his head above the canopy he sees no signs of man-made habitation. It's just leaves (and the occasional parakeet) as far as he can see in every direction. Edghar sniffs the air and sadly notes the absence of other monkeys.

With no better plan, Morningstar casts *find the path* to the next Way and gets a direction. At her request Step *detects evil* before they leave. It's negative, though he allows his gaze to settle on Flicker for a couple of extra seconds, and then breaks into a chuckle when the halfling looks taken aback.

It's mighty slow going. The forest is littered with boulders, some only a few feet across, some a hundred feet or more in length or height. There's plenty of scrambling, stumbling and slipping on slick roots. Kibi grows so weary that he casts *xorn movement* to travel more easily through the ground, but finds that just as tedious since the roots block him there too. Dranko, in a *telepathic bond* with some of the others, scouts ahead. (But not too far ahead – Morningstar needs to see him to make course corrections when necessary.) Edghar parallels him high up in the trees.

For a couple of hours it's an uneventful slog, save for a brief encounter with a deer-like creature. It's alien-looking, with elongated eyes, six legs, and four sets of antlers. It responds to Dranko's questions by scampering off into the woods.

The monotony is broken when Edghar says to Grey Wolf: *There's something up here you're going to miss, if you keep going in that direction. It's in the trees.*

Grey Wolf relays this to the others, and Dranko again slowly climbs upward, until he sees what Edghar was talking about. About 150 feet away, and 60 feet off the ground, is a small tree-house. At the base of that tree, Morningstar casts *detect thoughts* and Grey Wolf *detect magic*, and neither turn up anything unusual.

"Hello?" calls up Morningstar. There's no response.

Dranko and Flicker climb the tree. There are no ropes, ladders, or any other visible means by which someone could reach the tree-house, but that doesn't deter the pair of rogues. They climb up the trunk until they find themselves right below the wide wooden platform that serves as the little building's floor. The radius of the platform is longer than Dranko's arms, so he clings to a branch with one arm and wraps his whip around the closest branch on the next tree over. Flicker goes hand-over-hand along the taut whip until he clears the platform, and then flips himself upward onto it, landing on the thin ledge between the platform edge and the near wall of the house.

Before Dranko can loose the whip, Edghar climbs up the half-orc's back and scampers across to the other tree. Flicker edges around the ledge until he finds a doorway and slips in, reporting over the *telepathic bond* that it's abandoned. "There's furniture," he calls to Dranko, "sized for a little person, about my size. Lots of moss, and bird-poop everywhere."

"According to Flicker," Dranko relays, "this place was once inhabited by small anthropomorphic birds who sat on chairs."

"How did they get up there?" asks Morningstar.

"I'm telling you, they were bird-people," says Dranko. "I'm actually being serious. And Flicker says there's bird poop everywhere."

"You may be sort of right," admits Morningstar. "Remember the skeletons we found in the coliseum, that had wings. They were humanoid, but they flew."

"There could be a whole race of the things around here," says Dranko.

"Or maybe there was only that one left, and he got lonely, went out, and got eaten," says Morningstar glumly.

There's a second floor of the house, but Flicker doesn't think the flimsy floor will hold his weight. Edghar scampers up and looks around, reporting to Grey Wolf that he sees a bed. He also finds a bird's nest with small eggs in it. *I wonder if they're edible*, wonders the monkey.

Don't eat them, advises Grey Wolf. *They could be poison, or unnatural. Remember that 'deer' we saw.*

Whoever heard of a poisoned egg? complains Edghar, licking his lips.

We shouldn't risk it, thinks Grey Wolf.

Wait, says the monkey. *I have an idea...*

Flicker's voice comes from the lower floor of the house. "What the... hey! Aww, yuck!"

Well, it's not contact poison, thinks Edghar to Grey Wolf.

Edghar! Get down here right now if you're just going to be a pest.

It's clear that nothing has lived in the house for years. Dranko mutters a small prayer for its former inhabitants, and back on the ground cleans off Flicker with the *decanter of endless water*. That sparks a strange discussion about where the water comes from in Het Branoi. Could it be from the part of the Elemental Plane of Water they've already visited? And now that they know fish live there, they wonder why fish never come flying out of the *decanter*.

Edghar keeps exploring while the humanoids hold this vital discourse. He finds another half dozen tree-houses, all abandoned and rotting.

"They must have fled ages ago," says Dranko.

"Or died off," adds Grey Wolf.

"But they wouldn't have aged to death, right?" says Kibi.

"Why is that when we find abandoned houses, they're not full of gold and jewels left behind by treasure-loving monsters?" complains Dranko.

"I don't have an answer for that," says Grey Wolf. "I'm sorry."

¤¤

They keep going, keeping their previous course even though the *find the path* has expired. It's only twenty minutes later that Dranko hears a very strange noise coming from behind a large mossy boulder still fifty feet away. He motions for everyone else to stop, and the rest of the Company hear it too.

It sounds like a repeating rhythmic buzzing sound, alternating with a weird beep. Had anyone in the Company known what it meant, they might have used the word 'hydraulic' to describe the sound.

"Sounds mechanical," says Aravis.

"Sounds like something we'll have to attack," says Grey Wolf.

"We shouldn't, unless it provokes us," says Dranko.

"Like I said," says Grey Wolf.

The Company move closer to the boulder to investigate. The sound continues, but now they hear something new – a sound like an automatic saw-blade spinning up, followed by a noise of splintering wood. Grey Wolf lifts his eyebrows.

"Maybe it's chopping down trees," says Dranko nervously.

"I've got an idea," says Flicker brightly. "Whatever it is, we'll capture it, take it back to the coliseum, and Dranko can fight it to the death!"

They reach the boulder, a round hunk of rock over twenty feet in diameter, and the strange sounds are still coming from the other side of it. Now that they're closer, they can hear that it's actually two sets of sounds, nearly identical.

Click. Buzz. Whirr. Beep.

Dranko scrambles up the boulder, crouches down when he nears the top, and peers over. He sees right away that they're intact versions of the smashed machine the Company found in the coliseum. There are two of them, each about six feet in diameter, trundling slowly along. They look like hodgepodge collections of machine parts and metal plates, rolling on wheels when possible and scooting on feet when necessary. Each has four strangely-jointed metal arms ending in sharp spikes, and assorted other moving parts – spinning tops, rotating gears, belts, tubes and the like. Dranko is reminded of the *apparatus of Aristus* that the gnome was working on back at the Eye of the Storm.

As Dranko looks at them, one of them notices him, stops moving, and 'looks' back. Something inside spins quickly, and a bright light shines in Dranko's eyes. He instinctively shields himself with a hand and turns away.

"What are you things?" demands Dranko, calling down to them. One of them makes some inscrutable semi-vocal sounds – clicks and buzzes interspersed. It sounds sort of like a language, so Dranko casts *comprehend languages* just in time to hear the word *engaged*.

From a spout somewhere inside the thing's body, a wide jet of flames shoots out at Dranko. He just manages to duck out of the way, crouching behind the boulder as moss is burned from its top. Dranko smells the burning tips of his own hair.

"I think it's hostile," he announces to his friends, as he clings to the side of the boulder away from the strange machines. He can hear their strange voices, which repeat over and over again:

+++ Bzzzz +++ Self-defense protocols engaged +++ Bzzzz +++ Self-defense protocols engaged +++

Craning his neck, he shouts over the boulder at them: "I AM NOT ATTACKING YOU! I AM A FRIEND!"

They just repeat themselves, one right after the other, like an echo. Then, yet another new sound: *CHOP-CHOP-CHOP-CHOP-CHOP*. It quickly gets louder, until Dranko sees one of the creatures rising up above the boulder on the other side.

“Holy crap!” shouts Dranko, who sees it first. “It’s levitating upward and swinging swords around its head!”

Plane Sailing: Brilliant description of a helicopter!

When it crests the boulder it announces once more +++ *Bzzzz* +++ Self-defense protocols engaged +++ and sprays the entire area around the waiting Company with flames. Smoke rises from burned vegetation and various party members. “What the hell is that?” shouts Flicker. He fishes out his sling and lets fly two bullets, but they just bounce off some of the metal plates.

Wisely, the party start to scatter as well as they can while they return fire. Grey Wolf pegs it with an *acid orb*, setting the thing’s metal bits to hissing and smoking. Snokas fires off an arrow that’s deflected like the sling stone. Kibi uncorks a *lightning bolt*, and for a split second electricity plays around the whole ‘body’ of the machine. But almost instantly the electricity rushes down a thin cord dangling from the machine creature and dissipates harmlessly into the ground.

“It’s immune to lightning!” calls Dranko from the boulder. “It’s got some magic cord hanging down that nullified the electricity!”

“It’s grounded,” calls back Aravis, understanding.

“No, it’s flying!” returns Dranko. Can’t they see it? “We’re the ones grounded!”

Aravis sighs. It’s just not worth the explanation. The grounding wire seems to have no effect on Morningstar’s *flame strike*, which brings down dark flames on both the metal beasts.

A wonderful idea comes into Dranko’s head as he watches the ‘whirling swords’ of the machine. On his first trip to the provisioners, the day after being summoned to Abernathy’s tower, Dranko had purchased himself a fishing net. Having carried it around all these years, here’s finally a chance to put it to use. “Net!” he calls, and it comes into his hand from his magic *wide-mouth pouch*. He grips one of its weighted edges, hefts it in his hands, and flings it at the flying machine.

It’s not a perfect throw, but the leading edge goes just far enough, and the whole net gets twirled into the thing’s propeller. A horrible wrenching sound comes from the machine, right before it drops from the sky and lands with a metallic thud.

+++ Self-defense protocols engaged +++ comes its emotionless voice.

“That was good,” says Grey Wolf. “That was very, very good.”

Step, closest to the second machine, charges toward it. The machine has the same idea; it extends its own propeller and shoots toward Step, hovering a few feet off the ground. As it flies it unfolds its four spike-tipped arms and drives three of them right through Step’s armor. Blood pours from the holes. With careful and practiced placement, Aravis and Ernie pound the machines with a *fireball* and *flame strike* respectively.

Dranko hears a whirring saw-blade sound from the one he netted, and in several places the net pops away, cut. From a nozzle it spews flame over half the party. Roots, rocks and clothing are blackened. “Self-defense my ass!” Dranko exclaims.

Grey Wolf pegs the netted machine with another *acid orb*. He’s rewarded with even more hissing and smoke, and then the propeller droops down, melted, while a jet of steam shoots out the machine’s back. Defense protoccccllllllllpffff... it says, before shutting down at last.

The other machine is soon overwhelmed. Snokas drives a pick into its gears, Kibi nails it with a *coldfire*, and Step, emboldened by a popular *healing circle* from Morningstar, hacks it with his *keen* broadsword. He severs enough important tubes and wires that it abruptly stops talking, falls five feet to the ground, and lies still.



Clues

“Those things *sucked!*” Dranko nudges one of the machine creatures with his foot, then casts a healing spell on One Certain Step. “But,” he continues, narrowing his eyes, “I wonder if you can take those fire-shooters out and use them as weapons.”

The creature sparks and twitches; Dranko jumps back, but it doesn’t move again. Morningstar shoos him away and casts *thought capture*, but only gets a pained memory from Step. “What *is* this thing?” asks the paladin, mostly rhetorically.

“I don’t know,” says Dranko, “but I want a souvenir out of it. It destroyed my net!”

"We'll buy you a new one," says Grey Wolf.

Since the *find the path* has run out, and the Company are likely going to camp nearby, they spend a couple of hours carefully searching the 'corpses' of these strange things. The three wizards are especially interested in its function. Though they are marvels of engineering, they could not have moved or attacked without heavy ongoing magic. The fire attack in particular *must* have been magical; there's no container or other source of fuel for its flame jet. But there's no magic on them now.

Dranko and Flicker are more interested in the 'material science' behind the mechanical constructs. Each one has three chocolate-bar-sized platinum rods at the base of the propeller, six four-inch-diameter adamantine discs from various joints, and a modest diamond (valued at over 2000gp, at Kibi's and Flicker's guesses) behind the flashing lens in its 'head.'

"We should take apart all of our enemies from now on," Dranko says, prying one of the diamonds loose from a steel housing.
"But what should we call these things? I need a label for 'em."

He is answered by an airy voice from the trees above. "We call them 'Scree!'."

Everyone leaps to their feet, weapons again drawn, and looks up. They see nothing. "Uh... hi," calls up Dranko. "Thanks for telling us. If you'd like to come down..."

"Who are you?" asks the voice.

"I'm Dranko Blackhole."

"We're just travelers passing through," says Kibi. "We didn't mean any harm, but these things attacked us."

"Did you come from the arena with the Lumbrese?" asks the voice. "The blue lizard?"

"Oh, that," says Aravis offhandedly. "It's dead."

"I hope it wasn't a friend of yours," adds Morningstar hastily.

"No, no, no!" says the voice. "We're happy to hear it's gone."

"It's dead, but there's no escape past it," says Dranko.

"Oh? What's beyond it?"

"Lightning," answers Dranko. "Lots and lots and lots of lightning. And past the lightning is a plane with nothing but air. Just a long corridor of air, with no exit."

"Ah. I'm sorry to hear all of that." The voice sounds sad and disappointed.

"Are you trying to find your way out?" asks Kibi.

"Not any more. All the Ways lead to death. But you are able to defeat the Scree! You are very powerful!"

"More powerful than the Scree, at least," says Dranko, nodding.

"What other ways out are th...?" Aravis starts to ask, but Dranko interrupts him. "Hey, will you at least tell us your name? And why don't you come down here where we can talk more comfortably?"

Two creatures descend from their hiding places in the treetops. They are small, slender humanoids, no taller than Ernie, with delicate fly-wings. Their eyes are long and alien, like those of the deer. Their wings make a soft humming noise as they fly.

"My name is **Reynoso**," says one as they land, still cautious, a few feet off from the party. The other says nothing but stares wide-eyed at them. Reynoso speaks in a high-pitched twittering language that is instantly translated to Charagan Common by a translator disc around his neck – just like many folks had at the Eye of the Storm.

"What are your people called?" asks Dranko, once Reynoso's feet are on the ground.

"We are called the Solfar. What are you?"

"Most of us are human. A couple of us are half-orcs." He notices the second Solfar is staring directly at Kibi, and adds, "He's a dwarf. His name is Kibilhathur Bimson." Reynoso's companion points at Kibi and starts twittering excitedly in her own tongue.

Kibi activates his *ioun stone of tongues*. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're the one from the statues!" she says.

"You mean like this?" asks Kibi, pulling out the little figurine of himself that Omar had given him.

"You have one too!" she exclaims. "Have you met the man who made them?"

"No. Er... have you?" asks Kibi.

"Yes!"

"Where is he?"

"He left us a long time ago," says the Solfar woman.

"Was he all right?" asks Kibi.

"No, he was mad," says Reynoso. "He was an old, bearded, straggly... human. Like you. Like him, but older." He points at Step.

The female Solfar whispers to Reynoso, "I should fetch Ilyrio right away." Reynoso nods, and his companion flies off.

"I'm not getting into any machine!" shouts Kibi after her. Then, as an afterthought, he mutters to Step, "He's not evil, is he?" Step shakes his head.

"So, where did you get that translator thingy?" asks Dranko.

"Some travelers brought them, many years ago," says Reynoso. "They had some they weren't using and gave them to us."

"We visited a place full of good people, and many of them had discs just like that one."

"There are other people trapped like us, then?" asks Reynoso, eyes widening.

"Oh, sure!" says Dranko. He fishes in his pack and pulls out his map of the Slices. Before he can get started on what would no doubt be a faithful retelling of the Company's adventures, Reynoso cuts him off with a gesture. "Please... Wait for my friend to return. We have sent for a scribe, who will write down everything you say."

"Um... no problem," says Dranko with a shrug.

"Should we be worried about more Screef finding us?" asks Morningstar, looking around.

"No," says Reynoso. "Not if the pattern holds. We shouldn't see any more for a week."

"Where do they come from?" asks Kibi.

"One of the other blue doorways. They usually come out in pairs. This was your first encounter with them, then?"

"Yup," says Dranko. "They went on and on about 'self-defense.' Pfffff."

Reynoso sighs. "I've never heard them say anything else."

"Charming," says Dranko.

"What do they do," asks Grey Wolf, "when they're not torching passing adventurers?"

"If they don't see us, they move through the woods until they find one of the blue doorways, and then they go through it. If they do see one of us, they say that phrase over and over again while attacking. We've lost several of our number to them. They fly as fast as we do, though either down near the ground or above the trees. The branches and hanging moss interfere with their gears and wheels and flying apparatus."

When an awkward silence follows, Dranko breaks it by lighting a cigar and asking, "So, how long have you been here? And what is this place called?"

Reynoso looks at Dranko nervously. "We've been trapped here for sixteen years. Our homeland is called Solfaria. And what is that?" He points at Dranko's cigar.

"Do you want one?" asks Dranko.

"Say no," advises Aravis.

"Is he going to breathe fire, like the Screef?" asks the Solfar.

"No," says Aravis. "Just smoke. Nasty smoke. It's not harmful unless you breathe it in."

"Fascinating. We should be writing this down. Please, no more discussion while we wait for the scribe."

"Scribes are very important to you," says Morningstar.

"Yes! It's very important that we write down everything. History, and its accurate recording, is one of the highest priorities of the Solfar. We are keepers of knowledge."

Kibi raises his eyebrows. "Do you have written notes from when the man who made the statues was here?"

"Yes, of course," says Reynoso.

"We'd like to look at them," says Kibi, trying to hide his sudden anticipation.

"Most of it was nonsensical ravings," says Reynoso, "but we did write it all down."

"We're experts in nonsensical ravings!" exclaims Dranko.

QR 80

A few minutes later the scribe arrives, descending gently to stand next to Reynoso. He carries a pack filled with scrolls and quills. A translator disc hangs around his neck by a string.

"Hello. My name is **Ilyrio**. Esheria told me there was need of a scribe." Even before he has finished his introduction, Ilyrio has fished out a pot of ink, unrolled a piece of parchment and readied his pen. He looks at the Company expectantly. No one says anything for a good ten seconds.

Aravis breaks the silence this time. "We're interested in hearing more about the man who made the statues."

"Of course," says Reynoso. "And we're interesting in knowing why he had statues of *you*." He nods at Kibi.

"Well, that's what I want to find out!" says Kibi.

"Because he's good looking," suggests Dranko. The scribe dutifully writes that opinion.

"How long ago was he here?" asks Aravis.

"He came to us not long after we discovered we were trapped. Fourteen years ago it was."

"We're hoping we can put this all back, some way," says Morningstar.

"You mean return this piece of Solfaria to the rest?" asks Reynoso. "Good! Do you know, then, why we're connected to other dangerous places?"

"This was done by some evil shamans," explains Morningstar.

"So they meant to trap us here?"

"Sort of," says Morningstar. "We think it's an experiment gone wrong. But they weren't up to anything good."

"They weren't trying to trap you specifically, if it makes you feel better," says Aravis.

"There are lots of pieces of lots of worlds cut off, and strung together," adds Kibi.

"And you can fix things," says Reynoso. "I think that's what the man said, though I haven't looked at his transcriptions in a long time."

"Like I said, I'd really like to see them," says Kibi. "Different people seem to have different ideas about what I should do, but none of them really know."

"And I'd be pleased to tell you all about my life, and where we're from, if you want to write it all down," says Dranko expansively.

"Yes!" says Ilyrio. "Of course!" The scribe is writing astonishingly fast, in tiny handwriting on his parchment scroll. He easily keeps up with the conversation, noting it word for word.

Dranko opens his mouth to begin, but Ernie kicks him. "Only say polite things, Dranko. None of your... stories."

"And you can ask him to stop smoking, if you don't like it," adds Kibi.

"Well, it is fouling the air..." says Ilyrio.

Dranko extinguishes his cigar by stubbing it on Ernie's armor. To Ernie's look of indignation, Dranko responds, "It's OK. When I made your armor, I made little rough spots so I could light matches and stub out cigars on it." While Ernie just stands there with his mouth open, Dranko muses out loud to himself, "Next time, I think I'll make a magical hot spot on the armor, so I can light my cigars just by touching it."

"And look, they've recorded your wonderful ideas," says Kibi. "'The ravings of the mad half-orc,' they'll call it."

"Ooooh. Ernie, show 'em. Pull the little finger!" says Dranko.

"No!"

Aravis clears his throat and points at Dranko. "For the record, I don't want to be included in the archive with him."

OR SO

For a long while the Company show the Solfar their map, and tell them about their adventures in Het Branoi while the scribe writes at a furious pace. Then Reynoso tells the Company their own tale.

"For a long, long time, after we discovered the nature of our predicament, we tried to find a way out. There were over two hundred of us trapped. Now we are only thirty. Many of us died going to where the demons live, thinking to find a doorway beyond that led to safety. Many died, we presume, going into the doorway from where come the Scree, hoping to find a way to stop their attacks. None ever came back. Yet more were slain by the Lumbrese, and while some made it past and through the horizontal doorway in the coliseum, none of them ever came back either. And a dozen or so of us went through a third blue doorway, and a week later the door itself changed from blue to gray. Now it is... disturbing... to go through, and it doesn't lead anywhere."

"Eventually Sonia, our eldest, decided it was enough, that some day this would end on its own, and that we should stay in hiding until then, and avoid the Scree as best we can."

"I like these guys too much," whispers Dranko to the others. "That means something horrible is going to happen to them, doesn't it?" Out loud, he says, "Do you guys have a map of what you've explored?"

"No," says Reynoso, "but we have recorded the words of those who made it back alive. Beyond our woods is a... Slice, you call them? A Slice with demons, and beyond that is another Slice with more demons. There's probably a way out beyond, but none of us have made it that far. A handful of travelers have come from there over the years, and they said things like, 'I can't believe how lucky we were to have survived.' Some had lost companions to the demons. One or two left us and went back in, and another couple left in the direction of the Lumbrese. One went to where the Scree come from, and we didn't see her again. There have been only six such travelers in our sixteen years here, though it's possible there have been others who came by one doorway and left by another without us even knowing."

Ilyrio fishes out a number of scrolls covered with tiny writing. "These are what we wrote, from the ravings from the mad sculptor," he says. "Please understand: most of what he 'said' was just noises, with no translation. And he was usually silent, laboriously carving little statues of Kibilathur. We built him a small house, on the ground since he could not fly, and brought him food and water. A Scribe was always with him. These scrolls contain the only lucid things he said. Twice he was talking to himself, and twice he addressed the Scribe directly."

Kibi takes the scrolls, casts *comprehend languages*, and reads aloud to the others.

Graywolf-ELM: Nice little flying creatures. I guess the bad guys had to put in food for the Lumbrese.

Sabriel: ["I like these guys too much," whispers Dranko to the others. "That means something horrible is going to happen to them, doesn't it?"]

This just after the Solfar have described how most of their people have variously been slaughtered by an overgrown carnivorous lizard or homicidal animated helicopters, or never came back from portals full of demons and cleaners and stuff... I think the horrible things have already been happening!

(directly to the Scribe)

What if the beard is wrong?

*He's so touchy about the beard.
For a faulty beard could my
whole plan fall into ruin? His
image shifts so, and the details
are sometimes blurry. And
what of the rocks at his feet?*

(directly to the Scribe)

*One thing I still don't understand, why is the interstitial matrix in
the far realms? I might have expected astral or ethereal or
shadow. Even dream would have been plausible. Could wild magic
be connected into the unspeakable reaches? It would be a measure
of success if that is where the master is and would more explain his
need, but at the same time would mean the whole enterprise was
misguided from the start. Even the lowest of infinite layers is no
closer or farther from the madness than anywhere else. More of
the yellow fruits, please. I enjoy them immensely.*

If I ever find Clouds in this mess I'm going to have his viscera for stew. Stop clamping the wild magic. More silver dragon blood. I'm sure the instability is normal given our power source. Don't let's waste any more precious essence on the structure. It'll all be fine. Such seductive words. Such idiocy in hindsight. And that stupid, stupid woman of his. It's a miracle she wasn't throwing dinner parties for the slaves in the rotunda. Did she think we were all on holiday? If there's any justice Clouds has discovered the elemental plane of hornets and the cleaners have eaten the only way out.

Plane Sailing: Ooooo...

KidCthulhu: Oh yeah. There's nothing this party likes more than unraveling raving, babbling prophetic nonsense.

No, really. That's not sarcasm. We really do. At least there are no turtles in this one!

Kid Charlemagne: The turtle prophecy was my fave.

Destil: I'd rather like a shot, myself...

They were working to get closer to... something or someone who's trapped and they seem to have assumed that was in the Abyss... That explains the number of Demon Slices.

I carve he who will undo my mistake. He won't know, so I carve, his face so clear it muddies my thoughts, so people can tell him, he is the key. He will open the way out of here. The source thrashes like a wild beast, trying to escape its cage. The dwarf can bring peace to my caged beast, lift it away so it never troubles me again. Past the demons now, the abyss brought home, the heart of our hut, there is the beast, casting about, ripping away pieces of the universe with no stopping it. It should have worked! It did work! We tore an opening to the abyss where from to call our lord home. Alone of my brothers I hid, and strived, and succeeded. The call went out. We were to be his beacon, so floating in the vastness of the cosmos he would hear our voice and find us and reward our long service and punish who defied him, who blinded and bound him even as they fled. He is the circle and the circle is he. But I failed him. Curse the day I found the eye and set it within my wheels, and now gem and essence both marred. I must escape to rebuild and try again.

Destil: Oh, boy... Isn't the main pantheon of Charagan "the Travelers" who fled some great unnamed enemy long ago? And wasn't there that line from the stones about "Fear the emperor, but he is only the means to an end, fear the end more" or some such... And here the Black Circle is working to... Oh, my...

Sagiro: Obviously I cannot publically confirm or deny any of your guesses or suspicions. (And my players have made similar guesses, among many others.) But right or wrong, I like the way you think!

Kid Charlemagne: Once you've got this portion done, could you give a more detailed explanation of the Slices and how they work and how you created them? For example, I'm curious if you chose each Slice's contents or if you used any random generation in the process...

Sagiro: When the Story Hour has finished with Het Branoii I'll be happy to talk about the Slices, if there are any unanswered questions at that point. You might be disappointed by the lack of algorithmic complexity in their determination, though.

OR SO

Ice, Ice, Baby

Kibi finishes his dramatic reading of the Solfar transcriptions. Ilyrio comments, "Ah, the rocks at your feet. We had wondered about that. They're depicted in almost all the carvings." He rummages in his bag and pulls out a half dozen more little statuettes of Kibi, all slightly different, some wood, some stone, but clearly made by the same hand. Scree is present in all of them, intricately carved.

"Can I have one for my collection?" asks Dranko.

"Certainly," answers the Solfar. "We have many more. He had a constant demand for rocks and pieces of wood, and he was carving or chiseling whenever he wasn't eating or sleeping."

"Soooo," says Dranko, scratching his head. "The crazy guy is the one responsible for this whole mess. And the Black Circle is the symbol of a Demon Lord of the Abyss, who they're trying to rescue."

"And we want to stop him from 'trying again,' that's for sure," adds Kibi.

That kicks off a long round of speculation about what's really going on with all of this. There's talk about the Abyss and the nature of demons, about the Far Realms (whatever that is) and how it might be connected to wild magic, about the Black Circle and its ultimate goals, about what the 'Interstitial Matrix' is, and how all of these things are interrelated.

Ilyrio writes it all down for posterity, which makes Morningstar nervous. When she expresses her reservations, the scribe nods understandingly, and offers to keep the Company transcripts hidden and private.

"If I were a Big Evil God," says Dranko, "and trying to get folks to help me, I wouldn't *tell* people I was a Big Evil God. I'd tell them I was an abstract concept of knowledge." Flicker raises his eyebrows.

"Would you?" asks Aravis skeptically.

"Well, no, I *personally* wouldn't. But I could see someone with more subtlety and intelligence deciding that was a good idea."

"In other words," says Aravis with a smirk, "it's something Pewter might do, because..."

"Let's just stop right there," interrupts Dranko. Then he mutters, "The fact that your cat keeps beating me at chess is no reason to rub that in." And then finally, "Er... I wasn't going to say that out loud."

That's all right, thinks Pewter to Aravis. *I won't tell anyone that I give him pawn and move every game.*

"Look at the bright side," says Aravis. "You can use utensils."

"Not that he chooses to, most of the time," says Kibi.

"But I *can*," protests Dranko.

Edgar thinks to Grey Wolf, *I can use utensils, and I'm smarter than him.*

He knows, answers Grey Wolf. *I won't bring it up.*

Aravis notes with amusement that the out-loud portions of this exchange are being dutifully scribed by Ilyrio. "Morningstar," he says, "I don't think we have to worry about anyone who's following us learning useful information from the Solfar. Our transcriptions will be indistinguishable from any other ravings of a madman."

The conversation gets back on track, but no one reaches any firm conclusions. Ernie brings up the disturbing idea that the "our lord" mentioned might be the Adversary, from whom the Traveling Gods fled before coming to Charagan. Everyone is reminded that whatever was going on in the Hets, the Black Circle thought it was dangerous enough to put a stop to it. Maybe because linking worlds is such a perilous enterprise? It's certainly wreaking havoc all around them.

Kibi thinks, and the rest agree, that the Black Circle was using the Eye of Moirel to punch a hole into the Abyss. The Company decide that going into the Demon Slices will get them closer to finding out what's going on, and they opt to leave that way rather than go to where the Screele are coming from. Kibi makes copies for himself of the 'mad' sculptor's transcripts and thanks the Solfar for their help.

Dranko seems happy with the decision. "It's OK," he says, putting on a brave face. "I like demons... more than those stupid mechanical things, anyhow."

"Which are coming," says Flicker wistfully, "from a place filled with diamonds and platinum bars and adamantium thingies and..."

"Flicker," warns Grey Wolf, giving the halfling a look.

"They're immune to your sneak attacks," Dranko points out.

"Well, you all kill 'em, and I'll loot 'em," answers Flicker. "How's that sound?" But nobody's buying it.

The party spend the night in a *Leomund's secure shelter*, though Ernie and Flicker opt to stay in one of the empty tree-houses.

OR SO

The next morning they ask the Solfar about the first Demon Slice. "It's extremely cold," says Reynoso. "Cold enough that we cannot survive without magical protections. We've seen nothing there but ice and demons."

Dranko is feeling nauseated and chilled, and is disheartened to find that he once again cannot reach the inner peace required to accept spells from Delioch. Ernie tries casting *break enchantment* ("Bad spell! Leave Dranko alone! Evil magic, I cast thee out!"), but it has no effect. A *detect magic* shows the hideous taint of the Cleaners still hovering about his body.

Morningstar brings out the big guns and casts *greater restoration*, willingly sacrificing some of her own life essence to cleanse her betrothed. As she touches him to cast the spell, she is nearly overcome with nausea herself. Then, as when a bandage is quickly torn from a healed wound, there is a flash of pain they both share, followed by a soothing sense of relief.

"I had no idea how corrupted and nasty I felt," says Dranko.

"Yeah, you were corrupted and nasty," Morningstar agrees.

"And she never knew quite how to tell you before now," says Flicker impishly.

"So, this is a lesson to all of us," admonishes Morningstar. "No playing with tentacles."

With everyone fortified with *endure elements: cold*, the Company strike out through the forest to the Way to the Demon Slices, less than an hour's walk away. Flicker mutters his misgivings about the loot they're leaving behind in the Scree Slice, but no one else cares. At last they arrive, and say farewell to the Solfar.

"Best of luck to you," says Reynoso with a bow. "You're the best hope we've seen to end this madness and set the world to rights."

Dranko, rope tied around his waist, jumps through the blue portal. A few seconds later he steps out the other end and sinks up to his knees in powdery snow. A strong wind whips through his hair, stirring up the snow into opaque clouds. Fortunately the *endure elements* is holding; he feels cold, but not dangerously so. As the others tug on his rope he grabs a handful of snow before returning. Back in the forest he pegs Ernie with a snowball.

"We're going to need our snowshoes," he says, as Ernie splutters and wipes cold water from his face. Fortunately the party *has* snowshoes – well, sand-shoes – that they bought from the folk of Green Valley for a magical halberd. Everyone puts on a pair, and they all dive into the Abyss.

¤¤

It's disturbing. They feel the same unsettling wrongness with the world that they experienced while pursuing Srapa through other Demon Slices. The Abyss is not like anything else in the multiverse, and it resonates jarringly with living souls.

The terrain itself is flat beneath the piled snow. Visibility is dangerously poor. No significant features, man-made or otherwise, are evident. Aravis looks around and exhales a steaming breath. "So, does anyone have any idea how we're going to continue?"

"Morningstar will cast *find the path* like she always does, and..." starts Dranko, but Aravis interrupts.

"No, I mean... what are we trying to *find*? I know our goal is to get the Eye of Moirel, but how are we going to *do* that?"

"We've got the mad sculptor's words," says Kibi. "'Past the demons.' We go to the 'Heart of the Hut,' find the Eye of Moirel that's taking chunks of the universe and sticking them in here, and we walk in, and say 'Stop!' And the Eyes we already have will help," he adds hopefully, with a glance at Scree.

"It's about time they pulled their weight," Ernie nods.

"You mean they'll actually *do* something?" says Grey Wolf sarcastically.

"Well, they did just destroy an entire Slice," says Kibi. "That's something."

Morningstar doesn't have a *wind walk* prepared, so after she casts *find the path* the Company strike out overland on their snowshoes. Half the party are connected by a *telepathic bond* as standard operating procedure. Visibility being what it is, they stay in close formation, and all holding onto a long length of rope (which soon becomes stiff and rimed with ice).

For an hour or more they trudge slowly through the blizzard, feet crunching in the dry powder. Everyone is nervously aware that demons could be lurking close by, made effectively invisible by the blowing snow. Other than their own footsteps, the only sound is of the howling wind around their heads. Even marching in a close line, no one can see much further than the person ahead of them.

Suddenly there's a tremendous cracking sound, audible even above the wind. One minute Grey Wolf is walking atop eight inches of snow. The next he is pitching helplessly forward into a crevasse. Only Ernie, last in line, sees what happens. "Grey Wolf is plummeting!" he both shouts and thinks (being on the *telepathic bond*). Grey Wolf is also shouting, for his part.

Kibi hardly stops to think. He *polymorphs* into a small dragon and flies down into the revealed ravine after Grey Wolf. Dranko starts tying rope around himself, planning a rescue. Ernie doesn't have time to do much more than shout his warning before the crevasse widens beneath his feet; a moment later he too is tumbling down into the icy crack.

Kibi's and Dranko's rescue attempts turn out to be unnecessary. Grey Wolf, bouncing, sliding and scraping along on a rapid descent, manages to grasp the *wand of flying* on his belt and use it before he is bruised to death. Ernie similarly activates his *winged shield*. The two of them are alarmed to see a silvery dragon flying down toward them, and Grey Wolf is almost ready to blast it, but on closer inspection he sees that this dragon has a suspiciously dwarf-like beard.

Less than a minute after Grey Wolf's unexpected plunge, everyone is safe again on the far side of the crevasse. Morningstar peers down, wondering how deep it goes. "Not something I expected in the Abyss," she says. "I figured it would be hotter."

"And shouldn't there be demons?" asks Flicker.

"And devils?" asks Dranko.

"No, devils live in Hell," corrects Aravis.

"Devils and demons are the same thing," says Dranko.

"No, they're not," says Aravis with a sigh. Hasn't he explained this before?

"Yes they are," insists Dranko.

"No they're not."

"Yes they are."

"No they're not."

"Look," says Dranko stubbornly. "Do bad people's souls come here?"

"Some of them," says Aravis patiently.

"Well, I know that when bad people die, their souls go to Hell. So this must be Hell *and* the Abyss. So demons and devils must be the same."

"At the rate you're going," says Aravis between clenched teeth, "you're going to find out, one way or another."



The slow pace and inherent vulnerability of the ground march prompts Morningstar to fill an empty spell slot with a *wind walk* after all. She can't get everyone, and the *ring of djinni summoning* doesn't work in Het Branoi, so Aravis *polymorphs* himself into a dragon to match Kibi. There are some logistical problems with communication and direction, but these are soon sorted out, and the Company make much better time.

Twice the party stop to land, each time giving the dragons a breather and allowing Morningstar to cast a fresh *find the path*. When the last of the tracking spells runs out and the Company get ready to make camp, Kibi and Aravis revert to their human forms. Scree is released from Kibi's *familiar pocket* and immediately starts complaining about his master's decision to fly.

Would you rather I be misty? asks Kibi. *Isn't it better that I'm a solid flying creature, at least?*

It would be better to be neither, says Scree sullenly. *Better not to assume any form that loses contact with the ground. You could have cast xorn movement, and we'd be swimming through the ground like normal people. Aravis could have polymorphed into something big enough to carry someone.*

Kibi stands with his mouth agape; the others don't know what's bothering him, since this dressing-down is taking place over the empathic link. *And besides,* adds Scree, *a big flying lizard isn't very attractive, particularly with a beard.* With that, Scree sinks into the ground.

Before turning solid, some of the *wind walkers* do a last fly-around to check the area. The wind has died down somewhat over the past hour, improving visibility. Ernie spots a group of creatures up ahead – six or seven – trudging through the snow. Dranko glides forward in mist form to investigate.

DM: "Make me a Hide check."

PIRATECAT: "Only a 35."

DM: "Unfortunately, there's a sarcasm penalty."

Dranko is not spotted. He can see that two of the creatures aren't humanoid; they're huge arachnid beasts over ten feet across. The remaining creatures are squat little bipeds with pot-bellies and long spindly arms dragging in the snow. They're headed in a direction that shouldn't take them anywhere near the party.

The half-orc returns to the others to report. "Well," he says smugly. "They aren't demons or devils. There are just two really, really big spiders and a bunch of small fat guys with long arms."

"Sounds like demons to me," says Aravis. "The little ones are called dretches. They're the cannon fodder of the demon world."

"Get out," says Dranko. "Everyone knows demons are red, and have little horns, and tails, and carry pitchforks."

"What do they teach you in those temples?" asks Aravis, throwing his hands up. "I'm telling you, those are demons. I'll bet the arachnids are bebeliths."

"Huh," says Dranko. "Should we go fight them?"

It's not a popular idea. Instead, Aravis waits until the demons are safely far away, and casts another *secure shelter* for the night. Since the spell uses local materials, they end up with an igloo – warm but not comfortable, with glistening walls. The party burn the tables and chairs in the fireplace for extra warmth. Since *endure elements* lasts a full 24 hours, everyone should be safe for the night, and Scree volunteers to keep watch outside. (The cold doesn't bother him underground, and he can sense vibrations if anyone approaches).

When he thinks no one's looking, Dranko licks one of the igloo walls, just to satisfy his curiosity. Curiously, his tongue sticks, and he's obliged to use a healing orison when he tears some of the skin off it. Flicker, watching from his bunk, manages not to laugh.

OR SO

Kibi, there's something out here. Kibi, wake up!

The dwarf shakes his head groggily. *What is it?* he thinks to his familiar.

A bunch of ice-creatures. They're pretty ugly. They're about eight feet tall and they've got icicles like stalactites sticking out of their bodies all over the place. It looks painful. They've seen the hut, but they haven't seen me. You'll probably hear them any min...

There's a loud raking sound on the east wall of the shelter. Half the party sit bolt upright, while the other half sleep through the noise. Kibi explains the situation. "Wake me if they start attacking with siege weapons," says Aravis, confident that the shelter will hold. He goes back to sleep.

"Did they *teleport* here or walk?" asks Dranko.

I saw them walk into my view, says Scree, but they may have teleported nearby and then walked. Visibility's pretty poor out there. Oh, and they smell funny. Like they have rotten meat inside their icy bodies.

Yeah, come to think of it, there is a faint, putrid aroma starting to seep into the hut. "Guess it's not a 'secure-from-bad-smells' shelter," says Morningstar with a smirk. (The integrity of Aravis's shelters has been a sore spot ever since those balls of black energy burned holes in one like a Swiss cheese.)

Ernie throws some herbs in the kettle to mask the smell. The party start to hear scraping on a second wall, and then an angry pounding on the door. Nothing's getting in, but the smell gets worse. Scree reports there are about a dozen of the things outside.

"We can always *teleport* out, or *wind walk* out the chimney if we have to," says Dranko.

"Scree reports that one of them just vanished," says Kibi.

That sets everyone on edge. They expect for a minute that one might have *teleported* inside, but Aravis reassures them that creatures cannot *teleport* to a place they've never seen if they don't know what the landing area looks like. Still, everyone who has armor puts it on as a precaution.

"Three more just appeared," says Kibi. "Scree thinks the one that vanished went to get friends."

The pounding on the doors and walls continues. Finding a curious rhythm to all of this, Morningstar takes out her flute and tries to play along. As soon as she starts, all the noise outside stops for a minute.

I think they're listening, says Scree.

Do they like it? asks Kibi.

I can't read their expressions. Maybe. Or maybe they weren't sure anyone was in there until now.

Sure enough, the pounding starts again, even louder than before. The smell inside the shelter is starting to become pretty rank. *I think there are around twenty of them now,* says Scree.

Eventually the incessant pounding and scraping becomes a kind of soothing white noise. The ice-creatures don't seem to be advancing any kind of adaptive strategy, and the Company manage to fall asleep again, long enough for the wizards to clear

their minds for more spells. They all wake hours later to a truly awful stench, though the battering must have stopped while they slept.

What's out there? thinks Kibi to Scree.

There are about thirty of them now. Some are keeping watch on the shelter while the rest sleep in the snow... Ooop. They seem to have heard you moving around in there. The guards are waking up the sleepers.

We're leaving soon, says Kibi. Come on in.

Scree moves, xorn-like, up through the floor of the igloo. "Hm," says Aravis, frowning at Scree's entrance. "I guess Leomund had a blind spot."

With a new batch of protection spells applied, the Company *wind walk* out the chimney. Oh, ye gods, the smell! Inside the shelter it was just a nasty stench. Outside, where some thirty ice-demons crowd around the igloo, it would be instantly vomit-inducing to someone with a solid stomach.

One of the creatures sees the fleeing party and points upward, shouting. Another, not quite grasping the situation, *teleports* upward, thinking to grab Flicker and fall with him back down to the snow. Instead, he waves his arms clownishly through Flicker's vaporous body and then plummets, confused, to bounce off the roof of the igloo some fifty feet below. And then the Company are safely away, high into the cold Abyssal sky.

el-remmen: Yay, update!

Please sir, might we have some more, with a nasty fight with several dozen ice-demons of some kind? It would be ever so exciting!

KidCthulhu: Oh, there will be demons aplenty, and before you know it. Trust me, you'll have your fill. We certainly did.

el-remmen: YOU GUYS ATE THE DEMONS!!!?!!! That's friggin' hardcore...

Fajitas: I ONE the demons...

spyscribe: I TWO the demons!

(Great update.)

Sagiro: I'm glad my story inspires such erudite commentary...



A Snowball's Chance in the Abyss

The wind isn't blowing as strongly today as yesterday, but the air is so cold that their vaporous forms are sluggish and slower than normal. Beats walking, though.

Morningstar leads, following today's first *find the path* while the rest of the party follows *her*. At two hundred feet in the air they can see the flat icy landscape for a good distance – snow-covered tundra, frozen boulders, roaming packs of ice-demons. Only once that morning do they land, just long enough for Morningstar to cast a second *find the path* when the first one runs out. Halfway through the second one they finally spot the hoped-for shimmer of blue light on the ground. As they get closer, it resolves into *two* glowing blue doorways, one right next to the other.

A thorough search reveals a large, monstrous footprint in the snow, its owner leaving this frigid Slice, heading into one of the two Ways. There is no sign of foot traffic headed into or out of the other one. Aravis, who hasn't tried using the Crosser's Maze to any advantage since the flight from the Vree's monastery, decides to do so now. After a warning to the others, he focuses his thoughts on the artifact in his head and quickly finds himself perched on the metaphorical window-ledge between the Inner Maze and the Outer Maze. Back in the Demon Slice, his body falls into the snow, Pewter resting on the shoulder in case he needs to drive his master in an emergency.

Aravis ignores the world of the Inner Maze (a stray thought: has King Vhadish XXIII forgotten him?) and focuses his attention on the model of the cosmos. As before, the view of Het Branoi is much different to look at than that of the "normal" universe. The whole of creation seems to be the single Slice he's in, and it takes tremendous effort to get a sense of what's beyond, but again as before, he manages to get a sense of the Slices adjacent to his own. One of these two Ways, he sees, leads to a large Slice, clearly more Abyss, with many life-forces therein. The other leads to a very small Slice, probably not in the Abyss, and with no living beings at all.

Learning that much drains Aravis of mental wherewithal; he finds himself back in his body, lying in the snow with Pewter licking his face. He gets up, dusts off the snow, and shares his findings.

The footprint, not surprisingly, heads into the larger of the two Slices. “We should check out the smaller one first,” says Dranko. “After all, look how useful that woman’s bedroom turned out to be.”

The others agree. Ernie volunteers to scout, by the usual rope-around-the-waist method, and with a ten-Abernathy count. He jumps through, endures the seconds of pulling blackness, and emerges into... more blackness. It’s completely dark, though he notices at once that the ground is solid stone, not crunchy snow. All is quiet. He fishes a coin from his pocket enchanted with *continual flame* and looks around for a few seconds before the others tug the rope.

“I got a piece of the house,” he announces to the others. “It’s a storeroom, with that blue-diamond pattern on the walls. It’s really dark. Morningstar should go first and get some *thought captures*.”

“Watch out,” warns Flicker. “Whatever horrible monster that’s lurking in there and saw Ernie, now it’s waiting to pounce on whoever goes through next.” Thus admonished, Morningstar pops into the storeroom Slice.

Her keen senses tell her that the room is large – certainly more than twenty feet on a side – and full of large stacked objects. She pauses for a minute to listen; it’s perfectly silent. Then she casts five *thought captures*.

- Capture #1 is a thought of someone well and truly fed up with excessive manual labor.
- Capture #2 is a clearer thought, that they really ought to procure a larger wheelbarrow.
- Capture #3 is the most interesting. Morningstar gleans a specific thought: *I never want to be in the room again when those two get into a fight. I thought that Clouds and Words were going to kill each other.*
- Capture #4 is also specific, though more mundane: *I’m not sure there are enough bricks left in this storeroom.*
- Capture #5 is a general thought of pain, suffered by someone who has just pulled a muscle lifting something heavy.

Morningstar pops back out and shares the results with the others. Some suspicions have now essentially been confirmed. ‘Words’ is almost certainly **Seven Dark Words**, whose home, according to the Eye Prophecy, is Het Branoi. And given that ‘Clouds’ is a person whom (a) the Mad Sculptor holds in deep contempt, and (b) apparently quarrels seriously with a person named ‘Words,’ it is now clearer than ever that Seven Dark Words and the Mad Sculptor are the same person. It’s not a huge surprise, but it’s always nice to have corroborating evidence.

Snokas and One Certain Step agree to stand watch while the others go in to search the storeroom. (That way, the party won’t be surprised by anything waiting outside when they return.) Once inside, the rest of the party break out lanterns and give the place a thorough combing. It’s a pretty large place – a 40-feet by 50-feet chamber supported by wooden columns every ten feet or so. There are wooden crates, some large trunks, and piles of building materials including many black obsidian bricks, nearly identical to those used in Mokad’s ritual room back in Kallor. Grey Wolf fires off a *detect magic*, and the only things registering are a dozen thin metal hoops, the size of hula-hoops, glowing faintly with enchantment. Flicker looks at them and declares in amazement they’re made of adamantium. “Whoa. It must have been a royal pain to make perfect hoops out of the stuff. Seems like a waste.”

Aravis and Dranko launch into a brief digression about how, while these hoops might have no obvious use, it would be funny to ‘link’ two of them together somehow. Aravis suggests it could work with a careful use of *dimension door*.

“This is what we’ve come to,” says Ernie. “You guys are talking about using magic to do... to do magic tricks!”

“It doesn’t sound so wrong when you put it like that,” says Flicker.

Most of the storeroom is filled with mundane building materials: planks, bricks, tools, slabs. The most valuable item is a huge chest of perfect steel nails. There’s also a crate full of green glass slabs (of varying sizes) of the same sort that were used in applications of stasis-magic, at the Black Circle bestiary visited by the Company years ago.

While Flicker takes inventory, Dranko goes out to make sure Step and Snokas are all right. Both of them are still standing an uneventful watch. “You can come in if you want, and I’ll stand guard,” Dranko offers.

“No, no, it’s fine,” says Snokas. “Really. I’m having a lot of fun out here.” Step stifles a laugh.

“You know,” says Dranko just before he hops back through the Way, “if you were being sarcastic, you just blew your chance.” Snokas grins back at him.

Scree discovers that the Slice ends at the walls and floor, and that there are no secret or hidden doors out. So, having discovered that there’s nothing of particular interest here, Dranko decides there’s only one thing left to do before leaving and trying the second Way. He spells out **BLACK CIRCLE SUXKS** (*sic*) on the floor with obsidian bricks.

Aravis shakes his head. "It's one thing to provoke the Black Circle. It's another to make them think we're stupid."

"It's part of the plan to make them underestimate us," says Flicker.

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Ernie again volunteers to be the scout. Rope tied around his waist, he hops through.

His first impression is: red. The light is red. The ground is a Mars-like red stone. The air *feels* red. Hot. Dry. Sulfurous. The Abyssal nature makes his skin crawl. The ground is pitted with shallow craters, varying in size from six inches to six feet in diameter. A few dozen feet away is a small fissure in the ground, ten feet long and a foot wide.

Ten seconds later he feels the tug and returns to the others. "It looks nasty," he reports. "Red rocks, red light. Even with the protection spell up it felt warm, so it must be way over 100 degrees in there. It still feels icky, though I didn't see anyone."

So everyone steps through the Way, Dranko scooping up a last handful of snow as he leaves. It starts to melt the moment he arrives. Kibi arrives a few seconds later and is quicker on the draw; having grabbed his own snowball he throws a strike at Dranko's face. Dranko tries to return fire but his snowball has mostly melted and so is ineffectual.

Ah, the zany hijinks. Pity that it gets interrupted by attacking demons.

el-remmen: GET TO THE DEMON-FIGHTING, ALREADY!!!!!! Please?

Graywolf-ELM: Good, fleshy post. Not everything can be combat.

Pyske: Fights are OK, but I think I actually enjoy the roleplaying in the Story Hour even more. Then again, it's always good to see some demons get their comeuppance.

Okay, Here's Your Fight With Demons Already!

Dranko glares at Kibi, wiping the snow from his face. He thinks, *As if it's not bad enough that the dwarf managed such a lucky shot, now Kibi is pulling the old 'look over my shoulder in horror like there's something behind me' trick. How gullible does he think...*

Then: *Say, why is everyone looking at me like that?*

Behind Dranko an enormous demon has appeared. It towers above him, a fifteen-foot-tall humanoid of horrific aspect. Its torso and limbs are covered with mottled black and green scales, and its muscular arms end with oversized lobster claws. Two smaller arms, more "human" looking save for the sharp claws, protrude from its chest. Multifaceted insect-eyes bulge from a monstrous horned head.

At about the same time as its arrival, half the party start to fall. Upward. Aravis, Grey Wolf, Snokas, Ernie and Morningstar are caught in a *reverse gravity* (origin unknown) and plummet sixty feet into the air, bobbing against the sky when they reach the edge of its effect.

A second demon appears near the first, human-sized, with uniformly red skin that glistens sickeningly. Its large hands have long taloned fingers. A long horn juts straight from its forehead, and another protrudes from the back of its skull.

Kibi's eyes grow wide. His mind races. Does he remember rightly that creatures of the Lower Planes are often telepathic, and able to understand any intelligible language? "We're not very interesting," he says, casting a *mass suggestion*. "I suggest you just go away and leave us alone." The massive glabrezu is unimpressed, but to the smaller babau this makes perfect sense. It blinks, nods, and turns to leave. Partially satisfied, Kibi moves off to the side and out of '*fireball formation*' with the others.

Sixty feet up, the floating half of the Company take stock. Grey Wolf burns a charge from his *wand of flying* before grabbing Aravis and preparing to land. Aravis similarly casts *fly* from a scroll, upon Snokas. On the ground, Flicker activates his *ring of blinking* and like Kibi moves away to create spacing. He's already sizing up the hideous demon for sneak attacks – mostly an analysis of ankle tendons, from where he's standing.

A third demon appears, different in appearance from the first two but no less terrifying. Shorter than the glabrezu but taller than the babau, it resembles a bony humanoid vulture with enormous talons. *A vrock*, thinks Aravis, looking down on the battlefield. *This just gets better and better.*

So, where a few seconds ago Dranko was wiping snow from his brow, now all Abyss has broken loose, with demons *teleporting* in and half the party flung up and away. He whips around to find the glabrezu looming over him, snapping its huge crustacean claws. He immediately activates his *sash of improved invisibility* and moves into attacking position.

It's unfortunate for him that the glabrezu, like all demons of its kind, is possessed of *true seeing*. The monstrous demon leans over Dranko and a pair of enormous mandibles unfolds from its maw. It seizes the half-orc in one of its lobster-hands, savages him with its remaining three claws, and chomps on him with the mandibles for good measure. That's the injury; the insult is that Dranko is now clamped firmly in the thing's claw.

As he's grappled by the glabrezu, Dranko hears its deep telepathic voice in his head. *Mmmmmm. Crunchy little man.*

Dranko answers, *Do you like being trapped in here?*

I do now, replies the demon.

Morningstar doesn't stay disoriented by the gravity reversal for long – the Chaos was worse. She gets her bearings and casts *darkbeam* at the glabrezu, striking it square in the face. But as Dranko discovered its *true seeing* ability, now Morningstar learns of its spell resistance. The *darkbeam* dissipates harmlessly. Snokas grunts in dismay, grabs Morningstar, and flies them both down to the ground.

"If we rescue Dranko, we can flee," says Aravis.

"Kick... its... ass!" shouts Dranko, as the breath is squeezed out of him by the glabrezu's claw.

But things just get worse. Yet another creature *teleports* into the battle. This one is a huge arachnid, ten feet high and just as broad, standing on six jointed legs. The remaining two legs, serrated and glinting, are already poised to strike. The whole creature seems to be made of metal. The beast is called a retriever in Abyssal circles, and is not technically a demon, though this would be of little comfort to the party even if they knew. It clacks its mandibles together ominously.

Ernie looks down from above and sees that the glabrezu has something invisible in one of its claws. From the sound of the pained grunts, it's probably Dranko. He activates his *winged shield* and flies down to help, staying (for now) just out of the huge demon's reach. Step (already on the ground) likewise closes with the glabrezu. The babau turns and discovers the other demons aren't following him. It motions angrily and says something to them in a screechy high-pitched voice. Why the others aren't following the dwarf's eminently sensible suggestion, he has no idea.

And speaking of the dwarf, Kibi positions himself for a *lightning bolt* and blasts the glabrezu and the vrock. Aravis watches closely, thinking he remembers that demons are immune to electricity, but these take a moderate amount of damage from the blast. Dranko, in the glabrezu's grip, manages to lift his legs and dodge the bolt, and shouts out a warning. "Hello! Invisible half-orc here!"

"Maybe you should *tell* us when you're going invisible," Kibi mutters.

Grey Wolf and Aravis land out of the demons' reach, and hardly need to discuss the plan they both intend to execute. Grey Wolf lays down the *iron storm*, picking an ideal spot that encompasses all three of the demons (and hopefully not Dranko, held, they surmise, in the glabrezu's outstretched claw). Aravis follows with the inevitable *chain lightning*, which gets sucked into the sphere of iron filings and fills the air with the smells of ozone and cooked demon. The glabrezu roars in pain and rage, while the retriever shivers as electricity plays along its legs and body, setting its mandibles to an almost comical clatter.

The vrock seems entirely unaffected. With a screech it takes a flying bound toward Morningstar, raking her with its talons. Worse, its body puffs up and releases a cloud of noxious green gas flecked with particles of filth. Both Morningstar and Snokas feel their skin start to sting and burn.

Dranko desperately tries to wiggle free of the glabrezu, but the demon's grip is too tight. Its cruel voice sounds again in his head. *Whatever's the last thing you want to see in this life, you should look at it now.*

Backing out of the *iron storm*, it squeezes with the grasping claw, and tears at Dranko's body with the other three. For good measure it sinks its teeth into the half-orc's shoulder. Somehow Dranko survives, though his blood is now pouring down the glabrezu's claw to soak the rocky ground. Dranko goes limp, hoping the glabrezu will think he's dead, but the demon doesn't buy it. *Oh, I guess I killed the runt!* thinks the glabrezu tauntingly via *telepathy*. *I suppose I'll just drop the body and turn my back on it!* It leans over and leers at Dranko. *Or not.*

Morningstar fires another *darkbeam*, this time at the menacing vrock, but it shrugs off the effect as easily as it did the *chain lightning*. Snokas leans in and drives one of his picks into the vulture-demon's body, but the thing's natural resistance prevents almost all the damage. And it's not bad enough that the beast is ignoring their attacks – green fungus growths start to sprout painfully on their skin. The vrock's face twists in an evil grin, while the retriever moves quickly out of the *iron storm*.

Ernie looks intently at the huge outstretched claw of the glabrezu. He can't see Dranko, but he can see blood pouring out of the air in numerous places. All he needs is to be sure... ah! There! A particularly well-defined stream of blood is drizzling from down low, probably Dranko's lower leg or foot. Ernie casts a Quickened *heal* from his *quickscroll tube*, leaps, and swipes at where he desperately hopes Dranko is. His hand comes into contact with Dranko's boot, which is enough. Healing energy flows from him into Dranko, sealing his friend's wounds and erasing his bruises. Ernie follows up the spell by swinging *Beryn Sur* but the blade is turned by the demon's thick hide.

Step steps in and smites with his own weapon, scoring the demon's legs. The babau, completely fed up by now with his fellow demons' failure to see reason, *teleports* away.

Kibi nearly fires off another *lightning bolt* before he remembers it will be drawn (now harmlessly) into the *iron storm*. Instead he tries to *hold* the vrock, but the demon resists. Grey Wolf tosses a *fireball* that's barely more effective. At Grey Wolf's side, the longsword *Bostock* speaks softly in his mind. *You see?* says the sword eagerly. *Spells are no good against them. I, on the other hand, will be effective. Wield me!*

Flicker has been blinking in and out since putting on the magic ring. It's strange, he thinks idly. Not only are those weird ethereal leeches nowhere to be seen, the entire place he goes when blinking seems to be different. Darker. Disturbing, even. Aravis has told him he goes in and out of the Ethereal Plane when he wears the ring, but it's always looked the same before today. Now... His mind, for whatever reason, refuses to think about it. Instead he concentrates on the ankles of the glabrezu, but his sword-attacks are ineffectual.

"You all right, Dranko?" shouts Aravis.

"He's healthy as ever," Ernie answers for him. "I just gave him a *heal*."

"Then duck," says Aravis. He fires a *cone of cold* at the glabrezu, hoping Dranko can evade it. It's a vain hope. The glabrezu instinctively uses Dranko as a shield, and while it takes some significant damage, Dranko gets the full blast. They both scream in pain.

The vrock tears again at Morningstar, screeching and spluttering. It bites deeply into Morningstar's shoulder, and thinks *Tasty!* to its victim. Meanwhile the fungus continues to burst painfully from her arms, her neck, her face. The stench of the spores reeks in her nostrils. It may even be growing there.

The glabrezu looks down at the frozen Dranko. *Looks like I'm not the only one who wants to kill you*, it thinks to him. *Heh. Heh, heh.*

Oh, shut up, replies Dranko. *If you were a proper demon, you'd be tempting me instead of killing me.*

That's devils, says the demon.

Oh, you're all the same thing, says Dranko.

GRRRRRAAARRRRRRRRRRR! While the demon roars in rage, Dranko makes one last attempt to squirm free of the giant claw. He's slippery with ice, and the claw is slick with half-orc blood, and with a mighty twist of his body, Dranko slips from the glabrezu's grasp. He lands on the ground.

RangerWickett: The demon told Dranko to look at the woman he loved, and what does he do? He keeps fighting. He's gonna be sleeping in the doghouse for that when he gets back to his home dimension, that's for sure.

So, Sagiro, what are you up to aside from entertaining us with your Story Hour?

Sagiro: Well, at home I'm mostly taking care of my now three-month-old daughter Elanor. At work I recently finished working on the well-reviewed *Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich*, which you should all rush out and buy if you haven't already. Now I'm working on a game with the working title of *BioShock*, though I'm not allowed to divulge any details at this time.

I've also found some time to play ultimate frisbee when the games aren't rained out. And I've started running my D&D game again with some regularity; the Story Hour is approximately 10 months and 11 sessions behind "real life." The Company has done some momentous things and made some startling discoveries since then!

KidCthulhu: Such as the discovery that [spoiler-person] is really [spoiler-other person], or the time when [spoiler-PC] was turned into a [spoiler]!

Mad-lib fun for everyone.

el-remmen: Such as the discovery that [Snokas] is really [Sagiro], or the time when [Dranko] was turned into a [pot-bellied pig]!

Wishful thinking on my part?

Seule: Such as the discovery that [Morningstar] is really [Dranko's wife], or the time when [Dranko] was turned into a [good husband]!

Okay, maybe that last bit is a little too far-fetched.

Spatzimaus: Such as the discovery that [Sagiro] is really [Abernathy's evil mirror image from an alternate timeline], or the time when [Dranko] was turned into a [giant tongue]!

Aravis: Interesting guess, but it was far more startling to find out that Dranko was in actuality the Emperor... Boy, did we all feel silly. But you should have seen Kibi freak out when he turned him into an orc. Talk about self-loathing.

Sagiro: Whoa. While Dranko does not *actually* get turned into a giant tongue, there's enough of a grain of truth in this prediction that it's creeping me out. You'll see why before too long.

KidCthulhu: I was thinking the same thing. Then again, connecting Dranko and tongues isn't exactly the wackiest leap of faith ever made.

Sagiro: Sure, though usually it's his own tongue we're talking about.

Oops... I've said too much already.

Kid Charlemagne: You remember that picture of the Giant Frog from the old *Monster Manual*? The one with the boot sticking out of his mouth?

I think that's Dranko's boot.

RangerWickett: In my home campaign, the half-orc Emperor Dranko Coaltongue led his armies to conquer the entire world, then became immortal, and was only defeated when he was betrayed by a close ally who was a half-orc mage. Let's hope Kibi is as powerful and lucky.

Piratecat: Are you paying attention to this, Sagiro? Take close notes! That Wickett guy knows what he's talking about... except for that whole "defeated" thing, which is only ugly gossip. Feel free to disregard that particular portion.

Please.

The glabrezu moves to grab him again, but thinks better. Dranko's not the problem. That puny wizard is the problem. *Excuse me for just a moment*, it thinks to Dranko. Then it straightens up and targets Aravis with a *power word: stun*. The powerful syllable rings loud in the air and Aravis feels the world go fuzzy.

Having no luck with the *darkbeam*, Morningstar switches tactics slightly and tries casting *flame strike* on the vrock, but the demon's constant lunges and feints prove too distracting. Her attempt to cast defensively is thwarted and the spell fizzles. Snokas again hammers the vulture-demon with his picks, but it's just no good – he might as well be poking it with knitting needles for all the good he's doing. On the other hand, the retriever has no such problems. While Snokas does resist a beam of white magic that shoots from its glowing eyes, he is shredded by its two serrated forelegs.

The glabrezu looks down with amusement; now that the human wizard in the silly hat is out of the combat, the rest should be easy. It chuckles as Ernie's swords bounce off its legs. It smiles as Step fails to overcome its resistance to weapons. And it barely blinks as Kibi pulls out a scroll and casts an ineffectual *cone of sound*.

What finally gets its attention is the sound of its right ankle being sheared off by Flicker's shortsword. The blinking rogue has finally landed a pair of sneak attacks, having figured out through trial-and-error where the vulnerable tendons and sinews must be. A shower of bone and ichor spews from the wound, and the glabrezu slumps to the right, standing unsteadily on one foot and a stump. Time to *teleport* away, it thinks, if only it can buy just a few seconds more. Dranko hears its voice in his head: *I think we should call a truce. I will agree to let you live*.

"You should never gloat before you've won," says Dranko out loud. He snaps his whip backward and then forward, lashing it around the huge demon's left knee, and yanks back with all his might. The glabrezu tips backward and falls, bones jutting through its skin where Flicker carved it up. It screams once more in pain before its head bounces hard off the rocky ground and it lies still. "Jackass," adds Dranko, gloating.

After that, it's just a matter of mopping up. The retriever is dispatched by a *flame strike* from Ernie followed by a *coldfire* from Kibi, which melt and fuse its entire back half before it can tear anyone to pieces. And the vrock, finding itself alone among enemies who somehow killed a glabrezu, decides that discretion is the better part of eternal damnation and *teleports* the heck out of there. The caustic growths on Morningstar and Snokas continue to grow for about a minute before withering and falling off.

At Dranko's request, Step decapitates the dead glabrezu. You can never be too sure about these things.

Wolfspirit: Nice fight.

Graywolf-ELM: I dream of the day I can place a huge glabrezu miniature on the battlemat, and not have the players all look at me like they know I'm kidding.

el-remmen: Man, that battle turned quickly... when the party formerly known as the Fearless Manticore Killers fought some powerful half-demon gnomes the combat took 40 rounds!

KidCthulhu: Sagiro has an almost uncanny ability to balance combats such that we spend 2-4 rounds going "Oh, crap, we're gonna die" and then something lucky or skillful or both turns the tide, and we end up panting and bleeding, but alive. Dunno how he does it, but it makes our victories feel more victorious.

Vargo: I had a GM like that in Torg, once. Also, I kept reading the conversation between Dranko and his grappler, and wondering if somebody was going to sneak in a "Dranko is dead." Guess not.

Piratecat: I dropped to single-digit hit points before Ernie got that *heal* in... and I still finished the fight with less than 20 hit points. This, considering that Dranko has far and away the most health of anyone in the party, over 130 at that point. That SOB picked me up and wouldn't let me go, *and there was nothing I could do about it*. Very scary.

shilsen: Yeah, Improved Grab is a killer, especially with creatures that have grapple checks in the +30 range. Though personally I like glabrezu that start with a *confusion* spell. Nothing's more fun than getting PCs to beat up on each other.

And is it just me or did anyone else feel bad that there's now one less glabrezu with a mean sense of humor out there?

KidCthulhu: It's just you.

shilsen: I get that a lot. Then again, I gather so does Dranko, so I'm in good company. In a manner of speaking...

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Queylic

Aravis regains clarity of mind soon after the end of the battle. He leaps to his feet and looks around. "What happened?"

Dranko looks down at the soaked ground. "We drowned them in my blood," he says ruefully.

"I didn't think you *had* that much blood," says Aravis.

"We kept topping him off," says Ernie.

“We should heal up and get the hell out of here,” suggests Grey Wolf.

“No objection here,” says Ernie. He glances up nervously at a black speck high above – probably a bird.

The clerics start healing everyone up, but before they finish a voice sounds telepathically in all of their heads (though no actual demon is in sight). It’s a female voice – silky, a bit sultry, and obviously demonic.

You live! says the voice. *Thank the pits! I’m about to teleport to you, but don’t be alarmed. I’m an envoy and an escort. I have no wish to harm you.*

Uh huh, thinks Dranko skeptically.

“If there’s more than one of you,” answers Morningstar, “we’ll open fire.”

Oh, I won’t be alone, says the voice. *But I strongly suggest you take no hostile action. Like I said, I have no wish to harm you, and I won’t attack you unprovoked, but I don’t travel without my entourage.*

“Entourage?” says Grey Wolf softly to the others. “We don’t have enough firepower left to take on an entourage.”

“Let me guess,” grumbles Ernie. “She wants Kibi.”

Who are you? thinks Dranko.

My name is Queylic, says the voice in their heads.

“*What* are you?” prods Dranko.

What do you think? asks Queylic.

“A fluffy bunny?” guesses Dranko.

“She’s a demon, for crying out loud,” interjects Aravis.

Micah: It could have been worse... He could have guessed a devil.

You should listen to your intelligent friend, says Queylic.

“You know, I’m liking you less and less,” says Dranko. “Cause, the implication is that I’m not. Intelligent, I mean.”

Did I imply that? says Queylic, voice dripping with mock sincerity. *I’m so sorry.*

“So, do we let ourselves be taken captive?” asks Morningstar. “That’s obviously what we’re talking about here.”

“Well, we should hear what she has to say,” says Ernie.

“But then they’ll have Kibi,” says Morningstar.

“What choice do we have?” asks Dranko.

“Run away?” suggests Ernie.

“I think we should let ourselves be escorted, as long as they don’t take our stuff,” says Dranko. “They might know something.”

“Each group we talk to adds something new to our stock of information,” agrees Ernie.

I’ll wait until you’re comfortable, says Queylic.

One Certain Step makes a strange noise and becomes visibly tense. Everyone turns to stare. “I’m sorry. She’s taunting me,” says Step grimly. “She’s reading my mind and taunting me.”

“What did she say?” asks Dranko.

“I don’t wish to discuss it,” says Step curtly.

“Leave our friend alone!” say Dranko, Ernie and Morningstar practically in chorus.

“You’re not helping your case,” adds Morningstar. Queylic laughs in their heads.

“Any chance I had of liking her, it just ended,” says Ernie angrily.

“Are you going to tell us what you want with us?” asks Morningstar wearily.

I want to escort you, to see my master, says Queylic. *Lord Tapheon is his name.*
He wishes to speak with you.

KidCthulhu: And the crowd all goes, "Boo, hissss!"

"He can come to us, then," grumbles Dranko.

No, I'm afraid not, says Queylic. *And this would be much more pleasant in person.*

"Why does this Lord Tapheon want us?" asks Ernie.

That's his business, answers Queylic.

"Does he have a cute little sculpture he wants to show us?" asks Ernie.

I don't know, Ernest. What do you think?

Ernie doesn't answer. Everyone looks at one another nervously. "If we flee, she could follow us," says Grey Wolf. "And we're hardly in a state to fight."

They huddle and debate, wondering if Queylic has the means to listen in on their private conversation. In the end they decide that while they're willing to visit Lord Tapheon, they'll do it at least partially on their own terms... by which they mean, "have their spells back." *We're somewhat... drained from our previous encounter*, thinks Morningstar to the female demon.

Yes, I know.

"Is that why you're approaching us now?" asks Dranko.

My reasons are more complicated, says Queylic.

"Are you willing to allow us a day to rest, before we accompany you?" asks Morningstar.

Ah, so you can regain your firepower? asks Queylic rhetorically. *It won't do you any good, and it may tempt you into taking... unwise action.*

"Oh, we have enough firepower for that right now," says Aravis.

"We don't need *any* firepower for that, really," adds Morningstar.

I'll bet you're hot, thinks Dranko, out of the blue. The others turn to stare at him. Morningstar rolls her eyes.

MavrickWeirdo: ROTFLOL (I could actually hear Kevin's voice as I read this.) Dranko was never good at resisting temptation.

You'll find out, says the voice.

"Were you sent specifically to look for us?" asks Morningstar.

Yes. Yes I was, answers Queylic. Impatience is starting to creep into her voice.

"Stop that!" blurts Step, unaware that his hand has strayed to his sword. He takes a deep breath.

"If you don't want any 'unwise' actions," says Morningstar, putting a hand on Step's shoulder, "you're going about it the wrong way. We told you to leave him alone."

I just wanted to see what he would do, says Queylic innocently. *He has remarkable self-control. But now that I've had a chance to reflect, I think I'd rather you come with me now. If I give you a chance to rest, you might try working out some silly escape plan, and I'd have to hunt you down, and what a bother that would be. As I said, Lord Tapheon assures me he means you no harm.*

Aravis guffaws. "What part of 'demons' and 'lying' do you think we don't understand?"

Let me try a simple cliché, says Queylic. *If we wished you harm, we would not be having this conversation. But how about this. If One Certain Step will promise, on his good soul, that you will not attempt to flee, and will come with us peacefully after a day, I'll let you rest.*

"Don't do it, Step," warns Ernie. "Don't promise your soul anywhere near these creatures... for anything."

"I will promise nothing," says Step between clenched teeth.

Aravis feels something probing his mind more deeply, a slithering foul mental presence trying to worm into his thoughts. He concentrates and repels the attack.

"I've had it," he says out loud. With no warning to anyone, he jumps back through the Way into the frozen Slice. The others watch him for a moment and immediately start to follow.

Oh, bother, says Queylic. What she says afterward, no one hears.

As soon as Aravis sees a second person arrive, he jumps into the Way to the Black Circle storeroom and casts two *rope tricks*. When the rest of the party arrive, he casts a *Leomund's secure shelter* so that the *rope trick* spaces are inside it. "That's to buy us some time, if it comes to it. Grey Wolf, you can cast *Mordenkainen's magnificent mansion* with the Cube, right?"

The party hastily stack up some iron trunks, to block a *detect magic* cast from the center of the room. Behind them Grey Wolf creates the door to the *mansion*, and they all jump in. The central room is a large library, with a fireplace and many comfortable chairs and couches. The Company sit and eat a magnificent meal around the fire, while *unseen servants* bring the food in from the adjacent dining hall.

"It *is* nice for someone else to do the cooking, every once in a while," says Ernie, his feet up on an ottoman. Their enjoyment of the meal is marred only by the constant expectation that at any moment the whole extradimensional space will be dispelled from the outside. But even if that happens, they won't *really* be any worse off than if they had just acceded to Queylic's wishes.

At least, that's what they tell themselves, as they fall into uneasy sleep.

el-remmen: More demony goodness... or badness... Whatever, I love it..

MTR: Hmm. Do I detect a bit of Sep-style demoness there? "Why yes, I am an evil monster. But it's still in your best interest to do what I say."



Worse than Hell

The night passes without incident. After a splendid breakfast they prepare spells and cast the usual battery of buffs.

"So," says Dranko. "Who's ready to be taken captive?"

"I hate it," Morningstar complains. "I hated it with the ogres. I hated it with the orcs. Hell, I hated with the guards back in Tal Hae that one time."

The Company are on high alert as they leave the *mansion*, but no one is waiting to pounce out in the storeroom. Aravis dismisses the *rope tricks* and reclaims the ropes.

Dranko goes first out of the Way, in case there's an ambush. And there is, sort of. Nine little demons – dretches – are standing around in the cold. They spot Dranko and immediately start jabbering and pointing emphatically toward the Way back to Queylic. None of them show signs of hostility. When the rest come out, Grey Wolf looks down at the blubbery little creatures. "If this is Queylic's entourage, I'm not impressed."

Still expecting trouble, the party hop through the Way into the next Demon Slice. The bodies have been removed, though blood still stains the ground. There are no demons, and no sign of Queylic.

After about thirty seconds, Aravis shouts out, "We're here! Please, don't make us wait."

Queylic's voice sounds in all of their heads. **Oh. Because you didn't make me wait. Have you freshened up?**

"Yes, we're feeling much better, thank you," says Aravis. He starts to whistle.

Such confidence, remarks Queylic.

"No, I'm just in a good mood," says Aravis.

"He beat me at cards last night," says Dranko.

And I'm sure that stretched his abilities, says Queylic. **But you'll be happy to know that since you rested up, I decided to increase my retinue.**

"What, those little guys?" says Dranko, ignoring the jab. "Yeah, they were cute."

The dretches? says Queylic, amusement in her voice. **Silly man. Those weren't my retinue.**

With that, demons start to *teleport* in all around them. There are four of the towering lobster-clawed glabrezu, and eight vulturous vrocks, in addition to a host of over fifteen arachnid bebiliths.

Finally Queylic herself appears before them, nine feet in height. From the waist down her body is that of an enormous green serpent. From the waist up she is a unclothed female human with six arms. Ernie turns red and casts his eyes downward.

“Are you Queylic?” asks Dranko.

“*Of course I am,*” she replies smoothly.

“How do you pee?” asks Dranko.

Ernie makes a choking noise, but Queylic is unfazed by the question. “*Would you like to find out?*” she says softly. “*Come here...*”

“Er... I’ll pass this time,” says Dranko, backtracking.

“*Ernest!*” says Queylic happily. “*Such modesty. I don’t mind if you want to gaze upon my form. But surely you’ve seen... No, no you haven’t, have you? How delightful!*”

She turns to One Certain Step. “*Ah, there you are. Still thinking about my offer, holy warrior?*”

“No,” says Step. “I stopped thinking about it less than five seconds after you made it.”

“What was the offer?” asks Dranko.

“*That is a private matter, between the two of us,*” says Queylic. Step looks grim and says nothing.

“Say, can you settle a bet?” asks Dranko. “Aren’t Hell and the Abyss the same thing?”

Queylic regards him with an indulgent smile. “*Are you really that much of an id... No, never mind. Of course you’re an idiot. And no, they’re not the same thing.*”

“Crap,” says Dranko. “Really?”

“*And you made a bet about that? What is a being as stupid as you doing making monetary wagers on matters of intellect?*”

“Because I have money!” says Dranko.

“In his view,” says Aravis, “it’s not a matter of intellect. It’s a matter of theology.”

“Ah, yes, right. He worships a God of Healing. What’s his name?”

“Delioch,” says Dranko. “Would you like to worship him?”

“Yes, he sounds wonderful!” Queylic squeals.

“Cause if I convert you, that would so be a feather in my cap,” says Dranko.

“Dranko?” whispers Aravis. “Sarcasm.”

“*Please tell me more about Delioch while we travel,*” says Queylic. “*I want to consider converting.*”

It’s a surreal conversation with no obvious purpose. On the surface Dranko is trying to make Queylic underestimate him, but deep down he knows the demon is not being fooled at all. And Queylic keeps asking questions and pretending to be interested, even though she knows that Dranko can’t possibly think she’s serious. But Dranko has his reasons, and whether the demon guesses them or not, he is satisfied.

The cavalcade of demons surrounds the Company as they walk across the cracked red ground of the Abyss. The demons themselves are quiet for the most part, listening curiously to the banter between Queylic and Dranko. When that discussion starts to sputter, Dranko turns to Morningstar and asks, “So, what do you think? Is this better or worse than the Mouth of Nahalm?”

“This is worse,” says Morningstar without hesitating.

“*Watch out!*” says Queylic, putting an arm across Dranko’s chest. “*Dranko, watch where you’re stepping!*”

Dranko looks down and sees he was about to step into a small fissure while turned toward his fiancée. “*You don’t want to die here,*” advises Queylic with a grin.

“We probably don’t,” agrees Dranko. “Hey, I think Delioch is getting through to you. You just performed an... an anti-sin!”

“*Lord Tapheon prefers that you arrive intact,*” says Queylic. “*But if I have committed an ‘anti-sin’ I suppose I’ll have to sin twice to make up for it.*”

"But if she worships something evil," says Ernie, a puzzled look on his face, "isn't doing evil good for her, and doing good is evil?"

"Ooooh, I think you're right," says Dranko. Then, to Queylic: "I take it back. By doing good, you actually sinned!"

"*I did?*" says Queylic, aghast. "*Dranko, quick! Have Delioch save my soul!*"

"It's not too late," says Dranko sagely. "Here, bend down in front of me."

"*Oh!*" says Queylic, with a knowing nod. "*He's that kind of god. Sorry, we already have one of those.*"

"Perhaps I should stop sassing the demon," says Dranko. "It's probably bad for my health."

"*I'll bet you don't get many opportunities to sass demons,*" says Queylic.

"On the contrary. I 'sass the demon' all the time, if you catch my drift."

Queylic thinks to everyone: *Does he often make comments like...* There's a resounding "YES!" from pretty much everyone.

"*You must make a lovely traveling companion,*" says Queylic to Dranko. Strangely, no one comes to his defense on that one.

"You want a cigar?" Dranko asks her, filling the silence.

"*No, I don't smoke,*" answers Queylic. "*Only my victims.*"

"What about Lord Tapheon?" asks Dranko. "Does he smoke?"

"*Lord Tapheon is... beyond you,*" says Queylic.



Two hours after entering the Slice, the Company and their escort of demons arrive at another blue Way. They can see from a distance that there's something different about this one, and up close they see that while most Ways are rigid, this one is rippling, like there's a vacuum on the other side, pulling at the fabric of the Way itself.

"Why's it doing that?" asks Dranko.

"*It's a side-effect of Tapheon's power,*" says Queylic simply.

"He sucks that hard, huh?" pipes up Ernie in the back.

Queylic turns to face the group, and her expression grows stern. "*I'm going to do you a favor, and give you some advice,*" she says.

"*I enjoy this witty repartee. Lord Tapheon has less patience than I do. I would be most careful how you 'sass the demon' in his presence.*"

"Gotcha," says Dranko. "But I have one more question. What do we call you? Besides your real name, I mean."

"*I don't understand,*" says Queylic.

"Let's pretend I'm going to survive all this," says Dranko. "And someday I go home, and get someone to buy me dinner by telling them that once I exchanged witty repartee with a ten-foot-tall bare-chested snake demon lady. What do I call you?"

Queylic slithers closer to Dranko and smiles. "*Such bravado. It's delicious,*" she says softly, running a red tongue over her lips. She leans forward until her mouth is right next to Dranko's cheek, and he can feel her hot breath on his face. "*I'm a marilith,*" she whispers, and licks the side of his head.

The others flinch in disgust. "Remember, you're spoken for," says Aravis.

Queylic straightens up, while Dranko turns to Morningstar and asks, "Have you ever told me not to get licked by a demon? I can't remember." Morningstar shakes her head.

Queylic turns on her in disbelief. "*Are you married to this dolt? On purpose? Did you lose a bet?*" Morningstar smiles.

"*Does it bother you,*" Queylic asks her quietly, "*that he lusts after other women all the time?*"

"Not particularly," says Morningstar.

"*Well, you shouldn't have anything to worry about. He's not much to look at, and he's not very smart. Ah, the long nights on the road must just fly by, with stimulating intellectual conversation full of euphemisms for masturbation. On the other hand,*" she says, turning to Dranko while Ernie flushes red, "*no one can be as stupid as he's pretending to be and have gotten so far in life.*"

"My instructions," she continues, "are to see that you walk through this portal. On the other side you'll meet Trugoth. He'll be taking custody of you once you go through the Way."

"Don't you see?" says Aravis to the others. "She's not powerful enough to appear in front of Lord Tapheon. So she's giving us to someone who is."

"Maybe it's time we stop annoying the demon," whispers Morningstar.

"Don't be concerned," says Queylic. "I've been baited by far better than you."

The marilith slithers back a few dozen feet, and gestures toward the rippling Way. "In you go," she commands.

As the Company step forward to enter, Dranko whispers to Step, "I tried to distract her for you, so she'd leave you alone. I hope it worked."

"I suspect it did," says the paladin. "Thank you."

And through they all go.



The next Demon Slice glows red with malice. Where the previous Slice was like a Martian landscape, this one has the ambiance, if not the heat and flames, of the Elemental Plane of Fire. The ground looks like orange sand that has congealed into a solid. The air is sharp with a hot sulfurous stink and olfactory overtones of things far worse. The sky is a pulsing, blazing crimson. And the ever-present vile nature of the Abyss lies unseen upon them all like a cloak of grief.

Before them stands **Trugoth**, a mighty balor of the Abyss, twenty-five feet tall and wreathed in flame. Huge bat wings rise from his back, and he holds a flaming serrated sword, larger than a man. Around him are a number of lesser demons – more vrocks and glabrezu, mostly.

And when the Company are able to tear their eyes from this gigantic demon, they see something that is perhaps worse. The ground around them is scattered with long iron stakes, and on each of these is impaled an upside-down body. Many of these twitch and moan. The sounds of these tortured souls mix with the sighing, swirling wind. Step's clenched fists go white.

"I hate it here," says Ernie in a very small voice.

"What did you expect?" asks Dranko. "This is the place where evil people go to get punished."

In all of their heads Trugoth's voice sounds, deep and resonant. **FOLLOW ME.**

They do. It's a sickening journey. Evil beats down on them like a hot sun, and the smell grows ever worse. The frequency and density of the staked damned souls rise as the hours pass, as do their plaintive shrieks and piteous moans. When it seems that things can't get any worse, Trugoth brings them to a bridge over a thirty-foot river. The bridge is made of human thighbones, and it spans a thick white flow of boiling pus.

Trugoth crosses the bridge in four long strides, while the rest of the demons form up behind the Company, leaving them no choice but to cross. Dranko can't help himself, and looks over the edge to see if anything swims in that river. A bubble of pus pops and splatters by his face, and the smell brings bile into his mouth.

Half an hour after the river of pus, Trugoth again brings the party to a halt. **HUNGRY?** says his voice in their minds.

I UNDERSTAND THAT LIVING MORTALS NEED TO EAT.

Strangely, the Company have no appetite. "We're not hungry," says Grey Wolf. "Really."

They do stop and drink some water from their skins. The demons mill about restlessly, and one of the vrocks stretches out its neck and takes a savage bite from a staked body. It groans and writhes on its spike as the demon chews. Step has gone as pale as a ghost.

"What really bothers me," says Dranko, "is that when they told us in church that places like this existed, I laughed at them. And I hate apologizing to people."

Flicker turns to Morningstar and asks only half-jokingly, "Can you erase our memories of this once we're done?"

Grey Wolf hears the sword *Bostock* whisper in his mind: *We should stay here no longer than is necessary.* Which is heartening, both because it speaks well of the sword, and because it reminds Grey Wolf that if he keeps his hand on the sword's grip, he won't have to breathe the foul air.

The balor Trugoth leans over and looks directly down at Kibi. Then he turns and for another moment stares intently at One Certain Step. “**YOU TWO DON’T LOOK THAT IMPORTANT**,” he rumbles. “**HMM.**” He laughs deeply, then says again, “**FOLLOW.**”

Ernie puts his hand on Step’s arm, and tries to distract the paladin by asking him stories about his childhood. For a while the two of them share memories of happier times and places, while the horrors around them grow worse. They cross three more rivers of festering fluids, and the impaled bodies of the damned grow so thick that they have to wend their way through them like they were trees in a forest. After more hours of this nightmare, the Fortress comes into view.

It is a great metal cube, a quarter-mile on a side, hovering a hundred feet in the air. It is tethered to the ground by dozens of colossal chains, each link of which is the size of a wagon. The Fortress itself seems to strain at those bonds, as if despite its great mass it would fall into the sky were it not anchored to the rock. The chains are welded to enormous adamant disks set deep in the ground.

Trugoth speaks to them, gloatingly. “**BEHOLD, THE FORTRESS OF INDIFFERENCE. LORD TAPHEON AWAITS.**”

Jackylhunter: ...Dum duM DUM... Very cool! And well done Pkitty, distracting the demoness from tormenting Step. It'll be nice when you guys can come back and kill her...

shisen: Very cool update, as usual. Sounds like you had fun describing the Abyss. I've run a couple of sessions there (not recently), and it always makes me more creative and my descriptions more vivid. My players at the time had a theory about that which included the concept of "home turf."

el-remmen: This is some sick !!!!! I am loving it!

KidCthulhu: Notice how many times he mentions the river of pus. That's quality ook factor here, people. It was even ookier in person. Blech.

QR 80

Professional Jealousy

Over the plains of the Abyss rolls the thundering sound of gears and chains. As the Company approach Tapheon’s Fortress, still an hour or more away despite its massive presence in the sky, a huge iron ramp is being lowered like a drawbridge from the side of the great metal cube. A hundred yards long and thirty yards wide, the ramp bridges a moat of boiling white pus surrounding the anchor discs that hold the Fortress in place. After a long march through a last forest of gasping damned, Trugoth strides up the ramp and motions for the party to follow.

At the top of the ramp (and it’s no easy climb, pitched steeply as it is) a pair of forty-foot-high iron doors have swung inward for the balor, and the Company cross into an enormous cubic “foyer.” Once inside, the oppressive weight of the Abyss becomes even more intense, more spirit-crushing.

The party now stand in a featureless iron room a hundred feet on a side, with doors lining the three inward-facing walls. There are fifty-seven of these doors, nineteen per wall, each thirty feet tall. Trugoth waves his arm and one of the inner doors, seeming no different from any of the others, swings open to reveal a straight, dark corridor.

IN THERE, booms Trugoth. **YOU WILL COME TO A RED CIRCLE. STEP INTO IT. IT WILL TAKE YOU TO YOUR QUARTERS. LORD TAPHEON WILL SEND FOR YOU. UNDERSTOOD?**

They nod. “Can we keep our belongings?” asks Dranko.

OF COURSE, says Trugoth, smiling.

“The theory being, it won’t make any difference,” Dranko mutters.

LORD TAPHEON WILL BE EAGER TO SPEAK WITH YOU, I’M SURE, says Trugoth. **YOU ARE HIS HONORED GUESTS. NOW. YOU HAVE THOSE AMONG YOU WHO CAN SEE IN THE DARK? FOLLOW THEM, THEN. NO LIGHTS. BUT YOUR QUARTERS YOU WILL FIND MOST COMFORTABLE.**

The balor turns to leave, but checks himself and faces the party one more time. **DID QUEYLIC GIVE YOU ANY ADVICE?** he asks.

“She advised us not to get sassy with Lord Tapheon,” says Dranko.

IGNORE HER, says Trugoth, showing jagged teeth in an evil grin. **THE LORD LOVES A GOOD JOKE AT HIS OWN EXPENSE.**

Dranko takes out a rope and pays it out so everyone can stay together. He goes in the front of the line, with Morningstar at the back and Kibi in the middle. They move into the corridor, which to Dranko’s eyes is a flat-black iron, straight as an arrow, and at least as long as his vision extends. It’s wide, and high, and like everything else here it reeks of evil. Once they are all through the door it clangs shut behind them, leaving them in complete darkness.

For an indeterminate time, they walk. Ernie, feeling like he has to do *something*, starts to sing, and for a while the sound of his voice echoes up and down the metal hallway. But after a while Dranko starts to notice that there are doors set into the walls of the corridor, and from behind these doors come shrieks of pain and horror that mix gruesomely with Ernie's music.

"I'm officially not indifferent," says Dranko under his breath.

Ernie stops singing at one particularly loud scream. "And this is officially the worst place we've ever been," says the halfling.

"I think I came to that conclusion by the first river of boiling pus," says Dranko.

Morningstar begins to murmur a prayer, one of the first taught to neophytes of her church, about how the darkness is neither good nor evil by its nature. Step wonders to himself if this is the "lightless room" where he is doomed to die, but it doesn't feel right, and he is not ready.

Dranko steps in something sticky and leaps back instinctively. A dark liquid is oozing out from under one of the doors; he directs the others to avoid it and doesn't look too closely himself. When the Company are starting to reach the point of exhaustion they see up ahead a red light glowing in the darkness. A minute later they are upon it – a circle of red light on the ground, ten feet around. Without hesitation or discussion they step into it.

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The Abyss vanishes. Well, no, that's not technically true, but for a moment it seems that way.

For starters, the oppressive soul-crushing nature of the Abyss is conspicuously absent. What's more, the Company are standing in the corner of a large room, bright with a pleasing ambient glow, and smelling of a light, pleasant perfume reminiscent of a spring day. There is also the smell of good food, the source of which is a table heaped high with meats, fruits, cheeses and bread. Against one wall is a wine fountain and nine crystal goblets. Arranged tastefully around the room are numerous comfortable-looking sofas, chairs, and ottomans. And there are nine doors out of the room, standing open. From where they stand, the Company can see that each leads to a small but finely-appointed bedroom.

Oh, yes, there's one more thing. Lounging around the room in the chairs and sofas are a dozen extremely attractive women, who can only barely be thought of as "dressed." Some are drinking wine from goblets, some are eating daintily, and most are whispering softly to one another behind perfectly-manicured hands.

Aravis, exhausted, doesn't give them a thought. He immediately lies down on a sofa, at the far end from one of the women. He curls up into a ball facing inward and closes his eyes tightly. Even so, one of the women sidles up to him and runs a hand through his hair. "*You've had a hard day, haven't you?*" she asks in a sweet, beautiful voice. "*Do you want me to rub your back?*"

"No," says Aravis curtly.

"*Are you sure?*" she asks, voice full of obvious concern for his happiness.

"Yes."

"*Would you like me to rub anything else?*" she asks, a faint mischievous smile showing on her red lips. Aravis shuts his eyes tighter.

The other women in the room, one at a time, have come to rest their eyes on Morningstar. Their expressions are hard to read: puzzlement? Annoyance? Curiosity? "Can I help you?" asks Morningstar, staring levelly back at one of them.

"*They're not all yours, are they?*" asks one of the women, in a tone of mild disbelief.

"In a sense, yes," says Morningstar with a wry smile.

"*Impressive,*" says another of the women, nodding. Then, to the whole Company, she speaks while gesturing at the table of food. "*Thirsty? Hungry? The food and drink are yours to enjoy. As are we.*"

One of them stands from her chair and walks toward Ernie. He's not exactly sure when she changed, or if she looked like that from the start, but she's a cute, plump halfling girl, apple-cheeked and smiling shyly. "Please don't do that," says Ernie.

"*Why not?*" asks the girl, pouting prettily.

"It's very disturbing and I'm not interested. And neither is Flicker!"

Not that Flicker was starting to stare, or anything. "You know she's not real," whispers Ernie to Flicker.

"Looks real," remarks Flicker.

"Do you want to leave your soul here?" whispers Ernie, a little more loudly.

Dranko clears his throat. "Can I confess a fantasy of mine?" he says loudly.

"*You don't have to confess it,*" says one of the women. "*You can act it out.*"

"I've always wanted to be with a woman with a crooked nose and spots and bucked teeth," says Dranko with as straight a face as he can manage. "I know it's wrong, but it's what I always wanted."

The woman laughs, clearly seeing through his game. But she asks anyway, "Do you prefer orcish or human?"

Dranko gestures to Morningstar. "Actually, I prefer her. I'm afraid I'm not interested. You couldn't match her, so don't even try. You're outgunned."

Some of the women look at Morningstar and giggle. "We're not here to compel you," says another of the women. "But we are all here for your pleasure. And understand... I don't know how old she is, but we've been practicing our art for thousands of years. If you'd like, she can join us, and probably learn some things."

"Slut," says Dranko.

"Flatterer," answers the woman.

"Did you say 'practicing'?" says Ernie. "All those years and you still can't do it right?"

"Oh, Ernest," says the halfling woman, giggling in a fetching manner.

Ernie frowns and turns his back on her, and almost immediately feels soft hands rubbing his neck. "Stop that!" shouts Ernie.

"But why?" asks the girl. "You're so tense."

"I don't want you touching me!"

Dranko claps. "All demons, stand up!"

They all look, but none stand. "I'm sure all of you are trying your best to be exactly what we want the most," says Dranko.

"But you're out of luck."

Then one of them does stand, and walks toward Dranko. He didn't notice when she changed, but now she looks just like Morningstar, only... enhanced. More traditionally beautiful, and with none of Morningstar's physical flaws.

"Oh, this is no good," mutters Grey Wolf.

"We're not interested," insists Dranko.

"What we'd really like is to be left alone tonight," adds Morningstar.

"Actually," says Dranko, "We'll be having a group prayer session in a few minutes, if you'd like to join in. We'll be singing hymns, telling sermons, passing around holy water and symbols, and praying. You're more than welcome."

"*You're going to pray to your own gods? Here?*" says the other Morningstar, raising a perfect eyebrow. "Interesting. Can we watch?"

"Tell you what," says Dranko. "I'll spray some holy water on you, and if you like it, you can stay and watch."

"*You think your water is still holy here?*" says the woman. "*You don't understand Lord Tapheon very well, do you?*"

The halfling woman scoops up some of the fruits from the table, then turns again to Ernie. "Ernest, do you think we could make this into a pie?"

"I could," says Ernie, "but you couldn't."

"*I know I'm not as good a cook as you are. Maybe you could... teach me some things?*"

"You don't understand," says Ernie, his voice breaking. "I'm sorry." He stalks into one of the rooms, closes the door, drops to his knees, and prays.

"Look," says Dranko. "You're here to satisfy our every desire, right? We desire that you leave us alone and let us get some sleep."

Morningstar turns to Dranko with a grateful smile. "I love you," she says.

"I love you too," says Dranko.

The woman who looks like Morningstar walks slowly to the real one. "How do you do it?" she asks. "You have them all whipped like dogs. Especially that one," she adds, pointing at Dranko.

Morningstar just shrugs, but she finally figures out the expression these creatures have when eyeing her. It's professional jealousy.

The party spend a few minutes dragging some beds from room to room. While they can't all fit into one of the bedrooms, they arrange to sleep in just two of them, for more security. Only Aravis stays outside, still curled up on the couch.

"I told you mortals were boring," says one of the women, yawning.

"Not all mortals," says another. "But these are lame."

Not one member of the Company eats any of the food or drinks any of the wine.



The party sleep. Aravis is woken briefly by the sound of Pewter hissing. One of the women has flopped down on his sofa and had sidled up to him. Faced with Pewter's bared teeth and arched back, she's sidling away again. Aravis smiles and goes back to sleep.

On Grey Wolf's watch, one of the women opens the door to his room and pokes her head in. Two more do the same.

"Let me invite you to shut the door and leave," says Grey Wolf flatly.

"See," says one of the women. "I told you they didn't sleep in the nude." They shut the door.

Finally, Morningstar visits all of their dreams, sliding them away from their fears and worries, soothing their troubled minds. She leaves them each secure that their sleep is guarded. It's a rare thing indeed for mortals to slumber soundly in the Fortress of Indifference, but with Morningstar's help, they manage.

Micah: Nice update. The surroundings are quite threatening, very well executed. I think the name of the place alone makes it formidable; add to that some superlative description and you've painted a picture for sure.

It's updates like this one when you realize that Abernathy's Company is more than just adventurers - they fall into that bright category that my five-year old considers "the good guys." From an adult perspective it means that they can be tempted, but they're fighting it tooth and nail.

Dawn: Must have been funny to listen to Sagiro making those "invitations." Were they done "in character"? Not sure I could have maintained a straight face. Really great comebacks from the players however. Just goes to show how fun good role-playing can be.



Lord Tapheon

Aravis wakes, slides off the couch, and joins the others in the bedrooms without so much as a glance at the lounging succubae. Despite an overwhelming hope that combat will not be necessary in the coming hours, the adventurers cast the usual set of protection spells for the day. They are not long finished when a succubus pokes her head into one of the rooms and says sulkily, "Are you almost ready? Lord Tapheon wishes to speak with you."

"I'll be sure to tell him how you all failed," says Dranko, looking serious. "You might have succeeded, but you're just not sexy enough. You're no Morningstar, that's for sure."

Ernie kicks Dranko in the shins, but the succubus smiles. "Of course. No doubt we'll be cruelly punished."

The Company find a red circle glowing in the corner of the room. One succubus points and nods her head. There's no question about what is expected, and it's still disturbing that no one has bothered to divest them of a single weapon or magic item. As a group they walk into the *teleportation circle*...



Lord Tapheon was the uncontested ruler of the 348th layer of the Abyss. He might be the ruler still, but, maddeningly for him, there's no way to be sure. It's been so long since he was actually there.

The game of politics in the Abyss is played on a shifting board of violence and deception. At times the moves are made with slow deliberation, at others they come furiously fast. Tapheon has weathered numerous assaults on the Fortress of Indifference, mostly assayed by lesser powers of the demon realms. (Though once, centuries ago, an invading army of vrocks and hezrou, led by a quartet of marilith generals and the balor Caikol, managed to fight its way to the inner chambers of the Fortress. Tapheon suspects, but could never prove, that it had been sent by no lesser demon lord than Demogorgon himself. But Trugoth,

always loyal (given demonic norms for treachery and power-grabbing), slew Caikol before the throne of the Fortress, and the invasion force was broken.)

Tapheon sits on his throne and frowns. This... place... has tested him as much as Abyssal intrigue ever has. The sliver of the Abyss in which he is trapped measures less than forty miles on a side and is home to fewer than ten thousand demons. He knows its bounds to the inch. From within his throne room, the heart of his power, he has sent his mind wandering far, and learned many things.

He knows that while the Slices seem largely of random selection and haphazard placement, there is a concentration of Abyssal cells that is not accidental. He knows the exact location and destination of every Way into and out of the demon-lands. He knows that his power grows weaker the farther afield he goes from the Fortress of Indifference. And he knows all the players who are the vital pieces on the board. The end game is fast approaching.

For Lord Tapheon is certain that in all of this web of carved-away cells, he is nearly the most powerful being alive. Dozens of Slices away there is a living tree that feeds a thousand worlds when not kidnapped and stranded. There is a nascent God of Chaos not far off, with concerns of its own and heedless of what lies outside its own demesne. His guests currently resting in the Fortress have two sources of untapped power with such potential that it terrifies him to have them so close. But greatest of all is the one with whom he has striven directly, the key to his freedom from this prison of planes. Hot and angry have been his psychic battles, his vain attempts to conquer this being by force of will. But there is no victory there; this enemy wields the same mighty forces that tie the Slices themselves together. He must effect his escape by proxy.

Now there is only this one final interview. Tapheon knows the warnings he must give, the offers he'll make, and the promises he hopes to exact. Not that he's likely to get everything he wants; these mortals are weak but not foolish, and it will be impossible to explain what needs explaining without them coming to understand the leverage they wield. No, as long as the paladin plays his part, this meeting will be a success. Oh, and also as long as Kibilhathur Bimson doesn't figure out how to obliterate him.

OR SO

The Company are *teleported* into a large cubic room, a hundred feet on a side. Its grilled meshwork walls and ceiling are filled with a mortar of smashed, writhing bodies, maybe structural, perhaps simply aesthetic. From these emanates a faint chill of the Negative Material plane.

The whole of this chamber is lit by a dim sourceless glow, but all eyes are drawn to the throne and the beings who stand in front of it. The throne is a serrated latticework, a sharp-edged iron jumble whose gaps are filled with groaning bodies. Around this seat of pain are a half dozen succubae in their natural forms, voluptuous women with bat wings rising from their backs and sharp fangs in their cruel mouths. They eye the Company hungrily.

In the throne itself sits **Lord Tapheon**, unconcerned with its cutting angles, and indifferent to its lamentations. The demon lord has skin like polished bronze, and something writhes beneath it. Four two-foot-long curved horns rise symmetrically from the top of his head. His face has no nose, no mouth, only four brilliant green eyes arranged in a square pattern, and these are particularly disturbing because none of them need look in the same direction as the others. Some in the Company notice that while three of these eyes sweep back and forth across them, one of them is fixed, perfectly fixed, on Kibi and Scree.

In his left hand Lord Tapheon holds his most prized possession: a rod called *Despoiler of Flesh*, fashioned entirely of sewn-together human tongues. Kibi leans to Dranko and whispers: "That's what happens to people who lick the wrong things."

Before Dranko can answer, a voice sounds in the minds of all the Company. It is a beautiful voice, that of a human male, filled with subtlety and wisdom, calming, mellifluous. But underneath, almost at a subsonic level, evil power fills it, unheard but not unfelt. **Please come forward and introduce yourselves**, commands Lord Tapheon.

They do. The floor of this chamber is also an iron grille, though thankfully without the mortar. It clangs dully beneath their boots. When the party are only ten feet from the jagged throne, Tapheon motions for them to stop. One by one they speak their names. One Certain Step's introduction is almost inaudible, and his clenched fists are white at his side. He twitches slightly.

When it's Kibi's turn, the dwarf says, "I believe you know who I am."

All four of Tapheon's eyes lock on Kibi for a moment. **Yes. Kibilhathur Bimson. Welcome to my home.**

Up close, the crawling of Tapheon's skin is impossible to ignore. Beneath the bronze flesh it seems as if hundreds of worms are squirming without cessation. Dranko, predictably, decides to start up the conversation. "With respect, Lord Tapheon, had you intended to be stuck in this place?"

No, Tapheon's voice sounds in their heads. **And I sense that you can do something about that. There are things you can do for me, and there are things I can do for you. I have brought you here to discuss those things.**

For a moment, the three of his eyes not trained on Kibi swivel to fix on One Certain Step.

You people are vital to my return, continues Lord Tapheon. **Kibilhathur Bimson, One Certain Step... and a third power. He is a man whose true name I cannot sense. He calls himself the Lord of the Roses.**

Well, isn't *that* interesting. "He tried to make an appointment to see us," says Dranko, "and we chose to deny him."

Did he? asks Tapheon. **And how did he contact you?**

"By sending someone to escort us," says Dranko.

This someone. Where is he now? presses Tapheon.

"Dead," says Dranko simply.

"He made the mistake of kidnapping one of our number," adds Aravis.

What was his name? asks Tapheon.

"Srappa."

Did Srappa cross my domain? I refer to all pieces of the Abyss.

"Yes," says Aravis. "Several of them."

He did? Tapheon sits up straighter in his throne. **More and more reason to... Hmm. The Lord of the Roses seems to have violated our truce. I have striven with him, mind to mind, from afar. But he sent an emissary right under my nose, and my minions did not sense him, and so did not bring him to me. Another reason to have him killed.**

"What is the essence of the Lord of the Roses, Lord Tapheon?" asks Dranko.

His source of power is very much like what binds this place together, answers the demon.

Which brings two thoughts to the minds of the Company: *Why didn't we just go there first and skip that whole Chaos fiasco, and Oh, crap.*

I have wrestled with him, from here, says Tapheon. **He is powerful... and opaque. But you will be able to fight him.**

"You think we need to do battle with him?" asks Morningstar, raising an eyebrow.

"I thought you needed him to help you escape," says Kibi.

No. He is a key player in the game. You will visit him, and you will get what you need from him, and then I wish you to kill him.

Ruined: Glad I scrolled down and caught this update! Negotiating with really powerful demons... not something I'd be eager to do.

Zaruthustran: Great narration, Sagiro! Love the unexpected, unexplained revelations. You've really set the mood of the place and given a strong idea of what this Lord is about (but not *all* about).

QR 20

A Poor Suggestion

The Company mull Tapheon's request for a few seconds, after which Dranko asks, "And why should we want to do that?"

It is part of the bargain we are making, says Tapheon coolly, **where my part of the bargain is: I let you live, I give you an escort out of the Demon Slices which you will certainly need, and I will point you to your destination. It won't be a great burden. He will attack you. You will simply be acting in self-defense. You will want to kill him, anyway.**

Lord Tapheon has to try. It burns, how the Lord of the Roses has taunted him, defied him, and these lesser beings are his best chance for revenge. But he harbors no illusions about his chances, and will only press them so far.

Morningstar is the first to see the obvious problem with this 'bargain.' "But if we *don't* agree to kill him, and we *don't* reach an agreement, then you *won't* escape from here. And if he has something, and we need it, and we get it, I don't see how his death has anything to do with it."

His death will satisfy me, says Tapheon, and the undertones of malice in his sonorous voice grow stronger. **He dared insult me. Here. Here!**

"He's either very brave or very foolish," comments Dranko. "But our goal, Lord Tapheon, is to free you and everyone else, returning you to your own planes of existence. And I would assume that someone of your great power could assault the Lord of the Roses with even more force, once you are returned to your own demesnes."

What do you know of demons? rumbles Tapheon.

"Well, until recently, I thought they lived with devils in Hell," admits Dranko. "So, apparently, not very much."

No, not very much. I will have different priorities once I am home again. This is a matter to be resolved sooner, not later. I have options, Morningstar of Ell. I prefer this option, but I'm sure I could find new ones if I had to.

"We're simply not comfortable agreeing to kill someone we've never met," says Aravis.

"You're not going to make me get inside some great piece of machinery, are you?" asks Kibi with sudden worry. "And Chaos hasn't been whispering into your mind? Right?"

What a strange creature you are. Tapheon's eyes fix again on Kibi. *His alien face betrays no sign of his fear, that Kibi's elemental familiar houses such power as could tear his throne room to pieces.*

"If you don't mind my asking," says Aravis. "Why are Kibi and Step so important to freeing you?"

Tapheon chuckles in their minds. **Kibi... may I call you Kibi, master dwarf?**

"Apparently," says Kibi insolently.

The chuckle stops. Palpable anger fills the air between the demon lord and his audience. *To be talked to in such a way! Tapheon grips his unholy rod, prepared to make Kibilhathur Bimson suffer in ways mere mortals could not imagine, and he nearly... No. Not the dwarf. It is too dangerous, risking his wrath.* Tapheon masters his anger and says simply: **I beg your pardon?**

Kibi senses immediately that he has overstepped his bounds. "Yes," he says humbly, looking at his boot-tops. "Yes, my Lord Tapheon, of course."

Tapheon composes himself. **Kibi has a great power... with him. It is the best chance we will have against the Lord of the Roses. One Certain Step's role lies beyond that.** Two of Tapheon's eyes focus intently on Step. **But we will come to you presently, paladin.** Ernie puts a hand on Step's arm.

"Assuming we actually deal with the Lord of the Roses," says Kibi, "how do we go about breaking up the Slices?"

You go to the source of the phenomenon. You put a stop to it. All I know is that it – whatever it is – lies beyond the Lord of the Roses.

"Heading that way, and getting out of here, has been our intention all along," says Morningstar. "Do you have anything substantial to contribute?"

Tapheon glowers again. **I don't think I like your attitude.**

Ernie immediately jumps in to change the subject. "How do we fight the Lord of the Roses? If he's so powerful that even a being of your great might is wary...?"

Tapheon exhales. **I'll tell you this. Even with Kibi's power brought to bear, it will be very difficult. You'll be hard pressed. So here's something I'm contributing: good advice. When you go before the Lord of the Roses, be girded for battle. Be sure you will survive. He has gathered powerful servants to his side.**

"He does not want the Slices to be returned?" asks Morningstar.

My sense is, no.

Damn. "Can the Lord of the Roses fight directly," asks Dranko, "or will he only fight through his servants?"

I don't know. My knowledge of him is imperfect. I see many things, and my consciousness spreads through the fabric of this great prison, but the Lord of the Roses is like a bright light into which I cannot look.

"Has he wanted to fight us all along?" asks Kibi worriedly.

I think he's wanted you all along. A second of Tapheon's eyes flick down to Scree. **I sense he enjoys how things are here.**

"There's a man, one of the humans who created the Slices," says Dranko. "He's been wandering around carving statues of Kibi. Have you seen him?"

Ah, him. Tapheon nods. **He came close once, but eluded my grasp.**

“We think he’s probably really important,” says Dranko.

I disagree. I don’t think he’s important anymore. He is broken. But, back to the matter at hand...

“We basically want the same thing,” says Kibi. “And we’ll certainly do our utmost to make that happen.”

“If killing him is the only way to accomplish our task, then we will,” adds Aravis.

Tapheon sighs. **I don’t know that it is. I am asking you to do it regardless. And here is a thing that perhaps has not occurred to you. I need Kibilhathur alive, and I need One Certain Step alive. But the rest of you...**

“I was wondering when he’d get to that,” mutters Grey Wolf under his breath.

But Morningstar is undaunted. “I’m certain that Kibi and Step would be unwilling, if not unable, to fulfill their part of the bargain by themselves.”

“The only thing we will agree to,” says Aravis, “is to attempt to break up the Slices and free you, by whatever means are necessary.”

What could I offer, then, that would make you change your mind and agree to kill the Lord of the Roses for me?

There is a pause of a few seconds while the Company ponder, before Dranko answers. “You could renounce evil, give up your demonic throne, and free all the souls you have captive,” he suggests.

Some of Tapheon’s succubae cannot help but gasp at the audacity of this proposal. The three of Tapheon’s eyes that are not locked on Kibi and Scree all focus on Dranko, and again the anger of the demon lord rises up to fill the iron chamber. *Such impudence! To suggest something so outrageous, to his very face!* Tapheon’s hand grips the *Despoiler of Flesh* and the tongues on the rod start to flap and wiggle.

“I think I hit a sore spot...” says Dranko, gulping.

Tapheon makes the slightest of motions with the rod, and Dranko *changes*. His body twists and morphs horribly. In a matter of seconds he has been *polymorphed* into a paralyzed, man-sized fish, balanced on his tail. Tapheon flicks the rod a second time, and Dranko’s body is torn and stretched, as if someone had sunk claw-fingered hands into the fish and pulled it apart like taffy. No parts of him are actually torn away, but the horrified Company can see organs pulsing in the rent gaps of Dranko’s form. As for Dranko himself, the pain is immeasurable. Beyond the haze of agony he realizes that he cannot breathe, no matter how hard he tries.

Aravis is the first to find voice. “That’s not a very good negotiating tactic, if you want us to kill...”

Tapheon cuts him off. **We are now negotiating for something else.**

Thornir Alekeg: Ouch, poor Dranko. Too bad you didn’t know how afraid Tapheon was of Kibi and Scree. Are you just finding this out now upon reading this update? Just wondering if Sagiro’s rat-bastardness extends right on into his Story Hour.

KidCthulhu: Yep. We had no idea he was that afraid of us. Mind you, I don’t know that we would have changed our strategy much. He’s still a freakin’ demon lord, and that’s a big can of whup-ass. We might have destroyed him, but he’s not our objective.

Sagiro: The only indication I gave about Tapheon’s... concern... was that I made a point of constantly mentioning how one of his four eyes was *always* locked on Kibi and Scree, no matter what else he was doing or who he was talking to. But, no, he never let on that he was terrified of what Kibi might do.

Dawn: Did that type of torture/punishment have any lasting impact on Dranko – say, permanent ability damage against Wisdom or Intelligence?

Also, why a fish? Seems like a strange thing for Tapheon to come up with to use as source of punishment. Or did I miss some history between Dranko and fish?

Ashy: I don’t know, of course, but if I had to think of a critter that was pretty much completely powerless before a demon lord, a fish would fit the bill.



A Tempting Offer

Tapheon’s voice is calm and matter-of-fact in their heads. He has clearly mastered his temper. **Your friend here cannot breathe and will soon suffocate.**

Aravis immediately begins to cast a spell, but stops at a threatening gesture from Tapheon. **Stop that, Aravis Telmir. It won’t work, and will only anger me further. Besides which, you are wasting valuable time. Your friend is dying. What would you like to give me, so that I will return him to his normal, air-breathing form? Items of monetary or magical value will suffice for this... sub-negotiation.**

Aravis whips the magical wizard hat off his head; it's been a long time since he's pulled anything out of it. He ends up with a small glass globe, half-filled with a shimmering grey liquid.

What is that? asks Tapheon amusedly.

"Mercury. I think," says Aravis.

Toss it over.

Dranko is almost as confused as he is tortured. He has no clear sense of his body, not even of where his feet are. For that matter, he can't even *feel* his feet. One of his fish-eyes is fixed on the party, and the other is on Tapheon, but he can neither blink nor turn away from either. His field of vision is distorted and alien, like he's looking through two blurry spyglasses each pointed in a different direction. Of course, it's hard to think clearly about those things given how much pain he's in. The others can see his tendons and ribs and fleshy fish-bits through the holes ripped in his body.

One of Tapheon's eyes follows the globe of mercury as Aravis rolls it to the base of the throne. The demon lord shakes his head, taps his foot, and casts two of his eyes meaningfully at Dranko.

Grey Wolf offers up his *ring of the berserker*. Ernie gives up a seldom-used *+1 shortbow*, and Flicker reluctantly sacrifices his *glove of missile snaring*. When Tapheon still looks unimpressed, Kibi fishes out his bag of reserve gems and starts pulling out handfuls. When he's emptied over 1000gp worth into the pile, Tapheon nods his head slightly.

Pathetic. But acceptable. This sidelight is about instruction, not extortion.

He squeezes the *Despoiler of Flesh* and the tongues wriggle and writhe. Dranko congeals back into an unstretched fish and then quickly back into his half-orcish form. The pain switches off, leaving only a hideous memory.

Tapheon stretches out a hand and the pile of loot slides itself behind his throne and out of sight. Dranko watches, and can't stop himself from exclaiming, "That's it? You ransomed me for that? I thought I was worth ten times that much!"

If you wish, I can turn you back, and your friends can give up more of their valuables. It's hard to tell if he's joking.

In as steady and stern a voice as he can manage, Ernie says, "Dranko, I'm your friend, and I don't ask you for much. But I'm begging you... Shut. Up. I don't want to stay here anymore, and I don't want you to die here."

"I'm not afraid of that," says Dranko, full of sincerity and bluster together. "My soul is pure. Ish. Pure-ish."

Your soul is most certainly not pure, Tapheon scoffs. **But then, very few people can say that. Not even you.** Here he looks meaningfully at One Certain Step. **But like I said, we'll get to you presently. Now. Shall I ask the question again, now that I can expect more reasonable answers?**

"No, there's nothing you can offer us," says Aravis wearily.

Pity. And I ask for so little.

"Like we said," says Morningstar, "It's entirely likely that if he attacks us, you'll get what you want anyway."

I suppose I'll just have to make do, says Tapheon with exaggerated resignation. After a few seconds of silence, the demon lord speaks again, his tone lighter. **Step. Come forward, please.**

Step walks forward slowly until he stands directly at the foot of the serrated throne. Ernie goes with him, and Tapheon does not object.

I'm going to make you an offer. Tapheon's voice is now full of magnanimity. **It only applies to you, so the rest of you, don't get any ideas. I'm going to offer to let you kill me.**

Er... what?

I won't defend myself. I haven't done anything to you personally, yes, but don't let that stop you. I've committed atrocities of such magnitude, and in such numbers, that there is no doubt I deserve death, or worse. So, because I sense you want it so badly, and because you'll be doing the world a great service... you may kill me.

Finnmtiu: I guess they'll have to start calling him Dranko *No-Tongue*, once Tapheon cuts it off and sews it onto his rod. Way to go, Piratecat!

el-remmen: I don't know, seemed like a reasonable request to me...

Funny, in my Story Hour, when the party refused to go kill someone for a demon he made an example of the half-orc as well...

KidCthulhu: How often have we told him, "Don't sass the demons!" But no, he just had to stick his oar in.

On the plus side, he was delicious breaded and fried.

StevenAC: Ernie? Are you sure you're feeling all right?

KidCthulhu: Oh, that's me talking, not Ernie. Ernie doesn't like fish. I, on the other hand, had to give up magic items to get fish-boy restored, so there's a little bitterness.

Len: But you were obligated. "In fishness and in health" and all that.

Tamlyn: Oh, that's just bad! Even for a gamer.

Len: Sorry. I'll pay the pig next time I'm in Boston.

Step instinctively grips his sword, but Ernie whispers to him: "Temptation is temptation, Step. Think about what you're doing."

Temptation? That's such a crude term. Tapheon shakes his head at Ernie, then turns back to Step. **Don't you think I deserve to die? Did you see what I did to your friend? Step. You've wanted to. I know what you want. I'm offering you a once-in-a-lifetime congruence of what you want, and what is right. It is not right that I should be alive. Would you like me to show you deeds I've done? The torments I've visited on a thousand souls? Once you've seen them, you may have no choice. Your conscience, that which makes you so noble, will move on its own to strike me down.**

"Don't do it, Step," whispers Ernie.

Step doesn't release his sword, but he says haltingly: "I know what it is you offer."

Oh, I doubt that. The obvious answer isn't the right answer in this case, One Certain Step.

Conflict darkens the paladin's complexion. He thinks he sees the trap. He'll move to strike this creature, a vile monster more deserving of death than anything that's been in the reach of his sword. But Tapheon is lying, and won't allow himself to be killed. Step will accomplish nothing save breaking his own code of conduct. But would it, really? Didn't Tapheon strike first when he... changed... Dranko? What would Kemma's judgment be if he dies having rid the universe of such a loathsome beast as this? Or having struck down in anger a being offering no resistance? Aren't the giants of Surgoil enough of a blemish on his soul? Must he add this as well?

You see, Step, what you're thinking is: 'I'm being tempted to strike you because the right thing to do is, never strike first.' They do teach you that sort of thing, right? But in this case, the temptation is deeper. In this case, the temptation is: are you so bound to your promises that you would doom thousands of people, all those who I will go on to torment and kill in my life, to uphold an abstract ideal that frankly means nothing in this context? Think of the suffering you will cause, by not killing me.

"And you're making this offer out of the goodness of your heart?" asks Morningstar.

I have good reasons, that you will come to appreciate. Step, strike me.

One Certain Step starts to pull the sword from his sheath, then stops. With a great effort he releases the grip; his hand finds Ernie's hand, lifted up to him, and he grips it, trembling. "You know so little of Good," Step utters, exhaling a long-held breath.

Tapheon steps back. **My friend, I know more about Good than you. But, well done! You've passed the test. Your soul is pure. Pure enough. A lesser man would have struck me, I'm sure. But now you are ready to atone.**

Step goes pale.

It is necessary, isn't it. I can sense it. Can't you?

The paladin nods instinctively. Yes, he can sense it. The Lightless Room...

He'll need all his faith, all his purity when the time comes, won't he? Tapheon addresses the others. **I don't know why. That moment will come beyond the Lord of the Roses and beyond my sight. But I feel it will be so.**

Tapheon manages to convey a contented smile despite his lack of mouth. **Now I'll tell you something more, and this truly is of the goodness of my heart. Mostly. I'm also telling you this because I don't know what you'll find past the Lord of the Roses, and this information may be useful to you. And, it pleases me to think you may owe me something in the future. Not that you have any intentions of paying me back; you won't consider this a debt, and I don't blame you. But I digress.**

The Black Circle wizards, they also deserve death. I know why this all started, and it's their fault. They had the gall to come to the Abyss, set up shop. They were attempting something very strange. They were setting up... a beacon. Sending magical signals into the adjoining planes.

He turns to Aravis. **You know of what I speak, Holy One.**

Holy One? What? Tapheon continues. **The coterminous planes, they call them. The Black Circle devotees sent this signal out, as if they expected something to hear them. There are parts of these coterminous planes that can only be reached through the Abyss, or the Hells, or some other Outer Planes. Nothing answered them. I don't think there was anything there to answer. But they attempted to augment this with a wild-magic item. That was a mistake. I suppose I could have stopped them, but I found their efforts fascinating. It is always bad news for people on the Primes to open permanent ways to the Lower Planes. They meddled in things they knew not of, and look what happened. The Slices. Their power source got out of hand.**

"We know they were trying to summon what they believe to be their Lord," says Aravis.

Yes. And what is that? Do you know? The Company shake their heads.

Something immensely powerful, I imagine. Trapped, unable to find its way home. I suppose I should be glad whatever it is didn't answer. If it did, it may have traveled through my domain and challenged my power. I have better things to do.

And now, this interview is at an end. You will be escorted to the borders of the Abyssal lands. Beyond that you will have no option but reach the Lord of the Roses. He has seen to that. By destroying certain of the Ways he has made a corridor between me and him, as we have wrestled from our seats of power. He... can turn off Ways, to better channel his power. But he has not turned off the Ways necessary for you to reach him. He desires that.

"Does he have the power source that the Black Circle used to make the beacon?" asks Kibi.

My guess is yes. I sense it is the same type of power.

Not for a single second in all of this encounter has Tapheon's upper left eye strayed from Kibi's feet. Now the other three eyes flick again toward Scree. Then Lord Tapheon gestures, and the red circle blinks back on.

Queylic will escort you. Good luck.

QR 80

Soon the Company are back in the long corridor. Queylic is there, with two vrocks attending her.

"*This way.*" She slithers down the corridor.

"I never thought I'd be glad to see *her*," says Morningstar.

Queylic soon leads them to the large room with many doors, and then out and down the huge iron ramp. The screams of impaled souls sound loud and terrible in their ears.

"*It is not a long walk to the next Way out,*" says Queylic, gliding on ahead of them. "*I hope that your audience with Lord Tapheon went well?*"

"As well as could be expected," says Dranko.

"We're all still alive," adds Kibi.

"**Yes. Most unexpected,**" says Queylic, sounding honestly surprised. "**He must want something very badly from you.**"

"He does," says Dranko. And then he adds: "You were right about him not liking jokes, though."

Ashy: AWESOME!! Excellent job, Sagiro!

el-remmen: Eh. Ya let 'em off easy... ;-)

coyote6: I dunno, it seems like Tapheon got something close to what he was expecting.

shilsen: I wouldn't count on it. As the saying goes, it ain't over till the four-eyed noseless, mouthless demon lord sings. Or something like that...

Sarellion: El-Remmen prefers a more gritty style.

el-remmen: Come on! What part of ";-)" don't you guys understand?

I mean, first Tapheon *polymorphs* and tortures Dranko, and then to show the party that they will do what he wants he demands a paltry little thing from them (some minor magic and gems) just to show his "generosity" because obviously if he wanted more from them he would have it.

KidCthulhu: Believe me when I say we didn't feel like we'd been let off easy. Tapheon was bad, bad, bad. Not all scary, dangerous encounters involve combat.

Len: Not only that, *he's still there*. So you haven't really been let off at all, yet.

RangerWickett: Kevin, if you're at GenCon, I'm buying you a beer!

Piratecat: Deal. And Dranko has a *brilliant* plan to deal with Tapheon. Absolutely brilliant. Err... if you take his 9 Intelligence into account, at least. Ahem.

KidCthulhu: Which means "Let's find him and do something embarrassing to him." It's not a brilliant plan, but it is a predictable plan.

RangerWickett: And really, predictable plans are the greatest love of all...

Er, um, no, sorry, that's not quite right. Fish! Fish is the greatest love of all!

LightPhoenix: Once you've had fish, you never go back?

QR 80

Out of the Abyss

"I should warn you about where we're going next." The marilith Queylic slithers ahead of the Company, while the two vrocks hunch and flap restlessly behind them. Around them is the omnipresent murmur of a thousand damned souls, the song of the Abyss. *"You should have the means to protect yourselves from flies,"* she says.

"Flies?" echoes Dranko, making a face. "Ugh."

"And they'll be particularly hungry," adds Queylic. *"Ordinarily they are corpse-eating flies, but the supply of fresh corpses has dwindled of late. I suggest you make your preparations before we go to the next Slice. Once there, they will make it difficult to cast spells."*

"How long will our protections have to last?" asks Aravis.

"You will have to endure the flies for three hours. And while we're on the subject, the Slice beyond that is extraordinarily hot. There you will need protection from heat, or you will burst into flames. It will take four hours to cross that one, if things go well."

For another two hours they trudge through a veritable forest of impaled bodies. Talk turns to their meeting with Tapheon, and Dranko's transformation in particular. Dranko expects sympathy, but gets little. In his mind the demon lord's torment of him was unjustified. He asked a question honestly, and was made to suffer. Only Aravis sides with this opinion; the others either agree that he spoke unwisely, or stay silent on the subject. Kibi, with an unsurprising absence of tact, remarks, "Dranko, that was just a stupid thing to say. You should consider yourself lucky it wasn't worse." Dranko glares at him for a minute before turning away with a grunt. Kibi shrugs his shoulders, and Dranko is uncharacteristically silent until they reach the Way out.

As they draw near to the blue portal, they see a dozen more vrocks and a contingent of glabrezu waiting for them. "Are they with you?" asks Grey Wolf.

"They are coming with us. In the Slice beyond the flies – the hot one – we will want a show of force to deter the magma demons."

"Magma demons?" asks Grey Wolf worriedly. "I don't like the sound of that..."

"Yes, nasty creatures," says Queylic. *"Now, take what time you need. You probably won't have seen flies in such quantities."*

Morningstar fills two empty spell slots with *repel vermin*. During that fifteen minutes Queylic smiles and stares intently at Step, but the paladin just smiles back at her. After the interview with Tapheon, One Certain Step no longer finds the mockery and taunts of the marilith troubling. Queylic looks disappointed. When Morningstar is ready, they step through the Way.

OR SO

She sure wasn't kidding about the flies. The air is filled with their loud, unending drone. The ground is littered with skeletons. And in the air are a million flies, easily the size of bumblebees, swarming as thickly as snow in a blizzard. The nearest of these spot the party and move to feast, only to be thwarted by Morningstar's spell. Thirty seconds later and the flies have formed an opaque hemisphere around them, thousands of starving vermin desperate for food and buzzing angrily. There are many utterances on the theme of "Thank you, Ell!"

Queylic's voice, her actual voice, sounds above the fly-wing din. *"Can you hear me? You'll have to follow my voice. You'll be fine – just keep your eyes on the ground."*

While they walk, Queylic talks loudly to keep the Company headed in the right direction. She explains that when the Abyss is working properly, bodies of the damned are falling from the sky all the time in this Layer. The flies feast on the bodies, but of course no corpses have fallen in many years.

"You'd think the flies would have died off without food," says Dranko.

"These flies can live a long, long time. They are part of how the Abyss works. This Layer is used as a disposal. I guess that in other parts of the Abyss, the real Abyss, they've had to improvise to handle the glut of corpses. But that should be an easy problem for the more imaginative demon lords."

"So these flies aren't for torment, then?" asks Dranko.

"We have plenty of other options for torment," says Queylic. *"There are specific individuals to whom flies are assigned, depending on their transgressions and phobias."*

Abruptly Queylic appears before them, having entered their fly-edged bubble. (The flies bounce harmlessly off her – a perk of Damage Reduction.) *"We have arrived at the next Way. Are you prepared for the heat?"*

They are. “*Beyond the next Slice there is only one more section of the Abyss for you to traverse. It is a large sea of mercury.*”

Aravis has an idea, and asks Queylic, “How many miles are we crossing in the next two areas?”

“*It’s about ten miles through the hot Slice, and perhaps twenty to the Way that leaves the Abyss entirely.*”

“And then what?” asks Dranko.

“*I don’t know,*” says Queylic. “*My knowledge ends where the Abyss does.*”

“Should we expect to be attacked in the Slice with the mercury?” asks Dranko.

“*No,*” says Queylic. “*Nothing lives there. Nothing could.*”

“But we should expect to be attacked in the fiery place?” Dranko persists.

“*Not if I and my entourage are with you,*” answers Queylic. “*The magma demons only attack if they are assured of victory.*”

Aravis shares his idea; that they should just *wind walk* through the next two Slices. Queylic is amenable to this; she and her retinue can *teleport* to keep up. Spells are cast, and the group of them go through the Way. After the usual black void of portal travel they emerge into a Slice that is indeed very hot. On the plus side, they do not immediately burst into flames, despite the glowing red air and numerous rivers of molten lava. On the minus side, the balor Trugoth is there with his own entourage of demons. Once Queylic and her crew arrive, it’s almost a convention.

Queylic regards the balor towering over her. “*What are you doing here?*” she asks haughtily.

Trugoth rumbles, “**YOU THOUGHT YOU COULD PIN IT ON ME? YOU FOOLISH LITTLE GIRL.**”

The balor grips his enormous flaming sword and speaks to the Company. “**THOSE DEMONS WHO ATTACKED YOU. WE WERE ALL UNDER STRICT ORDERS TO CAPTURE YOU ALIVE, AND YET YOU WERE ASSAULTED. WHO DO YOU THINK ORDERED THEM? WHAT DO YOU THINK, QUEYLIC?**”

The Company decide that this would be a good time to start turning into mist-form.

“*I’m certain I don’t know what you mean,*” says Queylic, her six arms starting to reach for her own weapons. “*No one would have been foolish enough to...*”

“**YOU THINK YOU CAN HIDE THE TRUTH FROM ME, MARILITH?**” booms Trugoth.

The demons on both sides are starting to snarl and pace. Combat seems imminent.

“Uh, excuse me!” says Dranko, interrupting. “If you could just point the way to the exit, we’ll get out of your way.”

“Your Lord feels strongly that we leave this place safely,” adds Aravis.

Both Queylic and Trugoth point, both in about the same direction, without taking their eyes off one another. “**I SUGGEST YOU LEAVE AT ONCE,**” says Trugoth. “**BECAUSE WHEN I START TO PULL THE ARMS OFF THIS MARILITH, THERE MAY BE SOME... FALLOUT.**”

Just as the Company turn gaseous, the fighting breaks out in earnest. The air is filled with rapidly *teleporting* demons trying to get advantageous tactical positions. Combat both physical and magical explodes all around, and as the Company flee, those who turn around to watch see Trugoth holding up Queylic by the neck, while all six of the marilith’s blades slash at the balor’s body.

Flying at two hundred feet above the ground, the Company see magma demons moving about below, bright red specks populating the banks of the lava rivers. Morningstar spots a landing spot safe enough for her to cast *find the path*, as a precautionary measure in case Queylic and Trugoth’s directions were off. This provokes a small course correction, but they had been heading in about the right direction, and only minutes later they spot the glowing blue light of the Way out. There are several magma demons in its vicinity.

The Company land, go solid, and Kibi immediately puts up a *wall of force* shielding them from the demons. Ernie activates his *winged shield* and flies through the Way to check things out. He is disappointed to find that there is no place to land; the Way opens thirty feet above a flat gray expanse of mercury that stretches as far as the eye can see in every direction.

Ernie comes back just in time to witness a volley of *fireballs* explode against the *wall of force*. Dranko, still in a sour mood, gives the magma demons the finger. Grey Wolf uses a wand to cast *fly* on One Certain Step, so that the paladin and Ernie can shuttle the rest of the group through the Way. (Once on the other side, the non-flyers can turn gaseous again while being held

up by the flyers.) Ernie and Dranko are the last two to go through, literally pursued by *fireballs* from some magma demons who have figured out the wall of force and gone around it.

Morningstar, last to be carried by Step, casts a new *find the path* before turning back into mist. Dranko convinces Ernie to fly low enough to allow the half-orc to scoop up a vial of mercury. Mmm... demonic mercury.

Once everyone is back in mist-form the Company fly quickly across the steely gray sea. It looks like solid ground, offering no reflections and betraying not the slightest ripple. Half an hour later they spot the Way out, hanging high in the air. Beneath it, resting atop the mercury, is a huge jumble of bones. On close examination they guess it's the bones of sixty or seventy humanoid creatures, piled haphazardly.

There's a quick discussion about how to scout the next Slice, and how to get everyone into it given that they have to be solid to go through the Way. Aravis is the answer to both questions. First he flies upward until he's a thousand feet in the air, and then becomes solid. He has enough time while falling to cast *overland flight* and pull up before diving into the mercury. While the others wait, he flies through the Way.



The first thing he registers upon arrival is the absence of the Abyss's all-pervading evil nature. It's a joyous feeling, and he revels in it while taking in his surroundings. These are fairly nondescript; the Way opens onto a deserted dirt road running through a tiny village of simple clay dwellings. There are no signs of inhabitants. Aravis returns to the others, where the despair of the Abyss reasserts itself.

For part two of the plan, he casts a *rope trick* so that the rope hangs down directly in front of the Way. The rest of the Company fly into the extradimensional space, turn solid inside, then climb down the rope and swing into the portal. Fortunately, no one slips and falls into the mercury.

Everyone enjoys the spiritual uplift now that the Abyss is behind them, but Kibi, paranoid as they draw nearer to the Lord of the Roses, casts a *veil* to make everyone look like chipmunks. Then he casts *prying eyes* and sends the sensors out to scout. (Due to a surge in the wild magic, he actually gets thirty such eyes, as the spell is spontaneously augmented by the Twin Spell feat.) It's very quiet as they wait for the *eyes* to return; there's nothing besides themselves making any noise at all.

"Do you think you're ready for *atonement*?" Morningstar asks One Certain Step.

The paladin gazes down the empty street. "Yes," he says softly.

"We should cast it now, before we meet the Lord of the Roses," says Morningstar.

Step nods, but says: "Not here, though. This is not a good place for it. There will still be time, I think."

Plane Sailing: I really like the opportunity that we've had to see the growth in Dranko. It is easy to mistake his behaviour for plain old reckless licking and wench-watching, and miss the depths he has – such as distracting the marilith from One Certain Step while she was escorting them, and the reasons he just gave to the Company for his behaviour before Tapheon.

He still looks as shallow as he always was, but that tends to stop us (and indeed the Company) recognise his depths. Bravo Dranko.

the Jester: I love Dranko. He's great. His attitude is fantastic.

Hammerhead: I'm not sure there's really much growth in Dranko, per se, as that Dranko thrives on being underestimated. He's so good at it that he manages to fool his friends from time to time.

Plane Sailing: Don't you think Dranko is growing? He certainly seems to be to me. I'm not saying he is deep all the time, but there are increasing flashes of it compared to how he used to be. More thought behind his taunts and jests.

Just my perception, though.

shilsen: That's definitely the sense I get, especially from the last two updates.

Piratecat: It may be worth weighing in here. Warning: optional overly complex character overanalysis follows. Read at your own peril.

Dranko's initial personality is based on one of my best friends in high school. This was a guy with an astonishingly fast mind who was adopted into a family that didn't entirely know how to cope with him. For my friend, doing poorly in school was a form of rebellion because class was so easy for him; why should he try, if it was more fun to be disruptive? He knew he could do the work and saw no reason to prove it to anyone. But fundamentally he was insecure, and he took that weakness and made it into a wall to keep other people out.

And thus, Dranko: rejected by family and reviled for being a half-orc, he took all that anger and turned it into a spiral of self-destruction. He'd disobey, the Scarbearers would punish him with their torture in an attempt to bring him closer to God, and he'd disobey again just to stubbornly prove to the Scarbearers that they couldn't get to him. When he came of age and took to the streets, he was a big mass of streetwise anger hiding some crippling loneliness that he wouldn't even acknowledge. Most of the things he'd do were done not to impress others, but to reassure himself that he could somehow matter in the world, that he wasn't the inconsequential loser that he had been labeled for twelve years. More than anything else, Dranko wanted to *matter*, and he didn't care what he tossed into the pond just so long as he made waves. He could just as easily have been recruited by Sagiro and the Sharshun, with no moral qualms whatsoever.

Enter Abernathy and the Company, the first real family he'd ever experienced. Ernie's influences (among others) gave Dranko something of a moral compass, and he gradually turned from neutral to neutral good roughly two years into the campaign. Nowadays he's still plenty shallow – there's nothing that a good treasure bath or ass-kicking can't improve – but he's developed a very strong set of ethics and morals. They just happen to be sort of flexible in areas like the possession of individual property. He's developed far more empathy for other people, and the surprising result is that he no longer fears death in a good cause. Deflecting the marilith's scorn was almost a reflex to him; he's been harangued by the best, and had no doubt that Step would do the same for him as well.

Luckily for all of us, he's still not especially bright. Aravis's cat reminds him of this on almost a weekly basis.

I think of it this way. Originally, Dranko was like strolling across a beach knee-deep in the surf: shallow, with some sharp stuff you might step on because you couldn't see it. Nowadays he's still like that, but you have a chance of stepping into the hidden depths of a sinkhole and briefly getting dunked over your head. That doesn't mean the rest of the water isn't shallow, just that you have some areas you'll want to watch out for.

Ashy: And that, my friends, is the kind of character analysis that makes for a glorious roleplaying experience! Want to know why this Story Hour is so good – that is just one little slice of a big, juicy, wonderful role-playing pie!

KidCthulhu: I don't remember the precise moment Dranko realized that we wouldn't leave him just because he's rude and offensive; that we were neither scared off by his act, nor planning on abandoning him. There may have been no particular moment. But his gradual emergence from his shell has been a beautiful thing to watch. He's still got the mannerisms, but the anger and fear behind them is gone (with a few aforementioned sinkholes).

As Ernie says, "He's just an old softy, really."

Dranko abruptly stands and stalks off. Despite the departure from the Abyss, he has descended into a deep funk, still fuming over the others' lack of sympathy, and Kibi's insult in particular. He explores the small clay buildings, finding simple plates and bowls, and primitive furniture.

Half an hour later, the first of Kibi's sensors comes back, having seen nothing interesting. The village is extremely small. If the bones in the sea of mercury came from here, it was probably the whole population. Eventually all the *eyes* return, collectively painting a picture for Kibi of a small Slice with a cluster of four Ways on the other side of the village. Three of the four are gray and dead.

While the Company are ready to stop traveling for the "day," they decide to scout out the next Way before going to bed. Dranko volunteers, relishing the chance to be alone, and goes through with the usual rope-around-the-waist precaution. He finds himself standing on a grassy hill at night, under a sky blazing with stars. In the soft starlight he sees many such hills, dotted with trees and stands of sleeping flowers. He hears a rustling nearby but it's only a rabbit munching on some grass. Very faintly he smells the familiar tang of wood-smoke.

He comes back and reports, sullen. "Habitable," he shrugs. "Nice. Bunnies and flowers."

Step wants to check it out, and Dranko accompanies him. For a minute the two of them stand there side by side, gazing out upon the starlit grass.

"What's the matter?" asks Step quietly.

"Nothing," says Dranko crossly.

"If you don't want to talk about it," says Step with a wry smile, "you can say 'I don't want to talk about it.'"

Dranko can't help but crack a small smile himself. He turns to Step and says, "I'm not ready yet."

Step nods. "I understand. I'll listen, when you're ready."

The paladin looks around and sniffs the air. "It seems good, but I won't know for sure until the sun is out."

At Dranko's suggestion he decides to camp there, so that he can watch the sun rise the next morning. The two of them stay there while the rest sleep back in the village, a precautionary rope stretched between Slices just in case.

QR 50

Dranko wakes to find One Certain Step watching a gorgeous sunrise. The sun itself is twice the size of the one that rises over Kivia, casting its early light across a pristine countryside painted with blossoming trees and flowers. A sunrise chorus of birds sings in the boughs. From a couple of valleys over a thin thread of smoke rises, as if from a campfire or chimney.

Step sighs contentedly. "This place will do."

aros: I sorta forget, but why does Step have to atone?

Sagiro: Remember first that One Certain Step is only with the Company in the first place to fulfill a prophecy. According to that prophecy he needs to "be the one in the lightless room." Also (he thinks) he is doomed to die there.

Jump forward to the battle with the Nightmare Beasts in the cave, early on in Het Branoi. Step was killed in that battle, and upon his death his body left behind a small smear of light that quickly faded. After Morningstar resurrected him, Step knew more about what he had to do. When a paladin of Kemma dies, the light he leaves behind is proportional to his purity of spirit, his "goodness," if you will. Step realized that he had slipped from the true path of Kemma, particularly in the episode where they slaughtered the giants who lived near the Het Branoi tower. That is why the light from his death was so paltry.

In the "lightless room," Step thinks, he's going to die, and will need to provide as much light as possible upon his death. In order for that to happen, he'll need to atone first, to repent of his sins and become pure in the eyes of the Sun Goddess.

Make sense?

aros: Makes sense... now just to see the atonement process... that sounds interesting.

Sagiro: Don't get too excited; it mostly involves the casting of the *atonement* spell.

KidCthulhu: It's like holy marinating. Makes him more tasty! The goodness is soaked through!

Quatermoon: Is my memory faulty, or is Step an NPC? Such a rich story line for an NPC is pretty cool.

el-remmen: I was thinking the same thing...

KidCthulhu: Step is indeed an NPC, although he has been played by various guests at Sagiro's table over the years. Rich story-line is Sagiro's middle name. Which is hard to fit on forms, and makes monogramming difficult, but shows great foresight on the part of his parents.

Jackylhunter: *glares at KidC while squeegeeing the soda off the monitor screen* Thanks, KC...

QR 50

A Little Slice of Heaven

The Company are gathered around One Certain Step, at the top of a green hill. Morningstar and Ernie have both offered to cast *atonement* and are preparing for the ritual. Step notices Dranko frowning despite the glorious sun and the cloudless blue sky. Dranko is still sullen about the Tapheon incident, and now keenly aware that his god-derived power lags behind that of his fellow clerics. “Dranko, I’d appreciate your help as well,” says Step. Dranko looks up sharply, but his expression softens and he nods his head.

Step sits down on the grass and closes his eyes, a picture of solemn introspection. He has no need to dwell upon his misdeeds, having done that on a daily basis every day since the battle with the giants. Instead he focuses on his desires for the future: that he serve the Sun Goddess with an unclouded mind and unsullied heart; that he show an unflinching bravery when he is called upon to sacrifice; and that he not only be at peace with his lot, but understand the depth of the honor Kemma has bestowed. While he prays, he chews on a perfectly made cinnamon bun, prepared by Ernie for the occasion.

Ernie casts *consecrate* on the hill, centered on the paladin. “Yondalla, I ask you to take unto yourself, and also place on me, the burden of Step’s soul. He acted, as I did, from enthusiasm but not from wisdom. He struck when it was not necessary, and brought pain where it was not needed. He knows this well, and wishes to atone.”

Morningstar effects a *personal darkness* for her own part in the ritual, but follows this immediately by activating the *daylight* power of her holy shield. This moment is not about her, after all. Step’s body is rimmed with light, his armor gleaming. “Ell, I ask you to help me take up this burden, to restore the balance that is needed, between darkness and light, between daylight and night.”

Both clerics feel the chill of life-force lost, and the sins of Step being lifted away. Then Dranko speaks. “Life is a path toward the sunrise. Stay out of the shadows. Not the darkness – the shadows.”

“Well do I know the difference,” says Step, and as he speaks, his sins are cleansed, and the *atonement* is complete.



The Company feast upon a fine breakfast (prepared by Ernie, of course). As they eat, Kibi looks up at Dranko and catches the half-orc’s eye. “Dranko... I’m... I’m sorry that I made you mad. It’s hard, I know, not to speak out to a nasty evil demon lord like that. I know you’re brave, and I know you’re not stupid. I shouldn’t have said what I did, and I’m sorry.”

Dranko finishes chewing and looks straight and hard at Kibi. “You need to understand,” he says. “You don’t bargain with that sort of evil. Nor do you get down and lick its boots. He asked a question, and I gave him an answer. He didn’t like the answer, so he turned me into something that would kill me. I was ready to die for that. You don’t, however, get to claim that I was ‘stupid.’ I don’t think you have the moral authority to make that sort of judgment. Not on me. If you wouldn’t give *your* life for that, that’s your choice.” Dranko realizes that everyone is listening to him now. He speaks broadly to the Company. “You don’t *bargain* with a being like that. If you give in, if you make deals for the little things, then it knows it can make you bargain for the more important things. You should have let me die, if that’s what it took, or you should have called his bluff. He knew that if I had died, you never would have agreed to help him. But if I’m wrong, if that wasn’t the case... so, I die. If it thwarts something like that, it’s worth it.”

Flicker takes exception. “But, Dranko, from our point of view, it was *Tapheon* who wasn’t worth it. Your life’s more important than any dealings with demons.”

“I still think Dranko gave a legitimate answer to Tapheon’s question,” says Aravis.

“Sure!” agrees Flicker. Then, to Dranko: “And so some demon guy got all pissy, and we gave up some useless junk to soothe his ego. Who cares? He’s still a jerk, and you’re still alive!”

Dranko turns to Kibi again. “I’m more upset that you... no, you apologized, and that should be the end of it. Maybe you understand, and maybe you don’t.”

“I doubt I do,” says Kibi. “But I do understand that I shouldn’t make moral judgments about your decisions. And that you have your own code you live by, that’s very important to you.”

Dranko nods and grunts. The discussion is over. “Let’s move,” he says, standing and stretching.

"Where are we going?" asks Flicker.

"I think there's a little town down that way. By the time we get there, it'll be time for lunch."

❧ ☽

There's some debate about going in disguise, but there's a general feeling that it would be nice to trust people for a change, and besides, it's not as if they can sneak up on the Lord of the Roses. Surely he knows they're coming. The Company pack up and head down the hill toward the straggle of smoke that rises from a distant valley.

As they walk, they speak at length about what they learned from Tapheon, and again about such arcane topics as the "interstitial matrix," and the relationship between wild magic and the Far Realms. There's general agreement that the encroachment into the Abyss must have been why the Black Circle wanted to destroy the Hets. In Tapheon's own words, "it is always bad news for people on the Primes to open permanent ways to the Lower Planes."

The party come across the source of the smoke sooner than they expect. Not more than an hour has passed before they are looking down another hill into a picturesque valley, with small, well tended fields, clear green pastures, and a single farmhouse with a nearby barn. There is no town, only the one farm, and the smoke rises from the farmhouse chimney.

A lone farmer works in a field not far from the house. As a group they walk down the hill towards him. "Hello!" shouts Morningstar, when they figure he's close enough to hear them. The farmer looks up, sees them, and goes stock still. He drops his hoe. Dranko smiles and waves. The man shakes his head as if to clear it, gives a small wave in return, then turns his head and shouts something over his shoulder. Kibi activates his *ioun stone of tongues*.

The Company don't want to tromp across the man's crops, but they get as close as they can. The farmer just stands there, turning in place to track them and looking deeply concerned, or at least puzzled. "Hello!" says Kibi, standing about twenty feet from the farmer. The man reaches down slowly to pick up his hoe, but doesn't take his eyes off these well-armed strangers. He's an older man, probably well into his sixties.

"Have you seen anyone else pass through here?" asks Kibi. "It looks like you're not used to seeing strangers."

In a slow drawling voice, the farmer says, "What're y' doin' here, eh?"

"Just passing through," says Kibi, now translating for the others. "We're wondering where the next Way is."

The farmer looks as though he's trying to solve an impossible riddle. At last he answers. "Passing through? But... this is heaven. Are you dead?"

Kibi thinks long and hard about how to answer. "Have you been here a long time?" he asks finally, evading the farmer's question.

"It's kinda hard t' gauge th' passin' of th' years," says the farmer. "I'd say maybe ten'r fifteen, since Trin and I passed away."

"So, you died and ended up here?" asks Kibi. "How did you die?"

"We jus' assumed we passed in'r sleep," says the man, idly scratching his head.

In a small voice, and unable to help himself, Kibi asks, "So... how do you know this is heaven?"

The farmer seems undisturbed by the question. "What *else* could it be?" he says smiling. "It's just me and m' wife here on the farm."

"Have you seen any angels, or holy beings?" asks Kibi.

"Can't say that a'have," says the farmer, amused. "F'ya don't mind m' askin', how'd you all get here?"

"Have you seen the shimmering blue things?" asks Kibi.

"Yeah. Temptations, they are. I'm not going through and losin' heaven, believe you me. Like m'wife says, even if they take y' somewhere else, what's better'n here?"

"I'm staying," says Dranko, smiling widely for the first time in a while.

"I see your point," says Kibi. "This is... really nice."

"You speak th' language, but yer friends don't," observes the farmer. "Don't mind m'askin', but you ain't human. What are ya? And are ya hungry?"

"We just ate a big breakfast, but thanks," says Kibi. "And I'm a dwarf."

"Well, y're kinda short. And why're you here in heaven?" asks the farmer. "I figgered, since it was only us, everyone must have their own heaven, right? But you ended up in ours!"

"We're able to pass through from one heaven to another," says Kibi. "But some of them aren't heavens at all. They're bad places."

"You mean hell?" asks the farmer with a knowing nod.

"Yeah," says Kibi.

The farmer looks awed. "You've been through hell, and now yer in heaven. What kind of critters are ya, who can travel like that?"

"Ones who aren't as fortunate as you. We haven't found our peace yet."

"We're testing our will by going through the temptations," says Aravis, while Kibi translates.

"So you came from yer own heaven, and yers had those blue things too, and you went through 'em? I don't think you outta have done that. How do you know you can get back? You mighta just failed!"

"Ours is not a good fate, forever wandering, but we're hoping to finish our quest and find peace," says Kibi. "Can you tell us, where is the next blue doorway?"

"Sure can," he says, pointing. "It's a few miles that way. Through some woods, then across the stream. It's up on another hill-top."

"Is there anything we can do for you? Anything you need?" asks Kibi.

"Oh, we have everything we need. We have each other. Maybe it's *you* who outta be askin' what we can do for *you*. But I think the only answer to that is to pray, isn't it. I'm sorry, I really am. While you're here you're welcome to everything we have. Food. Place to stay. Warm fire. Stay in the barn if you want."

"That's very kind, but we shouldn't dawdle," says Kibi. "Thanks for your kindness."

An old woman has come to the door of the farmhouse and is just staring at them confusedly. "I think we're disturbing them," whispers Ernie. "We should go. And if we fix all this, they'll end up back here. But it'll still be where they're happy, and I think this will be their heaven after all, in the end."

"Peace be with you," he says to the farmer, bowing.

"Well, may Shayle bless you, and may he bring you a bounty and a happiness like he's brought me and Trinia. Mind you don't step on the crops on your way."

As the Company climb up the other side of the valley, Ernie turns to see the old couple holding hands, standing and watching them go. He waves back and smiles.

Ashy: Excellent update, Sagiro – just goes to show us that not every awesome update is filled with verbal fencing with demons or chaos critters gettin' their rumps roasted...

carpedavid: Hmm. These people were nice to the party. They're obviously evil.

Graywolf-ELM: Or they will be dead soon. Somehow either of those seems to happen.

Nathez: This is in no way criticism – more like fascination at a moral doubt. Did any of Abernathy's Company consider that by solving the problem of the Slices... they'd, in a way, be robbing this old couple of their heaven? ... Would the old couple still have faith, if they discovered what they'd thought for so long to be heaven was... a mistake, a failed experiment, and not heaven? Someone asked, "Imagine you could make a perfect world. A world without sorrow, hunger, pain. But imagine all this cost the life of a joyous, beautiful little child. Would it be worth it?"

I don't know, maybe it's a silly question...

Piratcat: We sure did. But they'll still have each other, and they'll still have the farm, and the month or two in which they'll have trouble adjusting isn't worth the misery being inflicted on everyone else. Remember that baby back in Green Valley, the sixteen-year-old stuck in the six-month-old's body?

All things considered, I think we're better off trying to set things right. But we did have some regrets about these folks. The regret was only tempered by the meta-knowledge that since they were kind to us, they would inevitably turn out to be eeevil.

MavrickWeirdo: Or when the situation ends, their age may catch up with them, at which point they die and go to heaven. They may not even notice the difference.

Sagiro: I'd like to think that something like that happens to them. Not necessarily that age catches up to them all at once, but that they end up living out the rest of their years, and then, like you say, have a smooth segue to the afterlife. Not every sympathetic NPC in my world is evil or comes to a bad end.

Dream a Little Dream

For the remainder of the day the Company wander across a charming landscape, past wide meadows of wildflowers and through small deciduous forests teeming with birds and squirrels. Morningstar comments offhandedly that maybe the Lord of the Roses has set up individual heavens for people, and that's why he is reluctant for the Slices to be broken apart. No one really believes that, though, not even Morningstar.

As the oversized sun starts to set they spot the expected glimmer of blue light on a barren hilltop. A close investigation suggests that nothing has gone through this Way, in either direction, for a long, long time, if ever. Dranko volunteers to be the scout; he ties the rope around his waist and jumps through.

Fade: What's the group calling itself these days? You were Abernathy's Company, then briefly Ozilinsh's Company I believe, but since neither Abernathy or Ozilinsh ever existed what name do you use? Are you just The Company?

KidCthulhu: We're really just The Company now. We were Ozilinsh's Company, but when Aravis sucked the Archmagi-ness out of the Archmagi we kind of went off on our own. We still report to the Spire, of course. When we're in the same time line as they are...

His first sensation (upon arrival) is that he's floating, but not falling. In the distance he hears the faint sounds of a great battle, swords clanking and voices shouting battle-cries. Around him swirls a thick mist, but almost immediately an image starts to coalesce in front of him. The image becomes solid. It's a row of close-set vertical bars like those of a prison cell.

A human face appears at the bars, hands grab them, and the man shouts at Dranko: "Let me out!" Before Dranko can respond, the others pull him back.

"Well, that's unusual," he says, before describing his experience to the others. When he finishes, he realizes that there was something familiar about that place. And it comes to him: it felt like *Ava Dormo*! That obviously intrigues Morningstar, enough so that she wants to scout it out herself. Dranko ties the rope around her waist, and in she goes.

Her experience is slightly different than Dranko's. Like him she finds herself floating in mist, but it's much less thick (or maybe she just has an easier time seeing through it). It feels like *Ava Dormo*, but sharper, more intense than normal. The sound of distant battle rings clearly from somewhere out of sight.

A small child looms in the mist and walks by, a handful of balloons dragging behind him. The child notices Morningstar and smiles at her. "Hello!" says the child.

"Hello," replies Morningstar, nodding.

"You're not part of my dream," says the child solemnly.

"No," agrees Morningstar. "I'm part of my own dream."

"Would you like a balloon?" asks the child.

"Sure," answers Morningstar. And taking the balloon, she thanks him.

"You're welcome... no! Wait! Don't wake me up yet!"

The child vanishes. His balloons start to fade almost immediately, including the one Morningstar is holding. Instinctively she concentrates on it, willing it to stay solid. Such a manipulation of the Dream is easy for her, and the feeling of manifesting that power has a kind of clarity in her mind that *Ava Dormo* usually lacks.

Another image swims in front of her. It's a being like a huge praying mantis, larger than a person. It looks as though it's slapping at an invisible enclosure, like a mime. Before she can address it, the others pull her out.

"I wonder if that's a slice of Dream," she muses, after describing her experience to the others. And if that were true, then she was in *Ava Dormo* in her actual, waking body! "Let's go back!" she says excitedly.

"We'll have to cross it one way or another," says Grey Wolf, shrugging his shoulders.

But the general consensus is that the trip will better wait until the next morning. They make camp and Ernie prepares dinner. Over a relaxing meal, talk turns to light topics like planar theory and the makeup of the cosmos. Aravis tries to remember anything he learned about *Ava Dormo* in his apprenticeship, but only recalls the general prevailing theory that it's one of the Coterminous Planes, similar to the Astral and Ethereal. There are obvious differences, of course, such as how one gets there...

Dranko lies on his back looking up at the stars, listening to Aravis dredge up memories. During a lull, he says, "Remember back at the Eye of the Storm, when Medina said the stars were really giant balls of flaming gas? What kind of crap was that, anyhow?"

"I thought it was a fascinating theory," says Morningstar, lying next to him and holding his hand.

"Yeah, if you want to make up stupid stuff," guffaws Dranko.

"It's as possible as anything else," says Morningstar patiently.

"No it's not!" pipes up Flicker. "Look at how tiny they are!"

"When we're flying high up," says Morningstar, "and you look down at demons, they look really small, right?"

"Yeah, but..." says Flicker lamely, "...er, how big are we talking here? And how far away?"

"Pretty far," says Morningstar.

Flicker does some quick mental calculations and voices his conclusion: "There isn't that far!"

"Wait a minute," says Aravis. "If the stars are giant balls of gas very far away, and this Slice is only a few miles on a side, how do we see stars at all? Or suns, for that matter?"

That's a head-scratcher and no mistake. One by one the Company fall asleep pondering that mystery, most just chalking it up to the wonders of wild magic. The only sounds as they sleep are the chirping of crickets and the rustle of a night breeze. It sure beats demons.



The next morning it's *owl's wisdoms* for everyone, in anticipation of going into *Ava Dormo*. A typical battery of buffs follows, and without further ado the Company hop through the Way.

They find themselves standing on cobblestone pavement, stretching away into the mists as far as they can see in every direction. Architecturally impossible buildings are scattered haphazardly around them. Flitting around and through the buildings are glimpses of creatures, though none with enough substance or duration to observe with any satisfaction. "I've been in a city in a bottle, and I've been in the Abyss, and I've been in someone else's dreams," says Dranko. "And my grandfather said I'd never amount to anything."

Everyone hears the faint sounds of a great battle, maybe a quarter mile off. A large pit opens up almost directly in front of them, and from its depths they hear a voice calling, "Help! Help!" (No one is sure of the language, but everyone can understand it.) Peering down into the pit they see a small goblinoid creature with green skin and wild eyes. Its fingers scrabble uselessly on the walls. It notices the faces looking down upon it, and cries, "I can't get out! I've been stuck down here for so long!"

"You just appeared, just now," says Ernie confusedly.

"You're dreaming," says Morningstar.

"No, you don't understand!" shouts the goblin. "I've been..."

"You're dreaming," repeats Morningstar firmly. "Wake up!"

"You mean I..." says the goblin, and then it disappears.

"If anyone attacks me, I know what I'm telling 'em," says Dranko. He starts to say more, but stops when he sees the rest of the party staring upward.

A small globe of yellow light glides downward toward them, and from it speaks a pleasant voice of indeterminate gender.

"What's going on here?" exclaims the voice. "Who is... oh! Excuse me!" The ball of light extends and grows into a glowing humanoid shape. It turns to Morningstar and bows low. "We don't get solid visitors very often," it says.

"What are you?" asks Dranko.

"I am Dream Essence," it answers. "And you, you are waking people! You must be very far from home. How did you get here?"

Dranko points to the blue Way behind them. "That's a portal to the waking world," he says.

"I sometimes visit *Ava Dormo* from there, back in my own world," says Morningstar.

"Of course you do," says the Dream Essence. "You're a Dreamwalker. I can see that."

"And you are the essence of dream?" asks Morningstar.

"I'm one of them," it replies.

"Are you a good dream, or a bad dream?" asks Ernie.

Dawn: À la *The Wizard of Oz!* I've been following this Story Hour since many moons ago and I just can't help but be constantly amazed at the vastness of this world! So many things to encounter and so many different things to interact with.

"Both, I suppose," it answers. "It is out of my essence that all dreams are spun."

"Tell me," asks Dranko, "is there another one of these blue portals, elsewhere in Dream?"

"Yes, there is." The Dream Essence points into the mist.

"Would you lead us there?" asks Morningstar.

"I'd be honored," it answers.

Kibi asks, "What is that sound of battle that we hear?"

"That is what we do in this part of the Dream," says the Essence. "Here is where there are dreams of battles fought. Exultations of battles won. Nightmares of battles lost. Would you like to take part?"

"Is it dangerous for my companions?" asks Morningstar.

"It might be," concedes the Essence.

"I don't think it's worth it, then," says Aravis, and the others are inclined to agree.

A hallway appears. A halfling-sized creature is running through it frantically, bouncing off the walls as if he's looking desperately for something. He doesn't see the party, though he passes quite close before fading away into the mists. "Where are these minds coming from?" asks Morningstar. "Is there a waking world associated with this part of the Dream?"

"There must be," says the Essence, "but there shouldn't be. We are in a part of the Dreaming far from any waking minds. We are far adrift. We are where dream battles are fought. But yes, there are minds ending up here, though we don't know where they come from."

"There has been a terrible experiment that has scrambled many planes," says Morningstar.

"Perhaps that is why no new combatants have come for so long," says the Essence.

"The minds you see here," says Morningstar. "Are they the same minds, over and over?"

"There are some we see recurring, but there is a constant influx of new dreamers. There is a common theme among the dreams of these dreamers, though. They are all trapped, and wish to get out, but out of what, I don't know."

"They're the dreams of all the people who are trapped in Het Branoi," says Dranko, and the others nod in agreement.

"People have been trapped in small bits of their waking worlds, some of them for many years," explains Morningstar.

"And this is where they come to dream," says Aravis. "It may be the only part of Dream they can find."

"Do you see many creatures that look like large spiders?" asks Morningstar curiously, thinking of the Vree. The Essence nods.

"I'll bet the Vree have been dreaming a lot about tentacles recently," says Dranko.

"How did you know?" asks the Essence.

"We were there for the incident that caused them to have those dreams," says Dranko with a shudder.

"Whatever is happening, you should stop it," says the Essence. "It's not the way things should work here."

"If we succeed, it should restore your bit of Dream to the whole," says Dranko. "You'll get new dreamers again."

"If I go into the Dream connected to my Prime, and traveled far enough, would I reach here?" asks Morningstar, growing more intrigued all the time.

"You would have to travel a very, very long way," says the Essence. "I don't understand the waking world very well. I believe there are places you can go that are very far from your... Prime. Out in misty reaches where nothing is real and solid. Even those places have a dreaming, and this is one of those places."

"Do you ever see Dreamwalkers?" asks Morningstar.

"From time to time, they do travel far enough, and we see them here. Once in a century, maybe."

“Are they Ellish?” asks Morningstar.

“Ellish? None that I have seen,” says the Essence.

“Any in red armor?” asks Ernie.

“There was a group of dreamers from some battle, and they were wearing red armor,” says the Essence. “They were shorter than you, of a race that called themselves ‘kobolds.’ They wore reddish leather armor, that they painted with the blood of their enemies.” In other words, no.

“So, your role is to create the battles that the dreamers come to fight?” asks Morningstar.

“When people are in battles, their dreams are very strong, and echoes of those dreams come here. We are like a magnet.”

Morningstar describes the battle that she and her fellow Dreamwalkers fought against Octesian, and asks the Essence if it sounds familiar.

“Yes, I’ve seen one like that,” the Essence replies. “It still goes on, in another part of the Dreaming. That battle made a strong impression on many dreamers.”

“Let’s go find Octesian and kick his butt again!” says Ernie.

“The Dream you talk about, and the events that created it, are long over,” says the Essence. “But I will take you there, if you wish.”

The Company follow the Dream Essence, trying to will themselves forward to go faster. They have differing success, though it’s clearly (and unsurprisingly) Flicker and Snokas who slow them down. “Think faster!” urges Morningstar.

Eventually a battle comes into view, but it’s not their battle. As they look down upon it from a high vantage point, it resembles a contest between an army of giants and an army of huge fireflies. The giants are firing stones from enormous catapults, and the projectiles are blinking in and out. The fireflies attack with energy rays as they fly above the giants.

“Those are dreams, not dreamers,” clarifies the Essence. “As I said, we usually don’t see dreamers here; just the echoes of dreams of war. The terrain here is the terrain of many battles, that people have dreamed on which they fought.”

“So this is history... a record of battles,” says Morningstar. “Which means that somewhere is a record of every battle that has been fought. We could use this place to research a battle fought a long time ago.”

“Yes,” agrees the Essence. “If you could find the battle you wanted, you could watch it unfold, from the collective dreams of the beings involved.”

They continue to travel, led by the Dream Essence, toward the exiting Way, stopping only to wake up some trapped dreamers. Most of the dreams are similar – beings of all different races, trapped in prisons from which they cannot escape. The sounds of battles never go away.

“Is there a Dream Essence in my part of *Ava Dormo*?” asks Morningstar as they travel. “Like you?”

“It would not have consciousness, but it’s there. It has to be.”

“Do you have a unique identity? A name?” asks Dranko. The Essence shakes its head.

“Well, thank you for all your help,” says Morningstar.

“It is my honor,” says the Essence.



They reach the Way after some mentally draining hours. Before them is a glowing door, all too familiar. Aravis volunteers to be the scout and wills himself through.

After the black void, he finds himself standing in what was probably a library. There are stacks, desks, and shelves, but they have been emptied of their books and scrolls. Only a few scraps of paper remain. The walls are of the blue-diamond pattern that they’ve seen three times before – the bedroom, cloakroom and storage room. Torches imbued with *continual flame* shine from wall brackets.

Behind him is the blue Way through which he came, and about sixty feet away, straight ahead of him down a wide aisle, is a second Way. It’s not blue, and it’s not gray. It glows a deep red, the color of a rose in full flower.

Piratecat: Things are about to get interesting. Er. Interestinger. More interesting. Whatever.

Unfortunate mistake #1: We distrusted everything Lord Tapheon said so much, that we didn't go in there armed for bear the way we should have.

Enkhidu: ...a.k.a. "The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend."

Softwind: Or should that be, "The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my fiend?"

KidCthulhu: Yeah, who knew Sagiro would sic a bear on us.

Delemental: So, are you saying that the Company is about to meet a grizzly fate?

RangerWickett: Stop with the puns. I can't bear them.

el-remmen: Well, if there is some kind of major carnage coming up I would sure like some kind of indication that it is coming, but not a spoiler, just some kind of primitive gesture, some kind of ur-sign...

blargney the second: Does the Lord of Roses live in the Pandamonic Wastes or something?

QR 80

Lord of the Roses

Aravis spends minimal time observing the red Way. He steps back into the blue Way and returns to the Slice of *Ava Dormo*. After a brief consultation he goes back with Morningstar, to stand guard while she drops a few *thought captures*.

Once in the library Morningstar first casts *detect thoughts*, but there are no minds other than Aravis's and her own. While Aravis stays back, Morningstar slowly walks down the aisle toward the glowing red portal. Her eyes stray to the empty shelves, which are coated with dust and give the room a desolate aura. Between and behind them she sees the blue-diamond walls.

When she is only twenty feet from the Way, she is startled by a woman who steps silently out from behind the last shelf on the left. The woman is dressed like a simple commoner, in a plain peasant skirt and blouse, but Morningstar's attention is drawn immediately to her eyes – or the lack thereof. There are bulging rubies protruding from the woman's eye sockets, though they seem to be causing her no discomfort. The formation of the crystals reminds both Aravis and Morningstar of the huge lizard inhabited by the Purple Eye, and the skeleton possessed by the Green.

"Where is Kibilhathur Bimson?" asks the woman, as Aravis hurries up. Her voice is an earnest monotone. With a start, Morningstar realizes that she's not detecting any thoughts from the peasant.

"He will be here soon," says Aravis.

"Bring him," says the peasant woman. "Please bring Kibilhathur Bimson. My lord wishes it." There's something disturbing about the way she pronounces Kibi's name. It's not menacing, or threatening, but somehow she conveys eagerness without raising her voice.

"Will you tell me your lord's purpose?" asks Morningstar.

"Please bring Kibilhathur Bimson," says the woman. It's not entirely certain she heard the question.

"Why do you need him?" asks Aravis.

"I do not need him," says the woman, her expression flat.

"Why does your *lord* need him?" asks Morningstar patiently.

"He has not shared that with me. Please bring Kibilhathur Bimson."

"Yes, I hear you," says Morningstar with a sigh. "I understand you."

"Please bring Kibilhathur Bimson immediately," repeats the woman.

"We will go and tell him," promises Morningstar, and before the woman can present her demand a sixth time, she and Aravis walk back down the library aisle and through the blue Way. They share this new development with the others.

"Eyes," says Kibi, addressing Scree, "If you have any advice, this would be a good time."

Nothing, says Scree. *They'll talk if they feel like it.*

Kibi tries a more direct approach. He reaches into his familiar and pulls out the two Eyes of Moirel, gripping one in each hand. He feels a shiver run through his body, as if the Eyes are vibrating slightly, but they remain silent. "I can tell you're agitated," says Kibi to the Eyes. "So are we. Any information you have about what we're up against would be greatly appreciated."

They still don't answer, but Grey Wolf mutters, "I really don't want to hear that the Eyes are 'agitated.'"

"It probably means they sense they're close to another Eye," speculates Aravis.

Without warning, Dranko hops through the Way. He sees the same library hallway, and the woman standing in front of the red Way at the far end. Immediately he hops back. "Just wanted to make sure there weren't five undead hydras waiting for us this time," he explains.

The Company spend a few final minutes reviewing the Solfar transcriptions of the Mad Sculptor before casting some preparatory spells and, with the sounds of dream-battles still echoing behind them, hopping en masse through the Way.

The woman is still there, standing patiently. "I have brought Kibilhathur Bimson to you!" Morningstar calls to her.

Kibi himself feels tingly now, and Scree reports the Eyes are vibrating more quickly. Morningstar puts a hand on the dwarf's shoulder and can actually *feel* the slight tremor in his body. Of course, everyone then wants to find out what that feels like.

"Wow!" exclaims Dranko, his hand on Kibi's head. "He really *is* tingly!"

Flicker reaches for the beard, which is when Kibi decides he's had enough. "Hey! Hands off the beard!" exclaims the dwarf.

"Yeah," says Aravis. "Didn't you read the words of the Sculptor? He's touchy about the beard."

"Wow," says Flicker. "Those Black Circle guys really know what they're talking about!"

Morningstar turns to One Certain Step and asks solemnly, "Step, are you ready?"

"Yes," answers the paladin. "I don't yet understand what my role will be, but yes, I am. Thank you."

Dranko puts an arm on Snokas's shoulder and with mock seriousness asks, "Snokas, are you ready?"

Snokas gives a snorting laugh. "Yep. I never understand *anything*, but that's never stopped me before." Step smiles.

Ernie casts *true seeing* but notes nothing different except Kibi himself. The dwarf looks blurry to Ernie, and ambient magic in the air is being drawn into and through his body.

The Company approach the peasant woman with the ruby eyes. "What are your Lord's intentions toward us?" asks Kibi.

"Kibilhathur Bimson," says the woman. Her eyes glow just a bit more brightly. "Come through."

"Will we be harmed?" asks Kibi suspiciously.

"No. But your friends must wait here. My Lord wants Kibilhathur Bimson only."

"I would prefer to have my friends with me," says Kibi.

"Only Kibilhathur Bimson," insists the woman.

"And if I refuse?" asks Kibi.

"You must come alone," says the woman, avoiding the question.

No way, says Scree to Kibi. *Nuh uh. No. Forget it.*

"What's your name?" asks Kibi, buying some time to think.

"My name is no longer important. Kibilhathur Bimson, you must come alone."

"What's with the freakish eyes?" asks Dranko.

"You are not relevant," answers the woman, though her head still points at Kibi. "My Lord wants Kibilhathur Bimson."

"If you want him, you'll have to come through me," Dranko growls.

"We mean no harm to you, but I want to stay with my friends," says Kibi.

"Very well." The woman stands to the side, seemingly conceding the point.

Of course, the Company suspect treachery, and so decide to send in a scouting force that does *not* include Kibilhathur Bimson. Dranko, Ernie, Aravis, Flicker and Step go into the red Way.

There's the typical second or two of blackness, as they feel themselves getting sucked toward their destination. But there's a new sensation that follows, as if they have been shunted to the side and then turned around. A second after that they find themselves emerging from the same Way as they entered, into the library.

"That was quick," says Kibi.

"We never got there," says Dranko. "We went forward, but then got sidetracked, turned around, paddled on the behind, and sent back here."

"I'm not going to go meet the Lord of the Roses if I can't bring my friends with me," says Kibi to the woman.

Scree stirs, and his voice sounds deep and powerful in Kibi's mind, a sure sign that one of the Eyes of Moirel is addressing him:

IF WE GO THROUGH, WE WILL FIX THINGS FOR THE OTHERS.

Thinking they understand what this means, a new group go through the Way, including Kibi. The dwarf goes through with Morningstar, Aravis, Ernie and Step, all of them holding hands so that Kibi doesn't get "filtered" by the journey between Slices.

They feel the pulling, and all of them but Kibi feel the sideways wrenching experienced by the last group. Despite their best efforts all of their hands are forcefully separated, and there is a moment of panic, but then there is a second lurching course-correction, and all five of them are deposited into a large room that is not the library.

Kibi notes first, with relief, that his friends are by his side. They stand at one end of a long, sumptuously opulent audience chamber. The floors and walls are of a white marble veined with streaks of ruby, and mounted on the walls are a number of decorative swords and shields. On one of the side walls, near the far end of the room, are a pair of huge wooden doors, closed, with polished brass handles. Directly above their heads the ceiling is only ten feet high, but that's because they're standing under some kind of overhang; were they to take a few steps forward into the chamber, the vaulted ceiling would rise above them almost a hundred feet, supported by huge marble pillars.

At the far end of the audience chamber are wide steps leading up to a long dais. A humanoid figure stands there, glowing with a white light that makes it impossible to see him or her as anything more than a blurry silhouette. The figure holds a staff, and the white glow extends along its length, becoming a bright red at its tip. Ernie, squinting with *true seeing*, can tell that the magic of the staff is the same sort that flows through Kibi, only much, much stronger.

Curled around the humanoid's feet is a huge bronze-colored snake, twenty feet long at least and glinting in the light of the humanoid figure. There is one other person in the room – a second peasant woman sits at a wooden table in a far corner of the chamber. She is hooded and hunched over, her face hidden. Ernie can tell there are spells upon her, but not anything specific about them.

Kibi feels his whole body hum with power. *How are you feeling, Scree?* he thinks to his familiar.

Something is happening to the Eyes, says Scree nervously. I can't tell what.

The glowing figure picks his way around the coils of the copper snake. At the bottom of the stairs it takes a step toward them, then stops, lurching unsteadily. Scree's body starts to roil.

The second half of the Company arrive through the Way, in time to hear Ernie speak. "Excuse me!" says Ernie. "Are you the Lord of the Roses?"

A voice sounds from the light, a male voice. It is tinny, as if coming from far away.

"SCREE!" says the figure. **"COME FORWARD, SCREE! BRING ME THE..."**

His voice cuts off as if he's choking, and Scree erupts into redness. For just a second it seems as if all of Scree's component rocks have either become, or been replaced by, bright rubies. But then they are partially replaced by a similar outbreak of bright green emeralds and deep purple amethysts. Within three seconds he has become a turbulent mass of red, purple and green gemstones. *I have nothing to do with this, says Scree to Kibi.*

The staff flies from the figure's hand, as if with a life of its own. It soars high toward the vaulted ceiling and hovers there, pointing down directly at Scree. With the staff removed from the white glow of its wielder, the Company can see that crystalline red flowers adorn its length, and that a bright red gemstone shines from its top.

With the departure of the staff, the glow also fades from the man who had been holding it. The Lord of the Roses' features are revealed, and the party stand agog. Surely they are being deceived.

It's Sagiro Emberleaf.

the Jester: HAW HAW HAW!!

Thornir Alekeg: Excuse me while I pick my jaw up off the floor. Absolutely brilliant!

RangerWickett: This, you see, is when Dorian mysteriously vanishes forever, leaving us to never learn the end of the story.

So, wow. How long did you hold off bringing him back? Six years? More? I will, as a fellow DM, of course assume that you'd planned for this to happen all along, and not that Sagiro has only returned because you knew we'd think it was cool. Though that excuse works too...

MavrickWeirdo: You recorded this moment, right? The group's reaction when you said those words must have been priceless.

KidCthulhu: Oh, it was classic. When Sagiro (the NPC, not the person) disappeared, we spent years joking that every bad guy we met was him. Then, when they weren't and the joke got old, we stopped doing it.

And only then did Sagiro (the Rat Bastard, not the NPC) bring him back.

Dumbfounded doesn't begin to describe it.

Dakkareth: Shame on me, but could someone enlighten me to the significance of that? It's been a long time since I read the early records of the Company...

Fade: Refresh my memory about Sagiro? I'm getting him confused with Parthol.

MavrickWeirdo: From the "Abernathy's Company, Dramatis Personae":

Sagiro Emberleaf, a.k.a. "the Weasel" – an apparent collector, known to be working with the Sharshun; deceased?

It's not Sagiro's (the DM's) fault that the party decided not to "travel to nowhere" after Sagiro (the Weasel) till now.

Kid Charlemagne: He's one of the party's first nemeses – I think he was probably the first one who established the "polite = enemy" pattern that is often remarked on. Looking back at the old logs, he first showed up in session number 3, I think. He was believed killed, but his body was never found...

Sagiro (the DM): Sagiro "the Weasel" Emberleaf was first seen in Tal Hae, an apparent mercenary who hired on to help protect the same merchant wagon as the Company, on a trip from Tal Hae to Calnis. It was later learned that the merchant hired the Company at the *urging* of Sagiro; for some reason, the mustachioed one wanted to get to know Abernathy's gang. As Kid Charlemagne said, that was run #3.

In the first series of adventures, Sagiro was an off-screen figure of great annoyance. The Company were sent by Abernathy to procure a cursed magic item, only to find that Sagiro had already been there and bought it first. When the Company were then sent to retrieve the *Matun Essendi*, they had to fight off some competing thieves who they later learned were working for Sagiro.

The Weasel next turned up at the Mirrors of Semek, where the Company had been sent to observe "Flashing Day." That was the day a Sharshun vanished in the center of the Mirrors while holding an Eye of Moirel. The Company suspected Sagiro of being involved, but couldn't prove anything. That was run #14.

The Company's next meeting with Sagiro was at the auction in Minok, where an Eye of Moirel was up for bidding. Sagiro was in the auction house, though he didn't actually bid on the Eye. After the auction, the Company helped Sarai (who had won the Eye fair and square) fight off some attackers who included one of the other bidders. When that bidder was questioned, he admitted to the party that he was working for Sagiro and the Sharshun. That was run #29.

Finally, about a year into their adventuring career, the Company were sent to Longtooth Keep to secure yet another Eye of Moirel (that turned out to be the green one). Sagiro showed up and attempted to steal it, but in the ensuing battle he was knocked off a steep mountainside by a *lightning bolt*. His body fell into a raging river far below, and that was the last the Company saw of him, until he showed up as the Lord of the Roses.

In real time, Sagiro fell off the cliff in 1997 (run #43), and wasn't seen again until 2004 (run #169). His re-emergence in Het Branoi was long planned, and a tough secret to keep for so many years.

Enkhidu: What's the chance of you piping that taped session into an mp3 so that we might hear the shock and awe at the table after that little revelation?

Redwald: Bravo, Sagiro. Had I been one of your players, I no doubt would have goaded you into bringing him back – or so I'd have thought – by calling the site of Sagiro (Emberleaf)'s disappearance "Reichenbach Falls."

Zustiur: There had better be a damned good explanation of how the Weasel survived falling off a cliff, and how he managed to be transported into an alternate time line, *and* how he got into Het Branoi. I wouldn't be surprised if the first is tied to the second.

Kid Charlemagne: Going back through the PDFs, I find this interesting bit from the Eyes of Moirel, speaking through Eddings:

HE IS IN THE HOUSE OF HET BRANOI, BEYOND THE GATE OF FIRE, AND HE CANNOT RETURN ON HIS OWN. THE CANARY HAS ENTRAPPED THE CAT. RETURN HIM TO US, SO YOU MIGHT WALK IN THE FOOTPRINTS OF MOIREL.

The "he" appears to refer to a third Eye of Moirel. I'm guessing the "canary" is the Eye as well, and that the "cat" refers to Sagiro. He cannot return on his own – because of the nature of the Slices. The "Gate of Fire" could refer to the red gate that leads to the Lord of the Roses.

Jackylhunter: Wow, great find, Kid! Sagiro, had you created the layout of Het Branoi when you gave the party that tidbit? How long had Het Branoi been finished (in your head) before the party got to it? Was it something that you had to modify as the group got more powerful?

Sagiro: The Company had sussed the meaning of that already, and you're close, but not quite on the mark. "He" does refer to the third Eye of Moirel, as you guess. But the "canary" refers to the Black Circle who built Het Branoi, and the "cat" is also the third Eye. (The idea being that the Eye is inherently more powerful than the Black Circle, but somehow the Black Circle had arranged to entrap and make use of the Eye.) The words of the Mad Sculptor back this up, as he refers to the Eye of Moirel as "my caged beast."

The "Gate of Fire" refers to the gartine arch in Delfir (home of the fire-god worshippers), through which the Company had to travel in order to get from Charagan to Kivia in the first place.

Now, what Sagiro is doing here, and as this "Lord of the Roses" character no less, is a separate (but highly related) mystery whose explanation will be made clear in the next few Story Hour posts.

Abstraction: The way I see it, Sagiro could have died when he went over the falls. History has been rewritten so none of that happened, now.

Kid Charlemagne: True, but Sagiro was also very involved with the folks who changed history, and which the Company kind of ignored after a certain point because they had other things they needed to focus on. And even if he did die, it's possible the Black Circle could have brought him back, though I don't see him as being important enough to warrant such consideration. My suspicion is that Sagiro Emberleaf is one of the very few who is aware of what has happened. I also suspect that there is a very good chance he is utterly insane at this point.

Piratecat: I can't tell you all the places that you're right, but there are a lot of them! Sagiro being here isn't anywhere near as far-fetched as you'd think it is... but that will become clear.

You're going to see something very interesting in the next few posts. You know how in a given fight, there's either some really brilliant tactic you can use, or you just totally miss the important point and your tactics make things a lot worse? Well, you're going to see *both* of those.

That rat bastard DM of ours...

shilsen: As the good book (LotR, of course) says, the praise of the praiseworthy is beyond all reward.

Graywolf-ELM: I had wondered a few times, after he disappeared, when he would return. Bravo.

Zaruthustran: Wow. Bravo. That one took me completely by surprise. I suspected the glowing figure would be Kibi and you'd have some weird splintered reality, "No, I'm the real Kibi!" thing going on.

Bringing back Sagiro is just way, way better. And yeah, please please post an mp3 of the Big Reveal and the table's reaction!

Cor Azer: No... I'm all caught up, after not having time to read this for months, and it has to hang at this point?!

Next update, please? With Ernie-baked goods on top?

Sagiro: I have neither the time nor the technology to make an mp3 available of the "big reveal," but it would probably disappoint most of you. There were a few seconds of "No way!" "You're kidding," etc., and Piratecat must have said "No..." about half a dozen times, but the players got right down to business after that, realizing that combat was imminent.

Some of your questions should be answered in this [next] installment. Not all, but some...

QR 80

False Bottom

His skin is covered with crusted patches of ruby, a red, glittering pox. His eye sockets are filled to bulging with bright red gemstone. Even his prized moustache is flecked with the stuff. He opens his mouth and speaks again, but whether the sound of his voice comes from him or the staff high above, no one can say for sure.

"**GET... GET MY PRIZES!**" he commands.

Dranko figures he must be addressing the peasant woman at the table, and figuring that combat is on the brink of breaking out, decides to push things over the edge. He uncurls his whip while striding toward her and lashes her with a well-aimed strike. But Sagiro has more allies in the room than just her and the copper snake. Four of the swords mounted on the wall are swept up in a sudden whirlwind, where the blades turn and flash in a spinning funnel of air. The whirlwind sweeps toward Aravis and the swords draw blood.

Sagiro himself draws a rapier as he charges the party, unconcerned with being outnumbered. Once the weapon is outstretched, red crystal races up his arm and grows over the blade. He thrusts at One Certain Step and the ruby-serrated weapon easily punctures the paladin's plate, to sink deep into his flesh. Step grimaces in pain.

"Hey!" shouts Ernie, up the hovering staff. "Red Eye! We're not your enemies! Someone else has been using you. We just want to set you free!" But just in case, he casts *shield* on himself.

Morningstar shouts, "Anyone who doesn't want a *blade barrier* in front of that snake, speak up now." No one objects and the air is soon filled with the familiar sound of whirling magical blades. The deadly wall has the huge copper snake trapped up on the dais. The snake rises up on its back half, metallic scales rasping on the marble floor, but it's not long enough. The creature moves restlessly back and forth and hisses menacingly, but decides not to test the blades.

Grey Wolf ignores *Bostock*'s pleas to wield it, and like Ernie casts *shield*. Snokas has no magical preparations to make; he positions himself between Sagiro and Kibi and swings his heavy pick with all the strength he can muster. There is a loud clink of metal on crystal and the pick is stopped dead. Snokas snorts in frustration.

The *blade barrier* vanishes, dispelled. A second later a small creature appears on the edge of the dais. It is a small, frail humanoid with an oversized head and six spindly arms. Like Sagiro and the peasant woman, its eyes are large rubies, and various other parts of its body are crusted over with gemstone. It becomes visible because it's in the act of casting a *sonic fireball* into the midst of the Company. **Wa-BOOM!**

Kibilhathur Bimson is experiencing something akin to a sixth sense. He can *feel* wild magic suffusing his being, leaving him saturated. He is keenly aware that near his feet a titanic battle is going on, with Scree as the battlefield. He toys with the notion of interfering with that struggle but realizes quickly that the magics there are far beyond his control or understanding. So instead, he replaces the absent *blade barrier* with a more enduring *wall of force*, trapping the snake and the six-armed creature on the other side of it. As he casts, the wild magic in the room surges through him, enhancing the spell and causing it to fire in under a second. With the extra time he *summons* a large earth elemental, and again the wild magic flares. The elemental appears, and then a second one beside it. Quite pleased with himself, Kibi commands that his elementals tie up the

man with the moustache. The two towers of elemental rock attempt to grapple Sagiro, but he dances, dodges, and manages to elude their stony grasp.

Flicker gulps and activates his *ring of blinking*, setting the world to flickering on and off. As before in Het Branoi he is not blinking in and out of the Ethereal Plane, but someplace more... No. He doesn't want to think about it. He moves toward the woman at the table while drawing his sword... and flinches as the hunched peasant woman at the table tosses back her hood, revealing that the entire top half of her head is a mass of red crystal. She casts *dimension door* and appears on the other side of the *wall of force*, standing next to the snake.

One Certain Step ignores the pain of Sagiro's attack and launches one himself, but as with Snokas, his sword is turned by the red crystal patches on the Weasel's body. He lands one feeble blow, and Sagiro sneers.

Aravis surveys the combat with the calm reason of a seasoned adventurer. Of the several targets to choose from, Sagiro is well surrounded by allies, and the peasant lady is now behind a *wall of force* with the snake. That leaves the small-six armed spellcaster and the all-too-close whirlwind of swords... and the staff. He decides to roll the dice, and they come up sixes. His *sonic fireball* soars into the air and detonates directly above the hovering staff tipped with the red Eye of Moirel. Kibi sees right away that the green and purple rocks gain a moment of majority in Scree's body, and next to Aravis the whirlwind of swords nearly flies apart, losing its cohesion. The staff itself flies higher, rising until it scrapes the ceiling of the audience chamber. Everyone takes note.

Dranko casts *prayer*, and Ernie casts *divine power*, while the whirlwind of swords gets itself under control and reforms. Sagiro faces One Certain Step, the only combatant to do him damage. Step is just noticing that the small wound he inflicted is starting to fill in with red crystal, when Sagiro launches another attack with the rapier. Step tries vainly to dodge and parry but Sagiro has too much strength and speed. The paladin's blood starts to pool on the marble floor.

Morningstar produces an acorn, casts *chill seeds*, and hurls the missile at the hovering staff. **BOOM!** The staff spins for a moment in place. The copper snake starts to thrash wildly, slamming itself repeatedly into the *wall of force*. The small six-armed creature also twitches violently, its arms waving in a fashion that would be comical if... oh, heck, yeah, it is comical.

Once again the Green and Purple Eyes gain a brief advantage in the battle against the Red. *Scree?* asks Kibi. *Does it help when we attack the staff?*

Only temporarily, if I'm understanding things correctly, says Scree. *The Red Eye seems remarkably resilient.*

Grey Wolf casts *true strike* and moves into position near Sagiro. Bostock speaks in his mind: *Yes. I am ready to strike!*

Snokas launches a flurry of pick attacks, all of which miss. In the back of his mind he starts to wonder why he bothers.

While the six-armed creature spends a few seconds composing itself and clearing its head, Kibi's elementals again try to pile on Sagiro. This time, though he wounds the first of the creatures to try it, the elementals manage to grapple Sagiro to the ground. He is essentially buried beneath a pile of living rock. Flicker darts into the rock-pile and stabs, but the blade catches on Sagiro's crystal body and nearly snaps before he yanks it back. Step takes the opportunity to back off and heal himself.

Kibi fires off an Empowered *lightning bolt* at the staff. Again the staff spins, and the woman behind the *wall of force* clutches her half-crystal head in pain and confusion.

Aravis casts *chain lightning*, though it targets only Sagiro, since no other combatant is close enough to take a secondary bolt. But while Sagiro might be pinned beneath earth elementals, he's still afforded a resistance to magics by his half-crystal body. Aravis's spell does no harm.

The same cannot be said for Dranko's whip. With plenty of time to line up his shots against the immobile Sagiro, he waits for his openings and cracks his whip. Two of the strikes are perfectly placed; chunks of crystal and flesh are torn from Sagiro's body, sending out sprays of blood. Sagiro squirms mightily and manages to break the pin of the elementals, but can't escape the grapple.

The whirlwind of swords, having gathered itself, erupts into a wide frenzy of flashing blades. Flicker leaps and dodges, but Step, Snokas and Kibi are caught in the blender. *Ouch!*

Ernie activates his *winged shield* and flies upward toward the Eye Staff. He can see that it's made of a crystal-rimed silver metal, with the Eye of Moirel glowing red at the top. It looks unharmed, despite the damage that's been done to it.

Morningstar drops an enormous columnar *flame strike* that straddles the *wall of force*. The snake and the crystal-headed woman are badly injured but not killed. The six-armed spellcaster isn't so lucky; it topples to the ground, frozen to death.

Grey Wolf swings *Bostock* at Sagiro, channeling a *fireball*. The *fireball* fails to penetrate Sagiro's spell resistance, but *Bostock* itself finds a patch of flesh between chunks of crystal and opens a new wound on Sagiro's body.

Above the general melee, Ernie watches as the Eye Staff swivels toward the red Way through which the Company arrived. As did the very first Way that left the party in Green Valley, this one grows quickly narrower, as if sliding into an invisible sleeve, and then vanishes. The only remaining way out of the room is the enormous pair of double doors on the side of the audience chamber, and now the staff turns toward those. From behind the doors is a flash of red light, and a giant armored bear bursts out, splintering the doors into fragments. Its eyes, as well as over half its body mass, are solid red crystal. It lets out a mighty roar.

Having had no luck with Sagiro, Snokas swings his picks into the whirlwind of swords, and is surprised to feel his weapons make contact with something. As for Sagiro, the earth elementals shift their bodies and manage to reestablish their rock-pile pin.

Ah, poor Sagiro. His – his? – off hand claws desperately, trying to free himself, but it's just too much weight, too much strength, too much stone. He can feel his lifeblood ebbing from the parts of him that are still flesh. The better part of his awareness – his soul? – feels like it's high above his body, engaged in other, more pressing matters. That awareness, he thinks fuzzily, isn't paying any attention to his body. If it was, it might realize the danger that it's in, but it fights its own battle. As he hears the sounds of spells crackling all around him, he laughs at a fleeting joke his mind makes. *An Eye for an Eye...*

The crystal-head woman casts *dimension door* again, bringing herself and the snake back into the battle. Kibi casts an ineffectual *coldfire* that does not damage either target. Aravis casts another *chain lightning*, which does no damage to the woman and seems to heal the snake. But it does do more damage to Sagiro, who twitches in pain.

Sagiro, bent backward by the elementals, sees through crystal eyes as his enemies crowd around him. Another joke comes to him: *rose-colored glasses*, he thinks. *You'd think things would look more optimistic...*

Flicker jams his short sword into Sagiro's side. Step slashes him with his bastard sword. Dranko winds up his whip, and through his crystal eyes Sagiro sees the weighted end flashing through the air toward him. Time slows down enough for him to think: *I never should have mocked his God...* The whip smashes the crystal in his left eye, and there is a last bright flash of pain, and then his soul, his horrible, torturing soul, lets him go.

For the Red Eye of Moirel, it all unravels after that. The staff starts to spin like a compass needle gone crazily awry, sending Ernie scooting away in alarm. On the ground, the Red Eye's minions fall apart. Literally. The bladed whirlwind gusts wildly and its swords are flung to the far corners of the room. The huge bear, summoned too late, thrashes in pain as crystal clumps shatter all over its body. Since almost half its body *was* that crystal, what's left cannot live. The metallic snake breaks into a number of disjoined segments. Most horrible of all is the peasant woman, who loses the entire top half of her head when her crusted rubies shatter and melt.

Ernie, emboldened by the developments on the ground, flies back to the staff and swings *Beryn Sur*. The conveyance of the Red Eye of Moirel flies across the room, strikes the wall, and falls with a clatter to the floor. So quickly is the battle ended that the Company stand for a few seconds in utter confusion. Did they win?

The elementals back away from Sagiro, who is rapidly bleeding to death. All over his body the red crystal is breaking away, leaving him covered with a hundred wounds. His lacerated eyes are revealed as their ruby casings flake away. They stare upward, unseeing. Dranko rushes forward to heal Sagiro before he can die, and by administering a number of curing spells, keeps his one-time foe from slipping away.

"You know what's really nice about this?" says Dranko, grimacing. "My healing leaves scars."

Indeed, Sagiro is now covered with the grace of Delioch, as every one of his hundred closing wounds leaves a small mark. His healed eyes flutter. His hand reflexively grasps for his rapier, which now lies a few feet away on the ground, stripped of its gemstone enhancements. Above him an image swims into view. It's the tusked face of Dranko, looking down upon him. Sagiro looks confused, as if he's hallucinating.

"What... are you doing here? ... Ah! My head!"

"You're a long way from home," says Dranko.

"My eye..." says Sagiro weakly. He tilts his head so that his cheek lays on the cool marble floor. He looks at the staff, and the now colorless Eye of Moirel.

Kibi still feels like he's vibrating. He follows Sagiro's gaze and sees the no-longer-red diamond atop its silver staff. The crystal roses are gone. He glances down at Scree, who is back to his normal self.

The dwarf walks over to the staff and looks down at it. “Scree, if I start screaming maniacally and doing horrible things, restrain me.”

Restrain you? asks Scree, horrified at what Kibi’s about to do. *But...*

Kibi reaches down to grasp the Red Eye. Even before his fingers make contact he feels a vibration coming off it, setting his fingers tingling. His hand closes around the Eye.

There’s a terrible jolt of pain. The Red Eye flares back to life, and red crystal starts to race up Kibi’s arm. But before it can even reach his elbow that crystal becomes mottled with green and purple stones, recedes back down to his hand, and then is gone. In his mind, Kibi hears the voice of one of the Eyes – Green or Purple, he’s not sure which – speaking through Scree. It says:

CAREFUL.

Kibi looks down at the diamond in his hand. “Little Eye of Moirel,” he says soothingly, “why don’t you calm down now and stop being tainted. Just relax... there’s a good Eye.”

The two Eyes in Scree speak again:

WE WILL NEED TO CONVINCE IT TO OPEN A WAY OUT. PLACE IT WITH US.

No! exclaims Scree. *Bad idea!*

I’m sorry, Scree, says Kibi sadly. *I don’t like it either, but we have to get out of here.*

I’m unhappy with this plan, Kibi, says Scree nervously.

Me too, says Kibi. And with that, he tosses the staff onto Scree’s body.

The Red Eye snaps off and is subsumed into the body of the elemental, at which point the roiling combat flares up anew. Green, purple and red gemstones erupt in quickly-vanishing patches.

Dranko smiles at Sagiro, who still lies on his back, looking up. “Ever since that sad day when we knocked you into the river, we’ve been worried about you,” says Dranko. “We’re glad you’re alive.”

Sagiro blinks confusedly. There’s a sensation he doesn’t recognize, a feeling whose context has long been lost to him. He struggles to put that feeling to words. “My... my mind... my mind is my own...” he whispers.

“Welcome back,” says Dranko.

“Thank you. I’m...” Sagiro Emberleaf figures it out. “I’m free!” he exclaims.

“Yep,” agrees Ernie.

“I’m free!” Sagiro says again, and his newly-healed face breaks into a huge smile. “Darkeye is not in my mind!”

That elicits a collective “Oooooh” from the Company. ‘Darkeye’ is the seldom-heard name of the leader of the Sharshun.

“How did you get here?” asks Sagiro, struggling to a sitting position. Dranko and Ernie help get him comfortable.

“You should consider a change in sides,” says Ernie brightly. “Have you considered the forces of good? We have a lot of fun... really!”

“I am good,” says Sagiro.

Step nods in agreement. “He’s not evil, at least.”

“Was Darkeye in your mind back when we first met you?” asks Dranko.

“She has been in my mind for as long as I can remember,” says Sagiro softly.

Morningstar, suspecting deception, casts *detect thoughts*, but Sagiro’s mind resists it. He flinches and looks around in a panic. “Someone is trying to get into my mind! She’s here!”

“It’s just me,” says Morningstar with a sigh. “We need to know if you’re telling the truth.”

“I am!” insists Sagiro. “I’m telling the truth, I swear it!”

“We have some reason to distrust you,” says Morningstar flatly.

"I understand. But she is not here. She has left me. I am free."

Ernie turns red like he's had an embarrassing thought, but he screws up his courage and asks a question that's been on his mind for years. "I have to ask you," he says, stammering. "Is that real?" He points to Sagiro's moustache. "We've often wondered if it had a... you know, a life of its own."

Sagiro looks offended for a second, then smiles. "It's just a moustache," he says.

"Sagiro, welcome back," says Dranko again, grinning.

"We did feel guilty about knocking you into the river," says Morningstar.

"No need," says Sagiro. "You did exactly what you should have done. The Sharshun are wholly evil. They must be fought!"

Drank introduces Sagiro to those he hasn't met. "Grey Wolf here was at the center of the Black Circle's first plan to restore the Emperor. And Aravis stopped the second one."

"I know what it's like to have... things... in your eyes," says Sagiro to Aravis.

"It's not actually so bad," Aravis answers.

But that gets Sagiro to thinking about something, and suddenly he panics again. "We have to get back! The Sharshun will try again!" He tries to stand but lacks the strength.

Dranko lowers him back to a sitting position. "They did," says Dranko grimly. "And they succeeded."

"Our world doesn't technically exist anymore," says Aravis.

"So they found the three Eyes they needed," says Sagiro, as if Aravis's revelation makes sense. "I remember they had one of... no, it was... it's so hard to remember." He closes his eyes as if it hurts to recall certain memories.

"Take your time," says Dranko. "Take your time."

Sagiro rubs his temples, dredging up memories of the Sharshun, and the mission... the mission that was so important... "No," he says, straightening up. "They had two. They only needed one more, and they sent me to get it. Darkeye sent me, along with one of the two Eyes they already had."

"To Calnis?" asks Morningstar, confused.

"No. To here! Het Branoi!"

Everyone digests that for a minute. "There are two more Eyes here, then?" asks Dranko, slowly puzzling it out.

"The Sharshun sent me with the Red Eye, thinking it would assist me in bringing back the one that was here. The plan was to... they... they had a way to change time. They needed three Eyes of Moirel to do that. And now you tell me they succeeded. We have to set things right, but I don't know how."

"But..." says Kibi, "but if you were sent with one Eye, there must still be another one here in Het Branoi! The one you were sent to collect!"

"That's the one that's powering the Slices," says Aravis wearily. "And it's still here somewhere."

"Lord Tapheon thought *yours* was the one causing it," says Morningstar, and the thought of Tapheon being so mistaken makes her smile.

"Speaking of whom, you should probably stay away from the demon lord," says Dranko to Sagiro. "He isn't very happy with you."

"Yes," says Sagiro. "I... I felt that the Red Eye contested a great power. I could feel the struggle, with what little sliver of consciousness was left to me. It... it's very painful to recall... The Red Eye decided it wanted this place for itself. But it couldn't take control on its own. It wasn't powerful enough; the Eye that controls and creates Het Branoi was too well entrenched. The Red Eye needed... it thought... it could take your Eyes, and with three, it would overcome the one that is already here."

"Perhaps we should back up," says Morningstar. "This place is a Black Circle experiment that screwed up."

"Black Circle?" says Sagiro. "That is the god of the Sharshun."

"We think they tried to bring back the Adversary," says Dranko. "The evil god from whom the Travelers fled."

"*That* Adversary?" says Sagiro, incredulous. "That cannot be."

"We believe they created this place to bring the Adversary from wherever he is, into our world," says Aravis.

"The Adversary is the Dark God from whom the other gods fled!" exclaims Sagiro. "Why would he not just come here? He would not need help from mortals."

"We're getting ahead of ourselves," says Dranko. "The Black Circle built this place and tried to use the Eye of Moirel to power it, and that didn't work out so well for 'em. The whole place went kerflooey."

"That would be the Blue Eye," guesses Sagiro. "The Eye I came with made red portals for itself, but the ones that were already here were blue."

"The Blue Eye seems to have gotten out of control, and has been sucking in pieces of various planes," says Aravis.

There is a long silence, where everyone contemplates the implications of the encounter, and all they've just learned in its aftermath. Ernie walks over and sits next to Sagiro. "Were you sent alone?" he asks. "Just you and the Eye?"

"Yes," says Sagiro quietly. "Just the... just the two of us. I never saw it coming. I think from the moment it entered Het Branoi, the Red Eye stopped worrying about our mission. Darkeye never truly had it under control. It... I don't know, but I'd almost say it was jealous of Het Branoi, that the Blue Eye should be wielding such enormous power. Such enormous power."

At Kibi's feet, Scree continues to churn.

Fimmtiu: Yow. One of your best posts yet. I bet it must have been a big relief to get some closure on the Het Branoi quest after so long, even if it's not all over yet.

MavrickWeirdo: So the Slices are maintained by the Blue Eye which maintains the blue gates. Sagiro was able to travel through red portals which were created by the Red Eye.

The Company first entered the Slices through a green portal which must have been created (then closed) by the Green Eye which they had with them, (along with the Purple Eye).

So the Company had the means to make their own portals the whole time, but didn't know it. If Green and Purple were not in a big battle with Red at this moment, then I think the Company would have some serious questions to ask them.

the Jester: And then there's the matter of trust.

Sagiro: A reasonable speculation, but only because of some unnecessary red herrings on my part. I may not have explained this well before, so let me do so now: the colors of the exterior doorway into Het Branoi – the one that started red, then became blue, and finally was green when the Company went in – had nothing to do with the colors of the Eyes of Moirel. Those colors merely reflected the prevailing ambient light of the Slice on the other side. I don't think I've ever told the PCs this, but had the Company gone in when it was red, they would have found themselves in a small bit of the Elemental Plane of Fire. Had they gone in when it was blue, they would have found themselves on a small deserted island surrounded by a vast blue ocean. Instead they went in when the door was green, reflecting the light filtered through the trees of Green Valley.

I apologize profusely to all readers who have concocted perfectly good conspiracy theories involving the changing colors of that first doorway. I only wish I had been that clever at the time!

KidCthulhu: I don't.



Waiting Room

Morningstar suggests that any further interrogation of Sagiro should take place under reliable truth magic. Sagiro maintains that he is telling the truth, though he assents to being questioned inside a *zone of truth*. He balks, however, at giving assent to *detect thoughts* or any other invasive measures. He shudders at the very thought. "I do not wish to have the sanctity of my mind violated any more than it has been already."

With the *zone of truth* in place, they first have Sagiro repeat what he has already told them, and it all checks out. Then Kibi asks: "It must be strange for the Sharshun to have a human... servant. Why did Darkeye pick you?"

"I don't know," confesses Sagiro. "I was brought up by the Sharshun, and under her thrall, though I didn't know it at the time. Darkeye always said I had great potential, and that she'd see to it that I realized it."

"Were you always able to say the word 'Sharshun'?" asks Ernie. "Or did the Masking prevent it?"

"The Masking did not affect me in any way," says Sagiro. "It never did."

"Aha!" says Ernie. "They had people just like us! Sagiro, were there others like you?"

"I think so," says Sagiro, "but I never knew anything about them."

"If you were brought up by the Sharshun," asks Kibi, "did they make you worship the Black Circle?"

Sagiro frowns. "They... could make me do many things. But they left me to my own devices, to form my religious basis. I believe in the Black Circle, but I am no fanatic. The Black Circle is just a God of Knowledge. Dark knowledge."

"But who is the god?" asks Kibi. "Who is the god of the Black Circle?"

"The Black Circle is the god," says Sagiro. "It is a Divine Concept, an object of worship in its own right. The symbol and the deity are one and the same."

The *zone of truth* expires, and the Company regroup and talk for a while among themselves before the next session. Grey Wolf grumbles at the coddling Sagiro is getting, and mutters that just chopping off villains' heads on general principle would save them a great deal of time.

Ernie overhears him. "Grey Wolf, what is it with you and chopping off heads?"

"We should *always* chop off the heads," answers Grey Wolf. "Fewer surprises that way."

"I'll bet it's the sword," says Dranko, referring to *Bostock*. "I told you it was evil."

Actually, says *Bostock*, speaking clearly in Grey Wolf's mind, *I fail to understand the need to decapitate those already vanquished, unless you have specific expectation that otherwise they'll spring back to life*. Grey Wolf just shakes his head.

Some of the others start scouring the room and bodies for loot, while Ernie makes idle conversation with Sagiro. He learns one interesting fact: Darkeye also had a Soul Eater in her thrall for a while, almost certainly King Farazil.

There's little loot to be found in the bloody mess of the Lord of the Roses' minions. The sorceress had some magical stuff – bracers, a ring, a cloak and a couple of potions – but that's about it. Dranko seems remarkably unconcerned. "Remember," he says brightly, "this is the place where five thousand gold-piece sapphires grow on trees, and Sagiro here hands them out to his lackeys."

Sagiro says nothing, and looks confused. "Srappa," prods Dranko. "You gave him sapphires, right?"

"I gave him nothing," says Sagiro. "Not that I remember."

"Damn it!" cries Dranko. Another get-rich-quick scheme is down the tubes.

Scree's body has started to settle down, but every couple of minutes it bursts into a seething mass of colored gemstones as the Eyes of Moirel struggle. Scree says to Kibi: *Tell Grey Wolf that I have much more sympathy for him now*.

Grey Wolf smiles. "Tell Scree that between the two of us, I think he has it worse."

I really appreciate what you're doing for us, Kibi tells his familiar.

I'm not really doing anything, says Scree morosely, *except serving as a combat arena*.



Morningstar casts a new *zone of truth* and the discussion with Sagiro picks up again. "What's the last thing you remember clearly?" asks Ernie.

"Clearly? That's difficult. I remember... I think... I think that I... yes, setting out from near Verdshane. I remember the Eye helping me stay hidden when I went through the gartine arch on the Balani Peninsula. There was a long overland journey. It was the only way to reach... Kivia? Is that what it was called? I remember a tower... and giants... Darkeye had told me something I was supposed to say." Sagiro is clearly struggling as he answers. Many of his memories are hazy, muddled; he dredges them up with great difficulty.

"Did you need a key?" asks Dranko.

"The Eye *was* the key," says Sagiro.

Dranko throws up his hands in disgust. "Oh, for crying out loud! That just gets right up my nose! The Eye was the Key? We went through all that crap for nothing!"

"I needed a phrase, and a key, yes," says Sagiro. "Darkeye told me the phrase, and the Eye said it would serve instead of the key."

"*Your Eye talks to you*," says Dranko.

"So do ours," says Kibi.

"Yeah, when they feel like it," says Aravis.

"Once inside I traveled through many strange places, but my memories of those places are dim," continues Sagiro. "The Eye already had its own idea of what it would do. I think... from the very moment we arrived inside, the Eye knew it wanted this place for itself."

"Do you know what happens if you go through the Mirrors of Semek with an Eye?" asks Dranko.

Sagiro looks startled at the question, and digs around for memories on the subject. "Yes," he says at last. "Something significant happens, though I don't know what."

"Cause a Sharshun did that, and disappeared," says Dranko. "You were there, remember?"

"I was? Yes... I think... I was there, long ago. Or was it that long? But, yes, that's what the Eyes are *for*. You stand with them in the Mirrors, and they activate. I don't know what happens. I don't know where they go, but they travel somewhere."

"Or nowhere," says Ernie.

"When you get out of here, what's going to stop Darkeye from taking over your mind again?" Dranko asks.

"I don't know. It may just reassert itself automatically, or she may try to re-establish it." Sagiro looks worried at the prospect.

"But as far as you know, no one is controlling you now," asks Morningstar.

"No," says Sagiro with surety. "And I don't wish to serve Darkeye again. She has a reputation for cruelty, and no one is even allowed to look upon her."

"How come?" asks Dranko.

"It is the rule," says Sagiro with a shrug. "I don't know why, it's just how things are,"

"I'll bet she turns people to stone!" exclaims Ernie. "She probably has snaky hair."

"So," says Dranko, returning to more important matters. "Where do you keep your loot?"

"My loot?" asks Sagiro.

"Yeah, your loot," says Dranko impatiently. "You were the Lord of the Roses, with hundreds of servants!"

"I didn't have hundreds of..." says Sagiro, confused.

"Well, dozens then," says Dranko. "Either way, you were a powerful guy. You must have had a big ol' stash of loot."

"Actually, the Lord of the Roses had a very small retinue," says Sagiro, thinking hard. "There were servants who came with the castle who are probably still in it, elsewhere. I... he did gather some powerful servants. That... sorceress... was the first. He sent her out, to bring others back. If I remember rightly, she convinced the six-armed creature that she had found a way out of the Slices, and when he got here, the Red Eye dominated him. And she brought back the whirlwind with the swords in a bottle she had found. Srapa was the only one of any power who arrived on his own."

"And the bear?" asks Dranko.

"I think the sorceress *charmed* it, and brought it back from some other Slice."

"If it intended to subjugate the Eye that was already here," asks Morningstar, "but felt it needed our two Eyes to do it, did it know we were here?"

"It suspected you were coming," says Sagiro.

"So," says Dranko, realizing that he's not going to get anywhere in his 'loot' line of questioning, "what's the deal with you and that demon lord, Tapheon?"

"He strove with the Red Eye constantly," says Sagiro.

"It's not going to take him long to figure out that the Lord of the Roses is no longer in power," says Aravis. "We need to get moving, or Tapheon may be coming for Kibi now that there's no Red Eye to fight against."

"Do you know where the other Eye is?" asks Aravis.

"I... the Red Eye knew," says Sagiro. "But I don't remember."

Ernie shouts into Scree: "Hey! Red Eye? Where's the Blue Eye?"

To everyone's surprise, Scree roils around a bit, and the Eyes actually speak into Kibi's mind.

WE'RE WORKING ON IT.

"Wow!" exclaims Kibi. "They answered!"

"And without any crazy prophecy," adds Aravis.

"Yeah, Scree has it worse than I did," says Grey Wolf.

"Agreed," says Ernie. "Grey Wolf, your stomach never talked back to you."

"On the other hand, we're not thinking about killing Scree to fulfill a prophecy," says Aravis.

No, we're not! says Scree emphatically.

The second *zone of truth* runs out, and the Company are well satisfied that Sagiro is being honest with them. They keep talking for a while, about Darkeye and her plans. Sagiro thinks that if he didn't come back, the Sharshun were going to have to hunt down the remaining two Eyes in order to get the three they needed. He has a hazy memory that the Sharshun were already planning an expedition into Calnis to grab the Yellow Eye. A quick rundown of all seven Eyes' dispositions:

- Green: owned by the Company.
- Purple: owned by the Company.
- Red: brought by Sagiro; now owned (sort of) by the Company.
- Blue: currently powering Het Branoi.
- Yellow: once in Calnis; probably recovered by the Sharshun.
- Remaining two: unknown, but probably both found eventually by the Sharshun. One was probably already in their possession, being the one seen used in the Mirrors of Semek already.

The Company now come to the unfortunate realization that there's no way out of the throne room. With the red Way gone, the only door out is the one through which the bear attacked, but that only leads into a large pen that smells strongly of bear. Ernie worries that elsewhere in the castle are ordinary servants who now have no guiding power in their mind, and no eyeballs. "Sagiro, how did the Red Eye get to the rest of the castle?" he asks.

"It opened doorways when it needed to," says Sagiro. "A long time ago the Eye decided to make this an impenetrable sanctum, controlling the only doors in or out."

On the one hand, that doesn't bode well for their continued travel plans. On the other, it's a darned good thing that sort of cavalier opening and closing of Ways didn't attract Cleaners! "Well, I say we throw the bodies into the bear's room and clean the rest of this place up," says Dranko. "'Cause it looks like we'll be here for a few years, at least."

"Years?!" squeaks Flicker.

"Unless you can think of some other way out of here..." says Dranko.

Kibi says, "Well, our two Eyes may be able to strongarm the Red one into getting us out of..."

WE'RE WORKING ON IT!

"They're getting snippy," says Kibi worriedly. "Let's just be patient."

Ernie lights the fire pit, and starts preparations for cooking the bear meat. Dranko lounges on the throne, pulls out a crown from an old treasure hoard, and puts it on his head. "He's cute when he's delusional," says Morningstar with a smile.

From the throne, Dranko calls to Ernie. "You know, when I smell that delicious bear meat, and see the smoke rising, I think to myself, 'There sure isn't another source of fresh air in here.'"

"The Eye used to open a Way for the smoke to escape," says Sagiro.

Dranko leaps from his throne and calls his *decanter of endless water* from his *wide-mouth pouch*. The fire is soon out, and they set to discussing ways of cooking the meat without using up the air supply. "I'm *not* eating bear meat cooked over a *flaming sphere*," Morningstar insists.

That earns a gale of laughter. Which is highly disturbing, because everyone hears the laughter, and yet no one is laughing.

QR 80

The laughter dies down, and a voice sounds in their heads, a rich, beautiful voice with an unmistakable undercurrent of limitless malice. **The Lord of the Roses no longer strives against me!** exults Lord Tapheon. **You've done well, my friends.**

I want you to know, thinks Dranko. I've been thinking about what you did to me in your throne room, and I want you to know... I forgive you.

Grey Wolf slowly sidles away from Dranko, as if he expects his friend to be consumed on the spot by unholy fire.

It is not your place to forgive me, Dranko Blackhope, responds Tapheon. **It is not the ant's place to forgive the man for stepping upon it. And you cannot forgive me.**

Fortunately for you, I am generous, and do not hold your views against you any longer, thinks Tapheon into their heads. **We are one step closer to our collective goal. But, unless I miss my guess, we are not as close as we believed we would be, are we?**

The Lord of the Roses is gone, but the power that creates the Slices is still unchecked! Now that I can cast my perception beyond the Lord of the Roses, I see there is a new barrier between it and you. It is... opaque, in a way that troubles me. But I will make you another offer. To bring you even closer. You must get closer, and end this. You mortals must... study, reflect, practice to improve yourselves. This costs you in money and time, waiting for your experiences and knowledge to crystallize. But now that the Lord of the Roses is no more, the balance of power in the Slices has shifted. Things may start to unravel, and time may be a luxury you no longer have.

Tapheon isn't in the room. He's probably still in his Fortress, several Slices away. But every member of the Company gets the unsettling feeling that he's *looking* at them, and not just communicating via telepathy.

Why will things unravel? asks Kibi.

The Lord of the Roses' power was the same as that used to power the Slices, says Tapheon. **It may have tied itself in somehow, had its tendrils in the fabric of Het Branoi. Without it, who knows what will happen? But don't think of this as an offer. It's a gift. I can make things clear to you, in an instant. I can grant you the benefits of weeks of study and training in just a few minutes' time. I ask nothing in return. Nothing. You will not be beholden to me in any way.**

Ever? asks Dranko.

Ever, as far as I'm concerned. I ask for nothing. What I get out of it, is that you'll be better prepared to face your upcoming trials. You can accept or reject my offer on an individual basis, as you will. I assure you there are no strings, no bargains.

Can we get that in writing? asks Kibi.

No, of course not! thinks Tapheon, and they can feel his temper start to rise. **I would, but physical reality precludes that at the moment. So... any takers?**

No, says Ernie flatly. There's no way.

Flicker is the only one who entertains the offer, but Dranko talks him out of it. "If you do this," Dranko whispers to Flicker, "you'll have to listen to Ernie lecture you about it for the rest of your natural life. And since the people who say no will have to train anyway, we might as well spare ourselves the lecture."

Step smiles grimly. "I'm still waiting for the demon to say something that's actually relevant to me."

You know, thinks Dranko, I would have entertained your offer, but being turned into an inside-out gutted fish really put our relationship in a new light. Even considering I've forgiven you.

Over the telepathic connection they can feel Tapheon seething. **I wish to amend some of my previous statements. Any words I've spoken of reconciliation, amnesty, and working toward a common good, I retract in the case of Dranko Blackhope. When I get out of here, we'll... see about things.**

Oh, yeah? thinks Dranko. *(In for a penny...) You're threatening me?*

"Dranko!" hisses Ernie, but it's too late for that.

Yes, replies Tapheon. **Yes I am.**

Well then, says Dranko. I guess it won't do me any more harm to tell you that you can kiss my ass.

A number of gasps resound through Tapheon's telepathic link. "Dranko, I refuse to marry a fish," whispers Morningstar.

I am secure in the love and solace of my God, says Dranko.

And I, says Tapheon, **am secure in the love and solace of myself, which is essentially the same thing.**

That'll put hair on your palms, says Dranko, smirking. Now everyone starts to sidle away from Dranko, just in case.

Perhaps, hisses Tapheon, and there's no sweetness now in his voice. **Perhaps when your current personality and soul have been burned away by a few millennia of torment, a person like you might have a future as part of my retinue. You certainly have the mouth for it. Perhaps I'll be kind and give you a form with a mouth, when the time comes.**

That's great, answers Dranko. I'll put 'quaking in my boots' on my calendar for... oh... next Friday.

This discussion grows tiresome, says Tapheon. **I'll just have to hope you succeed on your own. In the meantime, Dranko, I'll have some of my minions start sharpening your stake.**

I like steak, says Dranko, but Tapheon's presence is gone from their minds.

"Er," says Dranko, when he notices everyone staring at him with wide eyes. "I think I may have a problem with authority figures."

"You know, I've always been impressed with your faith," says Ernie. "But sometimes I wish you'd keep your mouth shut about it! A simple 'no thank you' would have sufficed."

"I thought it was great!" says Flicker, reaching up to pat Dranko on the back. "You told a demon lord to kiss your ass, and you're still alive!"

"I guess we'll add 'rescue Dranko's soul from eternal torment' to our list of things to do," Ernie sighs.

el-remmen: I knew there was a reason I liked Dranko!

*Piratecat: You know, I think I'd blocked out exactly how badly I'd offended Tapheon. Huh. In retrospect, maybe that wasn't such a good idea after all. I've just finished re-reading the John Constantine (*Hellblazer*) graphic novel *Dangerous Habits*, in which our hero is dying of lung cancer but manages to infuriate the devil enough that he decides dying would be a really bad idea. I have got to find better sources for inspiration when playing Dranko.*

Dranko has a plan, though; oh, yes. Thought up with his mighty 9 Intelligence.

KidCthulhu: Actually, I'm more worried about the plan thought up with your mighty, what, 14 Wisdom?

Oh, well. We recently crossed some stuff off the list, so we have room for "rescue Dranko's soul from eternal torment." Although if you keep this up, we might amend that to "send Dranko's soul a muffin basket and get back to work."

A glowing red gem pops out of Scree and starts to roll across the floor toward the throne. Before anyone can react, Scree becomes entirely amethyst for a second, and the Red Eye goes shooting back into Scree as if it had been attached to an invisible rubber band. There's some more churning of contesting gemstones before Scree's body settles back down. *There's still some convincing left to do, observes Scree.*

The Company start to think they should begin to train where they are, and hope the Eyes figure something out before there's no more air in the room. Aravis sits down and goes into the Crosser's Maze, thinking to learn something useful. As before, he sees the strange partitioned universe of Het Branoi, but he's disappointed that there are no adjacent Slices to this one. Even parts of the castle that once were in the same Slice are no longer connected. Truly the Red Eye had made this a place of isolated security.



It is some hours later, after the Company have cleaned the place up and unpacked bedrolls, when Kibi looks suddenly alert.

"The Eyes are talking again!" he says. Then, after a pause: "Scree says the Eyes have things under control." Another pause. "They have the Red Eye subdued." Pause. "They are learning what it knows."

The others look at Kibi and Scree expectantly. "The Red Eye knows where the Blue Eye is!" says Kibi excitedly. "In fact, the Red Eye could have gone near to where the Blue Eye is at any time, but was afraid for its own safety. The specifics are still obscured; there is an unknown power between this throne room, and where the Blue Eye resides. The Eyes – our Eyes – think they can imitate the Red Eye's trick of opening Ways. It'll take another day or so. But they say it's a solvable problem."

Knowing that they'll be leaving soon, Ernie makes a small cook-fire and stews some of their beef jerky. "It's 'bear surprise,'" he says. When the others start to point out that he hasn't actually carved any meat from the animal, he adds: "Surprise! There's no bear!"

Sagiro wolfs down the food, making happy slurping sounds. "It's been so long," he says, "I'd forgotten what it feels like to eat!"

Kibi breaks out some of the ale (*Eye of the Storm* vintage) from the *bag of holding*, and passes it around. Snokas takes a deep drink, then comments: "Not bad for dwarfish stuff, but it lacks a good bite."

"You mean the rancid overtones of orcish swill?" says Kibi, affronted. "True, I avoided that."

"The problem is, you use tame ingredients," says Snokas.

"I use *tasty* ingredients, if that's what you mean," says Kibi.

"We need a bar fight!" exclaims Dranko, grinning.

Grey Wolf turns to Morningstar. "You need to have more control over your half-orcs," he says. Morningstar just shakes her head.

"Look," says Snokas, "I'm not saying it isn't any good. It *is* good. But..."

"But you prefer bad beer," says Kibi. "I understand."

"I prefer different amounts of fermentation," Snokas explains. "Different ingredients, yes. Different... well, yours just isn't *chunky* enough."

"This, from a race that likes black lizard pie," says Grey Wolf.

"Black lizard pie?" says Snokas. "I *love* black lizard pie! You know, what's-his-name, that orc servant you had *polymorphed* into a human. Skorg. He made a *great* black lizard pie. Wasn't good for much else, being a full orc and all, but it's a shame he doesn't exist anymore."

Kibi rolls his eyes and says to Dranko and Morningstar, "Oh, great. I'll bet you'll be making black lizard pie for all your little... quarter-orc kids."

"I can't stand black lizard pie," confesses Dranko. "It tastes like... it tastes like feet."

"You've lost your appreciation for the finer things in life," says Snokas, shaking his head.

"*Feet!*" insists Dranko. "I don't like lizard feet."

"It's 'cause you haven't had enough of them," says Snokas.

"Snokas, we've all tried black lizard pie," says Ernie. "The good stuff, straight from Abernathy's icebox. And I've got to agree with Dranko: feet." There's a round of general agreement from the others.

"Well, I'd expect that from humans and elves and halflings," says Snokas. "But Dranko, you've got orcish blood in your veins."

Step sits down and shakes his head. "These may be among my last days alive, and here I sit, listening to a discussion about half-orcish cuisine. Though, having tried it, I agree with the 'feet' opinion."

Snokas throws up his hands.



The Company sleep, and with the Eyes moderately quiescent, it's probably the safest place to camp in all the Slices. Over breakfast, the Eyes announce:

WE'RE READY.

"Where are you taking us?" asks Kibi.

A SLICE NEAR TO THE BLUE EYE.

"What's it like?" asks Kibi. "Should we make any special preparations?"

THERE ARE MANY LIVING BEINGS THERE.

In the center of the room a Way opens, appearing like a window shade pulled down from an invisible window. Its surface is mottled with red, purple and green, swirling in a chaotic mix. Every so often it flickers in and out of existence. "Well, *that* just fills me with confidence," says Grey Wolf.

DON'T GO THROUGH YET.

"Does anyone here ever question their career choice?" asks Morningstar.

IT SHOULD BE SAFE IN A MINUTE. NO. WAIT!

The Way disappears. The Company watch nervously. Two minutes later it reappears, still swirling with color but no longer flickering.

"C'mon, Sagiro," says Dranko. "You're coming with us. We're not going to leave you here."

"Though when we get back from all this, we'll need to have a long talk," says Morningstar, distrustful even now.

"Yes!" agrees Sagiro. "It is possible, as you have said, that when I am once again in the same reality as Darkeye, I may become dominated again. I do not wish for that! It would be better if you share no secrets with me, in case that happens."

"Don't worry," says Grey Wolf. "We won't."

And with no further delay, the Company step into the multicolored Way.

bargney the second: That was wonderful! Thank you, Sagiro... Thanks to all the players for the epic banter!

LightPhoenix: Lots of people? Ten bucks says the Blue Eye is at the Eye of the Storm.

Kid Charlemagne: Ya know, I'd really love it if it turned out Sagiro Emberleaf was pulling another con on the PCs...

Zustur: Wasn't there supposed to be an explanation of how Sagiro isn't dead after falling off a cliff? Or does that come later?

Is Pewter still around? He hasn't done anything hilarious lately.

Sagiro: Here's the explanation: Sagiro didn't literally fall off a cliff. He was knocked down a very steep mountainside into a raging river which swept his body away. But he hadn't taken lethal damage, and he washed ashore before drowning. In other words, he didn't die in the same way that (unlikely but possible spoiler) Aragorn didn't die in the *Two Towers* movie.

As for Pewter, sure, he's still there. But there's only so much screen time to go around!

Someone: Ah, the Good Guys had a Bad Guy moment! Always look for the Good (in this case Bad) Guy's corpse!

Fimmtiu: IIRC, they did, but *couldn't find it...* (cue ominous music)

I'm truly impressed that you managed to keep that secret for so long, Sagiro. Nicely done.

Sagiro: Thanks! The hardest moment was the day or two before the session, when my wife (who plays Kibi) actually *guessed* that the Lord of the Roses was Sagiro. Of course, she was joking, ha ha, because how preposterous would that be? I joined her in laughing off the suggestion as ridiculous, but I couldn't laugh too hard without making her suspect something.



Welcome to Bakersfield

The good news is, the Way does its job. The transit feels rough, as if the Eyes are still getting the hang of the whole "connecting worlds" thing, but in the end the Company are ejected into the Slice the Eyes were aiming for.

The bad news, which really isn't all that bad in the grand scheme, is that the Green and Purple Eyes don't quite grasp the concept of "ground level." The Way opens into the air forty feet above the ground. Someone must be watching out for them though, as below them is a steep grassy hill. Each member of the party plummets (except for Dranko, who *feather falls*), bounces down the springy incline, and rolls to a bruised and battered stop at the bottom.

Ernie rolls over, pushes Flicker off his chest, and checks himself for broken bones. He sees that a human girl is standing nearby, watching them curiously. She looks like she's seven years old, though in Het Branoi her true age is impossible to tell, and her expression carries an adult maturity.

She speaks to them in a foreign tongue. Ernie gets himself into a sitting position and casts *tongues*.

"Hello there!" he says, smiling. "I'm Ernest."

"I'm **Luna**," says the girl.

"Would you tell me where we are?" asks Ernie.

Luna looks up, to the patch of sky out of which the Company fell. Ernie sees her looking and says, "Yes, we fell out of the sky."

"There's no Way up there," points out Luna. Ernie looks up and sees that she's correct. The multicolored Way is gone.

"We came through a special gate," explains Aravis, with Ernie translating. "Not all Ways are permanent."

Luna keeps looking up, as if she expects a trick. "So," repeats Ernie. "Where are we?"

"We're in the hills outside of Bakersfield," says Luna.

"We haven't been here before," says Ernie. "It looks very pretty."

Luna shrugs, and then, bizarrely, asks, "I don't suppose one of you is made out of ruby and emerald and amethyst and sapphire?" She looks more carefully at the assembled Company as she says this, as if trying to pick out such a person among them.

"That's a strange question," remarks Kibi, thinking immediately of Scree and his Eyes of Moirel.

"Why do you ask?" says Ernie excitedly. "Do you have a prophecy?"

"It's not my prophecy," says Luna. "It's Mystic Peralta's prophecy."

"Ask her who Mystic Peralta is," prods Dranko.

"Duh," says Ernie. "A mystic."

"Just ask her."

"Who is Mystic Peralta?" asks Ernie. "A wise woman? Wise man?"

"If you ask me," says Luna, "she's... well, she's what happens if you look into the Seeing Flame long enough."

Dranko casually calls from his *wide-mouth pouch* a ruby, sapphire, emerald and amethyst, and shows them to Luna.

"I see that you're rich," says the girl, "but I don't think that's what she meant." To Ernie, she adds: "I don't think he's the one."

"Do you know the rest of the prophecy?" asks Ernie.

"No," says Luna. "It's been a long time since I heard her say the whole thing. I think that someone made out of that stuff is going to go through the Black Door, or something like that."

"Let me guess," says Ernie. "No one who goes through the Black Door ever comes back."

"No, they don't," says Luna, a bit surprised. "Well, except for Porridge."

"Who's Porridge?" asks Ernie.

"He's the only guy who's ever come back," says Luna.

"What happened to him on the other side?" asks Ernie.

"Who knows?" replies Luna. "He's nuts. He hasn't really been right in the head since then. And he never said what he saw."

"Maybe we should talk to Porridge and Mystic... er... what's-her-name ourselves," says Ernie.

"Peralta," says Luna. "Mystic Peralta of Na'Lil the Seeing Flame, blah blah blah."

"How many people are in Bakersfield?" asks Dranko.

"Right now?" says Luna. "Maybe a hundred, hundred and fifty. Say, why don't you come with me into town. I'll take you to the Wily Warthog. I spend a lot of time there. Sadly, it doesn't take a lot of alcohol to get my body drunk, since I'm still physically a little kid."

Scree has stayed hidden underground through all of this exchange. As the Company head toward the town, the earth elemental says excitedly to Kibi: *I'm made of all those things! Those gems! That's me!*

I know, says Kibi. But we don't want to cause a panic or anything around here, so I think you ought to stay hidden until we figure out what's going on. Scree agrees.

"We've got three other Ways out of Bakersfield," says Luna as they walk. "There used to be five, but two of them have gone gray."

"Cleaners," says Ernie, his voice grim.

"I've heard them called that," says Luna.

"Where do they go to?" asks Dranko.

"Well, one goes to the lions," answers Luna. "Another goes to the ocean, but no one goes in or out of that one. And the third goes to... slime tunnels, I think? Someone came out of that one. I think the orc came from there."

"An orc?" asks Kibi, grimacing.

"Yeah, Garg. Garg came out of the slime tunnels. Figures, really. Anyhow, there are a lot of people in Bakersfield. All the townspeople, they haven't gone anywhere, and plenty of folks come and go through the Ways. It's sad, but one of the Ways only went gray about six months ago. That's a shame, cause that went to the apes. We had good trading with them. The Vorsh, I think they were called. No one knows what happened to them."

"They're probably dead," says Dranko.

"You know not to block off Ways, right?" asks Kibi anxiously.

"Yeah, we hear that a lot," says Luna. "But we wouldn't do that anyway since nothing dangerous ever comes through. We get lots of visitors, mostly people who've heard about Peralta. They all want to check out the Black Door. Some of them go through, despite what she tells them, and like I said, they never come back."

"Except for Porridge," says Kibi.

"Yeah, except for Porridge," agrees Luna. "But he was a lucky bastard."

"Why was that?" asks Dranko.

"Well, he was roaring drunk when he went through. So were his two buddies, and neither of them came back. That was a long time ago – within days of when we all arrived. I was seven then, and I'm twenty-seven now. A few townsfolk went in the Black Door right away, who didn't believe Peralta, and they didn't come out. Then, a few days later, Porridge and a couple of other drunks decided they would just hop in and hop out again, real quick."

"Haven't you people heard of ropes?" asks Dranko.

"They were drunk," says Luna. "Porridge came back out, but the others didn't. He doesn't like to talk about it."

"We'll make him," says Dranko, but Ernie doesn't translate that.

"Lots of people come and go," continues Luna. "Plenty of folks like you in town... adventuring types. Some leave and come back. Others are waiting around for Peralta's so-called saviors to show up. She can spin a story pretty good, and has a bunch of people convinced, or at least curious enough to stick around."

"What exactly are they waiting for, when you say 'saviors'?" asks Morningstar.

"If I understand Peralta right, when the saviors come, they'll go through the Black Door and do whatever it is that will get us all out of here. Some of the folks in town claim they'll help when the times comes. Others I think just want to see what happens. It's a shame, the number of people who have come and thought they could take on whatever's beyond the Door. Apparently whatever's in there pulls you in quickly. We know from the ropes."

"When you pull the ropes back, what comes out?" asks Ernie.

"Nothing. The ropes always get pulled in with the people, or the ropes get pulled back without them."

"Haven't you tried tying the ropes to things?" asks Dranko.

"Well, sure," says Luna. "There's nothing too close to the Black Door, but people have tried tying ropes to the closest tree, about a hundred feet away. The ropes just break, or whatever's on the other side manages to remove the ropes from the people."

A light snow has started to fall, and the air has cooled in the late afternoon. They crest a small hill and see the town of Bakersfield just a few more minutes' walk away, looking like any small town in Charagan. Lights are being lit in the streets.

"Where would we find the Mystic?" asks Ernie.

"Probably at the inn, or maybe at the shrine," says Luna. "Of Hol, that is, God of the Harvest. The actual god. I mean, I'm sure the Seeing Flame is very impressive in its way, but... Anyway, Peralta and Prinn have lots of discussions about religious matters. Prinn is the Priestess of Hol."

"I also worship a goddess for whom the Harvest is sacred," says Ernie.

"Yondalla, I'll bet," says Luna.

“Yes!” exclaims Ernie.

“You should talk to Yoba then.”

“There’s another halfling here?”

“Yes, she’s very nice.”

“Oooh,” says Ernie. “I shall have to pay my respects.”

“So,” says Dranko. “About this Seeing Flame...” Ernie translates.

“Oh, there isn’t an *actual* flame,” says Luna. “But Peralta looks into fires all the time. She says the Seeing Flame is an oracular god, who shows itself in fireplaces and campfires and things.”

The Company reach the outskirts of the town; some passers-by nod politely while others stare unabashed. Down one of the side streets they catch a distant glint of blue light.

“Oh, that’s the one that goes to the ocean,” explains Luna. “The only Way people use – the one to the lions – is about a mile out of town, that way.” She points.

“Lions?” asks Ernie curiously.

“Yeah. Never actually been there, but I hear they’re very nice. They’re intelligent lions. Vicious when they need to be, that’s the word on the street, but perfectly pleasant if you don’t anger them. We don’t need many guards around, with the lions at our back, so to speak. A lot of our visitors who come from civilized Slices, they say they need to keep the Ways in and out heavily guarded, since you never know what’s going to walk through. We have a few archers, but really, if anything is strong enough to get past the lions, there’s not much we’re going to do about it. So why bother? We have our livestock, our farms, no one’s getting any older... this’ll all end eventually, whether it’s by Peralta’s prophecy or something else.”

“That’s very optimistic of you,” says Ernie approvingly.

“That’s Hol. ‘Things work out,’ he teaches us.”

“Well, I hope things work out in a way that involves me getting a beer,” says Ernie with a grin.

“We can see to that!” says Luna.

Now they’re walking down the main street of Bakersfield, passing small homes and shops. Ernie’s eye is caught by a large sign with a pie. Luna sees his head turn and snorts. “That’s where Torin lives and works. The food is good, though you have to talk to Torin to get it. He complains a lot.”

Two blocks later, near the other end of the town, they reach a large building whose large sign shows a warthog peeking slyly over a hand of cards. Beneath it is written ‘The Wily Warthog,’ though in a language none of the party can read.

In they go. It’s a large busy place, with a cheery commons holding about thirty noisy patrons. Most are dressed like Luna – simple commoner garb – but a few stand out as folks like themselves, festooned with the gleam of enchanted masterwork.

One of these is a kobold seated in a corner, talking boisterously to a couple of bored-looking locals. Near the other side of the room two tables have been pushed together to accommodate a well-populated card game, and one of the gamers is a tall man with a rapier at his side and a number of glinting daggers strapped to his body. In the center of the room, at a smaller table, is a huge man drinking and laughing with a burly dwarf.

As the Company get seated, Dranko notices that no one seems to be paying for their meals and drinks. When he points this out to Luna, she says, “Oh, this place stopped charging a while ago. There wasn’t much point in just moving money around within the town, and **Toggle** didn’t want to charge the outsiders while letting the locals get free stuff. So now everything’s free, but you’re encouraged to make donations. And speaking of Toggle...”

A boisterous man comes bounding to their table. “Hey, you’re new!” he says. “Come from the lions?” He’s wearing a translator disc, as are many people in the building.

“No,” says Ernie.

“The ocean?”

“No.”

"Ah, the slime pits then. You'll want to talk to the orc."

"I'll do that," says Ernie, smiling. "Thanks."

"How was the journey then?" asks Tuggle jovially. "Lotta slime, huh? That's what I hear."

"Oh, there are all kinds of different things," says Ernie.

"You want something to eat? Drink? You like stew?"

That's more like it! Tuggle motions for provender while Ernie asks about the Mystic Peralta.

"She's up in her room as usual," says Tuggle. "She'll want to see you, I'm sure, and talk to you about her prophecy. I don't suppose any of you are made out of gems?"

"We've been asked that before," comments Morningstar.

The food is excellent and the ale is hearty, and if Snokas finds it suboptimal he keeps that opinion to himself. Sagiro's appetite seems already to have diminished, and he's very quiet, often just staring out into space. The party chalk it up to post-Eye-possession trauma, but there's not much to do about it.

Halfway through the meal Dranko gets up suddenly and announces he wants to visit Mystic Peralta right then, and before anyone can object he's bounding up the stairs. (Kibi does grumble that Dranko might not be the best "face" for the Company, but isn't inclined to intervene.)

OR

Dranko knocks sharply on the door. A weary middle-aged woman's voice answers. "Come in?"

Dranko opens the door and sees a gray-haired woman in her late forties sitting cross-legged in front of a fireplace. "You're the Mystic **Peralta**, right?" asks Dranko.

"Yes," says the woman, breaking off her flame-gazing and turning to face him. "And you are... ?"

"If you were really a prophetess, wouldn't you know?" asks Dranko with a smirk.

"The Flame must not deem you important enough," says Peralta, smiling back at him.

"I'm Dranko Blackhope, and I happen to be with some people who are extremely important. We just got in, and they're finishing their dinner, but we'd like to talk to you about prophecy, if you don't mind. Something to do with gems. We'll be back up in fifteen or twenty minutes."

He turns to go, but Peralta calls after him: "Wait! Wait, wait, wait! You've talked to some of the others then, I take it?"

Dranko stops in the doorway and turns around. "We haven't heard the actual prophecy, so we want to hear it first hand," he says.

"Of course," says Peralta, her voice rising. "But... talk to me about gems."

"Well, first, could..."

Peralta springs to her feet and interrupts him. She almost shouts as she demands: "Talk. To me. About gems!"

"Couldn't we wait fifteen..."

"NO!" she cries. Then, calming down a bit: "I'm sorry, but this is important."

"Well, OK," says Dranko. "We heard that you have a prophecy. Something about rubies and amethysts and emeralds and sapphires."

"Do you have such a person with you?" Peralta asks breathlessly.

"Not necessarily. But we might know where we can get one."

Mystic Peralta visibly deflates. "I don't appreciate mockery," she says testily.

"I'm not mocking you," Dranko assures her. "We're just used to being suspicious. But..." And here he puts on as grave a demeanor as he can. "It's time," he says.

"But you won't talk to me about it now," says Peralta.

"Well, you might have noticed that I'm not the most diplomatic person. Some of the people I'm with should do the talking."

Peralta sighs. "I will be here when you're ready. In the meantime, I will consult with the Flame."

For a moment she stares intently at Dranko's face. "Umm... what are you looking at?" asks Dranko.

"I'm memorizing you," she says quietly. "The Flame will give me clearer answers if I can preserve your image in my mind."

"Right," says Dranko. He backs out of the door, then heads downstairs to rejoin the others.

OR SO

"She's on board, and all set," he announces. "She'll meet with us in fifteen or twenty minutes. She's a bit too serious, but seems nice enough. We should..."

"Hey there!" A high-pitched grating voice interrupts Dranko. The kobold has released his previous conversational companions and wandered over to their table.

"Hello," says Ernie, being polite.

"I'm **Nurgonik!**" says the kobold. "Who are you?"

"Nurgonik?" says Dranko. "Is that communicable?"

"What?"

"I'm Dranko," he sighs. Kobolds never get the joke.

"Nice to meetcha!" says the kobold energetically. "You the leader?"

"Nah," admits Dranko. "We..."

"You got the gem guy? Peralta's gem guy?"

"We've been asked that before," sighs Morningstar.

"Well, sure! That's what we're all waiting for!" Nurgonik is like an excited little kid. An ugly kid who doesn't smell so good.

"What happens then?" asks Kibi.

"I assume we all go into the Black Door and get the hell out of here!"

"Where'd you come from?" asks Dranko.

"My world doesn't exist anymore. The Way to it went gray. I had some friends, too, but they all got eaten by wolves. But I fought 'em off, and made it here." Then his voice takes on a reverent tone as he says, "That's when I met the prophetess. Have you talked to her? She knows everything!"

"Everything?" asks Aravis, skeptically.

"Everything!" affirms Nurgonik. "Well, she knows about how to get out. Isn't that enough? So, you gonna go fight? I can fight! Is one of you the gem person?"

"Do we look like gem people?" asks Dranko warily.

The kobold looks them over. "Maybe it's him," he says, pointing to Ernie. "Maybe he's all made of gems under that tin can!"

"So, you say you can fight," says Dranko. "Gotta weapon on ya?"

"Of course!"

"Let's see how well you can fight then," says Dranko, rising from his chair.

"I'm not gonna draw my cutlass in here!" squeaks Nurgonik. "Tuggle would chuck me out!"

"Just pretend," says Dranko, grinning. "Use a spoon."

"Dranko, why are you torturing him?" asks Aravis.

Dranko takes a menacing step toward Nurgonik, and the kobold backs up and gets into a defensive stance. From his body language, Dranko guesses he's a decent warrior, though not really on the same level as the Company.

"You're good," says Dranko approvingly.

“You bet I am!”

“Are there a lot of people around here who are ready to fight?” asks Kibi.

“A few, yeah,” answers Nurgonik. “Like him. Ox. That’s the guy talking to Kiro. Kiro’s the dwarf. He’s the one who came with Kell.”

Perhaps hearing his name, the tall, heavy-set **Ox** looks over at them. “Nurgonik!” he shouts, slurred with drunkenness.

“Leave those people alone. They’ve heard everything you’re gonna say. Probably more than once already. Jus’ leave ‘em alone for a few minutes, ’right?”

Nurgonik looks over and ducks his head. “Yeah. Sorry. Yeah, yeah.”

“Thanks, Ox!” calls Dranko. Nurgonik hops across the commons to another table and starts badgering someone else.

OR SO

In the modest inn room of the Mystic Peralta, she looks at the assembled Company crowded inside the door. “There are a lot of you,” she observes.

“Good things come in large numbers,” says Dranko.

Kibi introduces himself and the others, and Peralta looks carefully at each of them. They look at her expectantly, but after two tense minutes her shoulders droop and she sighs. “Ahh. I suppose not,” she says.

“Actually, you may be surprised,” says Ernie. “We have more to show you, but we want to hear the prophecy first.”

“All right,” says Peralta, though she looks unconvinced. “I am a servant of Na’Lil, the Seeing Flame. I was passing on a pilgrimage and staying at this very Inn, when it was Sliced away.

“On the night before we were trapped here, I had a prophetic dream. In that dream I was sitting in this room, as I am now, by the fire. The fire spoke to me. As with all people who visit me, I will share my dream with you. If you are not the saviors, I will ask you to go forth from this place and spread the word.

“The fire said that when I awoke, I would be trapped in amber. That I would appear in a room without walls, and yet with many doors. It said that most of the doors would lead to other lands, but that one door would be black, and it would lead to salvation and certain annihilation. The Flame said that I was to stay here and guard that door, and warn others of what was beyond it. That they needed to wait for the saviors to come. And I would know them, for they would be made of ruby, and emerald, and amethyst, and sapphire. They would go through the Black Door and find salvation.

“And when I woke up, here I was. It had all come true. So now, I wait.”

Jackylhunter: Very cool, but the Mystic is waiting for a person “made of” four gems – the party only have three, unless I’ve missed something.

Sagiro: I think you’ve missed that Scree’s eyes are sapphires.

Dherys Thal: Waiting for the mystic to blow a nut... This is disorienting to read – I wonder if the PCs feel the same way about playing through this planescape... I feel lost and groundless just reading it. Fantastic plot though... seriously.

And if ever Tapheon gets the best of Dranko, dude could always move to Innsmouth, MA... The evil lord must “hate pons” and rag about them “on the PA,” even though in the end there is “no” such thing as “phate.” I was hoping for anagrammatic insight and all I found was nonsense.

Piratecat: Well, it was worth a try – but any anagrams would be courtesy of WotC, because I think that Tapheon is mentioned briefly by name in the *Book of Vile Darkness* (yeah, Piratecat, that was a great Christmas gift for Sagiro. Doh...) or the *Manual of the Planes*. Everything else about him is courtesy of Sagiro.

Sagiro: In the interests of giving WotC the credit they’re due: I not only stole the name “Tapheon,” but also the name of his fortress and the rod *Despoiler Of Flesh*. The only things about him I made up were his physical appearance and his personality. He’s from the *Manual of the Planes*, but that doesn’t change the fact that the *Book of Vile Darkness* really was a great gift. Thanks!

KidCthulhu: We won’t be making that mistake with your birthday present!

By the way, today happens to be Sagiro’s birthday. Wish him a happy one, everybody!

the Jester: Happy Birthday, Sagiro!

Blackjack: Happy birthday, Sagiro!

Funeris: Happy b-day, Sagiro! May your days (and ours as well) be blessed with much more RBDM-goodness.

Graywolf-ELM: Happy Birthday.

el-remmen: Sagiro’s birthday is today? Ah-ha! That helps prove my theory that Cancers make the best DMs! (And I’m not saying that because my birthday is next week...)

KidCthulhu: Well Happy Birthday in advance! But Pkitty and I, both Tauruses (Tauri?) dispute your astrological assertion!

el-remmen: Bah! Now you're just being bull-headed!

LightPhoenix: Happy birthday Sagiro! Somebody needs to get you some roses...

carpedavid: What has always impressed me about Sagiro is that he manages to be a RBDM in a, well, geologic timeframe. Happy birthday!
(P.S.: Capricorns make good DMs, too.)

thatdarncat: Happy birthday Sagiro...

Kesho: Happy Birthday Sagiro!! I couldn't possibly get you anything that has the same value as your Story Hour has for us, so I'll just say it again – HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

Zaruthustran: Happy Birthday, Sagiro! As a gift I offer you another page view for this thread.

Sidereal Knight: Jeez... It's his birthday, and he's giving us a gift. Thanks for all your work on this Story Hour! Happy Birthday!

Micah: Happy Birthday! Thanks for the Story Hour!

coyote6: Happy Birthday, Sagiro!

Duncan Haldane: Sagiro, Happy Birthday, and thanks once again for the hours of enjoyment you have given to all your readers over the years you've been documenting this campaign. I started reading not long after you first started posting, way back when, and love every minute of it.

Sagiro: Well, my birthday is officially over. I "celebrated" by treating my players to a brutal combat, though all of the Company is still standing. The fight isn't over, but the tide may be turning in their favor, as Morningstar just laid down some *fire storm*-flavored smack that killed one of the prime villains' two powerful servants. But the main bad guy is still up along with the other of his spiked-chain-wielding, rage-inducing minions, there are *blade barriers* all over the place, and a few remaining [spoiler redacted] are still making a nuisance of themselves.

Anyway. 36 years. Am I really so old as that? I guess so. Thanks so much for all the kindly birthday wishes, and for your continued readership. For the record, the Story Hour is holding steady at about 10 runs behind. In real time, the Company first spoke with Mystic Peralta in late October of 2004.

Plane Sailing: Don't let anyone kid you, Sagiro – you are a spring chicken!

Naathez: I'm late. But Happy birthday Sagiro! Thanks for the wonderful Story Hour you bring us! You're really an inspiration, every time. Best wishes ALL the way from Italy!

Piratecat: Oh, last night's game was incredibly humbling. We didn't realize that the wussy combat we appeared to be having was an incredibly deadly ambush until far too late, and by that point we were scattered and demoralized without any kind of plan for withdrawing or attacking. It was (and still is) *ugly* with lots of missed opportunities. Compounding the problem, it appears that my dice don't read well to heat; the first five rolls I made (one of them critically important) were 5, 1, 2, 10 (go me!), and a 1. Needless to say, Dranko was not precisely the heroic paragon of the battle. In other words, it's a great fight. You guys don't want to know what my dreams were like last night.

It's okay, though; my game is Thursday, and payback is incredibly sweet.

Ashy: Oh! To live in Boston!

Knightfall1972: Just caught up on this Story Hour. Excellent stuff, as usual. The return of "Sagiro" (the NPC) was a fantastic twist. Also, I loved how Dranko called out the demon lord. That took guts. And Scree being the one in the prophecy is just great thinking on Sagiro's part.

QR 80

First Sight

The Mystic Peralta, having finished recounting her dream, looks expectantly at the Company.

"That creature with all the gems," says Kibi. "He's with us. He's my familiar."

Peralta opens her mouth, closes it, frowns. "You're a wizard?" she asks skeptically. "But you're a dwarf. I thought dwarves couldn't be wizards, by their very natures."

"We tell him he's a freak all the time," says Dranko.

"We're very rare," says Kibi, throwing an annoyed glance at Dranko. "My familiar is an earth elemental."

Peralta whispers almost reverently: "And he's made of gems?"

Kibi shifts uncomfortably at Peralta's eager look. "Well, no," he admits. "He's made of granite, though he has sapphires for eyes. But along the way he's found some... friends. Gem friends. Like an amethyst. Friend. Er." *I'm not explaining this very well.*

"Suffice to say," interrupts Aravis, "we believe that Scree fulfills your prophecy."

"I want to see him, then," says Peralta.

Kibi goes outside and has Scree hop into his *familiar pocket*. He then deposits his familiar on the floor of Peralta's room. The Mystic stares at Scree, searching, but says slowly, "I see sapphires, but no rubies, or emeralds, or..."

"There, inside," says Kibi, pointing. "Look there."

"Those are diamonds," says Peralta. Very impressive diamonds, admittedly, but..."

"They turn colors when their magic is turned on," says Kibi. "Then they glow and turn into other gems."

Peralta looks skeptical. She gestures as if waiting for Scree to demonstrate this transformation. *They're not talking, as usual,* says Scree.

After another minute of uncomfortable silence, Dranko clears his throat and says, "Kibi's telling you the truth. They opened up a Way for us to get here, that didn't exist before."

"Interesting," says Peralta, but her face tells a story of disappointment. "That's... interesting."

"It doesn't matter if you believe us or not," says Aravis. "We fulfill your prophecy, so we intend to go through the Black Door."

"Don't you think that..." begins Peralta.

"We don't think!" says Dranko earnestly. "We *know*."

"If you're sure," says Peralta. "All I do is warn people. I'm not going to stop you, no matter what I think. But dozens of people have gone before you, some of whom, like you, claimed they were the Saviors."

"Did Porridge have information about what was on the other side?" asks Morningstar.

"Pfffff," says Peralta dismissively. "Porridge's report was... remarkably free of detail. But he's alive, which is remarkable in and of itself, even if he's never been right since then."

"Can we heal him?" asks Dranko.

Peralta shrugs her shoulders. "No one else has been able to."

"When we go through the Black Door we can bring some of the others with us," says Dranko. "It'll be like a private army."

"I don't know," says Morningstar. "I don't want to get distracted by additional people we'll have to protect."

"I'm not saying we should bring kids along like it's a field trip," says Dranko. "But if, say, a bad-ass kobold with a spoon wanted to come with us..."

Peralta shakes her head. "If you're going to take others with you, I hope you're very sure you're the ones."

"Look," says Dranko. "This whole place... this 'room without walls'... is powered by one of those." He points to one of the Eyes of Moirel inside Scree. "A different one, I mean. It's very powerful, and sits in the center of this place like a spider in a web."

"And these Eyes have been spouting prophecy and generally running our lives for years now," says Morningstar.

"They brought us here to get the third one," adds Kibi.

"One of them turns purple, like amethyst, and one of them turns green, like an emerald, and one of them turns red, like ruby," says Aravis. "We've seen it. We *know*."

"I think I do believe you, and like I said, I won't stop you," says Peralta. "But... if it's not you, I wouldn't give much for your chances."

"One way or another, we're going through," says Ernie.

It appears that their interview with Mystic Peralta has run its course. As they leave her room and head down the hallway to the stairway, they start making plans to train here in Bakersfield, which seems like a well protected and well suited place for it.

Ernie is halfway down the stairs and looking out over the commons when it happens. Just inside the door stands a vision that stops his very breath. Her tabard is green and gold, emblazoned with the cornucopia of Yondalla and perfectly complementing her brilliant green eyes. The hilt of a halfling greatsword peeks up over her strong shoulder. She has the face of an angel, flowing blonde hair, and a pious aura that Ernie can feel from across the room.

The halfling woman also stops, her eyes drawn to Ernie. A delicate blush creeps up her fair cheeks, but she does not avert her gaze, and neither does he. They stare at each other, hearts racing, and the whole of the Wily Warthog fades away. Ernie is barely aware that his legs are moving, as he floats toward her, smitten.



Chit Chat

Now, a warning about this post. It's long, and nothing really happens. It's all dialogue. If you're reading the story to find out how the plot advances, you can save yourself some time and wait for the next one.

It only takes a second for Flicker to figure out he has no chance.

She's beautiful, no doubt about it, and he'd love to get to know her better, but even from across the room it's obvious where her attention lies. And Ernie – well, one look at him, and it's clear he'd best not get in the way. Flicker contents himself with an exaggerated sigh.

"Good luck, Ernie," he whispers wistfully.

Ernie has reached the bottom of the stairs, and the halfling woman has taken a few steps toward him, when she is interrupted by a small weedy man in green robes. She lets her gaze linger on Ernie for a final second before attending to this new arrival.

Dranko, watching things unfold with a keen interest, narrows his eyes. He tugs Grey Wolf by the sleeve. "Come on," he says.

Dranko and Grey Wolf weave across the floor of the commons until they've reached the small man and the halfling woman. Dranko puts his hand on the man's shoulder.

"Excuse me," he says loudly. "Can we talk to you for a minute? Ma'am, you can... er... go about your business." Dranko smiles reassuringly at the woman. She returns the smile, then hurriedly glances at Ernie, who is now rushing over. He's horrified that Dranko might, with the best of all intentions, be ruining everything.

The small man looks up at Dranko. He's wearing a medallion around his neck with a clock-face design. "Hello, hello," he says.

"We're new here," says Dranko, "and everyone says you're the one to talk to if we want to find out what's what."

"Really?" says the little man with a nervous smile. "They say that? About me? How nice! I'm **Terrence**."

"Hi Terrence. I'm Dranko. Let's go over to that corner table, and I'll buy you a drink."

"You can tell us what's going on here," says Grey Wolf, nodding.

They depart just as Ernie arrives. The others have followed at a discreet distance, still mildly suspicious of anything that looks too good to be true.

"I'm sorry," says Ernie, unable to keep the worry from his voice. "Did my friend say anything offensive?"

"No, he... no. He seemed to want to talk to Terrence most urgently, though."

Ernie breathes an inward sigh of relief, and gestures to the retreating Dranko. "He's a diamond in the rough, and his heart's in the right place, but sometimes his mouth isn't engaged to his brain."

"And other times it is engaged," mutters Kibi, overhearing. "And then he's even worse!"

"I'm Ernest!" says Ernie, remembering his manners. "At your service."

"I'm **Yoba**," answers the woman, reaching out to shake Ernie's hand. Flicker smiles ruefully as the pair's hands stay clasped a moment longer than is strictly necessary for an introductory handshake. Yoba seems to realize this too, after a few seconds have passed, and lets go of Ernie with a blush. "Ernest, are you preparing for battle?" she asks, glancing at his plate mail.

"Almost constantly," says Ernie. "You see, we've been wandering the Slices quite a bit, and we have to stay ready."

"I understand," says Yoba, nodding.

"But it is awfully hot in this tin can, now that you mention it," says Ernie.

"Then why don't you take it off..." begins Yoba, who then stops, embarrassed. Ernie can't help but think how Yoba's face becomes even more lovely when she blushes. "I mean, you're quite safe here," she finishes, smiling shyly. "Do you do a lot of fighting?"

"Yes," says Ernie. "My friends and I. We spend a lot of time saving the world."

"Really?" asks Yoba, her eyes widening. "What is your world called?"

Thornir Alekeg: And she smells like freshly baked bread?

Piratecat: Ernest, meet Yoba. Yoba, meet Ernest. Dranko, meet nausea.

KidCthulhu: *singing*

Met her one day in the Wily Warthog
I asked her her name
and in a light, high voice she said Yoba.
Y-O-B-A, Yoba. Yo-yo-yo Yoba.

Tamlyn: Great. The last thing I expected this morning was a "Weird Al" parody.

Jacky/hunter: Nooooooo one expects a "Weird Al" Parody...

KidCthulhu: Actually, it's a Kinks parody. Wierd Al just did the same thing. I'd sue, but he kinda did it first!

Plane Sailing: The first song that came to my mind was:

Yo-ba, she was a show-girl
With yellow flowers in her hair and a tabard cut to there
She ate meringues, and drank hot cha
And while she tried to be a star, Ernie always tended bar
Across a crowded floor, they worked from 8 till 4
They were young and they had each other
Who could ask for more?

KidCthulhu: Thanks, Plane. Now I'll be singing *Copacabana* all day. Grrr.

"Abernia," says Ernie. "And we're not actually from a Slice. I mean, our world wasn't Sliced off like the rest. My friends and I, we came here on purpose."

"Why?" asks Yoba.

"To change history, and return our world to the way it should be."

Yoba looks genuinely impressed, and Ernie feels a surge of confidence. Steeling himself to do something extremely brave, something he's never done before in his life, he takes a deep breath. "Can I... can I buy you a drink?" he asks.

Yoba's face lights up. "Yes, of course! That's very kind of you." She looks embarrassed again for a minute, and then says softly. "What I really enjoy here is milk."

"I love milk!" exclaims Ernie, delighted. "Though we don't drink it very often since we travel so much."

"Have you seen the cows here?" asks Yoba. "They have six legs, but the milk is excellent."

"Six legs!" says Ernie. "That means two extra joints per cow."

"Oh," says Yoba. "Are you a cook?"

"Every time I get the chance," says Ernie proudly.

"I do some cooking, but I'm not very good at it," says Yoba, and her modesty seems genuine. "I serve Yondalla in more... martial ways."

"Oh, me too!" says Ernie, eager to assure there's nothing inherently wrong with well-intentioned violence. "I mean, I cook, but I also fight. And heal, sometimes. Oh, let me get our milks. I think I see a free table. I'll meet you there."

Ernie wafts in blissful reverie to the bar, studiously avoiding looking at Dranko.



"So, what's with the holy symbol?" Dranko points at Terrence's olive-colored medallion, which shows a stylized clock face.

"Oh, that," says Terrence. "Well, you see, I'm a priest of Noofr. God of Cleanliness and Punctuality."

"Cleanliness *and* punctuality!" exclaims Dranko. "You don't say?"

The half-orc whips out a blacktallow cigar and lights up, which sends Terrence into a mild fit of coughing. "I'm a cleric of Delioch, God of Healing."

"We have several healing gods," says Terrence.

"Several?" Dranko raises an eyebrow.

"Yes. They are among the Thousand Gods of Corrish."

"A thousand gods," says Dranko, sounding impressed. Then he asks, "So, what do you do with dirty stuff?"

Terrence blinks. "Clean it, of course."

"And what if cleaning stuff makes you late?" asks Dranko.

Terrence sighs and squints at Dranko. "Are you sure you're a cleric?"

"Yeah, of course!" answers Dranko, taking another puff of his cigar. "I've even got a holy symbol around here somewhere..."

"He is," confirms Grey Wolf. "Believe it or not."

"Yes. Well." Terrence may in fact be starting to feel as if he's being mocked. "What is it again that you wanted to know?"

"Tell us about the portals in and out, and the people, and... oh, your thoughts about time," says Dranko, returning to acting serious for moment. "It must be fascinating for someone who worships a God of Punctuality to be in a place where time doesn't actually pass. You can't be late!"

Terrence smiles again. "Oh, no no no! *Relative* time still passes, and one can *still* be late. It's *aging* that doesn't happen. That's different. It's winter again, for instance. I've been here a year, and the seasons most definitely change. Anyhow, I help Prinn, in the tending of the sick and wounded. I... I do have some abilities to heal."

"What's the sickest person you ever healed?" asks Dranko.

"Well, Crieger had a terrible rash. He arrived with it. I'll bet he picked it up from the Dark Dwarves on his way here."

"Dark Dwarves?" asks Dranko. He leans forward a bit, since this is the first thing Terrence has said that he actually finds interesting.

"Yes, Dark Dwarves. I understand that one of the Ways out from the lions' Slice goes underground, and evil dwarves live there. Now, I personally came from one of the Ways that's gray now; the one that went gray just a few months ago. So, my plan is just to stay here, until something happens, and then find my way home somehow."

"Ever had any experience in combat?" asks Dranko, finally getting to the point.

"Er... a little," says Terrence, taken aback. "I try to avoid it whenever possible," he adds, laughing. "I prefer to heal than to need healing."

"How would you feel about being in the back line of a battle, helping heal people who are injured?" Dranko prompts. "Saving lives, that sort of thing?"

"Well, I... I don't... don't have any experience with that, so I..."

"Oh, I bet you'd be great! Grey Wolf, don't you think?"

"Yes, I think so," says Grey Wolf, trying to look like he means it.

"Are you planning on having a... a battle? Here?" asks Terrence nervously.

"No, not here," says Dranko truthfully.

"Well, that's good," says Terrence, relieved. "There hasn't been fighting here, not since I've arrived. The lions protect one of the Ways, and nothing comes from the Ocean Way. Nothing comes out of the slime tunnels either, except Garg."

"Garg?" asks Grey Wolf.

"You haven't met Garg the Great?" asks Terrence. It's strange to hear such obvious sarcasm come from the inoffensive little man. "He's an orcish wizardly person who thinks very highly of himself. I don't think highly of him at all. He's a pompous a... Excuse me. He's pompous. And annoying."

Dranko sneezes, and quick as lightning Terrence whips out a handkerchief and hands it to him. "Can never have too many," he says, smiling.

Drank blows his nose. "You want it back?" he asks, extending the soaking cloth.

"No! No, really, keep it."

"You sure?"

"Yes!"



Ernie brings back the milks to the table where Yoba awaits. *She's so beautiful. And she likes milk!*

"Thank you!" says Yoba, smiling, and when she takes her cup from him their hands touch briefly, sending a jolt of electricity through Ernie's body.

"So, how do *you* come to be here?" asks Ernie, after he's recovered with a sip of milk.

"Same as everyone else... except you. A bit of my world was sliced away. It was just me. I was off scouting... wandering, I mean... by myself."

"So you're here without your home, your family... without anything, or anyone?" says Ernie, horrified.

"Yes," says Yoba, though she doesn't seem as distraught about it as Ernie does on her behalf. "I do often wonder what my friends and family think has happened to me. But I'm sure I'll find my way back there someday. My country is called Evergreen."

"That's a nice name," says Ernie. "I'm from Dingman's Ferry myself. It's just a small village, but it's home, and I like it. But... what happened then?"

"When I found a Way out of my Slice of Evergreen, I found myself in a very strange place," says Yoba. "It was a world that was alive. A strange folded... being, I think. It's hard to describe. It... pushed me around in its folds, until I was forced through a second Way, and into where the lions live. And then to here. And this seems like a good place to me. I don't know how I feel about Peralta, but I don't entirely discount what she says. I thought I could do some good here. I have some modest healing skills, so I help out Prinn and Terrence. And in case there's ever any incursions, I can fight. I'm... I'm quite skilled. At fighting. So, here I am. But your life has probably been much more interesting than mine. Tell me about your adventures with your friends!"



The rest of the Company can't help but smile at the sight of Ernie animatedly gesturing to an attentive Yoba, as he tells her the tales of their various quests. Only Morningstar, always suspecting, worries that Ernie might end up giving away secrets that even a paladin of Yondalla oughtn't be told. But even she finds it difficult to throw any water on Ernie right now.

"You see that halfling over there?" says Dranko to Terrence. "He looks self-effacing, but he's our leader. He's the most qualified fighting man I've ever met. A born leader. If anyone asks, spread the word."

Aravis can't help but add: "In fact, he slew all his rivals back home." The others nod, trying their darndest not to laugh.

"But he's a man of good heart," adds Dranko, when Terrence starts to look nervous again. "So, how do you reckon we can help around here?"

"What can you do?" asks Terrence, casting a last worried glance at Ernie.

"We can heal," says Dranko. "We're very good at healing."

"We usually have enough healing to meet the town's need," says Terrence. "Can you... uh, can you farm?"

"Not very well," admits Dranko. "But I can do *this*. Want another drink?"

Dranko brings up his whip, and quick as anything curls the end around a mug of ale on the tray of a passing barmaid. With a deft flick he snaps the mug into his empty hand with only a minimum of spillage, and hands it to Terrence with a smile.

"Er... thank you," says Terrence. "I don't... I don't know that we *need* people for that, but... most impressive, I assure you. Um. If you don't farm, can you build?"

"I can whip people to make them work harder," says Dranko, leering. "Does that count?"

"That's awful!" exclaims Terrence.

"I'm kidding," says Dranko, shaking his head. "I only whip bad guys."

"Kidding, of course! Ha ha!" Terrence's laugh has reached new heights of nervousness.

"What he's really good at is making off-color jokes," says Grey Wolf.

"And blustering," adds Aravis. "Don't forget blustering."

A tall, rangy man, standing almost six and a half feet and moving like a warrior, comes up and puts his hand on Terrence's shoulder. "Terrence isn't boring you to death, is he?" asks the man, flashing a rakish smile.

"No, not at all," says Dranko. "Terrence has been incredibly helpful."

"Jack!" says Terrence, though his smile is forced. "Er... hi!"

"Incredibly helpful?" says **Jack**. "Good for you, Terrence!" Jack slaps Terrence on the back so hard that the little priest rocks forward and spills some of his ale.

"Don't you think that's a little rude?" asks Dranko flatly.

"Oh, it's all in good fun," laughs Jack.

Dranko's not smiling. "Terrence, are you having fun with this guy?" he asks.

Terrence looks from Jack, to Dranko, back to Jack again, wondering what the right answer is.



Ernie, noticing this exchange on the other side of the room, pauses in his narrative to ask Yoba, "Who's that?"

"Oh, that's Jack," says Yoba. "He's kind of a scoundrel, but I think he means well."

"Well, I don't like to see little guys like that get pushed around."

"Jack's always looking to get ahead," says Yoba. "He looks for the angle. He doesn't trust people very much, and doesn't expect others to trust him. But he's not a bad sort."

"I'll bet he and Dranko would get along like a house on fire," says Ernie. "I mean, with people around them screaming and running away."

Yoba laughs. It's the most beautiful sound Ernie has ever heard.

"Dranko," says Ernie with a sigh. "He seems like quite the character. But like I said, his heart's in the right place. And I should know... I heal it often enough!"

Yoba laughs again, and Ernie is positively flushed with happiness that she enjoys his jokes. That, or the milk is going to his head.



"Jack," says Dranko, sounding as serious as he can. "You might want to be careful pickin' on guys smaller than you. Otherwise I might have to get my friend over there to beat you up." He points at Ernie.

Jack looks over, but doesn't take the bait. "I'm not picking on anyone, sir," he says, just as seriously. "I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. My name is Jack."

"Dranko Blackhope." He stands up, and the rest of the Company also introduce themselves.

When he shakes Aravis's hand, Jack says "Nice eyes," but otherwise seems unimpressed. As he shakes Kibi's hand, he says, "I had a good friend who was a dwarf. He died in combat, like a true warrior. Nearly died myself in that fight."

As Jack pulls up a chair, Dranko asks, "So, Jack, where you from? And what were you doing when you got Sliced?"

"I was on a job," says Jack. "A... requisitioning assignment."

"Oh!" says Dranko. "Stealing stuff! You could have just told us you were a sneak thief. Doesn't bother us!"

"I'm not just a sneak thief," says Jack with an easy smile. "I have many abilities."

"It looks like you're a warrior as well," says Grey Wolf, and Jack nods.

(Ernie is now telling Yoba about the time Grey Wolf was run down by an animated carriage in Tev. Yoba is absolutely entranced.)

"So, you've talked to Peralta, I take it," says Jack. "Whaddya think? What's her angle?"

"Her angle?" says Dranko, raises his eyebrows. "She's not charging people, is she? And I don't think she has a hankering for gems, and is just trying to smoke 'em out."

"That thought had occurred to me," admits Jack.

"I think she's what she seems to be," says Aravis.

"Tell you one thing," says Dranko, looking carefully at Jack's expression. "If her savior actually *does* show up, I want a piece of that action. What about you?"

"If I had a good reason to think she's on the up and up, and we really were going to get out of here," says Jack casually. "I've only been here a few weeks. Of the four of us who were on the job, I'm the only one left."

"What, you kill 'em and take their stuff?" asks Dranko with a laugh. Jack doesn't look amused.

"That's not funny," he says, glowering.

"I'm sorry they died," says Dranko, quickly becoming serious.

"Yeah, me too. They were killed by... duergar, I think they're called. Evil dwarves."

"Yeah, well, Kibi here's not evil," says Dranko. "You can tell by the way he braids his beard."

"I think you can tell something like that just by looking at a person," says Jack. "You for instance. I don't think you're evil either, even though you look it."

Dranko notices that Jack's got a rapier, and four obviously magical daggers strapped to his chest. He points to a distant support beam near a wall of the common room, where there aren't any patrons. "Say. I'll bet you a silver piece that you can't hit that knot – the one that looks like a rabbit – with one of your daggers."

Jack glances over his shoulder. With an easy motion he pulls a dagger from its holster and flips it backhanded, not even bothering to watch its flight. It strikes dead in the center of the knot. While the Company stare, he holds up his hand. The dagger quivers, pulls itself free of the post, and flies back into his hand.

"That was worth it!" says Dranko, genuinely impressed.

"Keep the money," says Jack, smiling. "But yeah, I'd want a 'piece of the action' if I thought there was something to it. Course, I'd have to be awfully convinced. I assume you've seen the... remains."

"Remains?" asks Grey Wolf. "No, we haven't. What remains?"

"The stuff they've pulled out of the Black Door. The bits tied to ropes they've pulled out. Limbs, mostly. Torsos. I don't think they have any heads. The remains are buried – I've never seen them. Peralta's little guy, who runs around keeping the torches lit... he buries 'em."

¤¤

"And then there was this giant insane dragon!" says Ernie. "Flicker almost got eaten, and..."

Yoba has not looked away during the entire tale, a fact which has not gone unnoticed by Ernie, and which really *is* going to his head like strong drink. Morningstar decides that *someone* ought to be over there with them, to stop Ernie before he can say something that's supposed to be a secret. "I think I'll join those two," she says, pointing at the pair of halflings.

"Good luck," says Dranko. "Should we tie a rope to you?"

"We can count to ten Abernathies and pull you out," says Kibi.

Morningstar laughs, and wanders over to where Ernie is telling his tale.

"...and Aravis was able to stop the Emperor from invading," says Ernie. "So all that was left to do was the mopping up. It was a huge battle, but we won!"

"Ernest, may I join you?" Morningstar has appeared at their table. Ernie hadn't noticed her approach.

"Of course!" says Ernie, shocked out of his reverie. "Yoba, this is my friend Morningstar. She's a priestess of Ell."

"Goddess of Darkness and Dreams," adds Morningstar.

"Well, any friend of Ernie's..." says Yoba pleasantly. "Ernie has been telling me the most amazing stories of your adventures! I assume you were there with the insane dragon, while armies were pouring through magical gateways. I've never heard anything so fantastic! I've been in my share of battles, but nothing like that. Incredible! You must be famous heroes back in Abernia."

Hearing it put like that, Ernie does suddenly think that he may have been saying too much. Grasping for a more innocuous subject, he says, "Well, we *did* have a parade..."

"You did? A parade? For you?" Yoba's eyes are shining with admiration.

"For all of us," Ernie adds hastily. "Morningstar here was in it, too. Er... so, what kind of battles have you been in?"

"Mostly battles against the goblin empire," says Yoba. "It's the biggest threat to Evergreen. The goblins control almost a third of Treya. And I'm... well, I'm... I'm the Commander of the Southern Border."

Now it's Ernie's turn to gawk. "Really? And I've been babbling away all this time. I'm just an adventurer."

"I've killed lost of goblins," continues Yoba. "But I also spend a lot of time in tents, looking at maps, and advising the general as to what the battle plans should be. I was on a scouting expedition for him when I ended up here. I like to see the terrain for myself, and since we occupy most of the high ground along the border, I thought I'd get the lay of the land. See if I could spot anything about goblin troop disposition or formations. I could see a long way from the high hills, and we had plenty of sentries on the hillsides, so I wasn't in any personal danger."

Orichalcum:

Whatever Yoba wants, Yoba gets,
And little man, little Yoba wants you
Make up your mind to have, no regrets
Recline yourself, resign yourself, you're through.
I always hit, what I aim for,
And your heart and soul, is what I came for.
Whatever Yoba wants, Yoba gets
Take off your plate, don't you know you can't win...

KidCthulhu: Never was a musical more aptly named.
Damn Yankees. (Says KidC from Boston!)

Everett: What the hell??

Len: [<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0051516/>]

"How many people do you command?" Morningstar asks.

"Directly, or down through the hierarchy?" asks Yoba, starting to blush again.

"The whole group," says Morningstar.

"I'd say... about twenty thousand?"

"Twenty thousand!" squawks Ernie. "I'm lucky if I can just get Dranko to do what I ask!"

"There are plenty of people with greater fighting prowess than me," says Yoba, clearly self-conscious. "It's humbling to command them. But I have a good head for strategy. I... I studied a long time."

Across the room the rest of the Company are laughing uproariously, making "ten Abernathy" jokes and wondering if Morningstar herself now needs rescuing. Yoba can't hear what they're saying, but smiles at Ernie and Morningstar. "You have nice friends," she says.

"Yes, I do!" says Ernie, waving at the rest of the Company. This causes them to come over, and Yoba can't help but stare for a minute at Aravis's eyes. Then she quickly apologizes for staring.

"Were you born that way?" she asks, fascinated.

"No. It was the result of a magical ritual."

"I think I understand," says Yoba. "We have several wizards in the military. One of them has strange skin. Not in the same way you do, but it was from an experiment that went awry."

Morningstar starts to introduce Yoba as 'Commander,' but the halfling interrupts. "Just Yoba, please. Yoba Stoutheart. I'm not commanding anyone here."

"I'm Sir Dranko, of the Spire Guard. Like Ernie here."

"You're a knight?" asks Yoba, turning to Ernie. "You didn't tell me that! What's the Spire Guard? Tell me all about it!"

In the middle of the explanation, a stout dwarf comes marching over to their now crowded table. He's not armored, but wears a hammer at his belt and what looks like a holy symbol around his neck. Its design is a plain stone shield. "Hey there!" he says gruffly.

Yoba turns and smiles at the newcomer. "**Kiro**, welcome. You should meet my new friends."

After the round of introductions, Kibi says, "I haven't seen many dwarves around here."

"Yeah, me neither," says Kiro. "Nice to see a true dwarf. Better than a duergar!"

"Where are you from?" asks Kibi. "Are you a warrior?"

"Decent enough, but I'm a priest by trade," says Kiro.

"Of Moradin?"

"No. Of Vigus, the Defender. But I have fought plenty, including some nasty stuff just to get here. First it was yeti in some snowy Slice, and then some wyverns. You ever fought a yeti?"

"Not yeti," says Dranko with a smirk, and sending Kiro into howls of laughter.

"How do you fight against yeti?" asks Kibi.

"Same way I fight most things," says Kiro, grinning. "Off with their kneecaps!"

Dranko thinks, *If he were any more dwarfish, he'd vomit rocks.*

"I was down in the tunnels under our mountain, me and a buddy," explains Kiro, when Kibi presses him for more details. "On our way to spar, so I had a weapon on me, thank Vigus. Anyhow, I look back after he doesn't respond to a joke, and he's just standing there not moving. And I couldn't reach him, like there was an invisible wall between us. Just a Slice boundary, though I didn't know it at the time. So, I figured I'd go get help. But damned if there wasn't a blue Way blocking the tunnel in the other direction. I went through it, and found myself somewhere cold, snow everywhere. That's where I fought the yeti. That was about three years ago. I help out Prinn and Terrence, just like Yoba here. It's a decent enough place, but I miss my home."

"Say, isn't there an orc around here somewhere?" asks Dranko, figuring a dwarf would know.

"Yeah," says Kiro, who starts laughing again at the thought. "He's... heh... he's learned to stay away from me. Heh. Not that I ever laid a hand on him, mind you."

"You have a problem with orcs then?" challenges Dranko.

"I don't have a problem with *you*, if that's what you mean," says Kiro. The dwarf goes on to describe the slime tunnels. The slimes, he says, are supposedly alive, and will attack anyone who tries to traverse the subterranean ways, or so he's heard.

"'Garg the Great' came out of them pretty much unharmed," says Kiro, scratching under his beard. "He always claims he's gonna go back, get a whole bunch of orcs, and take over the place. But he's full of hot air."

At the Company's request, Kiro gives them directions to where they can find Porridge. "Has a little house," says Kiro. "Keeps to himself. Prinn brings him food, to make sure he eats. He's crazy."

"Curable?" asks Morningstar.

"Prinn doesn't think so," answers Kiro, shaking his head. "She says something in his mind is broken, and no one can fix it."

"Well, wonderful meeting you," says Kibi. The party decide to pay Porridge a visit right then, and all rise from the table.

"Poor guy," says Yoba. "Prinn has tried her most powerful curatives. And I've heard that a priest who is no longer here tried the prayer of *heal* on him, and even that did not restore him."

"We have some things we can try," says Ernie. "Would you like to come with us?"

"Of course!" answers Yoba.

And so they take their leave of the Wily Warthog, to see what they can learn from the one man who's returned alive from beyond the Black Door.

Jackylhunter: Cool stuff! Ernie and Yoba, sittin' in a tree, K.I.S.S.I.N.G....

RangerWickett: Sagiro, I didn't realize until today that not all the Slices have been stuck there the same amount of time. One guy's only been there for a few weeks, but some folks have been stuck for decades. Is that true? Does the group know why?

Sagiro: At this point in the story, no, the Company doesn't know why. They find out a few runs later, but that would be a spoiler.

LightPhoenix: [She's so beautiful. And she likes milk!] Hilarious! Go Ernie!!

Ten bucks says she's evil.

Fade: So, Yoba. New party member, or Black Circle spy (carefully disguised for maximum appeal to the most trusting party member)? Now taking guesses.

shilsen: No, no – her being evil would not be RBDM enough. She'll be completely, purely good. And the PCs will end up having to fight her anyway...

RangerWickett: She's lactose intolerant, but was too polite to decline milk. *dramatic music*

Cerebral Paladin: My theory is that she's one of Tapheon's succubae. She's just a little too perfect and follows on the heels of one of Tapheon's servants teasing Ernie about his lack of romantic experience. It seems like the perfect way to both insinuate a spy/agent, and to be extraordinarily cruel to a kind and good halfling – exactly what Tapheon would want to do. The only real sticking points I see are timing (how long has Yoba been in this Slice relative to when Tapheon's minions picked up the Company?) and the aura of good, although it seems like that could be explained by some form of empathic projection making everyone think that you feel good (probably with an *undetectable alignment* effect up as additional cover).

KidCthulhu: Man, you people are suspicious. What's so strange about a beautiful halfling maiden falling for Ernie? He's quite a catch, you know. Rich, single, a good cook, ennobled, powerful. Of course, you do get regular visits from Dranko with the package, but the course of true love ne'er did run true.

Morte: The milk has obviously gone to your head.

coyote6: It sounds like one of three things: (a) A setup for the Company to fight a band of rival adventurers (e.g., they are all somehow convinced that the Company is up to No Good, and Must Be Stopped; combat ensues). (b) A bunch of friendly types for the PCs to get to like, that will then be slaughtered mercilessly (thus demonstrating for the Company what not to do). Or: (c) the Company *really* needs reinforcements, and almost everyone is taking (or getting as a bonus feat) Leadership, and are about to collect their cohorts (Ernie -> Yoba, Kibi -> Kiro, Dranko -> Jack or Garg, etc.). Or, of course: (d) All of the above.

Piratecat: You forgot: (e) None of the above.

Zaruthustran: Or: (f) These new NPCs are the bizarro world mirror images of the Company. Sagiro never did say whether or not they have goatees...

Kid Charlemagne: It does kind of have a *Shaun of the Dead* vibe, where they're walking in the alley and run into the mirror-versions of themselves, all heading out to bash in some zombie skulls with post-hole diggers and shovels.

Piratecat: Nope, I put in a vote for good old-fashioned adventuring types... lots of them, of different shapes and sizes. Like the Eye of the Storm, they just happened to congregate in this spot because there's a woman who claims to know what's going on.

The really rat-bastardy thing is what happens *next*.

weiknarl: Someone made up of rubies, emeralds, amethysts, and sapphires shows up?

Step Into the Lightless Room**Memory of a Dark Place**

“He’s not raving mad,” explains Yoba, as the Company walk down the main street of Bakersfield. “He’s just... quiet. Most of the time he barely seems aware of what’s going on around him.”

Morningstar has a notion to cast *greater restoration* on Porridge, but not if it’s already been tried. To find out, the Company stop first at the small shrine of Hol the Harvest God, where the local priestess **Prinn** tends to the sick and hurt. They find her in a small chamber warmed by a fire, brewing a pot of sleeping draught for an ill patient. She looks like she’s in her mid-thirties, but of course in Het Branoi there’s no way to be sure of a person’s age. There is an air of matronly competence around her.

Prinn leaves her patient in the care of a young acolyte and motions for the Company to join her in her office. “We were talking about Porridge,” explains Morningstar, “and wondering what’s been done for him already. We’ve heard that someone has tried the prayer of *heal* on him. Has anyone, to your knowledge, taken the step of a *greater restoration*? ”

“Heavens no!” exclaims Prinn. “Few people who have come through Bakersfield have had that kind of power, and none have felt that Porridge was worth the... personal cost.”

“How long was Porridge on the other side of that door?” asks Dranko.

“Only a second or two, I think,” says Prinn. “But no one knows for sure. We’ve gleaned that from Porridge’s mutterings in the years since. Such a tragic thing.”

“More bad decisions are made when drunk,” says Ernie.

Prinn nods in agreement. “They had no ropes, even. Not that that would have helped. Young Sturt stands watch over the Black Door now, to stop other people from becoming drunk and doing the same.”

“But you do let sober people through,” says Dranko. “Tell us about the remains.”

Prinn looks distinctly uncomfortable at this question. She licks her lips, and decides there’s no way to be delicate about it. “Usually it looks as though – and I’m sorry if this is upsetting – usually it’s just torsos. The limbs and heads are pulled or twisted off. Not sliced like with a weapon. Now, usually nothing comes back, but when something does, it’s... torsos.

“There is a stand of trees about a hundred feet from the Black Door,” she continues. “Many people have tried tying ropes to them, especially after one person, holding a rope for another, was yanked through as well. It never amounts to anything. We’ve left the bloody ropes hanging from the trees there, as a warning.”

“Anyone ever tried to go through invisible?” presses Dranko.

“Folks have tried all sorts of things,” answers Prinn. “About ten years ago, a large party of adventuring types decided they would all go in together. They cast many spells on themselves, made many preparations. They talked a lot about ‘buffing,’ which I guess means something to you heroic types. Some were invisible. Some had other wards and protections and such. They went in, certain and brave, despite the warnings of Peralta. I think one of them who had a collection of gems thought she was the one foretold. None of them ever came back.”

“Never?” says Dranko, musing. “You know what that means? All of their stuff is waiting on the other side!”

“Yes, I suppose so,” says Prinn, frowning. “But you should mourn for the deceased, and not talk about looting them. Dozens of people have gone in over the last twenty years, despite Peralta’s warnings. We expect that all of them are dead, may Hol grant them peace.”

“Joke,” mutters Dranko.

“What about Porridge?” asks Kibi. “What did he see?”

“It’s hard to get him to talk about it... or about anything at all. Whatever he saw, it ruined his mind. I’ve talked to him on many occasions, trying to ease his discomfort and distress. He talked about a curtain. He talked of thick ropes... and that he didn’t see or hear anything at all. It was completely black.”

One Certain Step feels his throat go dry.

go with them to your certain doom

and be the one in the lightless room...

...light must rive the last of five

but don't expect to come back alive

Dranko comes to the same conclusion, and puts a comforting hand on Step's shoulder.

"Have you tried speaking with any of the dead who have come back?" asks Morningstar.

"No. And I'm not going to, and neither are you," says Prinn firmly. "Hol doesn't hold with necromancy, and neither do I. I've buried the remains, and I will ask you *not* to dig them up."

Dranko looks offended. "What kind of cleric do you take me for?"

"I didn't take you for a cleric, sir," says Prinn. "My apologies. It was the joke you made about looting the dead that threw me off."

Dranko glowers. "I have no interest in looting the dead, but I do want to eliminate whatever's *making* them dead."

"I appreciate that," says Prinn. "Do you think you're the ones from the prophecy?"

"Lord knows we have as good a chance as anyone else," says Dranko.

"You'll need a *better* chance than anyone else," points out Prinn.

"Well, thank you for your help," says Morningstar. "We're going to talk to Porridge."

"Please don't stress him unduly. He's in a delicate state."

❧ ☽

A light snow falls on the packed dirt streets of Bakersfield. The Company stand shivering outside a small dark house as the white sun sets. Dranko knocks on the door, but no one answers.

After two more knocks Dranko simply opens the door and peeks inside. A trace of dusk's light spills inside, revealing a single plain room with sparse furniture. There is a musty smell. Dranko's darkvision spots right away that a man is inside, sprawling out of a small chair on the far side of the only ground floor room. "Knock knock!" says Dranko cheerfully.

The man tilts his head slightly, but though his gaze seems to fall across the crowd on his threshold, he shows no sign of interest.

"Mr. **Porridge**?" says Kibi. "Would you mind if we came in and visited with you for a while?"

Enough time passes for the Company to start wondering if he's unconscious, or asleep with his eyes open, when he stirs and answers in a small slurred voice, "Come in. Please."

Slowly so as not to alarm him, the Company file into Porridge's house. Ernie reaches him first. "Are you hungry?" he asks the man.

"Hungry?" he repeats softly. "Hungry? Hungry? What? What... what..."

"I'd like to try to help you," says Morningstar, kneeling beside his chair.

"Uh huh," says Porridge, though this utterance doesn't sound like an assent.

"Would that be okay?" asks Morningstar.

Pause. "I dunno," says Porridge at last, but he nods as he speaks, which is enough for Morningstar.

For someone in his mental state, Porridge is not physically decrepit. There are signs of meals eaten, and he himself has clearly been bathed on a regular basis. His hair has been recently cut, and he is clean shaven. Terrence, they suppose, has been tending to his needs. While Morningstar begins preparing to cast the spell of *greater restoration*, Ernie tries to make small talk, but Porridge is mostly unresponsive. A few times he whispers answers to simple questions, or jerkily takes sips of water from a wooden cup that someone had set beside his chair. The only thing that seems to catch his interest is Aravis's unusual face.

"Funny eyes," he says, staring. "Funny eyes." His breathing starts to quicken. Aravis stands without speaking and leaves the room, respecting Prinn's request not to agitate him. Porridge stares after him.

"Prinn thought maybe we could help you," says Morningstar, distracting him.

"I dunno, I dunno," Porridge whispers.

"I don't know either, but I'd like to try," says Morningstar gently.

"I feel fine," says Porridge weakly. "I feel fine." He turns to the empty space where Aravis had been standing. "Go away, please."

Morningstar casts her spell. When she finishes there is a surge of energy from healer to patient, and a swift chill runs through Morningstar's bones.

Porridge's eyes pop open, suffused with a heretofore absent clarity. Calmly he observes the assembled company, and his gaze lingers notably on their weapons. He addresses Morningstar, whose hand is still on his forehead. "Who are you?" he asks calmly.

Morningstar removes her hand, her breath coming in gasps from the effort of the spell. "My name is Morningstar," she answers.

"May I ask what you... what all of you... are doing in my house?"

"You've been ill for a very long time," says Morningstar.

"Have I? Would you... would you mind if I asked you to leave? I don't remember asking eight armed strangers into my home."

"What's the last thing you *do* remember?" asks Dranko.

"I remember..." he trails off, his expression puzzled.

"You were drunk," prompts Dranko helpfully.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Do you remember being drunk?"

"I remember waking up," says Porridge, dredging up memories. "I remember going down to the Warthog. I was with **Tom** and **Crows**. We were having a good time, but I don't recall the particulars. I'll have to ask them."

Dranko opens his mouth to speak, but in the back of his mind he hears Ernie's reprimanding voice. *Dranko, how about next time you let me comfort the grieving?*

"You were talking about going through the Black Door," says Morningstar.

"Yes. We were," says Porridge. "We must have decided against it, fortunately,"

"Er..." says Dranko.

"Are you telling me I went through the Black Door?" Porridge sounds incredulous.

"Yep," says Dranko, looking for a bright side to share. "You're the only person who's gone through the Black Door and lived."

"Well, me and Tom and Crows," says Porridge.

"You're the only person who's gone through the Black Door and lived," repeats Dranko. "I'm sorry."

"This isn't funny," says Porridge. "Who are you people? Didn't I ask you to leave?"

"Prinn can explain," says Ernie.

"I should hope so," says Porridge, and Ernie dashes out the door to fetch her.

While they wait for him to return, Dranko asks, "Do you remember how long your hair was when you went through?"

"Yes, of course, it was..." He reaches up to feel his head. "Huh. That's weird. I... I don't know what to say about that."

"You went through the Black Door, and whatever you saw there broke your mind," says Dranko.

"No, I didn't," insists Porridge. "I think I'd remember something like that. And you still haven't answered the question of why you're in my house."

"To cure you," says Morningstar.

"I'm not ill."

"Not anymore," says Kibi.

"We could leave our weapons outside if that would make you feel better," says Grey Wolf.

"Could you? Yes, it would. Thank you."

While they are disarming themselves, Ernie comes back with Prinn, breathless from running. She goes inside while the Company wait without. Ten minutes pass, before they hear a terrible sobbing. A few minutes after that, Prinn comes back out.

"He's going to need a little while. Can you come back in the morning?"

OR SO

Dranko takes a deep breath. "Step?"

"Yes?"

"Can I work out a trade with you? No matter how I say this, it's going to sound ghoulish, so I'm just going to ask. You know your *immovable rod*?" Step nods. It's part of the paladin's equipment, but to Dranko's ongoing frustration Step has never explored its tactical possibilities.

"When was the last time you used it?" asks Dranko.

"It's been a long time," Step concedes.

"What do you want for it?"

The rest of the Company do in fact agree that this is a ghoulish request, but that's Dranko for you. One Certain Step looks at Dranko and laughs. "Dranko, it seems that soon I am going to die. I will give you the rod, and if I survive we can work out a trade. We've known each other a long time. If and when I pass away, you are all welcome to my belongings, to divide amongst yourselves as you all see fit."

Dranko has the good grace to look ashamed. "Let me just say that on a daily basis, you're an inspiration to all of us. My life's been better because of you."

"The future is written in water," says Kibi suddenly. "The Eyes said that... well, the one of them that was right."

"That is true," says Step. "But still, the prophecy said I should not expect to come back alive, and I do not."

"Grey Wolf expected to die too, and he's still alive," points out Ernie.

"And that fact does give me hope," says Step, smiling.

"That's only because we were too incompetent to betray him properly," laughs Dranko.

"I have a... feeling..." says Step, growing solemn again. "A feeling that I will go through the Black Door, and I will not survive. But thanks to all of you, I will be better off by far than the last time. And if my understanding is correct, you'd all better hope I'm right."

OR SO

They spend the night enjoying the hospitality of the Wily Warthog. Flicker spends most of the evening in a funk, looking often at Yoba but keeping his distance. When Ernie gets up to use the privy, Dranko sits down in his place.

"So, what do you think of him?" he asks.

"Ernest seems an honest fellow," says Yoba, looking hard at Dranko and wondering what other questions might be coming. "I think he'd have trouble concealing things about himself even if he tried."

"True," Dranko agrees. "You know, I don't know that he's ever had a girlfriend before."

"So he's not married," says Yoba, and she can't help but smile.

"He's been waiting for the right girl," says Dranko. "It's hard for him to find someone who'll understand the kind of life he leads, and appreciates him for who he is."

Yoba starts to blush again, and when Ernie comes back to the table Dranko excuses himself. Ernie looks after Dranko worriedly, but Yoba gives an assuring smile. It's then that Ernie notices Flicker, sitting gloomily on the stairs with his legs hanging through the banister, a mug of ale in his hand.

"I worry about Flicker sometimes," says Ernie. "I don't think he's found Yondalla. Brandobaras, more like it."

"I don't think anything's wrong with that," says Yoba. "Is he a good person?"

"Yes," says Ernie quickly. "But he... needs guidance."

"I'm sure he's getting it," says Yoba. "He has you! And... and he seems like a nice fellow." That prompts Ernie to tell Yoba the story about Flicker's unexpected game of Farangi back in Djaw, and Yoba once again listens eagerly to Ernie's tales.

Hours later they are still at the table, yawning but reluctant to part. They walk together up the stairs, though once at the top their rooms are in opposite directions down the hall. "Good night," says Ernie, a bit awkwardly. "I hope to see you in the morning."

They turn and walk away, but both of them turn around before going into their own rooms. She smiles once more at him, before opening her door and stepping out of sight.

¤¤

Prinn approaches Morningstar over breakfast. "I just came from bringing Porridge his morning meal," she says. "He said he wants to talk to you."

"How's he doing?" Morningstar asks.

"Better. He still doesn't remember what happened to him, but he knows now what he did, and what the consequences were. I explained everything to him, as gently as I could. He said he wanted to talk to the person who healed him." Morningstar nods.

A tall, portly man in dark blue clothing stands up from his own table and saunters over to where the Company sit. It's Ox, whom they briefly encountered the previous night.

He pulls up a chair. "So, what do you think of the place?" he says in a deep, stentorian voice.

Dranko's attention is drawn to the cheap-looking longsword strapped to his side. "Any good with that thing?" he asks.

Ox shrugs. "Maybe we can duel later," Dranko suggests.

"Ah, you'd be too much for me, I'm sure," says Ox. "And I don't like fighting."

"So why do you carry that thing around?" asks Dranko, pointing at the sword.

"Makes people think twice," says Ox.

"What is it you like doing? You a spellcaster?"

Ox nods and smiles, as if to say 'you got me.'

"We've got three of your kind in our group," says Dranko. "One who does it with his eyes, one who does it with his sword, and one who does it with his rocks." Aravis sighs.

"I just dabble," says Ox.

"What's the most powerful spell you can cast?" presses Dranko.

"Not even worth talking about," says Ox.

Somehow Ox manages to deflect several more of Dranko's attempts to pin down the extent of his spellcasting prowess. "It makes me happy to have people wonder," says Ox finally. "Makes people less likely to try something." Dranko gives up.

"Are you going to wait around for Peralta's savior to show up?" asks Ox.

"Yup," answers Dranko. "You?"

"Of course!" says Ox, grinning. "That's why I'm still here."

"You gonna help him then?" asks Dranko.

"Absolutely. With what little means I have. And it beats the alternative, right?"

"You *could* spend time trying to pick up chicks with your super magic powers," says Dranko.

"Actually, I'm hoping to be reunited with my wife as soon as possible," says Ox with a smile.

Ernie and Yoba have been making googly eyes at one another all through breakfast. Ernie suddenly pipes up. "Say, anyone want to go for a walk? I've never seen a six-legged cow before. I want to take a look!"

"I'll show them to you if you'd like," says Yoba. "Come on, I'll show you." Without waiting for anyone else to show interest, she takes his hand and leads him out of the inn. The others just watch, amused.

"This is so sad," says Morningstar. "When we get out of here, Yoba will have to go back to being the Commander of the Southern Border, and Ernie will stay with us."

"Maybe not," says Dranko. "Maybe he'll fall in love, and leave us to go with her."

"My folks always told me, it's better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all," says Aravis, though the others suspect he's not speaking from actual experience.

"That's a load of crap!" says Flicker bitterly, but no one pays him much mind.

"Can you *plane shift* from our world to her world?" asks Dranko, turning to Aravis.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Then she can come join us, and eventually you can send her home, and Ernie can go with her if he wants," says Dranko.

"Then we'll lose Ernie!" Aravis protests.

"It's better to have loved and lost..." says Dranko, leering.

"Isn't this premature?" says Kibi. "He only met her yesterday. Sheesh."



Only Morningstar goes into Porridge's house. Dranko eavesdrops from outside, just in case.

"Ah, Morningstar!" says Porridge, seeing her standing in the doorway. "Come in! Are you hungry? Thirsty? Sit down, be comfortable!" Morningstar sees that the furniture has been rearranged and the table set.

"I wanted to thank you," says Porridge, once Morningstar has been seated. "I know all about what happened. And I'll deal with it. We got drunk and stupid, and did something... well, stupid, and my friends paid for it. I don't know why I didn't. But, here I am. And I'm in my right mind again, which I understand I wasn't. So thank you."

Morningstar gives an acknowledging nod, then licks her lips. "Porridge, I have a question for you, one that I want you to think about. There may be a way that your memories could be helpful in separating the Slices and returning people to their own worlds."

"You think so?" asks Porridge, his eyes wide.

"I think it's very important for us to know what's on the other side of the Black Door."

Porridge shakes his head. "I don't remember. If I could, I'd tell you."

"I know," says Morningstar. "But I have a spell that could *cause* you to remember."

Porridge is silent for almost a minute before answering. "Prinn tells me that whatever was in there is probably what caused me to go mad," he says softly.

"Yes," says Morningstar.

"Do you think I might go mad again if I remember? I want to help end the Slices, but..."

"If you go mad again, I can fix you, just like I did before," says Morningstar.

"Prinn said that you had to make a severe personal sacrifice to help me. Would you do that again?"

"I... yes. We believe this is *very* important."

"Well... OK then," says Porridge.

"I want you take some time to think about it," says Morningstar. "It's a serious thing, what I'm proposing."

"You say it'll help fix the Slices?"

"It might."

"You should just do it then." Porridge sits up straighter in his chair. "'Cause if I think about it too much, I might chicken out. But if I could help fix things... that would be pretty neat, huh?"

Morningstar smiles at him. "Let me get a couple of my friends, so they can keep an eye on us while I cast the spell."

OR SO

Ernie is sitting on a beautiful snow-speckled hilltop, looking out upon a field of docile six-legged cows, listening to the sound of the wind, and trying very, very hard not to focus too hard on the fact that he and Yoba are holding hands. The two had talked for a while, but now are simply content to enjoy the presence of each other, on this lovely winter morning. It's just a perfect...

"Powerful cleric needed! Half-orcs don't qualify!" Dranko's voice intrudes on his reverie.

Ernie lets go of Yoba's hand like it had caught on fire, and leaps to his feet. "What about Morningstar?" he asks.

"You're her spotter," says Dranko.

"Ah." Ernie invites Yoba to come with him and she happily agrees.

OR SO

Morningstar knows that it is possible for the caster of a *memory read* to suffer if the memory in question is sufficiently horrible. But she has weathered the memory of a man thrown alive into a massive furnace, and trusts in Ell that she will endure this one as well. Ernie brews up a potion that fills the room with a pleasant scent, and arranges some cushions and bedding to make sure both Morningstar and Porridge are comfortable.

"We're going to live about five minutes of your memory," explains Morningstar. "Then we'll come back here, and see how you feel."

"I trust you," says Porridge. "Prinn said a lot of pretty powerful healers tried to fix me up over the years, and none of them succeeded. I have faith in you."

Morningstar takes a deep breath and casts her spell.

She's drunk.

It's always a strange sensation, being two people at once. She is Morningstar, and she is Porridge, and she is staggering out of the Wily Warthog into a cool autumn evening. On one side of her is a short and rotund fellow, and on the other is a tall gangly red-headed youth. It's hard for her to concentrate on the details of the memory, because she's rip-roaring plastered. The three of them stumble down the main road of Bakersfield. The red-head – Tom – is carrying a torch, and it's only by the grace of Hol that he's not setting his hair on fire. They are laughing and joking and from their banter it's clear that they have recently all convinced one another to see what's on the other side of Mystic Peralta's "Door of Certain Dooooooooom."

Ahead of them they see it, an opaque black rectangle against the almost-pitch-black horizon. It's dead dark, ten feet wide and eight feet tall. Tom holds the torch inches from the Black Door. "You sure 'bout this?" he asks.

"Hop in, hop out," Porridge says. "Whasseever in there, won't have time to know we're there. Jus' like any other doorway. Hop in, hop out. Coupla seconds inside, come out again. Don' worry. Ferny, he dinnit cmout again 'cause he stayed in too long. In, out. In, out."

"I don't know if we should be doing this," says Crows. "Thisss really... I dunno."

"Come on," urges Morningstar. "Go in, come out. In, out. In, out. No one knows we're coming. We'll be famous. Famous!"

"All right," says Crows. "Famouest of the whole town then."

They look at the Black Door in the light of Tom's torch. There's no reflection, no sparkling, just a matte black painting hanging in the air.

"When I say tree, we all runnan jump," says Morningstar. "Remember, right in, right out. One! Two..."

"No no no no no!" says Crows. "Wait, wait! We could get killed doing this."

"No, it'll be fiiiiinne," says Tom, emboldened by Morningstar's confidence. "Everyone elswennin, thinking they would look around, essplore. We're just jumpin in, jumpin out, like Porridge says."

"Here we go," says Porridge. "One! Two! Three!"

Morningstar sees the other two jumping in, one on either side of him. She experiences the memory of being pulled through a Way, so familiar to her, so unexpected to Porridge.

She arrives... somewhere. She feels like she's standing on something solid, but far away, as if she's on a stone floor in huge padded shoes. It is more than just pitch dark. There's no light, no sound, no sensory input of any kind. It is utterly not what she expected.

Some number of seconds have passed, maybe one or two, maybe more, and there's great confusion in her memory. "Right!" she thinks in a panic. "Jump back out!"

Morningstar feels like a curtain of ropes is in the way, and that she's pushing her way through it, even though the feeling of them is dulled to almost nothing. And as she does so, she gets a feeling, or the memory of a feeling, of a presence. Something unspeakably horrible is there in the darkness with her, and Morningstar's body shudders with the remembrance of it. It's incomprehensible, and she knows that it will devour her, and she'll never understand why. She panics. She thinks she has turned around and is pushing toward where the Door must be, but there's no way to tell if she's even facing the right way. Her last memory will be one of hideous oblivion...

She pushes through the ropes, and once more there is the sucking void of the space between Ways, and then he is stumbling out onto the hard ground, sobbing and retching and clutching the earth like it's his own mother come to embrace him.

carpedavid: Excellent, as always, Sagiro.

Enkhidu: I think I just figured out what's beyond the Black Door. Eww!

I've been thinking for some time that the Cleaners were going to play a central role in the endgame of this whole thing, and now I'm convinced. In fact, I think that the Cleaners are really just the Cleaner (singular), and it's what lies beyond the Black Door.

It was the torsos (with limbs ripped, not chewed) that was the final piece. Well, that and the fact that I kept adding "squamous" to the list of adjectives in Porridge's blocked memory and it didn't seem out of place.

coyote6: Enkhidu, that's what I was thinking, too.

Len: Yoba's a pit fiend, right?

MavrickWeirdo: Gotta be a succubus.

Of course, after they find out she is a succubus and attack her, they discover that she really is a paladin of Yondalla (wheels within wheels)...

Fajitas: Perhaps she's a succubus of Yondalla...

Everett: What makes any of you think that she's anything evil at all? She doesn't display any of the characteristics that villains in this Story Hour typically have... There's never been a villain who went disguised as a good guy for *that long* and *then* was unmasked as whatever, no! "Hi, Ernie's mom" "No, I'm actually the assassin king" – that's it!

MavrickWeirdo: However there is a tradition that allies are nasty to players, but villains are "polite."

Everett: And she doesn't follow it.

Sagiro's villains are polite in the way that a man's polite to an enemy he respects. Now ask yourself: Is that Yoba's behavior? No, of course it isn't.

OR SO

The Final Step

Morningstar is snapped back to her body, and finds that she is shivering. Porridge is curled into a little ball; Ernie has thrown a blanket around him.

"Are you... are you all right?" Morningstar asks, trembling.

"No," whispers Porridge. He follows this answer with some small whimpering noises, as he rocks back and forth.

"You're safe," says Ernie. "Nothing can harm you here."

Porridge is obviously traumatized, but does slowly recover over the course of the next few minutes. Morningstar spends that time describing what she saw to the others, and no one enjoys hearing it.

"I'm guessing that's all being done by the other Eye," says Dranko.

"Or something that's *between* the Way and the Eye, like a defense mechanism," says Aravis. "I suspect that's why Peralta's prophecy refers to the Eyes we have now. Only they will be able to navigate through the darkness."

"Or Step will help us with that," says Kibi, looking uncomfortably at the paladin. Step merely nods.

Dranko prepares two *remove fear* spells and casts them on Porridge and Morningstar. It helps. "See that?" says Dranko, addressing no one in particular. "I am a cleric. How about that."

"I think you should get some rest," says Morningstar to Porridge. "Do you want someone to stay with you?"

"Could you send for Prinn?" whispers Porridge. "She takes good care of me."

Morningstar nods. "Thank you," she says. "That was very brave."



Outside Porridge's house, a dour-looking elf in brown and green clothes stands in the street. Snow is gathering in her long brown hair, which she ignores. The Company had seen her briefly in the Warthog the night before, but she hadn't stayed long or talked to anyone. They recall that her name is **Spindra**.

"I understand you are trying to heal that man," she says, frowning.

"We just did," says Dranko. "Does that bother you?"

"He was suffering his deserved punishment," says Spindra. "You should not have interfered." Yoba sighs, like she's heard this before.

"What are you babbling about?" asks Dranko.

"Don't you understand where you are?" asks Spindra, raising her voice. "We're being punished. All of us."

"Noooooooo," says Morningstar. "We're pretty sure this is an experiment being run by a bunch of evil fanatics."

"What are we being punished for?" asks Dranko.

"That's my personal business, as your sins are yours. But we're all sinners, or we wouldn't be here."

There's general disagreement among the assembled Company. "What makes you think we're all being punished?" asks Dranko.

"We're trapped in a strange prison," says Spindra, gesturing to the sky. "Removed from our homes and families, and doomed to be here for eternity, or else to die in any of various horrible ways."

"Think for a minute," says Dranko. "When you're in your home, and there's a fly bumping into a window, is the fly being punished, or did it just happen to fly in through the door, and hasn't found its way out yet?"

Spindra thinks only for a second before answering simply: "I find your analogy unconvincing."

"And yet, it's accurate," says Dranko. "We're the flies."

"Have you seen what happens to the flies against the window?" asks Spindra. "They're dead on the sill. You should hope that's all that happens to you." And with that, she turns and walks away.

"I don't understand that attitude," says Ernie with a sigh.

"No one knows how long she's been in the Slices," says Yoba. "She won't tell anyone. But she's absolutely convinced this is hell. It's very sad. I've tried to talk some sense into her, to make her see that there was hope, and good works to be done regardless, but it was pointless."



The Company spend the next few weeks training in Bakersfield. It doesn't take Kibi long to find the local brewer and offer his services, though Dranko discovers that the town currently doesn't have a tanner or leatherworker, and ends up assuming that mantle. Spells are researched, skills are honed, and many of the locals are sounded out for combat worthiness.

One afternoon the Company wake to the sound of battle out in the street, but it's just Jack (whose nickname has turned out to be "Cashbox Jack") sparring with a short human woman. They're both pretty good, but Jack is clearly more skilled, about as good as Snokas and Step.

When they finish, Dranko approaches them. "Hey Jack, want to see a trick?"

"Sure."

Dranko loosens his whip and lashes at Jack, coiling the weapon around his leg. Before Jack can recover Dranko yanks hard and sends his target tumbling to the ground. He follows up with a nearly instantaneous attempt to divest Jack of his rapier, but somehow Jack uncurls the whip from his weapon and manages to hold on.

"Neat trick," says Jack, springing lithely to his feet.

"Actually I was pretty sure I'd be able to disarm you, too," says Dranko, impressed. "You're pretty good."

"And you're pretty fast," says Jack. "Looking at you, I'll bet you can dodge pretty much anything."

Dranko puffs up a bit at the praise, then deflates again when he hears Morningstar speak in his ear. “Dranko, now I’m going to show you a trick. You’ll want to try dodging this.”

“What am I dodging?” he asks worriedly. He’s thinking about *iron storms* and *chain lightning*, and the memories are not pleasant.

Morningstar says nothing, but takes Dranko’s hand and leads him to an empty side street. Jack and some of the rest of the Company follow, curious. “What am I dodging?” asks Dranko again, with panic creeping into his voice.

Morningstar smiles grimly. “Stand there,” she says, leaving Dranko in the middle of the street. “The rest of you... I’d back up.” She starts to cast.

“What are you casting?” says Dranko in alarm, though now he’s tensed to dodge whatever it is. “What am I...?”



Morningstar casts *fire storm*, filling much of the street with cold black flames. She leaves gaps for the bystanders, but Dranko is right in the middle of the conflagration. With reflexes honed by dozens of similar moments, he flips, leaps, bends, and somehow finds the gaps in the spell’s energy. When the flames recede, Dranko is miraculously unharmed.

Dranko stares at Morningstar, eyes wide, heart pounding. “That’s a crappy wedding gift!” he cries.

“Are you going to be where that spell is, when I use it in combat?” asks Morningstar.

“No!” exclaims Dranko.

Yoba blinks. “Wow,” she says. “That was... that was an amazing illusion.”

“That was no illusion,” says Morningstar, still watching Dranko.

“You actually cast a *fire storm* on your fiancé?” asks Jack, incredulous.

“I was making a point,” says Morningstar. “You see, we’ll be in combat, and Dranko will have a choice of leaping into an area where he suspects I’m going to be casting that spell. He’ll be confident that he can get out of the way. I wanted to show him exactly what he’d be dealing with. The direct lessons are the only ones that work.”

Jack goggles. “You cast a *fire storm* on your fiancé for *practice*? That’s the most impressive thing I’ve ever seen in my life! You’ve got yourself a fine woman there, Dranko. Don’t ever let her go.”

Dranko just puts his head in his hands and tries not to cry. At dinner that night, there’s a rumor going around that Dranko and Morningstar had one *hell* of a lover’s quarrel.

OR SO

It’s not long after healing Porridge that the Company realize their lives will be easier with translator discs of their own. The source of them is a crafty gnome named **Crieger**, who rents a room at the Warthog but mostly stays to himself. At a corner table, Crieger spends a few minutes examining some Charagan coins, before offering to sell nine of the discs to the Company for twenty gold pieces each. “So,” says the gnome. “Nine translators. That’s 180 gold.”

“Well, it would normally be 180, but you’re going to give us a discount,” says Dranko with a disarming smile.

“Oh, I already factored in the discount,” says Crieger, smiling back at him. “For people who look like you, I usually charge thirty. I mean, look at you. You guys are festooned with magic items! Don’t tell me you can’t afford it.”

“I don’t have any magic on me at all,” lies Dranko. “Can you *detect magic*?” He asks this with the confidence of a practiced charlatan who’s also wearing a ring that prevents *detect magic* from working on his person and possessions.

“Maybe I can, maybe I can’t,” says Crieger.

“Then check me,” says Dranko smugly.

“Oh, come on,” says Crieger, waving. “Half the stuff on you is masterwork. You think I don’t know? And what about your friends?” He points at Aravis. “Heck, look, his whole *head*’s a magic item!”

"That would make one think we're relatively powerful," says Dranko, switching tactics. "And it would make one think that you, being a gnome with a lot of sense, would want to be friends with people like us."

"Eh," says Criege. He takes a drink of ale. "Yes and no. You'll all be off soon, and I'll probably never see you again."

"Oh, I wouldn't count on that," says Aravis.

Criege gives Aravis a hard look. "Are you threatening me, star-field?"

"No," says Aravis, holding up his hands. "I just wouldn't count on never seeing us again. We turn up in strange places."

"That could be," concedes Criege. Then, to Dranko: "Hey, this is a bargain. You heard of the spell *tongues*? You know how much a magic item would cost that gives you *tongues* full-time?"

"Nope."

"A whole lot more than twenty of your gold pieces!" says Criege. "Probably hundreds or thousands!"

"Then why are you charging only twenty?" asks Dranko.

"Cause I'm a nice guy," says Criege. "You seem like nice people." In a low whisper he adds, "Maybe I want to be friends with people like you."

"Tell you what," says Dranko. "I'll give you a flat hundred, right now." He plunks down the coins in a sack, right on the table.

Criege looks at the bag, then at Dranko. "Er, OK," he says. "That'll get you five translator discs."

"Nope," says Dranko. "That's my offer for all nine. Take it or leave it."

"That'll be 'leave it', then," says Criege. "There'll be other people along who'll pay my price. I don't have an infinite supply of these things, so it's no skin off my nose if I have to wait."

As the gnome rises to leave, Dranko asks, "Where'd you steal 'em from, anyway?"

Criege stops and considers for a few seconds before answering. "Duergar."

"They gonna come lookin' for em?" asks Dranko.

"Nah," says Criege.

"You steal 'em yourself?"

"Yep."

"Wanna tell me the story?"

"Nope."

"Well, if you stole 'em yourself, I guess you deserve the twenty gold per," says Dranko. "You have yourself a deal."

Criege smiles and sits back down, as Dranko starts to pull out more stacks of gold. Then he hands over the money in such a confusing manner, 'helpfully' counting and restacking coins, that he manages to short Criege by twenty gold after all. He pulls this bit of sleight-of-hand trickery with such skill that the gnome doesn't even notice. "Good doing business with you," says Dranko, as Criege hands over nine metal discs.

All seems well, but that evening during dinner Criege comes downstairs and walks directly to Dranko's table. "Excuse me," he says politely. "I'm afraid that in our earlier transaction, you were twenty gold short."

"Couldn't have been," says Dranko. "You counted it."

"I counted again once I got to my room," says Criege. "I'm sure you were twenty gold short."

"I wasn't," insists Dranko. "You counted the money, I saw you. Could you have dropped it someplace?"

"I don't think so," says Criege. "I would have heard the clinks. You don't just drop money and not notice. I assure you, every gold piece you gave me went into this bag. And it all came out of the bag onto my desk, where I counted it three times to be sure."

"But I have the signed receipt right here!" says Dranko.

Criege sighs. He's played this game before. "You know," he says evenly, "I'd hate to see you get a reputation around here. That would be a terrible thing. No one wants to be known as a thief and cheapskate."

Dranko stonewalls, but is foiled when Kibi hands over the remaining gold pieces.

"Hey, thanks," says Criege. "At least one of you has integrity. Thanks a lot." The gnome departs quickly and heads toward the stairs.

Dranko turns on Kibi, angry. "You just gave up twenty gold we didn't have to."

"He's right, though," says Kibi. "We don't want a reputation for stinginess or cheating, if we're going to be convincing people to fight with us on the other side of the Black Door."

Dranko glowers, but then shouts to Criege, "Hey! You dropped your purse!" He holds up Criege's money pouch, which he had deftly picked before the gnome left the table.

Criege comes back, scowling. He grabs the pouch out of Dranko's hands and reties it to his belt. "I'm going to count that, you know," he says crossly.

"Of course," smiles Dranko. Criege turns to leave, and has only taken two steps before he hears Dranko calling, "Hey Criege, you really should be more careful. You dropped it again." Once again he's holding up the pouch.

Criege walks slowly back to Dranko, his hand out. But instead of being angry, he looks impressed. "You should make a living doing that," he says. "I'm not the easiest gnome to rob, but I would have bet you twenty gold pieces you couldn't pick my pocket twice in a row."

When he leaves the third time, he's still got the pouch clutched in both hands.



Two weeks before they intend to brave the Black Door, the Company start to spread the word. This is ostensibly to give folks time to return to their own Slices, on the assumption that if they succeed, people will find the Slices 'reattached.' It will also give some of the adventuring types hanging around Bakersfield the opportunity to mull things over.

Not many people choose to leave the town. Many are skeptical, in the absence of proof that Scree is truly the savior predicted by Mystic Peralta's prophecy. Some others plan to go with the Company, or at least figure they could still be convinced.

The Wily Warthog does lose one of its least pleasant patrons. A rude and demanding tiefling named **Grivian** packs up the day after the Company's announcement and departs into the Way to the slime tunnels. Some think he could be a spy for someone (maybe even the Black Circle), but it doesn't seem worth going after him.

Jack corners them that evening in the Warthog. "It's true? You're going in? Do you have proof you're the ones? Other people thought they were the ones, and they weren't, you know."

"*We* didn't get caught in a Slice, Jack," says Dranko. "This collection of Slices is linked by a permanent portal to our own world. It's where the people who started all this are from."

"What about all the gems?" asks Jack. "What about Peralta's prophecy?"

"We know we fulfill that prophecy," says Dranko.

"I want to believe you," says Jack, "But I've lived a long time being a skeptic. Can I see these gems?"

"The gems are intelligent," explains Dranko. "They're incredibly powerful chaos magic, and they only choose to show themselves when they want to."

"You mean they're invisible?" asks Jack.

"No," says Dranko, "But they don't look like Peralta's gems. They look like diamonds. Kibi, can Scree show him?"

Kibi frees Scree from his *familiar pocket*. "Hey, an earth elemental!" says Jack. "You've got an earth elemental as a familiar! That's pretty cool! What's his name?"

"His name is Scree," says Kibi, pleased to find someone so polite.

"Nice to meet you, Scree," says Jack with a bow.

Can we keep him? Scree asks Kibi.

Scree's sapphire eyes are visible, along with the three diamonds. But as Jack watches, there's the tiniest of flare-ups. A streak of rubies ripples through Scree's body, followed quickly by a surge of emeralds and amethysts. Jack jumps back, but the whole

thing is over in less than three seconds. “We have various prophecies involved in all this, including one about that Black Door,” says Kibi, but Jack needs no further convincing.

“It beats sitting around here for the rest of my life,” he says. “If you want me, I’ll go with you.”

“We do,” says Dranko.

OR SO

In the end, here’s how it shakes out: Garg the Great, legendary orcish wizard and all-powerful savant, refuses to get involved. He outwardly refuses to believe that the Company are the ones prophesied, and inwardly (everyone suspects) is scared out of his ever-loving orcish mind.

An elderly half-elven bard named **Mavis** offers to sing inspiring songs as they leave, but doesn’t think she’d be much good in a fight. If they come back alive, she promises to sing a ballad about their experience.

Cashbox Jack is the first to sign up. He tries to sway others to the cause, claiming that he saw the gems for himself, but it turns out he doesn’t have the most sparkling reputation in the honesty department.

The gnome Criege is noncommittal, but no one thinks he’s the sort to risk his own neck.

Terrence, Priest of Noofr, God of Cleanliness and Punctuality, decides not to risk it. “I think I’ll be of more use here,” he says.

“But it’s destiny!” says Dranko.

“Well, if destiny beats you up, come back here and I’ll heal you.”

The fighter who sparred with Jack, named **Gussie**, waffles for days but decides not to go. She was Sliced away along with a dozen members of her fighters’ guild, and all of them made their way to the strange “living plane” described by Yoba, but she was the only one deposited near Bakersfield. She hopes still to be reunited with her fellows.

Kiro the dwarven priest and the sorcerer Ox both choose to take the plunge. And Yoba insists that Ernie not be allowed to face further danger without her by his side.

Spatzimaus: Ah, young love. It’s the classic story. Boy meets girl, boy goes into battle alongside girl, girl turns out to be horribly evil but they win the battle anyway, boy and girl settle down and raise a bunch of halfling-ish babies...

el-remmen: It’s much more likely that a villain will throw Yoba off a bridge and though Ernie shoots a web from his wrist in time to catch her, he pulls her up just to find out that the jerk of the stop snapped her neck. Holding Yoba in his arms he cries out with an anguish and horror he has not felt since the death of his Uncle Ben that he always blamed himself for...

Oh wait, no it isn’t...

Kid Charlemagne: I thought that was Piratecat’s game...

KidCthulhu: To respond to those that think Yoba is evil, remember that for betrayal to be dramatic, you have to have trust. If every NPC we meet is an evil bastich, then we simply won’t trust anyone. There have to be good people too, or the occasional sneaky ones have less weight.

Kid Charlemagne: This is so true. I’ve played in games in the past where all the NPCs were untrustworthy or incompetent, and the DM would wonder why we never trusted any of them, or helped them, or relied on them. It’s a lesson that I learned years and years ago...

Fajitas: Feh. KC’s just trying to gain our trust with this so that it’s dramatically meaningful when we find out she’s lying...

spyscribe: I don’t know if Yoba is evil or not, but I do know that the fact that I have been humming *Copacabana* for the last week and a half is proof positive that Plane Sailing is.

Everett: Yeppers.

And then there’s Sagiro Emberleaf. Sagiro has been silent and withdrawn throughout their stay in Bakersfield, mostly staying in his room. But he nods when asked if he intends to come with them through the Black Door, and as it seems he can still wield his rapier with his old expertise, they don’t deny him the chance.

That makes fourteen heroes in all, to face whatever lies beyond the dark portal: Morningstar, Ernie, Dranko, Grey Wolf, Kibi, Aravis, One Certain Step, Snokas, Flicker, Sagiro, Yoba, Ox, Kiro and Cashbox Jack.

The night before their departure, they gather in the Wily Warthog for a final meeting. Almost everyone in the town is packed into the place. Dranko stands on a table and the common room goes silent.

“Here’s the deal,” he says to the assembled throng. “We know we’re the ones in the prophecy. And we know at least a little about what’s on the other side of that door.”

Morningstar climbs up on the table with him, and recounts her experience from Porridge’s horrible memory. When she’s done, the dwarf Kiro speaks up. “I guess I’ll ask the obvious question. We show up. We can’t see. We can’t hear. We can’t

feel anything. We don't know which way we're going. And something in there kills people in seconds. You, uh, see where I'm going with this, right?"

"Well, two things," says Dranko. "One, Morningstar here will bless us with a miracle that will protect us from the horrible crushing fear."

"That's a good start," says Kiro. "What's the second thing?"

Dranko motions to One Certain Step. "A long time ago," says the paladin of Kemma, "my Goddess directed me through a holy writing that I would 'be the one in the lightless room.' I now understand what that means. You see, when a paladin of my order dies, it creates light in proportion to the health of his soul, which in my case I have tried to cultivate as best I can." (Here he smiles at Ernie and Morningstar.) "It is my intention to be killed, and in the aftermath there will be light for you to see. I expect that you will make use of that light in the best possible way." If this plan bothers Step in even the slightest way, he betrays no sign of it.

"You're sure this is it?" asks Kiro. "That this here Black Door is the 'lightless room' from your own prophecy?"

Step nods. "There are other details. They all point to this moment. This is my destiny."

"You're sure there's not a way around this?" asks Jack. "Prophecies are prophecies, and I've heard my share in my time. Sometimes they come true, and sometimes they don't."

Step smiles. "If something occurs to me before tomorrow, I'll be sure to let you know. But I have given this a great deal of thought, and I have a plan. Consider this: if we all go in at once, and you try various sources of light that don't work, then what? What if whatever is in there chooses to kill others of you, before killing me?"

"We'll play it by ear, as usual," says Aravis.

"I was thinking that I would go in first," says Step.

"I don't like that plan," says Morningstar.

"I don't like it either!" says Step. "But I have to do what I feel is right. And to do anything else would be to put all of you in danger, in the face of Kemma's prophecy."

"We love you, Step," says Dranko, "and we don't want you to die."

"Remember Grey Wolf's prophecy," adds Morningstar.

"Oh, I do," says Step. "But even if there's some way to avoid it, I must go in, expecting to do this thing."

The rest of the night is spent planning their spell complements for the morrow, and then talking about what might be waiting for them beyond the Black Door. Maybe it's the Rotunda, or some infernal machine of the Black Circle. Maybe it's the Eye of Moirel, protecting itself from all who would steal it. Grey Wolf speculates glumly that it's probably more Cleaners.



The next morning Morningstar treats the Gang of Fourteen to a *heroes' feast*. The excitement and tension is tempered by the stoic presence of One Certain Step, who looks utterly at peace.

"I had a dream last night," he says during the meal, and everyone quiets to listen. "It doesn't concern our task directly, but it makes me even more sure of my path. I dreamt of my warhorse, Thunder, whom I have not seen in a long, long time. She was running through the fields of heaven, under a sun that never sets, and the sight of her filled my heart with joy."

For a long moment no one speaks. Then Morningstar says quietly, "There's no better way to go out, right?"

"When you get out of here," says Step, "and you put things right, it will truly have been worth it."

"It's been an honor," says Morningstar, and there are tears in her eyes.

Step stands and bows to her. "The honor has been mine."

"We'll never forget what you're doing for us," says Kibi in a small voice. Ernie simply gives the paladin a hug.

When the meal is finished, a throng of people accompany the heroes to the Black Door. Not everyone in town is convinced that the Prophecy is about to be fulfilled; they've witnessed this kind of scene before. And the ropes and graves still serve as a grim reminder of past failures.

There is a flurry of last-minute spellcasting, and while the bard Mavis sings a song of hope and encouragement, Step gives his final command. “Don’t follow too closely. When I arrive in there, I want to be the focus of attention.”

He turns to face the Company.

“*The honor*,” he shouts, drawing his greatsword and holding it high to the sun, “*has been mine!*”

He turns to face the Black Door, and through it he takes... one certain step.

the Jester: Oh, bravo, Step! Whether his time has truly come or not, he is facing it like a paladin should.

Pyske: Agreed.

KidCthulhu: Step is a paladin’s paladin. Which is why it’s such a shame that the Eye waiting on the other side of the door grabbed him and seized his mind...

Only kidding.

Tamlyn: Now that’s a way to end a chapter. Well done!

el-remmen: I bet you’ve been waiting a long time for that. I am very anxious for the next installment...

Vargo: Aw man, now I’m all misty-eyed. How am I supposed to hold my reputation as some hard-nosed manly man with all this sniffling?

spyscribe: ...holy crap, that was a masterwork cliffhanger. I’m torn between cheering at the sheer artistry of it and gnashing my teeth in frustration at having to wait to find out what happens next.

Everett: Curious to know – does someone among the players often run Step and the other NPCs in the party, or does Sagiro run them himself? It seems to me that to run an NPC with such a clearly defined personality would be quite a task for the DM...

Len: No reason the DM can’t be as good a roleplayer as the players. My DM played a particular NPC cleric so well that we dumped him (the cleric, not the DM) and hired a different one.

In our group, cohorts are run by their leader’s player and other tag-along NPCs are run by the DM.

Sagiro: At a guess, I’d say that Step has been run by a guest player about 15% of the time (most often the husband of the player who used to play Kay), and Flicker has been run by a guest about 10% of the time. The rest of the games, they’re mine. Morningstar’s player and I tend to share Snokas – I do more of the role-playing, but she handles him in combats and other tactical situations.

Zaruthustran: So on the other side of the curtain is a horrible creature that has a thing for torsos, huh?

Sagiro: Au contraire! Whatever’s in there tends to take off the limbs and heads but *leave* the torsos. Not that that’s more comforting to the denizens of Bakersfield.

LightPhoenix: Not the first time [this Story Hour] has ever brought a tear to my eye, and certainly not the last.. but damn Sagiro, that was incredible.

Plane Sailing: Sagiro, there are a very few times when I’ve read an episode in a book and got ‘choked up’ on the emotion in it. This is the first time I ever remember feeling that way about a Story Hour. It is perfect writing of a situation with genuine emotion, and I salute you.

Sagiro: ...it warms my heart to know I’ve managed to convey, at least to someone, the lump-in-throat, heart-pounding feeling I had at the table as Step was taking his step through the Black Door. I know I’m not supposed to grow attached to my NPCs, but that was an emotional run for me – both for Step’s plot arc, and for the fact that I was about to enact one of the most complex single scenes (in terms of number of actors) that I had ever tried to pull off. (The Battle of Verdshane was bigger, though I don’t know if it counts as “a single scene.”)

I’ve just finished transcribing from tape what happened on the other side of the Black Door. I’m probably not spoiling it to say that it involved some combat. Because of the huge number of participants, and the length of the whole scene, I don’t think it will work for me to provide the usual round-by-round narrative of who did what. I’ll have to think about the best way to present it all, and that may take me a while longer. No promises, but I’m guessing I’ll start resolving this cliffhanger with a post in the next few days. A whole bunch of cool stuff happened beyond the Black Door, both in terms of cool PC tactics, and horrific enemy abilities. (Morningstar’s player called me “a sick, sick bastard.” I have it on tape!) It was hugely fun for me to relive it. I hope I can convey that...

QR 80

Droid101: Been reading a long time, good stuff. I still hate Dranko though. He’s so annoying and off-putting.

But bravo to all the other characters and fun situations! Good writing, Sagiro!

el-remmen: Blasphemer! Dranko is the best! Morningstar is my least favorite...

Piratecat: Sorry about that. Sometimes he’s kind of like the kind of bullying 14-year-old you never wanted to run in to – an overweening show-off who seems to be more concerned with appearance than substance. He pushes some people to see how far he can bend them. That’s intentional. On the other hand, I’m also very much shooting for the “diamond in the rough” mentality. His personality is tempered by his love for his God (although not necessarily his religion) and his endless loyalty and love for his friends. He sees himself as largely alone and unloved in the world, except for the small number of people who have learned to trust him (and vice versa). That’s a treasure more valuable than any magic item or jeweled crown.

He’s not really as shallow as he pretends. It’s a ploy, but sometimes it backfires. And if he doesn’t at least have style, it’s not for lack of trying.

Droid101: Fair enough. At least you are staying in character. What else can a DM ask for?

Piratecat: Morningstar is certainly the most serious member of the group. She’s the only neutral, and she’s far more suspicious than the others. She, too, had hidden depths; she’s deeply committed and spiritual, and more pragmatic than anyone else. It’s fascinating roleplaying from her player.

Kudos to Sagiro for the writing in this part, by the way. I was there – and it’s bringing the adrenaline rush and teary eyes all over again. If I didn’t love and respect his NPCs so much, it wouldn’t hurt so much when they face horrible danger.

And we all still miss Abernathy. I mean really miss him, and this is an imaginary character who passed away in a game more than six years ago. Weird.

QR 80

The One in the Lightless Room

There is a place...

No. No, there isn't. To assign it the term 'place' is to grant an undeserved grounding in reality. 'Dimension' is a better term. Or maybe 'frame of reference.' 'Madness' is also close to the mark. Planar scholars have arrived at a term that implies nothing because nothing is what they know.

The Far Realms.

There are beings in the Far Realms, and 'madness' would be good term for those as well. They dwell in the dark reaches beyond the borders of the multiverse, bizarre tentacled things thinking unfathomable thoughts. It is extremely fortunate that these creatures have little interest, under normal circumstances, in the affairs of men.

Since names make things easier, we'll call one of these beings FGOGL.

FGOGL is old even for a denizen of the Far Realms, a huge, drifting presence in a gibbering void. The material world would have been better off had it never attracted the attention of **FGOGL**, but it's too late now for that. First there was the Chamber, and now... something else. Floating, squirming, **FGOGL** bumped against a strange material construct, a web of connected planes from the Other Side, lodged like a tumor in the fabric of the Far Realms.

FGOGL was annoyed.

Through a century of studious observation, **FGOGL** found the source of the tumor, a blue speck of concentrated power. **FGOGL** was troubled. This speck was leaking, pulsing, emanating... and growing. It was an irritant. Worse, **FGOGL** could not discern a way to be rid of it, or the growth it was fueling. Only when something disturbed the web from inside could parts of it be eradicated, but that was infrequent, and its rate of expansion was troublingly quick.

The blue cancer had strong defenses that protected its heart. But slightly removed from the heart there was a single aperture through which the tumor was pouring out much of its power, and that, thought **FGOGL**, was a point of weakness. The mighty creature of the Far Realms thrust a single massive tentacle through the fabric of space, into the section of tumor that housed the opening. Like a twisted antibody it surrounded the aperture, blocking the flow of energy, sealing it from the emptiness of its home. **FGOGL** exuded an absence of feeling, a paradoxically palpable oblivion that dulled the irritation.

Better.

Lesser beings of the Far Realms were attracted by **FGOGL**'s thoughts and actions. They too extended tentacular extensions of themselves into the cancerous labyrinth, probing, questing in the strange anti-space of the Other Side. Sometimes they found playthings, which they slew. They heard the echoes of **FGOGL**'s ideas, that the Aperture should be guarded while the mighty creature pondered how to be rid of the anomaly for good. Some of the lesser beings worked out a way to imbue life and thought to their playthings, though they were puppets that still needed a will to move them. And while these would die, there were always more arriving, more puppets, so fragile – playthings dying in the dark.

Ten seconds.

The assembled heroes finish up the last of their preparatory spells, and ten seconds after watching One Certain Step vanish into the Black Door, they follow. The first sensation they have is a familiar one, of being pulled through a dark void from one Slice to the next. Then they are emerging, and sensation, for the most part, ceases.

Beyond the Black Door there is no sight. There is no sound. There is no sense of temperature, and the air, if it exists, carries no scent. They may be standing on solid ground but there's no way to be sure – it's possible they're in freefall. Some of the heroes are imbued with *true seeing* or *greater arcane sight*, but their augmented perceptions are utterly foiled. (Or maybe they work perfectly, and *there's nothing to experience*.) Only the connections of several interlaced *telepathic bonds* provide assurance to each of the group that they have not been separated into individual Slices. All thoughts are on One Certain Step, and what awaits them in the dark.

Time passes. No one knows how much. It might be a second, a minute, an hour.

There is a sound, coming as if from far away. It's a shock to hear it, and though no one can identify it, the sensation returns the ability to measure time. Over the next two seconds the sound grows louder, and as they realize it's a human scream, a tiny glowing spot appears.

The point of light provides spatial reference, just as the sound provides a temporal one. They think the light is many dozens of feet out from them, and just as high in the air. Another two seconds, and the light grows along with the sound. It's a heart-rending scream of pain, and they know the voice. The light flares to the brightness of a strong lantern, revealing a human silhouette hanging high up, light spilling out of it. The scream grows louder, and they catch the glint of a sword as it falls from the silhouette's hand. The blade falls out of the range of the light, and if it strikes ground it makes no noise.



A sun is kindled high in the air, revealing that they are standing in a huge stone cavern, a hundred feet across and nearly as high, and filled with – no, not yet. Everyone's eyes are drawn to the center of that sun, where a body is suspended in the air.

It's held there by a pair of long tentacles. One protrudes from a wall of the cavern, and is wrapped around the body's torso. The second is anchored to the ceiling and grips the body's legs. As the heroes below watch in horror, the two tentacles casually finish pulling One Certain Step apart. The paladin's dying scream ends abruptly. The light of his soul does not.

The cavern is flooded with brilliant radiance, and it reveals... horrors. A crazed fear beats at the minds of the Company and their allies. They know that without the lingering effects of the *heroes' feast* they would be mad with terror. Even so, there is no mistaking the disquieting wrongness of Cleaners, permeating the air like poison.

In the light of Step's sacrifice, there is no mistaking the source.

All sensation has come rushing back to them in that radiance. The air is filled with a hissing, rasping, squirming sound, of hundreds of foot-thick tentacles thrusting out from the walls, ceiling and floor of the cavern. The tentacles are quivering crazily, as if whatever they're attached to behind the stone is being administered an electric shock. It is heartening (the only such thing here) that these myriad tentacles are each kinked, bending sharply away from the center of the new sun.

The rocky, tentacled floor of this room – lightless no longer – is thick with bodies. Everywhere is the glint of armor, weapons, and enchanted gleaming objects too numerous to count. Everyone who came before them to brave this place now lies dead on the ground. But even Dranko and Flicker hardly notice. Like everyone else, their eyes, squinting past Step's radiance, are on the Trunk.

There's no better word for it. It's a tentacle, to be sure, a brownish translucent tentacle like all the rest. But it's thirty feet in diameter and almost a hundred feet long, vanishing into the rock of both the floor and ceiling of the cavern. Hundreds of smaller tentacles protrude from the Trunk like cilia. At its base, maybe sixty feet from the now-expanded Company, roam two large creatures, living masses of smaller tentacles.

Near ground level, and buried deep in the center of the translucent Trunk, there is a clear blue glow.

I hate it when I'm right, thinks Grey Wolf.

Micah: Wow... well written. Sad to see Step go, but it certainly is in a blaze of glory.

From a reader's standpoint he seemed more like a PC than an NPC. Very well developed character.

shilsen: Really bad pun, Micah...

Dawn: I kept forgetting he was an NPC, so well played and involved in the plot as he was. Well-written description of the cavern.

Funeris: Alas poor Step, we knew you well (through the glory of magnificent characterization)... Wonderful job, Sagiro.

RangerWickett: I honestly did not expect the guardians of the Black Door would be the Cleaners. After seeing what those bastards did before just by touching Dranko, well... this should be cool.

I think the image of a man alone in the darkness, illuminated by his own light as he is slain, will remain with me for quite a while.

Tamlyn: You said it better than I could. All I could think to say was, "Wow!"

Fajitas: [FGOGL exuded an absence of feeling, a paradoxically palpable oblivion that dulled the irritation.] This may be my new favorite sentence in the English language... Well said, sir. Bravo.

Fimmtiu: (And now for something completely crass!) Boy, I hope that, after this long, hard slog through Het Branoi, they at least end up getting to loot this horror show after the asskicking's done. Sounds like quite the reward!

Everett: I'm not sure if I really want to know, but here goes. What are Cleaners? Why are they called that? I kind of get it, but I also really kind of muchly don't get it.

Plane Sailing: The best way is to read [*the section starting on page 202*]. It contains a flashback and dramatic action both!

Everett: So the Cleaners dissolve realities around them. They 'clean' dimensions around them, making the Slices into null space. The more intriguing question is, why? Unless the answer is "because."

Ian the Mad: The answer seems to be that they're malefic denizens of the Far Realms and have a distinct distaste for "alien" (which is to say, everything not from the Far Realms) matter of all sorts. Het Branoi is apparently a web of planar slices constructed in the Far Realms. I can imagine that having their territory invaded in such a manner would render them a mite tetchy.

Alternatively, they are intensely alien beings and just feel like taking things apart for the heck of it.

Also, while I'm breaking lurk here, I may as well congratulate you on having an extremely fine Story Hour, Sagiro. My proverbial hat is off to you.

Sagiro: Ian, it's always nice to hear from someone who's enjoying the story! Your first theory is pretty much on the mark.

Fajitas: Sagiro, while the groundwork for Het Branoi was obviously laid a long time ago, I'm curious how much you knew when in what degree of detail. Were the Slices always part of the plan, or was it just created as a random, unspecified dungeon site? Was Sagiro's specific fate as pawn of the Red Eye always intended? Did you always know that this room right here was the fulfillment of Step's prophecy? I'm always very curious about how these things develop in long-term story arc'd campaigns.

Sagiro: Fajitas, I'm going to answer you. But first, a warning. Readers who'd be happier not getting a glimpse of my game's "sausage factory" may not want to read this post. That includes my players. While I confess I do a fair amount of long-term planning and foreshadowing, I don't think I do as much as you probably think. This post may help confirm or deny your suspicions.

That said, I'm not about to say anything shocking, like "I decided what Het Branoi was in the half-hour before the Company went in, and was making up each Slice as they went." And my players won't be spoiled, though they may be disillusioned.

So... regarding Het Branoi: The very first time the Company heard this term, it was when the Green and Purple Eyes spoke their prophetic bit about needing the third Eye to "travel nowhere." At that very moment, all I knew about Het Branoi was (a) that it was a dungeon-like environment, and (b) that I wanted it be an extended adventure. Also, (c) it was in Kivia – thus, the "beyond the Gate of Fire" reference. And (d) of course, which was: there was an Eye of Moirel in it. That was it – there weren't five Hets back then, and I didn't know what the Black Circle was doing in them.

At that point I knew the game was years away from the inside of Het Branoi, so I didn't bother worrying about what was in it. As the moment grew closer, my first idea was that it was like the old "Baba Yaga's Hut" module from *Dragon* magazine – a bigger-on-the-inside house with a bunch of weirdly connected rooms. I even borrowed the issue from Dr. Rictus and had read through it, intending to keep the geography and refill the rooms. But as the day grew closer, and I had thought more about other parts of the plot, I realized that the module was insufficient for what I needed it to be. I knew then that there were many Hets, and I knew what the Black Circle had been up to. Het Branoi needed to have specific relations to the Abyss, and to Cleaners, and Baba Yaga's Hut didn't seem like it could do. So, I decided to keep the "bigger on the inside" thing, but expand on what that meant, and how to design it. I ended up borrowing from the first computer game I had worked on – *Ultima Underworld II* – and started designing Het Branoi for real. By the time the Company got there, it was pretty much ready to go.

Regarding Sagiro: similar thing. When he was knocked into the river and swept away, I knew I wanted him to come back after a very, very long absence. My first thought was that the fall gave him a knock on the head, erasing his memories and breaking him out of Darkeye's thrall. I'd have him rescued by farmers and the Company would find him working in a field some day. But, heck, that was boring. Instead, I had him finding his way back to the Sharshun. When I thought about his relationship to the Sharshun, I realized what mission they would send him on: go get the last Eye of Moirel they needed to change history. Now, this was back when Het Branoi was Baba Yaga's Hut, and I imagined that Sagiro had gone in (without an Eye of his own) and become captured by some power, and that the Company would find him, whimpering in a dark cell, but with knowledge about how to find the Eye.

When Het Branoi changed, Sagiro's role changed too. I had two main reasons for giving him his own Eye: (1) having a hostile Eye gave me an excuse to "tie up" the two friendly ones, so as to answer more plausibly the question "Why don't the Eyes just solve the end of the dungeon for us?" and (2) so that I could pull the "you think you're finding the Eye you're after, but ha ha! It's a *different* Eye!" trick.

Regarding Step and the Lightless Room: ditto. When Step first shared his prophecy, all I knew was that there'd be some dark room in Het Branoi and that he'd have to do something heroic in it that would probably cost him his life. Because I didn't tie myself down to details at the time, I was able to develop what that meant to mesh nicely with all the other ideas I had about Het Branoi in the interim.

So, the clear lesson here is: only flesh out the details when you have to. The longer you wait, the more creative flexibility you give yourself, and the more integrated you can make your plot.

Which is not to say, though, that there aren't some story elements that I really did plan ten years ago, and which will soon be coming full circle [insert evil laughter].

coyote6: Sagiro, that's the way to do it, IMO.

Everett: I just have to tell you that you're insane. Not that others haven't, since they have. But sometimes you have to say these things your own self. You're not sane. There are elements of that which is generally felt to be sanity that do not commingle with your intentions behind this campaign. Which is to say that they aren't there. Not present. Lacking and underdeveloped. You might want to know.

shilsen: You say that like it's a bad thing...

QR 80

Tentacular Spectacular

Once I started writing this session in earnest, I realized that I am going to have to detail a lot of combat actions. There are plenty of individual moments that will want retelling, and which will make no sense without a pretty full context, combat-wise. I'm still not going to detail what every character did on every turn, but it looks like most of the interesting stuff will end up in there somewhere...

"This looks like an intestine!"

Dranko gulps and looks at down at Ernie. "No, it doesn't. This is worse."

"And Dranko would know," adds Flicker.

Aravis's *greater arcane sight* has flicked on like a switch. The cavern is flooded with a mix of strong Earth Magic and even stronger... something. Whatever you call the magic of the Cleaners and their realm, this place is full of it.

To the crowd of Prime-dwellers, there is a tiny glimmer of hope that despite the horrors of their situation, it'll be a straightforward matter of dealing enough damage to the Trunk to reach the Eye at its center. The many tentacles around the perimeter of the cavern seem to be disabled by the bright sunlight of Step's demise, leaving only the two tentacle-mass creatures, and the immobile Trunk. They have a clear numerical advantage.

The Company spread out into the space. Most of the clerics release *spiritual weapons* that go streaking toward the Trunk, and Kibi unleashes a *prismatic spray* followed up with a Quicken *coldfire* catching all three enemies in the blasts. Wild magic surges through his body and the *coldfire* is spontaneously twinned, a pair of loud blasts echoing through the cave and searing the flesh of the Trunk and its two Masses. In the wake of the spells many of the smaller tentacles are seared away. Two turn to stone and break off near the floor.

The glimmer of hope grows. Protected by the *heroes' feast*, illuminated by Step's dazzling aftermath, and numbering over a dozen stalwart adventurers, maybe they can just overwhelm these unnatural things and be done with Het Branoi.

Alas, no. From the ground three bodies rise, each at the end of its own wall-anchored tentacle. Each body is like the weight at the end of a long whip, jerking through the air like a spasmodic puppet.

There is a headless human-ish body wearing platemail and holding a greatsword. The end of its tentacle is wrapped around the corpse, and its tip sticks up through the neck like a grotesque parody of a head. The tentacle whips and swings until the body is hovering in front of Kibi, and the body launches a full attack. Most of the damage is absorbed by a *stoneskin*, but Kibi still stumbles back in the face of this new threat.

There is a dead troll being held aloft by its ankle. This creature is dangled over Snokas, whom it savages with tooth and claw.

And there is a body with no legs, a tentacle wrapped tightly around its torso. It was once an elven woman by the look of it, and now it is lifted high into the air, seventy feet off the ground by its controlling tentacle. From its lofty vantage the former sorceress casts a powerful sonic *chain lightning* into the midst of the Company, centered on Grey Wolf. The booming sound of the spell reverberates around the cavern, shaking small bits of rock loose from a few jagged stalactites.

The two Masses are still near the Trunk, so Aravis takes advantage, catching all three in an Empowered *cone of cold*. The Masses' tentacles flap wildly, ice forming and snapping off them. The Trunk quivers slightly, but endures. One of the Masses

turns to... face(?) Aravis and waves its four largest tentacles at him. He watches as strange runes carved upon them start to glow a sickly green, and then feels a revolting sensation rise in his gut. But whatever it was trying to do to him, he fights off the effect.

The combat is joined in earnest then, a furious maelstrom of steel and magic. Snokas fights off one of the animated bodies with his pick, while Cashbox Jack and Yoba attack the Mass. The sorcerer Ox follows Aravis's lead; he flies up to get an angle that won't catch his friends and casts his own Empowered *cone of cold*, again blasting the Trunk and the two Masses.

While Dranko rushes to heal the grievously wounded Grey Wolf, Flicker joins Jack in carving up the nearest Mass.

The second Mass lurches toward Snokas. Its four major tentacles glow with green runes, but like Aravis, Snokas is able to resist the effect. Everyone is just as happy not to know what it's trying to do. But then it physically slaps Snokas with those tentacles, and in addition to tearing into his flesh, their alien touch drains away some of his intellect.

The Company have little time to ponder this new development, as a fourth body-wielding tentacle rises from the ground. This one is wrapped entirely around the body's legs and torso, leaving only its arms and minotaur's head exposed. The arms of the body wave about, and Ox's *fly* spell is *dispelled*. He *feather falls* forty feet to the ground, swearing all the while.

Kiro targets the body that cast the sonic *chain lightning* with a *flame strike*, and Morningstar follows this up with a massive *fire storm* that burns every enemy in the cavern with black flames. For an encore she casts a Quickened *searing darkness* at the body of the sorceress. The animated corpse is burned off its tentacle and drops seventy feet to the ground, a development that is met with much cheering among the heroes.

The cheering is short-lived. A *fifth* body is lifted up into the air by a new tentacle. This body is a powerfully built dwarf, and in place of a torn-off right arm, a mass of smaller tentacles grips its war axe. It ignores the fact that Dranko is invisible, and delivers three vicious cuts with the axe, each inflicting extra sonic damage with the sound of thunderclaps.

Tentacles using magic items, thinks Dranko, grimacing in pain. *Not fair!* He gets a close-up look at the half-decayed face of the dwarf, with small tentacles spilling from its mouth and an old wound in its cheek. Then Sagiro is by his side, puncturing the creature with his rapier.

Grey Wolf surveys the battlefield, every detail of which is still sunlit and distinct. *The main tentacle?* he thinks over the *telepathic bond*. His fellow arcanists agree. Grey Wolf casts his *iron storm* so that it encompasses both of the Masses and a good portion of the Trunk.

The combat rages on, weapons and spells flashing. Kibi can still feel the Earth Magic flooding him, coursing up his arms with every spell he casts. His Empowered *chain lightning* is sucked into the *iron storm*, burning away chunks of his enemies.

Aravis does likewise. Most of the melee types trade damage with the revolting tentacle-animated bodies. The Masses, when not trying their yet-to-succeed glowing green rune attack, flail away with tentacles that drain points from random ability scores. Beneath them, black ichor is pooling from Company-inflicted wounds.

Enkhidu: Out of curiosity, Sagiro, how long ago did you decide to let your players open up the proverbial can of whoopass with the *iron storm/lightning bolt* family combo (which I assume simply allows the *lightning bolt* to be an area effect spell instead of a line effect), and how has it played out in practice – too much? Too little? About right?

Sagiro: In practice, the *lightning/iron storm* combo is *slightly* overpowered, but not so much that I want to do anything about it. The combo still has to be used thoughtfully and tactically. Remember, the *iron storm* is immobile, and enemies can move out of it, but even if there's no one in the *iron storm*, electricity still gets shunted to it. Effectively Grey Wolf has to spend one action to cast it, and sometimes another action to dismiss it. Those are actions where he's not doing any direct damage. For the spell slot, he could cast his own 10d6 *fireball*, for instance. The flexibility of the combo has to be worth an extra 10d6 of damage to be worth it, and that's not always going to be the case.

The combo really shines with *chain lightning*, but even then, it has to be used carefully in order to deal extra damage. If you can catch a number of enemies clumped in the *iron storm*, it's downright deadly – but I think that's OK for a two-spell combo of a 3rd and 6th level spell.

A little off-the-cuff math: assume a favorable scenario, where there are eight targets in the *iron storm*. Say that Aravis and Grey Wolf are both 15th level (they were lower in the tentacle fight, by the way). *Iron storm* has a 20' radius, and *chain lightning* effectively has a 30' radius, so we'll assume all eight targets are in the area of both spells.

Without an *iron storm*, Grey Wolf could cast a 10d6 *fireball*, and Aravis could get them all with a 15d6/7d6 *chain lightning*. In other words, one target would take 25d6, and the remaining seven targets would take 17d6. That's 144d6 of total damage.

With the *iron storm* in place, all eight targets take 19d6, which is 152d6 of damage. In other words, the combo does about 6% more damage (not including the extra damage done because more of the damage has a higher Reflex save DC – but that's more math than I want to do right now). That doesn't seem broken to me.

In a more common case, where there's (say) three targets, the damage totals are exactly the same. Now, if you arrange for your enemies not to leave the *iron storm*, the combo gets more powerful, but that doesn't bother me so much. It's a powerful combo that encourages good tactical thinking.

And if you can find an enemy that can't get out of the way – say, a huge immobile tentacle – you can really make hay...

Ernie flies right up to the Trunk, dodging the waving tentacles that protrude from its length. He can see that the Trunk is quite damaged in places, but that the blue glow is still deep inside of it. One thing that surprises him is that it's not covered with

crystal, like most things are that are possessed by Eyes of Moirel. *This is the canary that entrapped the cat*, he thinks. *The Eye cannot possess it.*

Through the mottled brown and clear flesh, Ernie can see that the blue glow is larger than he is, a rough rectangular shape that wavers and warbles at its edges. But there's something else that grabs his attention, something that he immediately transmits over the mind-link. He can also see that high up, near the ceiling, the Trunk is giving birth. It seems to be squeezing a third Mass out of itself; its tentacles writhe and flap as they become exposed to the cavern's sunlight.

Down below, one of the Masses waves its four rune-covered tentacles at Aravis, who had just delivered yet another *chain lightning* into the *iron storm*. This time, he is unable to resist the attack. There is a massive pain in his side... and a foot-thick, ten-foot-long brown tentacle erupts from his abdomen.

Aravis goes white as a sheet, as his body is jerked around by the powerful flailing of the tentacle. Adding injury to insult, the tentacle sprouting from his side slaps Aravis painfully in the head. For good measure, the Mass squishes forward and smashes him with all four of its own tentacles. Bruised and battered, and with some of his Constitution drained away by the touch of his enemy, Aravis drops to his knees, hovering on the ragged edge of consciousness.

Someone: After reading the last part, I agree you're a sick bastard (no offense intended).

Ovinomancer: Gross understatement! I doff my cap, sir!

shilsen: Beautiful, just beautiful! *wipes away a tear*

coyote6: *Force-grow tentacle* certainly does qualify as "sick" in my book. I may have to steal it.

I'm curious – how did you run the fight, with all the extra NPC guys (Jack, Ox, etc.) around? Were you running them all, were players running some or all, were there extra players, or what?

Sagiro: My players all helped out, each playing an extra character as follows:

Piratecat (Dranko's player): Ox.

KidCthulhu (Ernie's player): Yoba.

Kodiak (Kibi's player): Cashbox Jack.

Aravis (Aravis's player): Snokas.

Grey Wolf's player: Sagiro Emberleaf.

Morningstar's player: Kiro.

I still played Flicker, along with the cast of a thousand tentacles. Listening to the tape, I was surprised at how little "dragging" there was in the combat, given the battlemat complexity and doubling up of player responsibility.

Oh, and I see several of you successfully identified the exact moment of the "sick, sick bastard" comment...

OR SO

How Can This Not Be the Boss Fight?

Dranko, grievously wounded, has been intending either to heal himself or to try finishing off the more wounded Mass. Instead, seeing Aravis's gruesome new pseudopod, he rushes over with a wand of *cure critical wounds* and brings his friend back from death's door. He hears the sound of another *chain lightning*, this one from Ox, sucked into the *iron storm*. The Trunk sizzles.

Flicker launches a vicious attack at the Mass. He's *hasted*, and finds that these things *can* be sneak-attacked. (At the center of the Mass is an actual body, hard to reach, but more vulnerable.) He practically disappears into its multitude of smaller tentacles, and the others see gouts of black ooze spattering out of its middle. Finally it stops moving, and settles into a lifeless lump of drooping rubbery ropes. Flicker squirms out of its dead embrace, covered nearly head to toe in dark fluid and grinning like a maniac.

It takes Yoba a second to get over her shock at Aravis's condition, but with a determined grimace she steps up to him, watches for a second, and slashes mightily with her sword. She lops the tentacle off only a foot from Aravis's body, and that's enough. The remaining foot slides sickeningly out of his body, leaving a gaping wound.

"I... I'm sorry," says Yoba, as Aravis gasps in pain. "It seemed for the best."

"That's OK," Aravis croaks.

Fimmtiu: So many jokes... so very many jokes... must resist... argh...

The second Mass, itself badly wounded, still presses the attack. It fails to cause Ox to sprout a tentacle, but it slaps him hard with all four of its own appendages. The damage is immense, and now Ox is close to death.

High in the air, Ernie hears a loud sucking noise from the Trunk, as a third Mass drops out from near the top and lands with a squelch at its base. It looks slightly smaller than the others, and its tentacles are thinner, but it's still larger than an ogre and

writhing for all it's worth. Turning back to the Trunk, he can see now that it's been seriously damaged by the repeated spells. The part in the *iron storm* is ragged and spewing blood. *Hurt the pillar!* he thinks to the others. *Keep hurting the pillar!*

The minotaur body is lifted by its tentacle and whipped high in the air while it casts a spell. Then the tentacle brings it down to the second Mass, on which the minotaur casts *heal*. To make things more fair, Kiro casts *heal* on Ox, while Morningstar does the same to Aravis.

The battle grinds on. Ernie continues to slash at the Trunk, with *Beryn Sur* dancing on one side of him and his *spiritual weapon* chopping away on the other. Wedges of mottled flesh are hacked out of the Trunk and drop wetly to the stone below. Down below, Yoba looks up and watches Ernie's brave assault, admiration shining in her eyes.

More blows are traded. Sagiro attacks the tentacle-armed dwarf, who in turn unloads a full attack on the already injured Dranko. Somehow the half-orc stays conscious, but he knows that even if he survives, his scar collection will be getting a huge boost.

Before sinking into the stone floor for cover, Kibi *summons* a large earth elemental by the Trunk, then follows with a Quickened *coldfire* that catches multiple foes. The troll is seared away from its tentacle and falls lifelessly to the floor. The headless body with the greatsword and platemail survives, and is then carried up near the ceiling by its tentacle, where it unleashes an *ice storm* on the thickest concentration of heroes.

More melee, more spells, more pain on both sides. Jack has lost his rapier in the body of one of the Masses, forcing a switch to his *returning* daggers. Snokas gamely swings his picks. Aravis and Ox fire off Empowered *cones of cold*. With concentrated effort they manage to knock two more bodies – the minotaur and the dwarf – from their tentacles. (And a good thing, too. The axe-wielding dwarf was gearing up to finish off Dranko – and it surely would have, with one more round of attacks – when Yoba stepped forward to finish it off.) Meanwhile the Masses continue to wreak havoc among the heroes. Though they don't cause any more tentacles to bloom, their melee attacks are hugely damaging, and the ability score drain is starting to add up.

Ernie keeps carving away. The Trunk has now endured damage that would have brought a small army to its knees, but still it stands, blocking access to the blue glow at its center. Ernie has hewn himself a small niche in its bulk, and this affords a better look at his ultimate goal.

His heart sinks. He can see now that the bright blue object at the center of the Trunk is not an Eye of Moirel at all, but rather yet another Way, albeit a particularly vibrant one. *That* would explain the lack of crystal.

Crap! he thinks, and conveys this to the others. *This isn't even the big fight!*

But there's something else, something worse, something that's been happening for several seconds and is now impossible to ignore. Slowly, but unmistakably, the light of One Certain Step is fading.



Let us return for a moment to Kibilhathur Bimson. Having cast his spells, he finally remembered that he should be using his *xorn movement* to give himself cover each round. Now he has sunk himself into the rock floor of the cavern. Ordinarily Kibi finds comfort in subterranean immersion, but this time it's different.

He can feel an increase in the Earth Magic, but it's accompanied by a much larger surge in the churning nausea of Cleaners. There are *things* in there with him, squirming in and through the stone. Worst of all, he can sense that below him the stone doesn't get denser and more solid, but rather that if he were to descend much deeper, he'd leave the earth altogether and plunge into...

To his credit, he doesn't go mad. Instead he hastens to the surface, and once back in the relative comfort of the Cleaner-infested cavern he sends an Empowered *lightning bolt* sizzling into the *iron storm*. Over the mind-link, Ernie informs the mages that further use of the *iron storm* will be pointless; all of the Trunk that was in its area has effectively been burned away.



Realizing that Step's light won't last more than another five minutes (if that), Grey Wolf casts *body of the sun*. For a second his body flares with light, sending the nearest tentacles shying away from him. But almost immediately that light becomes dimmed, as the overwhelming presence of FGOGL stifles the effect.

From high above them, the platemail-clad body unleashes another *ice storm*. Given the precarious health of many of the heroes, Aravis decides to minimize the risk of one of the Masses delivering a killing blow. He casts *reverse gravity*, sending the newly-born Mass hurtling up toward the cavern's roof. Even from that distance the thing tries (and fortunately fails) to

force another tentacle to burst from Aravis. The remaining Mass at ground level is subject to a final burst of attacks from the heroes – Jack keeps throwing his daggers, Ox casts another *cone of cold*, and Flicker tumbles in to once again deal the killing blow. Already dripping with black goo, things just get worse for Flicker in that regard. The dead Mass falls on top of him.

While Yoba *lays hands* on Dranko, and Kiro applies much needed healing to himself, two of the Trunk's smaller tentacles wrap around Snokas and Ernie, pinning their arms to their sides. They hold their prey out away from the Trunk – and in the *iron storm*. At their mental cries of alarm, Grey Wolf dismisses the spell.

So. Two of the Masses are dead, and the third is suspended helpless in a *reverse gravity* field. Only one animated body is still active. The Trunk seems badly damaged, and the heroes' healing magic has kept pace with their wounds. Best of all, no one since Aravis has sprouted an unwanted tentacle.

On the other hand, many of the heroes are still seriously injured, and Snokas and Ernie are being grappled by the Trunk's smaller appendages. And now, from a spot about half-way up the Trunk's body, a pale green light begins to glow. Ernie looks up and wonders what new devilry is brewing. *This can't be good*, he thinks to the others, and no one disagrees.

Jackylhunter: Wow.

ToddSchumacher: I just want to say, I've just spent the past week reading this Story Hour from the beginning (I have all 15 PDFs on my desktop right now) and just finished the last update just now.

Bravo! You, sir, deserve a medal or something.

Sagiro: You read the whole thing in a week, and you say *I deserve the medal?* That's 600 pages of PDFs! But, thank you for posting. I'm glad you're enjoying the story!

(Really, though, my players deserve the medals for enduring my machinations for so long.)



Evacuation

Ernie strains, reaching as far as he can, but still Snokas's outstretched hand is beyond his reach. *Sorry, Snokas!* he thinks, just before using his *ring of dimension door* to escape.

Snokas tries to wriggle free from the grasping tentacle but it holds him tight. *This sucks*, he thinks to the others.

Ernie reappears where he expects – still right next to the Trunk. Once he has recovered from the *dimension door* he starts hacking away again, but luck is not with him. *Beryn Sur*, the dancing blade, gets stuck in the Trunk's flesh. Then one of the Trunk's cilia pushes the sword even deeper into the main mass, until it's completely enveloped by the monstrosity's rubbery flesh. "Give me back my sword!" shouts Ernie, but it's clearly going to take some doing. Does he have the time? Step's light continues to fade, and the green glow forming in the center of the Trunk gets brighter.

Kiro pegs the one remaining animated body – the high-up armored one that's been casting *ice storms* – with a *searing light*. Morningstar follows that with a *flame strike* that catches the body as well as the remaining Mass. While the Mass is still relatively healthy, the body is finally damaged enough that it slides off its tentacle and falls seventy feet to the ground. There is nothing now between the entire assemblage of adventurers and the Trunk.

Kibi casts *hold monster* on the Trunk, which of course has no effect. The same can be said for his large earth elemental, which has been beating fruitlessly at the Trunk since its arrival. Kibi glances up at the bobbing Mass at the top of Aravis's *reverse gravity*, and has an idea that he *knows* the elemental is not going to like.

"**SEE THAT TENTACLY THING IN THE AIR?**" he says to it. "**MOVE UNDERNEATH IT.**" The elemental doesn't understand, but it does as it's told. It starts to fall upward.

"**I'M LOSING CONTACT WITH THE GROUND!**" it roars in a panic, and thanks to their recently bought translator discs, everyone understands its cry of terror. "**HEEEEEELLLLLP MEEEEEEE!!**"

"**I'M SORRY!**" shouts Kibi. "**I'M SORRY, I'M SORRY!**" It's a hard thing to do to an earth elemental, but it does what he hoped. Six thousand pounds of rock essentially fall onto the Mass, seventy feet in the air. Kibi feels terribly guilty and expects Scree to take him to task, but his familiar merely comments, *Hard times call for desperate measures*. The Mass is injured, but is still alive and bobbing like a cork along with the elemental.

As the green glow starts to shine brightly from within the Trunk, Aravis nails it with a *disintegrate* spell. In return, the still-alive Mass activates its runes, and for the second time a long thick tentacle bursts out of Aravis – from his shoulder this time. Aravis screams in pain, and the tentacle immediately starts to slam his head.

The rest of the party don't have much time for sympathy. From deep inside the Trunk the green glow grows a hundred times brighter, filling the cavern with a burst of sickly light that contests with the dying radiance of One Certain Step. A wave of revulsion sweeps over them, and tentacles burst forth out of Ernie, Snokas, Ox, Sagiro and Kibi (Snokas's is particularly gruesome, as it's coming out of the side of his neck). Their screams of pain and terror fill the cavern, even as the greenish light dims and fades out.

Despite his dissembling, Ox is a pretty powerful spellcaster. He's honed his craft for years, working as a 'troubleshooter' for his barony back home. He's never been in as dire a strait as the one he's in now, but if there's one thing he's learned over the years, it's how to concentrate on spellcasting even in some harrowing situations. Now, granted, he's never tried to cast while a huge tentacle, growing out of his own back, was whipsawing back and forth and slapping at his head... He concentrates furiously, and somehow keeps his hands moving in the proper intricate patterns to cast *chain lightning*. The Trunk is his main target, and almost all of his friends' (plus his own) new tentacles are his secondary targets (only Kibi is out of range). Electricity crackles around the cavern, and when it's finished... all the tentacles are badly damaged but still attached to their hosts. Ox wants to cry.

Dranko decides it's time to try something new. For months now he has carried around a magical crown that, according to an *identify* spell, allows him to cast something called *paroxysm of fire*. He has no idea what that spell does, or how dangerous it might be, and it's possible he could make things worse. But, really, how much worse can things *get* right now?

He pulls out the crown and deftly places it on his head. He concentrates on casting its spell, targeting the Trunk. One of the rubies on the crown flares red for a second before becoming a bead of worthless glass, and there is an answering flare from deep in the Trunk's mass. Dranko holds his breath. Then, as if he's set off a fire-geyser machine inside its body, the Trunk starts belching jets of flame out of its bulk. These jets damage everyone indiscriminately, and while the severity is not great, the wounded tentacles crisp and fall out of their hosts. Never has such a cheer gone up from people whose ally has just inflicted fire damage upon them. Seeing that Kibi is now the only one afflicted, Yoba strides over to him and lops off his tentacle just as she had done for Aravis.

As the light grows ever more dim, the Company now bring all of their remaining firepower to bear on the Trunk. More spells and weapons rip into its flesh. A *chain lightning* causes it to drop Snokas, but another of the Trunk's tentacles wraps around Grey Wolf and holds him fast. Ernie carves his way toward *Beryn Sur*, determined to get his weapon back. Morningstar activates the *daylight* power of her shield, but it's immediately stifled and extinguished. There's still enough light left from Step to see, but at the rate it's fading, they have less than a minute before they'll be back in utter darkness and at the mercy of Cleaners...

Kibi casts his last *lightning bolt* at the Trunk, and the whole length of it shivers and shakes. From the floor and the ceiling there is a new sound, frighteningly loud, of grinding and groaning stone. Many of the hundreds of smaller tentacles start pulling themselves back into the walls, ceiling and floors. "Keep going!" cries Kibi.

Aravis fires off another *chain lightning*, targeting the spot where Ernie has been digging for his sword. There's a shower of gore, and Ernie hears a *tink!* as *Beryn Sur* lands on the stone somewhere behind him. As he turns to retrieve it, the entire Trunk quivers again, and then *shifts upward* about fifteen feet, sliding out of the floor and into the ceiling. Grey Wolf, still grappled, is carried upward as well. He struggles and squirms but can't break free. "We've got to save Grey Wolf!" Ernie screams.

Grey Wolf couldn't agree more. The Trunk continues to slide upward, pouring itself out of the ground and sliding into the ceiling, a colossal snake that's decided it's had enough. The sound of tortured stone fills the cavern even as the last of Step's light is fading away. Grey Wolf watches the ground recede beneath him, then looks up to see that in seconds he'll be smashed into the ceiling. And that's if he's lucky – it's also possible that he'll be carried away to wherever the Trunk is going...

Ox fires a final *chain lightning*, albeit with only one target. It blasts the tentacle holding Grey Wolf, and it twitches and unrolls. Grey Wolf has never been happier to suffer the damage from a forty-foot fall.

All around them the smaller tentacles are pulling themselves into the rock, retreating. The Trunk coming up out of the floor seems endless; surely hundreds of feet of length have already slid by. But at last it starts to taper, and then finally the end of a staggeringly huge tentacle comes up out of the ground. It whips around in the air for a second before getting pulled entirely up through the ceiling. A final cilium grabs the remaining Mass on its way out, pulling the creature out with it. Behind, in the ground, it has left a gaping hole into...

Sneakers, Grey Wolf and Sagiro are the only ones who happen to look into that hole, down into an alien void crawling with unspeakable horrors. All three go instantly and utterly mad, losing every mental faculty and starting to gibber like infants.

Kibi feels a surge of Earth Magic reverberate through the cavern. Abruptly the holes left by the Trunk are filled in as the natural rock reasserts itself. Morningstar's shield erupts into *daylight*, brightening the cave considerably. The Way, no longer contained by the Trunk, blazes with blue energy many times brighter than any other Way they've seen. The horrible fear that has been beating against the *heroes' feast* is gone. And amazingly, only One Certain Step did not survive the ordeal.

And speaking of the departed paladin, Dranko finds himself standing almost on top of Step's armor. He squats to examine it, and sees that beneath the twisted metal plates, miraculously undisturbed by the tentacles and the chaotic melee, is a pile of ash.

Ernie rushes over to make sure Yoba is OK. Both of them are covered in wounds and splattered with gore. Yoba reaches out and tenderly wipes a spot of ichor from Ernie's brow.

"Is your life always like this, Ernest?" she asks, trembling.

"No," says Ernie, smiling. "Sometimes it's interesting."

Fajitas: Wowzers. And it's not over yet? Sheesh, you know how to make a party work for their XP.

shilsen: So how long did that fight last? Sounds like it went for multiple minutes, which is rare by D&D standards, especially at such high levels.

Artoomis: Phenomenal.

Long-time lurker here, finally had to break my silence and just let you know that I've been reading and loving it for a long time. Thanks for doing this!

Sagiro: Artoomis, it always goes to my head when a lurker de-lurks to pay a compliment to the Story Hour. Thanks!

Fajitas: Out of curiosity, how much did the players know about the background with FGOGL et al? Was that info they had at the time, something they found out later, or something that they still don't know in-character but was just added as a special treat for us readers?

Sagiro: They knew nothing about FGOGL. Consider it a special bonus extra for the readers (including my players), just like the background bits on Srapa and Tapheon that have come before. I think it's fun to write up this sort of thing, once I'm confident I won't be spoiling anything for the players.

Fajitas: Oh, I quite agree, both as a pseudo-Story Hour writer, and as a reader. It's great to get those kinds of background bits and pieces. It's like having the special edition DVD of the game.

Interesting. Now I'm really curious how this played out from the players' perspective. What kind of understanding did they have about what was going on? At that point, were they still thinking that the Cleaners were somehow part of the "proper" functioning of Het Branoi, as opposed to some external, invasive force? Was it clear to them that the room was linked to the Cleaners at all, or did it just seem like a random room full of tentacles? Did they have any idea why the Cleaners were there?

Just trying to get a glimpse of the original theatrical experience...

Sagiro: Those are all excellent questions, and for the most part I don't know the answers. The only thing I'm pretty sure the players knew, was that the tentacles in the "Lightless Room" were of the same ilk as the Cleaners. Other than that, I have no idea what the players thought was going on in there, or why there were Cleaners, or what the connection was between the Far Realms and Het Branoi. There are some clues in the recorded writings of Seven Dark Words, as transcribed by the Solfar, but I don't know how much the players picked up on.

Piratecat: Oh, we knew it wasn't a random room full of big tentacles. We weren't quite sure what it was. I think if we had known about FGOGL at the time, it would have been even scarier than it was; even so, we were terrified and armed for bear. Eye-of-Moirel-esque crystal bears, at least; we thought that there was something horrible back there that was infected by an eye of Moirel, and because of the tentacles we thought it might be a Cleaner herself.

KidCthulhu: I'm afraid we didn't think too much about the metaphysics of it. It was a great big evil thing from beyond the border of madness, and it was between us and the way out. Pretty much, killing it was a much higher priority than figuring out its planar mechanics. That said, the backstory is cool.

I had great fun with this combat, actually. Ernie was buffed up with all the clerical buffing spells and had three swords going. For the first time possibly ever Ernie was really effective in combat, doing 90-100+ points of damage every round. His B.A.B. was something like 32! And he was over by the Trunk, so missed all the animated bodies/tentacle badness happening elsewhere.

Uzumaki: You guys should do a theoretical run through that again, only this time starting with Step alive, and see if you could do it without Step's light. Just, ya know, to see.

Sagiro: If the Company had gone into the Lightless Room without Step's illumination, it would have taken about two or three rounds for the hundreds of tentacles to pull them all apart. Maybe four for Dranko, who had a ridiculous hit point total going in.

As KidC mentioned, the Company were absurdly buffed going into this fight. Every PC had at least half a dozen magic effects augmenting his or her abilities. And a good thing, too! For the record, the Masses had 476 hit points each, and the Trunk had over 900!

Piratecat: It was fun watching a six-foot-tall Ernie kicking tentacular butt. In comparison I'm not sure I did any damage whatsoever in the fight; Dranko was on healing duty for a change, and never landed a single attack that I remember.

We all thought the blue glow was an Eye itself. You should have heard us groan when we found out it was a portal!

Plane Sailing: For some reason a six-foot-tall halfling seems... well, wrong...

KidCthulhu: Yeah, it felt wrong to me for a little while. But then I opened up the can of whup-ass ("NOW WITH 50% MORE WHUP") and I forgot all about the wrong.

Graywolf-ELM: How can something so right, be wrong?

Fade: I have a technical question which I hope Ernie (or perhaps Dranko) will be able to help me with: when faced with a hundred-foot tentacle, how does one go about locating the butt in order to kick it? Since it lacks a spine as such, the usual method of following this down to the base is ineffectual.

KidCthulhu: My tried and true method is just to kick everything, and eventually you'll find the butt. Although usually by that time the point is moot (and often squishy).

The Rotunda

"I think this qualifies as one of the worst things that's ever happened to us," says Ernie, looking around the cavern at the dozens of dead bodies.

"You charged right at it!" says Yoba, admiration unmistakable in her voice. "You were so brave, and you drove it away." She looks up at him more literally than usual, as he's been *enlarged* for the combat. "You're larger than life," she adds, grinning.

Ernie blushes, and Dranko bites his tongue, but Yoba's continued gushing is interrupted by a rumbling cry of terror.

"GET ME DOWN FROM HERE!"

Kibi's earth elemental is still suspended at the top of Aravis's *reverse gravity*. It's the only time the poor creature has ever been separated from the ground, and it's not taking it well. Kibi does the merciful thing and dismisses it.

While Ernie casts a *healing circle* on the assembled heroes, Dranko can't help but grin himself. "Damn, we're good!" he exclaims.



There follows a period of rejoicing and healing, and a great deal of discussion about whether they should go through the bright blue Way right now, or wait until the next day. On the one hand, they're pretty tapped from the fight, and who knows what further perils await on the other side? On the other hand, any force that might oppose them will have an extra day to prepare defenses beyond the Way, and also there's the lingering fear that the Cleaners might come back. The first hand wins, in particular because while Morningstar is able to *heal* Grey Wolf, Sagiro and Snokas are still blubberingly insane, and she won't be able to fix their poor brains until tomorrow.

"What do you think is on the other side of that Way?" asks Jack.

"We think we'll find the object that's powering the Slices," answers Dranko.

"That's my guess."

"And if you do... whatever it is you came to do, what will happen?"

"We'll all go home," says Kibi.

"All the Slices should go back where they came from," adds Aravis.

"If you're about to fix things," says Ox, "I'd like to try to get back to my home Slice. And someone ought to go back to Bakersfield and warn people of what might happen."

Kiro, Ox and Jack all decide they ought to get a head start now. "I know how things work, and that there are spells that take people from plane to plane," says Jack. "When you get out of this, I'll get someone to cast *sending*, and we'll get together then and divvy up the stuff."

Kiro and Ox are likewise content with this sort of arrangement. The three of them leave through the Way in, headed back to Bakersfield and perhaps beyond. Only Yoba stays.

"Would you mind if I went with you?" she asks Ernie.

"Please! But... what about your goblins? Don't you need to go back to your people?"

"You can *plane shift* me back, right?" says Yoba. "I want to see this through to the end."

"I'd like nothing better," says Ernie, smiling at the thought.



The Company spend the rest of the day looting corpses. It's gruesome work, picking through rotting remains searching for valuables and magic items, but Dranko and Flicker are more than up for the task, making up for their companions' flagging enthusiasm for the job. The others help move the bodies to a far end of the cavern, since they intend to stay the night here. (No one wants to risk coming back to find that the Cleaners have unexpectedly returned; if there's any sign of encroaching tentacles, the plan is to leap through the Way and take their chances with whatever they find.)

By the time the Company grow tired and ready for sleep, Dranko and Flicker have piled up several dozen items, a heap of potions, scrolls, rings, weapons, armor, wands, staves, and assorted wondrous items. Flicker has also amassed an impressively varied coin collection which he guesses is worth in excess of three thousand gold pieces, and probably much more to a collector.

energy One: Now seems an excellent time to take the time and ask... How often, in more recent times, have Dranko, Morningstar, and Ernie used their dream-vision granted abilities (for example, Dranko's scar-on-the-back-of-the-hand at-range healing ability)?

Piratecat: Dranko uses his distance healing ability quite often. It's saved the lives of numerous party members, including Snokas and (ironically) One Certain Step. Ernie uses his Strength ability at times; it takes a standard action to activate, so it's often a question of how much time he has.

Finally, before bed, they hold a short memorial service for the departed One Certain Step. Dranko has collected Step's ashes, to be returned to the Church of Kemma when they get the chance. The Company are silent and exhausted, each reliving fond memories of Step's time with them, and wondering if they really are but one Way removed from bringing Het Branoi to an overdue end.



The next "day" finds the Company standing ready. No Cleaners or other foul things have appeared during the watches, and all assembled are well energized by Morningstar's *heroes' feast*. Prep spells have been cast, guesses have been made, prayers uttered, and Sagiro and Snokas have been *healed* back to sanity. Now they are poised in front of a rippling, pulsing Way, their faces bathed in its garish blue glow.

As one, they go through. The transit time from this Slice to the next is shorter than normal, as if the structure of Het Branoi is eager to carry them. A second later, the Company emerge.

Aravis, his keen intellect and senses augmented with *greater arcane sight*, takes in a breathtaking scene in just a handful of seconds. He stands in a large round stone chamber, some eighty feet across and familiar on two accounts. For one, the stone pattern on the walls is the blue-diamond slate that he has seen several times throughout their journey in Het Branoi. For another, the floor is covered with black circles, lines, scrawled formulae and complex diagrams, in a manner immediately reminiscent of Mokad's ritual room in Kallor.

The Rotunda, he thinks.

He himself stands near one edge of the room, a bright blue Way at his back, and near the opposite edge stands the Pillar. The Pillar is what immediately draws his attention. It is a tall cylindrical column, stacked alternately with rings of obsidian and transparent crystal. A black liquid moves about beneath the surface of the crystal sections, as if dark oil is trapped between two pressed sheets of glass and is oozing like a living Rorschach blot.

Each stacked ring is a foot tall, and there are half a dozen each of black stone and clear crystal, making the entire Pillar twelve feet high. Shining out from the topmost clear section is a blazing blue light, as if from a small azure star, and out from this light strands of energy are shooting in a constant barrage of arcing zigzags. Some of these energy ropes smash into the walls, floor, and ceiling of the room, but one halts in mid-air, as if it's struck an invisible blockage. A blue Way slides open at the end of that energy strand.

Aravis thinks he can see a world through the Way – a field, some nearby trees – and then the Way slides shut, vanishing as if into an invisible slot, just as did the Way that brought them into Het Branoi in the first place. He has witnessed the birth of a Slice.

Aravis takes in all of this over the course of five seconds, during which time he is increasingly aware that some malign force is hammering on his psyche. For from the Pillar a great Evil is emanating, an Evil the likes of which he has never before felt. It is crushing in its intensity, a pure physical malice that would make the likes of Lord Tapheon seem petty by comparison. He turns to Dranko who stands next to him, and the half-orc is shielding his eyes from it as if it's a bright sun that burns. Dranko has felt this before, and in a similar place. In Mokad's lair, there was a book that radiated Evil like this. Dranko was knocked out just from its presence.

Aravis turns to the rest of the Company, but only Dranko and Sagiro (warded with a *protection from evil* spell before coming here) are standing. The rest of the Company are sprawled on the stone floor, unconscious.

porthos: Just got caught up (again) with the Story Hour. Simply mahvalous.

My wife and I (both faithful readers) would like one of the gang to settle a curiosity (disagreement being too strong a word).

Is it ah-RA-vis or AIR-a-vis? Or a-RAH-vis for that matter.

Sagiro: It's AHR-a-vis, where the "AHR" rhymes with the first syllable of "Harry."

Porthos, I'm glad you're enjoying the story! One of these days, I should get off my butt and transcribe/write/post the next installment or two, in which the great saga of Het Branoi will come to a conclusion. Wait 'til you see what Aravis and Ernie do when [details redacted].

the Jester: Sagiro, you're a damn cruel tease.

thatdarncat: Wait 'til you see what Aravis and Ernie do when [forced to dance a polka]. Am I close?

Eridanis: After all these years, I'm *finally* reading your Story Hour... Just finished the Crosser's Maze section, and I have to say it was absolutely breathtaking and mind-blowing. Now, *that's* epic gaming, no matter what the character levels are!

I'm just glad that I have lots more to read and enjoy. On to session 111...

Everett: Observation: the Crosser's Maze is easy to love; it's such a neato... thing.

energy One: Sometimes I feel such as to *pretend* that I just finished reading all of the Story Hour up to a certain point, just to see it to the top of the list again.

I must remind myself, however, that lying is wrong; also, that that will not bring an update any sooner.

So I'd like to take this time to make a post that isn't completely spurious. To all of those players in the Charagan Campaign, you players of the Heroes of the Kalkas Peaks, great job. Sagiro is apparently a mastermind of a DM, and the respect I have for him creatively is certainly magnified by knowing he worked for Looking Glass Studios, but it isn't just him and his creativity that has made this campaign what it is.

From reading this Story Hour, it's plain to see that this game isn't just blessed with an extraordinary DM painting an extraordinary story, but a fantastically creative and intelligent group of players, as well.

Good job! Players of your caliber are hard to come by, and as I'm sure he is, Sagiro should be proud.

Sagiro: Sorry for the delay... busy life, basically. Speaking of which, our daughter just passed her six-month checkup with flying colors. She's a chubby, happy amazon who loves pulling daddy's chest hair (Ow! Ow ow ow!) and smiling at pretty much everyone.

Eridanis, I'm always glad to welcome a new reader! ... I think the Crosser's Maze is still my favorite extended adventure. It's neck and neck, I think, with the Battle of Verdshane, which you may have already read by now.

And *energy One*, you're absolutely right. I have the best players ever. I don't know how on Earth I got so lucky, but I ain't complainin'!

wedgeski: OK, cliffhangers should be officially banned in Sagiro's Story Hour. Votes?

Ashrum the Black: Nah, I like them. They build character!

shilsen: If you mean that they kill PCs and require players to build more characters, then yes...

Fimmtiu: Oh, bloody hells. Was this automatic, or did everyone without the PFE just fail a tough Will save? Nice suspenseful way to start a fight...

Sagiro: No, it wasn't automatic. Everyone was permitted a Fortitude save, but it was a tough one, and only Dranko and Aravis made it. Sagiro Emberleaf was OK because the party had cast *protection from evil* on him, afraid that he'd be more susceptible to having his mind taken over by another Eye of Moirel.

KidCthulhu: Yeah, it couldn't have been a Will save, which some of the party might have a chance of making. Had to be Fortitude. *grumble, grumble*

Enkhidu: Says the halfling fighter/cleric. Mmm... this irony is delicious, don't you agree?

Kid Charlemagne: You just need to toughen up Ernie's doughy interior. I recommend a diet of whisky and habañero peppers.

Fimmtiu: I can see it now: a rumpled halfling in a battered hat leans against a lamp-post, waving a bottle and talking like Tom Waits... "Don't have a drinkin' problem, 'cept when I can't get a drink..."

Plane Sailing: Aravis? The wizard? All those clerics and fighting types are going to have some living down to do!

Fade: At 2000gp a pop, amulets of permanent *protection from evil* look like they would be a very wise future investment for the party. Prevents mind control, and provides a bonus to AC on the side.

Victim: Yeah, so do shield or true strike items... Continuous items using spells that grant bonuses should be priced with the bonus formulae, not as spell effects.

Seule: Exactly. The effect here is, from the SRD:

This spell wards a creature from attacks by evil creatures, from mental control, and from summoned creatures. It creates a magical barrier around the subject at a distance of 1 foot. The barrier moves with the subject and has three major effects.

First, the subject gains a +2 deflection bonus to AC and a +2 resistance bonus on saves. Both these bonuses apply against attacks made or effects created by evil creatures.

Second, the barrier blocks any attempt to possess the warded creature (by a *magic jar* attack, for example) or to exercise mental control over the creature (including enchantment (charm) effects and enchantment (compulsion) effects that grant the caster ongoing control over the subject, such as *dominate person*). The protection does not prevent such effects from targeting the protected creature, but it suppresses the effect for the duration of the *protection from evil* effect. If the *protection from evil* effect ends before the effect granting mental control does, the would-be controller would then be able to mentally command the controlled creature. Likewise, the barrier keeps out a possessing life force but does not expel one if it is in place before the spell is cast. This second effect works regardless of alignment.

Third, the spell prevents bodily contact by summoned creatures. This causes the natural weapon attacks of such creatures to fail and the creatures to recoil if such attacks require touching the warded creature. Good summoned creatures are immune to this effect. The protection against contact by summoned creatures ends if the warded creature makes an attack against or tries to force the barrier against the blocked creature. Spell resistance can allow a creature to overcome this protection and touch the warded creature.

That's a lot of cool effects, notably 2 better AC and saves against many opponents, and immunity to an entire class of spells. Much more valuable than 2K gold. I'd price it at least ten times higher, probably more.

TwinBahamut: My brother and I just finished spending the last two weeks reading the whole story of Abernathy's Company to date. And, amusingly enough, it happens to be the first Story Hour we have ever read on these boards...

I have to applaud everything you have done here, Sagiro. This story is incredible, and you are one awesome DM. There are too many quality moments in the story to even list.

Actually, this Story Hour has inspired me to pick DMing a small campaign. It has been a while since I had so many ideas for a campaign, and every time I read your Story Hour I get more inspiration (even inspiration not directly tied to what happens in your campaign, but I do borrow a few ideas). But what rotten luck to finally catch up at this kind of cliffhanger... Argh! I am eagerly looking forward to the next chapter.

MavrickWeirdo: That's not luck, he almost always ends on a cliffhanger...

TwinBahamut: But not always on a cliffhanger right before the climactic final encounter of a very long and interesting plot arc...

Richard Rawen: Yet looking back... and back and back and back... There are many times that Our Heroes™ have found themselves at a precipice of Epic Proportions only to have our exalted story teller decide to "close the book for now... We'll pick up there next time..."

Oh the number of times I have uttered nonsensical frustrations! Gah! ERGH! Ohhhh!

el-remmen: Please sir, might we have some more...?

Sagiro: Sorry for the long delay. Life has been very hectic lately, and with the baby waking so early every morning, I've had to cut back a bit on my late-night Story Hour writing. And, since that's when I do almost all my writing... well, you can see how it is.

Of course, some of my free time has also been consumed with prep work for the ongoing game. Oh, yes, it's progressed far beyond where the Story Hour is now. Just last night there was an epic battle against a true Boss-level opponent, and my players once again wrote a new page in the book of battle tactics. It was fantastically exciting, and you'll probably read about it a year from now, at the rate I'm going... (Specifically, the following is part of run #172. Last night's game was #185. So, I'm 13 runs behind, and maybe I'm only half a year away. Sigh.)

TwinBahamut, I'm delighted to hear I've moved you to run your own game. My only piece of advice for you at this stage is: make sure that the kind of game your players want is the same as the kind of game you want to run. That's about 70% of the battle right there.

As for the cliffhangers - well, I'm afraid this [next] installment won't make you any happier...



Don't Touch It! It's Evil!

"Crap!" exclaims Dranko. Scattered at his feet, the bodies of his friends lie bathed in harsh blue light. Only a few feet away is the Way through which they've all just arrived, the brightest Way he's ever seen, pulsing and rippling and buzzing faintly.

Are his companions dead? It's not worth taking the time to find out. Dranko casts *protection from evil* on Morningstar, and her eyes snap open. Her head throbs with ache. Aravis, meanwhile, stands transfixed by the Pillar and the beams of energy firing out of it. One of these smashes into a support pillar, sending a spray of ephemeral blue sparks cascading to the stone floor. Beyond the Pillar, high on the balcony on the opposite side of the Rotunda, he thinks he sees something like a metal cage.

Dranko quickly explains the situation to Morningstar, who takes her *gem of recall* and sets about filling an empty spell slot with *magic circle against evil*. Even protected by Dranko's spell she can feel the Evil from the Pillar washing over her. While she spends a round getting her spell, Dranko tries to get a better look at the cage. It's some eighty feet away and obscured by the top of the Pillar, but with his sharp eyes he guesses that it's gartine, and that it contains something stone, like a statue. Hard to say.

Morningstar feels the desired spell pop into her head and hastily casts it. Immediately the rest of the Company come awake, all with splitting headaches and feeling weakened and sluggish as they struggle to their feet.

Only Dranko, Aravis and Sagiro were spared the CON drain. Morningstar took 2 points, and the rest took 4 points. And that CON was vanishing at 2 points per round!

The newly conscious take a few seconds to look around, absorbing the strange scene. The blue strands of energy continue to surge from the Pillar, crackling snakes that either smash into the stone features of the room, or stop short and create short-lived openings into freshly birthed Ways. It's only a matter time, of course, before one of those energy beams flies into the midst of the Company.

Specifically, it happens about ten seconds after they've stood up. Grey Wolf is struck soundly in the chest by the energy ribbon. He feels a sharp jolt, a blue light explodes behind his eyes, and the world goes black. To the others, watching, Grey Wolf glows blue for a second and turns into a crystal blue statue, effectively petrified.

"Holy Yondalla's flapjacks!" exclaims Ernie.

wedgeski: Great stuff. That one's a keeper.

KidCthulhu: Thanks. But wait, folks. It gets worse. Much, much worse.

Plane Sailing: Presumably you are not referring to an increasing verbal armoury of cakes and buns deployed by Ernie in front of the (hopefully unshocked) Yoba?

shilsen: Can't hardly wait. Not that we'd want anything to happen to your PCs of course. Really.

Grey Wolf's body starts to tilt, but the others catch him before he smashes on the floor. They lower him gently to the ground.

Kibi immediately casts *wall of force*, and feels an exceptional surge of Earth Magic flow through his body. Its source is the same as that of the Evil – the Pillar – but the Earth Magic doesn't feel tainted. His wall springs up about halfway between the Company and the Pillar, and only a few seconds later an energy strand smashes into it.

Ernie casts *protection from evil* on Dranko so that he can leave the group and investigate the balcony. Dranko deftly wraps the end of his whip around a spoke of railing and hauls himself up. The balcony runs the entire perimeter of the room, save for four gaps at the cardinal points where now defunct magic lifts once carried people up and down. There are desks up there, one about every fifteen feet, most of them long since smashed by errant energy beams from the Pillar. Wooden debris is scattered on the stone floor, with scraps of parchment that flutter as he walks past. He reaches down to examine one, and finds it has strange diagrams and formulae scrawled upon it. On the wall more pieces of parchment are nailed into the stone, and these have more complex diagrams similar to those on the room's floor.

With his *greater arcane sight* Aravis can discern overwhelmingly strong Earth Magic ambient in the room, but it's mixed with necromancy, enchantment, divination – indeed, almost every known type of magic is here, save for illusion and the magic of the Cleaners. There are spells here aplenty, but none that he recognizes. "It's... frightening," he says simply.

More *protection from evil* spells are cast, to give the group a bit more tactical flexibility. Morningstar looks about and idly scratches her head. "Er... what are we supposed to do here?" she asks of no one in particular. The only immediate answer is the sizzling sound of another energy beam striking Kibi's wall. It leaves a glowing blue spot that quickly fades.

"Aravis!" calls Dranko. "There's a whole bunch of charts and diagrams up here. Want me to help you up to take a look at them?"

"Oh, *Aravis* is so smart," grumbles Kibi. "*Aravis* will figure it all out. Let *Aravis* see the diagrams."

"Sorry Kibi," says Dranko with a smirk. "Look, you're smart too. So figure out a way to talk Aravis into solving our problems." Kibi snorts.

Dranko moves around the balcony toward the gartine cage. He finds it large enough that he could stand inside it, though he doesn't open it for fear of traps. It doesn't quite block the balcony altogether. Inside the gartine lattice is a stone pedestal atop which sits a tilted stone disc, like a lectern made of rock. The disc is carved with patterns that exactly match the larger inlaid patterns on the floor of the Rotunda. In these carved grooves is a clay-like gray substance, like a long since congealed liquid. On the floor of the cage is a beige ceramic pot filled with a similar sludgy substance. Dranko shares the details of his discovery with the others over a *telepathic bond*. "It's probably dragon's blood," says Morningstar. "Silver dragon blood."

Beyond the cage and its pedestal, Dranko finds a particularly large piece of parchment nailed to the wall. On it is drawn a strange map, which Dranko describes to the others. From the description Aravis thinks it's a diagram of the Abyss, depicting its multi-layered spiraling nature. Dranko takes it from the wall, rolls it up, and stows it. He instinctively ducks as a energy strand shoots from the Pillar and strikes the wall near his head, then motions for Flicker to come join him.

Flicker gets his own personal *protection from evil* from Yoba, clammers up onto the balcony, and heads around to the far side taking the opposite route from Dranko. En route he stops to pick something up. "I'm glad we caught Grey Wolf before he fell and crashed," he says, gulping. "I think I found someone." Flicker holds up a broken-off blue crystal arm, mostly whole from the shoulder down, though with most of the fingers snapped.

"That's awful!" exclaims Dranko. "Grab me a piece." Flicker reaches down again, and tosses to Dranko half of the crystal head.

Down on the ground, Aravis and Kibi have been discussing ways to get the Eye out from the Pillar. Kibi is leaning toward using a *stone shape*, while Aravis favors bisecting the Pillar with a *passwall*. Both plans are potentially perilous, since they would probably release some of the oily black liquid that squirms through the Pillar's surface. Morningstar sits down and starts filling some of her empty spell slots with *break enchantment* spells, hoping to restore Grey Wolf to flesh.

"Dranko, what's up?" asks Flicker.

Dranko holds up the crystal half-head. "I have the best collection of souvenirs from across the multiverse," he muses out loud. "Er, but what I wanted you for was to check this cage for traps."

Flicker checks it out, but doesn't think the gartine cage is even locked, let alone trapped. Dranko opens the door and steps in to get a closer look at the pedestal and its tilted disc. He digs some of the sludgy gray goop out of the grooves and sniffs it, but if it was once dragon blood, it might as well now be clay. While he does this, Flicker sees something at the foot of the pedestal – a small black stone box. Taking the box and the ceramic pot, Flicker and Dranko scramble down from the balcony and join the others. Aravis examines the box with *arcane sight* and learns that there are two spells on it: *arcane lock*, and a potent abjuration that he's never seen before.

Flicker doesn't think it's trapped, so Kibi casts *greater dispelling* on it. This breaks the *arcane lock*, but the abjuration remains. Wondering what to do next, Kibi concentrates hard on the Earth Magic that permeates the Rotunda, and in specific seeks an empathy with the trapped Eye of Moirel. He thinks calming thoughts toward it, and even hums it a dwarven lullaby. Dranko looks at him askance. "That's why I asked Aravis first..." he mutters.

But despite the half-orc's skepticism, Kibi feels something, though he's not sure what. The Earth Magic starts to sharpen, almost as if it's gaining tangency, and suddenly Kibi feels a sharp pang, like an emotion. Frustration. Frustration, and panic. "We're here to free you," he says out loud. "Don't be afraid." There's a surge of Earth Magic that only he feels; it comes and goes in a flash.

¤¤

Morningstar manages to restore Grey Wolf on the first try. His crystalline form ripples quietly and becomes flesh again. He takes an instinctive gasping breath, then looks around and wonders how everyone changed positions so quickly.

"This was you," says Dranko, holding up the piece of crystal head.

"Ewww," says Grey Wolf, grimacing.

There's both curiosity and trepidation about what's in the black stone box. Flicker carries it back up to the balcony and sets it on the edge where Aravis can see it from ground level. Aravis then uses *mage hand* to gently lift the lid, peering at the box all the while with his *arcane sight*.

A great Evil wafts up from it, an Evil like that which emanates from the Pillar. Aravis hastily closes the box again, and the Evil is contained. They debate whether Ernie should try dispelling it, but it seems too risky. Only Kibi is staunchly in favor of the idea. "It's the evil in this room that's keeping the Eye trapped," says Kibi imploringly. "Anything that reduces the amount of evil in here, ought to help us set the Eye free."

In response, he feels another surge of power and emotion, this time like anticipation. "I think the Eye likes that idea," adds Kibi. "You're talking to it?" exclaims Ernie.

"Well, no, not really. I'm just getting flashes of emotions from it."

To the Eye, Kibi thinks, *How do we free you?* He is answered by another flash of frustration.

So Ernie casts *dispel evil* and approaches the box, while Aravis *mage hands* it open again. But when Ernie gets within about ten feet of it, he finds himself unable to physically approach it, or even look straight at it. "Aravis, just close it!" he exclaims. Aravis does.

"That's why there's a powerful abjuration on the box, clearly," says Ernie. "It's to keep the Evil... contained."

OR SO

In the end, they go with the *passwall* plan. Aravis walks to the edge of the *wall of force* and peers around it. From this closer vantage point he can tell that the Pillar is more complex than he first thought. There are actually *two* glass cylinders, each tall and hollow, with the first just a *tiny* bit larger than the second in every dimension. The smaller is nested inside the larger, and the black liquid is pressed in the thin space between the two. The obsidian rings are inside the inner cylinder.

"Ernie," says Aravis. "You've still got that *dispel evil* prepped, right? Be ready."

Aravis points his staff and prepares to activate *passwall*, aimed to shear right through the Pillar about half way up its length. That should expose the Eye, probably causing it to simply fall out and onto the ground.

The spell goes off. Pressurized black liquid explodes out from the Pillar as it is suddenly exposed. Some of it sprays against the *wall of force*, where it oozes down like dark mercury. Some of it jets directly onto the floor, beading into little glistening droplets.

And some of it spurts directly back at Aravis. He brings his hands to his spattered face, and screams, and screams.

Funeris: Magnificent. One of the great things about insomnia is being able to catch a... well... magnificent update.

Good work, Sagiro. I'll try not to hold the cliffhanger against you.

Zaruthustran:

DM: You enter a room that is obviously, grossly, filled with magical energy. There's this fragile pillar-within-a-pillar, surrounded by evil black goo. There's a shattered crystal statue. There's a cage containing a mystical diagram and an odd congealed clue. And there's lots of arcane formulae floating around.

BUTTHEAD: Let's... break something.

BEAVIS: Yeah! Um, okay – I break the statue!

DM: It's already broken. It's actually a crystal corpse.

BUTTHEAD: Like, a dead guy? Cool! I pick up his head and throw it at Beavis.

BEAVIS: What? No way!

BUTTHEAD: I gave you head.

BEAVIS: Huh huh.

BUTTHEAD: Huh huh.

DM: What do you do now? Look at the formulas, or the arcane diagrams?

BUTTHEAD: Uh... "Words, words" huh huh, "words"...

BEAVIS: This sucks! Let's break something!

BUTTHEAD: What else can I smash?

DM: Well, the cage is made of metal. As for the pillars, the inner pillar is rock while the outer pillar is glass. An evil-looking liquid –

BEAVIS: He said glass! Smash the pillar, Butthead!

BUTTHEAD: Yeah.

DM: – it contains a really nasty-looking oil, and –

BUTTHEAD: I smash the pillar.

DM: ...OK, it explodes, and covers Beavis with burning evil goo.

BEAVIS: AHHHH! AHHHH!

BUTTHEAD: You're on... fire. Huh huh.

BEAVIS: AHHHH! Huh huh AHHHHH! IT BURNS! Huh huh.

BUTTHEAD: Huh huh. Burning is cool.

Not meant as an insult! This latest update just reminded me how often adventuring parties solve problems by busting things apart.

Enkhidu: Brute force is always an answer. Not necessarily the correct one, mind you, but still.

Spatzimaus: If brute force doesn't solve your problems, you're obviously just not using enough.

OR SO

Your Own Worst Enemy

Kibi's attention is pretty evenly split. On the one hand, Aravis is in obvious pain, and to say that the effects of the black liquid cannot possibly be good would be an epic understatement. On the other hand, the *passwall* has triggered an emotional surge from the Blue Eye – hope, and strong anticipation. The Earth Magic in the Rotunda swells, the Eye sensing that an end may be coming to its long captivity. Kibi tries to send it thoughts of reassurance.

Aravis abruptly stops screaming, flinches like he's been struck, and breathes a tremendous sigh of relief. "You... you okay?" asks Ernie worriedly.

Aravis looks pale, but manages a smile. "Yeah. I'm okay."

Ernie looks steadily at Aravis. Most of the black droplets have slid from his clothes onto the stone floor, but one still blots the shoulder of the wizard's robe. Maybe it's just well-founded paranoia, but Ernie can't help but feel that Aravis's expression is amiss. Ernie walks over to offer comfort, the *dispel evil* still on his hand. He pats Aravis on the shoulder, discharging the spell. His hand comes into contact with the black droplet as he does so. Aravis and Ernie exchange the briefest of glances, and Aravis shudders as though some enchantment has been broken.

"I think it worked," says Morningstar.

For a moment no one says a word, as everyone holds their breath. Yoba is looking unflinchingly at the two of them, and Dranko still stands up on the balcony looking down. His eyes meet Yoba's, and the halfling paladin cannot hide her concern as she mouths silently to him: "*Evil. Both of them.*" Then she forces a smile and says, "Ernie, are you all right? What happened?"

"Morningstar is right," says Ernie. "It worked." His voice is clearly changed. It has become flat, devoid of all its usual innocent cheer.

"It?"

"The *dispel evil*," Ernie clarifies. Then: "Can we just take the gem out now, with *telekinesis*?" He points at the Pillar, and everyone's attention is wrenched back to it. The Pillar has been sheared into two sections, upper and lower, but incredibly the upper half, the Eye still inside it, now hangs suspended in mid-air. Black liquid is dripping out from between the two nested glass cylinders. Someone could, if they chose, reach up into the hollow Pillar and pluck the Eye from inside.

There's an awkward pause, broken by Dranko quickly lashing out with his whip... and deftly removing Aravis's spell-component pouch from his belt. "Yoba says they're both Evil!" he shouts, and then, being no dummy, he runs to put the *wall of force* between himself and Aravis.

"You shouldn't go making judgments about people," says Ernie evenly. "And does it really matter?"

Aravis looks up at Dranko and shakes his head. "I should point out that we don't have much time before the *passwall* runs out. I don't understand why you're wasting time attacking me."

"This is not the time to fight among ourselves," adds Ernie. "We need to get that gem."

Morningstar disagrees – about the fighting part, at least. "I'm sorry, Aravis," she says, as a *darkbeam* springs from her hand and burns into the wizard's eyes. Aravis grimaces as hot pain fills his sockets, searing away his eyeballs and rendering him blind. But Aravis has held his focus through intense pain before. Calm as can be he reaches out and touches Ernie, *teleporting* the two of them next to the Way through which they came. *Pewter, which way do I step?*

Pewter sticks his head out of Aravis's pack and hisses at Morningstar. *A little left, and forward*, thinks the cat to his master. Aravis steps through, pulling Ernie with him. Both vanish.

"What can they do?" says Morningstar worriedly. "Turn invisible and come back to get us?"

"We can bludgeon them into unconsciousness," suggests Dranko. "Ernie will be a tough little fight though..."

"I can use *hold monster*," offers Kibi.

"Should I go after them, then?" asks Flicker.

"Attack to subdue!" Dranko reminds him. "They're still our friends."

Flicker leaps through the Way. Snokas, Yoba and Sagiro follow him. Dranko, made invisible by Grey Wolf, goes as well. "Ernie might put up a fight," says Grey Wolf to Morningstar, "but Aravis is the greatest threat. He has the Maze!"

Kibi, meanwhile, has continued to concentrate on the Eye. *Free yourself! There's a gap!* He funnels his own Earth Magic into the Eye, lending it more strength to fight the Evil that pins it. Kibi feels a tremor ripple through the Earth Magic in the room, as if the Eye is shaking itself free. Its emotions ring clear in Kibi's mind: elation, anticipation, gratitude. Kibi thinks it's loosening whatever grip is upon it, even as the last of the black liquid drains out from between the glass cylinders and onto the stone floor.

QR 80

Ernie has backed away from the Way inside the cavern where FGOGL had dwelt, and turned to watch the entrance. The dark cave is illuminated by the faint glow of those magical suits of armor not deemed worth taking by the Company the previous day.

Flicker arrives, then Yoba, and Snokas, and Sagiro. Then there is a final shimmer, but Ernie sees no one come out. "Dranko, I know that's you," he says. "I'm not sure why you're attacking Aravis. We need to be working together."

But Aravis has decided that the time for chit-chat has passed. Using Pewter to guide his aim, he engulfs the recent arrivals in *prismatic spray*. Sagiro and Snokas are effectively saved by the strange nature of Het Branoi itself; they are *not* sent to another plane, because here in the Slices that simply can't happen. Yoba resists becoming petrified, and Dranko shrugs off the worst effects of the poison beam. Flicker, alas, does not endure the spell very well; light shines in his eyes and intelligence drains out of them, leaving him a drooling, gibbering wreck. He stumbles back through the Way to the others who wait in the Rotunda. Snokas, having resisted both planar banishment and petrification, turns to Ernie and grunts, "You can surrender, or we can do this the hard way."

"We came in here because you launched an unprovoked attack on Aravis," answers Ernie, his voice still flat. "I don't know why."

"The paladin says you're evil!" answers Snokas.

"What does that bitch know?" Ernie retorts, smiling slyly at Yoba. "Anyway, it's to all of our advantage to cooperate. If we..."

Snokas has heard enough. He lets fly with his picks, drawing blood. Yoba, her face expressionless, jumps to interpose herself. "Look," she says. "I think Ernie is... is right, in this case. Fighting won't get us anything." (She casts a dirty look at Snokas.) "We don't want to kill them, and they don't want to kill us. As they say, we need each other, for the short term."

"You got that right, toots!" Ernie agrees, and with a leer he smacks Yoba's ass.

Dranko is appalled. "He's not usually like this..." he starts, but Yoba cuts him off.

"I know!" she shouts, and her voice is clearly wavering with emotion. "Look, I know what's going on here, and I know that's... not him. But regardless of the cause, we need to stop fighting."

"Don't underestimate them!" answers Dranko. "They're really dangerous! Beat them around the head and neck – subdue them. But stop them!"

Sagiro unleashes an attack on Ernie, attempting to deal non-lethal damage, but Ernie weathers it and steps back through the Way. Upon arrival, Grey Wolf nails him with an *enervation* spell, sapping Ernie of life energy and some spells. Morningstar towers threateningly over him. "Sit down, Ernest. Sit down by the wall and don't move, or you *will* be attacked."

"I just want to help us..."

"Sitting down and not moving, is how you're helping," says Morningstar, steel in her voice. "That is your *one* option. Talking is not acceptable." Injured, drained, and faced with suboptimal odds, Ernie sits.

Back in FGOGL's cave, Dranko speaks to Aravis. "You're one of my best friends, and I can't think of anyone I respect more than you. But I'd like to think of this as my version of *iron storm/chain lightning*." Pewter just has time to think, *Look out, boss, he's...* before a dizzying blur of whip strikes to the head knocks Aravis unconscious.

Then, to Yoba, Dranko says, "I appreciate you trying to mediate, but we had to subdue them. And for another thing, I'll be really disappointed if you let this change your opinion of Ernie. The depth of his evil is, I'm sure, proportional..."

"I know," says Yoba gently. "I know that Ernie is..."

"Hey!" exclaims Dranko. "Paladins aren't supposed to cut people off. I'm giving a speech here!"

Thornir Alekeg: Is that rule in one of the splatbooks? I don't remember it from the SRD...

"I'm very sorry," says Yoba, taken aback. "Please, go on."

"His evil is proportional to the good in him. He's the best person I've ever met – though I won't tell him that to his face, so he doesn't get a swelled head. But... well, he's really something. His evil is like a mirror, I'm guessing. He's only so evil now because of how good he was before. Hell, if I turned evil, all that would probably change is that I'd smoke even more. Anyways, I just wanted you to know."

"I appreciate it," says Yoba, smiling.

"OK, then. Now, let's go bludgeon Ernie unconscious with Aravis's body."

OR SO

During this brief flurry of combat maneuvers and verbal jabs, Kibi has kept his focus on the original goal of their epic journey: the blue Eye of Moirel. With all his might he is channeling his own Wild Magic toward it, willing it to free itself. Less and less of the black liquid remains in the Pillar, and suddenly the Blue Eye shivers and falls to the ground with an audible *tink* before rising into the air. Kibi feels a flash of emotion from it – pure elation – and then it speaks into his mind.

I'M FREE! AT LONG LAST, I AM FREE!

"Yes," agrees Kibi. "I hope you think kindly toward us. We..."

YOU HAVE THE SKILL, MASTER DWARF.

"Wild Magic, you mean?" asks Kibi. "Yes. But I still don't know how we get out of here."

I WILL FREE YOU. I RULE THIS PLACE.

I HAVE BEEN TRAPPED BY AN EVIL BEYOND IMAGINING, BUT THAT NO LONGER HOLDS ME.

I KNOW ITS POWER. I FOUGHT IT FOR CENTURIES. AH...

The Blue Eye pauses, and quivers again for a moment.

MY BROTHERS ARE NEAR it says, tilting toward Scree. HMM. THAT ONE IS NEAR!

Sensing the moment may be escaping, Kibi hastily interjects. "Could you help me and my friends before you go fighting the Red Eye?"

MY TRUE BROTHERS STRUGGLE, BUT HAVE IT IN HAND. IT MAY BREAK FREE, BUT FIRST, I WILL HELP YOU.

Ernie pipes up, "Do you mind if I..."

"Yes, we mind!" Morningstar cuts him off.

By this time Dranko has dragged Aravis, now bound and gagged, back to the Rotunda. He and the others see Kibi standing straight and resolute, the Blue Eye hovering inches from his face. The Wild Magic around the two of them is so palpable that even the others can feel its heat.

In answer to the unasked questions from his friends, Kibi says simply: "We're finally getting out of here."

RangerWickett: Yay!

el-remmen: Woo-hoo!

coyote6: Shiny!

Tamlyn: Seconded. Very nice update. Thanks mucho!

the Jester: Very very cool. It seems as though a climax (though not the final one, obviously) is coming up soon...

Vargo: I'd say something about a certain response I had to this momentous event, but I have a feeling that Eric's grandma would not approve. Instead, I'll just say OH YEAH, BABY, YEAH!

Mishihari Lord: Yay!

carpedavid: I'll chime in with my own "woo!"

Funeris: And I'll second your "woo!" with a "Wheeee!"

Pyske: Welcome back, Sagiro. Glad you found (or made!) time for the update; I enjoyed it a lot, and it was much less cliff-hangery than the last one.

Graywolf-ELM: At the risk of sounding Country, Yeee-Haaaw.

Plane Sailing: Extra-shiny...

Fimmtiu: Kick ass! (Or, well, "grab ass" in Ernie's case.) Welcome back; your updates are always worth waiting for, no matter how long. Evil Aravis didn't get much of a chance, but I bet KidCthulhu must have had a fun time playing Evil Ernie.

KidCthulhu: The answer to this question is "I had a blast playing Evil Ernie." He wasn't puppy kickin', world dominating evil. Just very, very self-centered and cranky. Ernie's aims as a good person are small (peace, a simple life, protecting those he loves), so his aims as evil were small (comfort, self-gratification and no damn people telling him what to do).

The look on the party's faces when Ernie slapped Yoba on the ass was priceless. Evil Aravis was scary because he could wipe out the party with a word. Evil Ernie was scary because he was just so *wrong*.

Everett: That's enough "yays" without mine. But I liked it.

Dawn: Sweet! I picked a great time to return to the Story Hour.

Gold Roger: OK, it took me over two weeks, but I'm through. Now, there really is no comment I could make that hasn't been made often enough, so lets leave it at "wow." The sheer amount of time and scope of this campaign is mindboggling.

QR 80

Getting the Het Out of There

Everyone is looking expectantly at Kibi, when Ernie interrupts. "You know what makes me happy?" he says. "That I don't have to cook for you lazy f***ers anymore. Make your own damn meals."

"No talking," snaps Morningstar, only briefly turning her head. Yoba remains steadfastly expressionless.

Kibi listens for a while as the Eye communicates with him telepathically through Scree, then turns to inform the others. "The Blue Eye says that the Purple and Green Eyes are keeping the Red one in check. It also tells me that Aravis and Ernie are the only two people here affected by the black goo, and that it can temporarily reverse the effect. But it cannot cure them."

THAT WILL BE THE PROVINCE OF THE DIVINE, says the Eye to Kibi.

IT IS NOT IN ME TO EFFECT THAT SORT OF TRANSFORMATION.

Kibi offers to lend the Eye some of his own inherent Wild Magic, and thus fortified it channels its own power into Aravis and Ernie. Their eyes flash blue, and the evil shadow that had fallen across their souls is lifted. But their memories are still in place, and Ernie goes instantly pale.

"Ernie," says Kibi, "it wasn't your fault." Ernie starts to sob nonetheless.

"Can you stop crying long enough to listen to me?" says Dranko. "The better person you are, the eviler you get."

"It doesn't matter!" cries Ernie. "I was... I was terrible!" He tries to say more, but his voice breaks and he only manages some horrified squeaks. Yoba clearly wants to comfort him, but Ernie shies away from her.

(Aravis seems to take a more detached view of the event. He recalls his evil thoughts, and no longer accepts them, but more than that he's just plain irked at the rest of the Company. Evil though he might have been, the party *attacked* him before he had even lifted a finger, simply on the unspoken opinion of Yoba. And no one yet has healed his burned-out eyes.)

Morningstar takes this opportunity to *heal* Flicker of his madness. "Quick!" he cries, not certain of the passing of time. "Aravis and Ernie have turned *Evil!* You have to stop them from... um... er..."

He sees Ernie's red eyes and tear-streaked face, shuts up for once, and gives his friend a hug. "We know it wasn't you," he says.

At that moment, the Company's collective attention is drawn upward, to where a chunk of stone splinters noisily from the ceiling and falls to the floor.

FOR A LONG TIME I WAS THE ONLY THING KEEPING THIS PLACE TOGETHER, says the Blue Eye to Kibi.

Kibi hardly listens, though. Like everyone else he is noticing that from the dark gap left behind by the broken stone, the faint but foul corruption of Cleaners is emanating.

"Time to go!" shouts Dranko, though he and Flicker make a quick dash around the Rotunda, grabbing papers, objects, and anything else that looks valuable. And it's a good thing, too, since Flicker discovers a metal frame, like a tray, where the same arcane pattern from the floor and the stone pedestal is repeated – with inlaid gems. Dranko makes sure to grab both the pot of (presumably) silver dragon blood, and the small black box of concentrated Evil.

"What will happen to the other people – the other Slices – when we leave?" Kibi asks the Blue Eye.

THE SLICES ARE ALREADY RETURNING TO THEIR PROPER PLACES. ALL SHALL BE AS IT WAS.

"And what about us?" adds Kibi. "How do we get out?"



A tendril of blue energy fires out of the Eye, and a few feet away from the assembled Company it stops as if it had struck an invisible wall. At that location a blue Way appears, pulsing. Another piece of stone flakes away from the ceiling, and the nausea of the Cleaners grows a bit stronger. The last of the greasy black liquid has drained from the Pillar onto the stone floor, where it has pooled into a shape somewhat reminiscent of a Black Circle.

“We’re leaving!” says Grey Wolf, and with no more hesitation he leaps through the Way. The rest of the Company follow close on his heels. There is one final sensation of being pulled through a black void, as the Company pass through the last Way of Het Branoi.

QR 80

They stumble out into eight inches of freshly fallen snow, while more snow falls thickly from the sky. Next to them stands the statue of the beholder, the illusion that kept Het Branoi secret for centuries. They are back in the courtyard in the giantish town, after what feels like an eternity navigating the bizarre labyrinth of worlds that is – or was – Het Branoi. There are no giants in sight. There is, though, a beholder looking down upon them.

Grey Wolf moves off to the side immediately and makes himself invisible, while Ernie looses *Beryn Sur* and Kibi sinks into the ground. “Are we attacking or negotiating?” shouts Dranko to the others in Charagan Common.

“We could try to talk...” answers Morningstar, and that’s good enough for Dranko.

“Hey, you!” Dranko calls to the beholder. The monster floats about twenty feet above them, and while it wasn’t facing the tower, some of its smaller eyestalks had noticed the Company’s arrival. Already it is swiveling to face them.

“Just letting you know,” continues Dranko, “we’re leaving. And if you’re thinking of starting something – well, see him?” Here he jerks his thumb at Aravis, whose eyes are still seared away. “He’s blinded, and he’s our friend. So, if you don’t want some of that, I suggest you let us leave.”

“Why is Dranko negotiating?” mutters Ernie.

“Is that what that was?” asks Aravis.

The beholder finishes turning to face the Company. Grey Wolf blinks back to visibility and *Beryn Sur* drops into the snow as the beholder’s anti-magic cone plays across them. And a *second* beholder now floats into view, from around the other side of the tower. The first beholder speaks in a wet, rasping voice. “You are the ones who killed Veez Ch?”

“Yeah, that was us,” says Dranko. “And it wasn’t very difficult.”

“Where is Seven Dark Words?” demands the beholder.

“Seven Dark Words is flung into infinity,” says Dranko. “His tower has been destroyed, and he’s been cast out into the outer planes.”

The beholder allows three of its stalks to glance at the tower. “The tower has not been destroyed,” it hisses. “What are you talking about?”

“The outside hasn’t,” agrees Dranko. “But the inside is. It’s much bigger than it looks. You’re released from your duties here. Seven Dark Words ain’t coming back.”

“We don’t wish to harm you,” says Ernie, his voice still brittle with emotion. “We just want to pass in peace. I don’t want any threats to my friends.”

“I have not threatened you,” gurgles the beholder. It bobs up and down, tilting slightly, and if anyone in the Company had been able to read a beholder’s body language, they’d have known that this one was – quite frankly – pretty nervous.

"You have done your job well," continues Ernie, "but the man you served is gone. You're no longer bound."

"What of the rest of them?" asks the beholder.

"They're all gone too."

"All of them? You're certain?"

"They were driven away by their own madness," confirms Ernie.

"We've been in that place for months," adds Dranko. "Trust us when we say, there's none of them left in there. You're not bound by anyone anymore."

"We were never *bound*," grumbles the beholder.

"That makes more sense," says Dranko. "We couldn't understand how the Black Circle had bound creatures as powerful as you."

"You are very observant," says the beholder.

"When we fought your... cousin, it wasn't 'cause we hated him," says Dranko. "He attacked us, we defended ourselves. You know how it goes. Did you make a deal with Seven Dark Words?"

"We agreed to guard this tower," answers the beholder. "For a long time, we guarded the doors as they came and went. Eventually, they stopped coming. They stopped going. We grew tired of this place, this job. We set the giants to do it in our stead."

"Hah. Sneaky," comments Dranko approvingly.

"They were performing an experiment that went terribly wrong," says Morningstar. "We tried to fix it, but all we could do was destroy it."

"We'll take you at your word," says the beholder, bobbing even more nervously now. "I suggest that you leave."

Dranko can't resist having the last word. "Thanks for being wise enough to listen to reason," he says. Then: "Um, that didn't come out quite the way I meant. Er, I mean, thanks for not just killing us, which I'm sure you could have. If you wanted."

"Less talking, more retreating," says Morningstar.

The beholders release them from the anti-magic, which allows the Company to *teleport* the heck out of there. (Before they do, Morningstar uses a scroll to finally cure Aravis of his blindness.) In an eye-blink they are standing at one of their old campsites, several hours' journey from Het Branoi.

They stand on a snow-covered plain, with no signs of civilization in sight. Everyone just stands there in the snow, savoring their freedom and their victory. "You know what?" says Grey Wolf. "We just aged a minute."

"I hope everyone else in Het Branoi got out," says Ernie. Morningstar thinks of the person in Green Valley, trapped for years in the body of a baby, and shudders.

Aravis – having prepared more for combat than travel that morning – cannot produce a *secure shelter*. Instead, Grey Wolf fishes out his *Mordenkainen's cube*, and casts *Mordenkainen's magnificent mansion*. The Company pile in to the comfortable wood-beamed library with its roaring fireplace and fat couches.

Grey Wolf, closing the door behind him, is staring down at the cube itself. Heretofore the item had glowing script scrawled on five of the six faces, and the sixth face was black. Now, though, the last face is packed corner to corner with dense writing. Kibi casts *read magic*, and discovers that it will cast *Mordenkainen's disjunction*. Everyone edges away from it nervously. Grey Wolf opines that it can only be used once in a very long while, and that it must have reset while they were in Het Branoi.

While everyone enjoys the magnificent feast provided by the *mansion*, and the hot baths, and the warm fire, Dranko empties the *bag of holding* onto the floor. The quantity of loot scrounged from the floor of the Cleaner Cavern is staggering – it's a haul the likes of which they haven't seen since requisitioning Pog and Mazzery's collection from Zhamir.

He starts to put on magic rings (not realizing that once he's got more than two, they all cease functioning), and then picks up the object on top of the pile – a clear glass Erlenmeyer flask. Something about the flask makes him want to get a good look inside, but when he puts his eye up to the opening, he finds that his nose is getting pulled inside! The rest of his face soon follows, and he can feel his entire body become strangely un-solid. In a matter of seconds his entire body has somehow been poured *into* the flask.

Aravis, reading a treatise from the library on n-dimensional planar calculus, looks up when he hears the *tink* of the glass vessel falling onto the floor. Wasn't Dranko playing there just a minute ago? Aravis puts down his book and picks up the flask, and sees that it's filled with a silver liquid.

Inside the flask, Dranko feels like he's treading water. He can see just fine out of the container – in fact, he can see every hair in Aravis's nose, now relatively enormous, with disturbing clarity. As he watches, other members of the Company come into view. Other discoveries he makes are that he cannot wave (having no physical body) nor exit the flask on his own. Then the world starts to quake as Aravis upends the flask.

Aravis pours out the liquid, and it reforms into Dranko as it spills. In seconds Dranko is whole again and lying on the floor (dry), and he coughs as air rushes into his lungs. "I have no idea what that's useful for," he complains.

"Are you kidding?" asks Aravis. "You could smuggle people anywhere in that!"

"Or we could put you on a shop shelf, and you could see what's going on inside," adds Ernie. "I probably shouldn't ask what made you pour yourself inside there in the first place."

"It *wanted* me to look inside!" Dranko protests.

"And do you *always* do what the strange magic item wants?" says Morningstar with a smirk.

The rest of the evening passes cheerily, with no end of food or drink. Ernie seems in better spirits, as Yoba has pretty much dismissed the final moments in Het Branoi. The only sobering moment comes when Aravis muses out loud if the universe still hates them. But they are mollified by Kibi, who relays a message from the Blue Eye that as long as they stay relatively close to one another, they should be fine.

No one tries to kill them, the universe doesn't unravel, there are no Cleaners, no giant spiders, no slaadi – it's the perfect evening. (Scree might disagree, still serving as host for a quartet of Eyes of Moirel, one of which still isn't playing nice. But he's happy on Kibi's account.) Best of all is their plan for the morrow – identifying and distributing all the loot!

coyote6: So, were the players glad to be out of that "dungeon"?

Sagiro: I don't see why they would have been. They were only in there for 23 game sessions...

Jackylhunter: Happy, happy, joy, joy! Thanks for the update, Sagiro. What a mighty fine tale it has been... But aren't Aravis and Ernie still cursed/geas'd/ensorcelled? Didn't the blue Eye say it wasn't a permanent fix?

Anyway, it really was a phenomenal story line, a very cool idea. Thanks for sharing.

Gold Roger: So, traveling nowhere is next, eh?

MavrickWeirdo: Yeah, they are back! Now that is done they have nowhere to go (until they are ready to go nowhere)...

Graywolf-ELM: So, is the real timeline restored? Or is it still the alternate one?

MavrickWeirdo: They met up with a beholder, and it talked about the one they killed on the way in. He also mentioned they need to keep "relatively close to each other" to keep the universe from rejecting them. All indications point to them being in the alternate timeline. The good news is that it takes (I think) three Eyes of Moirel to "go nowhere" and they have four. If they can figure out how to make them work.

wolff96: They may have four Eyes of Moirel, but what they *truly* have is one evil red Eye and three other Eyes. Two of which are currently occupied with keeping the last one in check. It may be a bit of time before they can "go nowhere." Or at least until they can get the Eyes to stop fighting.

Piratecat: So, just to recap: the world is still evil, because of whatever the Sharshun did to change time. We traveled to Het Branoi because we knew that we'd need three Eyes of Moirel to "go nowhere" and fix it. We ended up with four, destroying the Het in the process.

Now we just have to get from Kivia back to Charagan (across the Uncrossable Sea), check in with Eddings, and go to the Mirrors of Semek in order to go nowhere. And lord knows what *that* means!

MavrickWeirdo: There was once a prophecy that said the magic of the Eyes of Moirel allowed people to "go nowhere." It was discovered by the characters (too late) that if you are in the same geographic location, in an alternate history, then you have in effect "traveled nowhere."

Everett: I would theorize that "travelling nowhere" will turn out to be being transported into some sort of null space between the original (or real) timeline and the current (or false) one... Hmm... well. It seems smarter in my head than it does in articulation.

Richard Rawen: In that case I'm glad you wrote what I was thinking to save me from being so confused by what I wrote. Oh, wait... Seriously, ya know, this is some pleasantly deep stuff. (Except, of course, for Aravis, for whom I wonder if 'deep' is even in his vocabulary?)

Everett: Hey, speak for yourself – I thought Aravis' reaction after being turned back to non-evil was... interesting. Go back and read it again – he had two completely valid points: (1) They attacked him before he'd so much as twitched. And on merely the paladin's unspoken say-so. Not just irritating... but predictable. And (2) they took their sweet-ass time about healing his eyes afterwards. Dranko even took the time to make a typically dumb show of braggadocio over it to the beholder (to the *beholder*!! Ugh). What did the "good" guys do at the time? Morningstar lorded it over Ernie, which she's rather good at.

Maybe I'm inclined to fight for him because I'm used to playing wizards in the D&D world (he's also my favorite member of the company), but I think you should examine your opinion.

el-remmen: Aravis is your favorite? Dranko is mine. Well, actually Mrs. Horn is mine, but she wasn't around very long.

Everett: Full of himself. If I were playing a psion in there it would come to blows with Dranko.

el-remmen: Oh, and Sagiro, in case I haven't said it before, your campaign wins for "game I would most want to play in" – but watch out... Fajitas' Halmee is gaining on ya!

But seriously, someone compared my game to yours favorably in my Story Hour thread and I took it as high high praise, because your shiz is the shizzest.

Sagiro: Thanks to all who embarrass me with praise (*el-remmen* – my shiz is the shizzest? I, um, I think that's praise!).

el-remmen: It most certainly is...

Sagiro: Maverick, the Company has yet to "travel nowhere." You may recall that it takes three (at minimum) Eyes of Moirel to do that (according to the Eyes themselves, anyway), and the Company has only recently acquired a third (and fourth). In other words, you were spot-on with your post two posts ago.

Sabriel: [Everett: They attacked him before he'd so much as twitched. And on merely the paladin's unspoken say-so. Not just irritating... but predictable.] Note to evil-self: corrupt the ones who can detect evil at will first...

Everett: What I was getting at was that Yoba is a recent addition to the party. They don't know her that well. Why so quick to take her at her word?

Sabriel: That said, if I was the party (arch)mage, I'd tell them to attack me before I even so much as twitched. Because after I twitched, it would be too late.

Everett: Uh, no, if you'd turned evil, you'd keep quiet until you were ready to proceed. Playing eleven wizards in two very different long-running campaigns (one hack 'n' slash, one more story-based) taught me that the wizard is not some kind of god. You have a set number of spells you can cast each day, and that's it. If you run too low, or don't predict well and stock up for what you're likely to need, then you've rendered yourself less useful to the party. You're always vulnerable to ambush, and you have to think about spatial strategy all the damn time, because if you let yourself be absent-minded about your placement in a fight, it only takes one or two spouts of dragon fire to wipe you out. (Which happened to my story-based wizard at 10th level, while I was trying to lead the party with the paladin's player absent.)

Sabriel: [Everett: They took their sweet-ass time about healing his eyes afterwards. Dranko even took the time to make a typically dumb show of braggadocio over it to the beholder...] I was wondering about/weirded out by that too. Was there a reason for the delay that went unwritten?

Piratecat: There sure was. We didn't think that there was any way that we could heal Aravis's blindness, given our remaining spell selection. Then someone realized that they had a scroll with *remove blindness*, so we used it as soon as we could. I believe we also ended one game as we emerged in front of the beholders, and (embarrassingly enough) when we reconvened a few weeks later no one but Aravis's player remembered that he was still blind. We had already started roleplaying with the beholders by then, though, so we just ran with it.

This last game created some interesting discussions. Aravis's player himself has issues with inter-party conflict, and I have huge issues with evil party members due to a particular player way back in high school. Some of that leaked through in this game. When Yoba said that Aravis turned evil, I immediately realized exactly how much damage he could do. What if he had *really* turned, escaped, and decided to go rat us out to the emperor? More so than Ernie, the downside of Aravis turning evil was huge... and it says something about how much respect I have for the character (and his player) that I wanted to avoid that. I had hoped that yoinking his component pouch might minimize this, but it all fell apart pretty quickly.

Everett, Dranko is absolutely full of himself! Or perhaps more accurately, he's full of bluster and recovering from being deeply insecure, which are not necessarily the same things. Morningstar has the tough job of being a strong-willed Neutral in a party of Goods. I think Ernie might be my favorite example of a "traditional" Tolkien-esque halfling forced into adventuring, in that there's nothing kender-like about him. It's such a nice change. I wish you guys could hear Kibi's voice, because more than anything else it personifies how I think of the character. It's so damn dwarfy. Kibi's player also plays Mara in my game, and the difference in her two PCs is vast.

Everett: ... And everyone always wants you to cast *fireball* instead of trying something intriguing.

And you have to spend a ton of money on building your spellbooks. Does the cleric have to cough up gold every time he swings his mace? No. And I could go on. A good wizard deserves some damn respect. End rant. Unless I think of something else.

Piratecat: Apropos of nothing, we split every treasure by an extra person (so eight ways instead of seven, for instance). This party share of treasure is kept by Ernie, and is used for paying communal expenses. That includes group magic item crafting and wizard spellbook-scribing that benefits everyone.

A powerful wizard benefits the whole group. Really, the hard part is finding time to do the scribing.

Everett: Yeah. The campaigns I played in always had trust issues to deal with, so I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what would benefit the whole group without having much constructive feedback in that direction. The highlight of the campaign for the others became listening to myself and the paladin's player bicker about morality...

Well, I think I've said my piece here.

Tamlyn: Nice update. I'm glad to see a semi-regular post! And I'm sure the players were glad to be out of there.



This is not an update. Rather, it is the list of loot the Company gathered from FGOGL's cavern. I may be a Rat Bastard™ sometimes, but let no one accuse me of stinginess with the swag, when the party has endured serious trials. I thought you all might like to take a look at the goods.

Weapons

▪ Shortsword, "Coiled Viper"

An exquisitely-made shortsword with a (carved) viper curled around the hilt. It's a +3 shortsword, with *icy burst* (extra 1d10 cold damage on a critical hit). It has 26 charges, any number of which can be burned on any attack roll. Each charge allows an additional die to be rolled, with the best result used.

▪ Longsword +2, "Black Sapper"

A longsword with a flat black blade. On a critical hit, it drains 4 points of STR from the victim and grants the wielder a +4 inherent bonus to STR for one minute.

▪ Dagger +4, "Ice"

A thin dagger with a wavy silver blade. It can be activated 1/day as a standard action. If dipped into water or similar liquid, it will instantly freeze up to 100 cubic feet (this ends the effect). Otherwise, when activated the next successful hit to an opponent will do an additional 8d6 of cold damage.

▪ Elegant Greatclub +4

A mean-looking greatclub wrapped with iron bands, and with an iron spike protruding through the business end. It does damage like a two-handed greatclub, but can be wielded with one hand, and the user can apply either STR or DEX bonus (user's choice) to the to-hit roll.

▪ Longsword +5, holy avenger

A cold iron longsword that's a mere +2 in the hands of a non-paladin. When wielded by a paladin, it is a +5 weapon that has two additional powers: it provides spell resistance of 5 + the paladin's level to the wielder and adjacent allies; and the paladin can cast *greater dispelling* (area dispel only) once per round as a standard action, at the paladin's level.

▪ Mace, Vicious +3

A black mace with red iron bands around the handle. Does an extra 2d6 damage on each hit, but also does 1d6 to the wielder.

▪ Falchion +2, luckblade

A softly-glowing golden falchion. It has one charge remaining, which allows the wielder to cast *wish*.

▪ Dwarven War Axe +4, thundering

A solid war axe with Dwarven runes carved in the handle. On a critical hit it does an additional 1d8 of sonic damage, and the victim must make a DC 14 Fortitude save or be deafened permanently.

▪ 6 Screaming Bolts, +2

When fired, all enemies within 20 feet of the path of the bolt must make a DC 14 Will save or become shaken. (This is a mind-affecting fear effect.)

▪ Spear +3

▪ Mace +2

▪ Spear +1

▪ 4 Darts +1

▪ Orcish Double-Axe +1

▪ Trident +1

Armor

▪ Half Plate +3, "Spikethrower"

Polished half-plate bristling with spikes. Once per day as a standard action the wearer can command the spikes to shoot from the armor. All within 20 feet must make a DC 19 Reflex save or take 4d6 points of damage. The spikes come back when the armor is next taken off or put on.

▪ Buckler +3, undead controlling

A round bone buckler with a skull design. The wearer may control up to 26 HD of undead per day, as per the *control undead* spell.

▪ Chainmail +3, celestial

Bright gold chainmail. This armor is so fine and light that it can be worn beneath normal clothing without attracting notice. It has a max DEX limit of +8, an armor check penalty of +2, and an arcane spell failure chance of 15%. It's considered "light armor" and weighs 20 lbs. The wearer can cast the *fly* spell on command 1/day.

▪ Studded Leather +3, wild

Painted with green leaf designs. The wearer retains the armor (and enhancement) bonus even while in *wild shape*.

▪ Hide Armor +3, glamered

Upon command, this armor will take on the appearance of normal clothing.

▪ Breastplate +5

▪ Heavy Steel Shield +4

▪ Medium Wooden Shield +2

▪ Chain Shirt +1

▪ Scale Mail +2

Rings

▪ Ring of Safety

A silver ring with a snake design that matches that of the shortsword "Coiled Viper." It has 19 charges, any number of which can be burned any time the wearer makes a saving throw. An additional die is rolled for each charge used, with the best result used.

▪ Ring of the Ram

An iron ring with a ram's head carved into a flat plate. The wearer can call forth a ram-like force that strikes a single target for 1d6 (one charge), 2d6 (two charges) or 3d6 (three charges) points of damage. This is a ranged attack with a 50-foot maximum range with no distance penalty. Those struck by this force are subject to a bull rush if within 30 feet of the wearer (the ram force has STR 25 and is Large). It gets a +1 on the bull rush attempt if 2 charges were used, and +2 if 3 charges were used. The ring also has the ability to open doors as if it were a character with a 25 STR (27 Strength if 2 charges are expended and 29 STR if 3 are expended). The ring has 38 charges.

▪ Rings of Swapping

Two identical white gold rings, with abstract star-pattern insignia. Each wearer, once per day, can swap places with the other wearer if s/he can see the other wearer. They have a maximum range of one mile.

▪ Ring of Energy

A shiny brass ring that seems to vibrate slightly when worn. It allows the wearer to burn hit points for speed, 5 HP for an additional 5 feet of movement. This is done as a free action concurrent with any movement. It is limited to 50 hit points (and thus 50 feet of movement) per day, which can be spent over any number of rounds.

▪ Ring of Water Elemental Command

A ring of twisted blue crystal that sparkles when immersed. Water elementals cannot come within 5 feet of the wearer, though this protection can be given up to attempt to charm the creature (Will save DC 17). Creatures native to the Elemental plane of Water are at -1 on attacks against the wearer. The wearer gains a +2 resistance bonus to saves made against such creatures, and a +4 morale bonus on attack rolls against them. Any weapon used by the wearer bypasses natural damage reduction of the creatures. The wearer suffers a -2 penalty on saves against fire-based effects. The wearer of the ring can converse with any creatures from the Elemental plane of Water, who will recognize the ring and show either a healthy respect, fear, or hatred, depending on relative alignments and strengths. Finally, the wearer gains the following abilities: *water walk* (personal, unlimited use); *create water* (unlimited use); *water breathing* (unlimited use); *wall of ice* (1/day); *ice storm* (2/week); *control water* (2/week).

▪ Ring of Spell Storing

Can store up to five levels of spells inside. It currently only has *cure serious wounds* in it.

Potions

- *resist electricity* 30
- *invisibility* (2)
- *gaseous form*
- *tongues*
- *cure light wounds* (9)
- *cure moderate wounds* (7)
- *cure serious wounds* (4)

Rods

▪ Rod of Privacy

A translucent smoky glass rod. It casts *nondetection* 1/day; *invisibility* 1/day; *Mordenkainen's private sanctum* 3/week; *mind blank* 1/week.

▪ Rod of Metamagic, Silent, Greater

A short ebony rod. Three times a day the wielder can apply the Silent metamagic feat to any spell.

Scrolls

- Arcane: *repulsion*, *prismatic spray*
- Arcane: *contingency*, *teleport*, *ice storm*
- Arcane: *comprehend languages*, *pyrotechnics*, *blink*
- Arcane: *Otto's irresistible dance*, *sympathy*
- Divine: *cat's grace*, *lesser restoration*, *tongues*, *cure critical wounds*
- Divine: *symbol of pain*, *symbol of sleep*, *symbol of fear*
- Divine: *greater dispelling*, *antilife shell*

Staves

▪ Staff of Illusion (12 charges remaining)

Its appearance is different to each observer. It casts the following spells: *disguise self* (1 charge); *mirror image* (1 charge); *major image* (1 charge); *rainbow pattern* (2 charges); *persistent image* (2 charges); *mislead* (3 charges).

Wands

▪ *false life* (17 charges)

▪ *order's wrath* (21 charges)

Wondrous Items

▪ Cape of the Mountebank

A cape of bright red and gold cloth. The wearer can cast *dimension door* (on self) 1/day, leaving behind a cloud of smoke and reappearing in the same manner.

▪ Snooper's Earring

A silver earring in the shape of an ear. It grants a +5 bonus to Listen checks.

▪ Load Boots

A well-made but plain pair of brown leather boots. The wearer does not suffer speed penalties for armor.

▪ Necklace of the Unseen

A slender silver necklace that's oddly hard to see when viewed directly. When a charge is used, the wearer is not subject to attacks of opportunity for any reason, for one minute. It has 9 charges.

▪ Mantle of Spell Resistance

A black mantle with a pattern of yellow stars. It grants Spell Resistance 21, as the spell.

▪ Stone Salve

A small stone pot with faintly glowing clay. One use, spread on a subject using a full-round action, casts either *stone to flesh* or *stoneskin* on the target. There are 3 uses remaining.

▪ Brooch of Shielding

A gold pin with an emerald eye design. It prevents all damage done by *magic missile* spells. It can absorb 68 points of damage before becoming inert.

▪ Cloak of Charisma +4

A gray cloak with a subtle dark green spiral pattern.

▪ Flask of Body Pouring

A plain glass Erlenmeyer-type flask. Exact use unknown, though it has a capacity of "one person of size Large or smaller."

▪ Dark Blue Ioun Stone

A rhomboid *ioun stone* that grants the Alertness feat.

▪ Lantern of Revealing

A finely-wrought glass and brass lantern. Lighting takes a full round action; once lit, it casts the spell *invisibility purge* in a 25-foot radius around itself. It will burn through a flask of oil in one hour.

▪ Belt of Equality

A wide leather belt with a buckle showing two hands in arm-wrestling position. When worn, the wearer uses the size bonus of his opponent when making grapple checks.

▪ 23 Translator Discs

Useful for translating languages in areas heavily saturated with wild magic.

Miscellaneous

▪ Assorted coins of various shapes, sizes and metals

Their strict monetary value is (according to Flicker after a brief assessment) about 3400gp, but as a collection it may be worth much more than that to the right buyer.

▪ Assorted gems

Worth (in total) about 18,000gp.

▪ Assorted jewelry

Worth (in total) about 44,000gp.

thatdarncat: Wow, can I have you as a DM?

coyote6: How about, "Rat Bastard when giving away swag"? 'Cause you give 'em [*a longsword +5*]... when the longsword-wielding paladin is dead, and the remaining paladin is a halfling.

Sagiro: Au contraire! Behold my generosity, wherein I ruled that Yoba could wield it two-handed without penalty. Such is the holiness of the weapon; in fact, a crystal gem set in the pommel became etched with the Cornucopia of Yondalla when she claimed it. I'm such a softy!

Everett: *arched eyebrows* I don't like it. Extremely convenient. What sort of magic justified that one?

MaverickWeirdo: That would be the "Yoba is an NPC run by the DM, he can do whatever he wants" kind of magic...

And isn't it an amazing coincidence that a couple of sessions before the NPC paladin dies another NPC paladin joins the party?

Piratecat: MaverickWeirdo, Sagiro doesn't actually have a paladin fixation. I think her class is less important than her personality.

Sagiro: Two things:

(1) I've never been much of a fan of the wacky weapon size rules. It seemed sensible to me at the time that a longsword for a size-M creature could be used as a two-handed sword by a size-S creature. I initially didn't even think of it in "magic" terms.

(2) But if you want a magical explanation, well, whatever it is that causes magic armor to resize itself to the wearer, that sort of magic must have been applied to the *holy avenger*.

Dawn: 'Nuff said.

Everett: I don't care for those rules, either. I meant the symbol of Yondalla that became emblazoned on the hilt... I know of course within parameters you can do whatever you like with world metaphysics when you're the DM, but a holy blade is a holy blade, isn't it? It should still have the aura of One Certain Step's god (aura, symbol, whatever...).

Sagiro: Ah, I see. Well, first, the sword in question never belonged to Step – it was found among the littered magic items on the floor of the cavern. Presumably it had last been used by one of the many adventurers who braved the Black Door before the Company arrived. Second, this particular sword was forged in the name of a non-deity-specific "goodness," if you will (a notion supported in the PHB, in case you were wondering). It was made such that any paladin of a good deity could pick it up, and it would become holy to them specifically.

At the time it was found, it had been unused for so long, it had reverted to its no-specific-deity starting state.

Piratecat: It didn't work worth a damn for Dranko. Hmmph.

Finally, when you look at the glorious loot list, remember that we have to share this with the NPCs who helped us in that fight. Mind you, we get first pick...

*Completing the Circle***Travel, Logistics, Onions and Strife**

“Does the Rope still work? Let’s try it!”

Dranko voices the question that’s on everyone’s mind. The Spire had given the Company a magical rope that allows them to cross Posada’s Boundary, but it’s running past its warranty. They’ve used it three times now already, more than the Spire thought they would, and there’s no telling if it has any more charges.

“We don’t know,” answers Ernie.

Kibi, desiring some answers before they leave, speaks into the body of Scree. “Hello, Blue Eye.”

YES?

It still boggles their minds: an Eye of Moirel that speaks when spoken to! “We want to restore the universe to the way it should be,” says Kibi. “and now that we have you, we can travel nowhere.”

YES.

“And that will make things better,” prompts Kibi.

INDEED.

“But, continues Kibi, “we have to get across the Uncrossable Sea, and we don’t really know how this whole ‘going nowhere’ thing works. We’re pretty sure we should go to where the Mirrors of Semek are, and go from there. Does that sound reasonable to you?”

THAT SOUNDS WISE.

“Do you have any ideas on how to get across the Uncrossable Sea?” Kibi asks. “We have this Rope, or we could go through the Gate of Fire. Do you have other ideas?”

**I COULD ATTEMPT TO USE MY POWER TO FORCE A WAY ACROSS POSADA’S BOUNDARY AND TAKE YOU WITH ME.
BUT IT IS UNLIKELY TO WORK, AND FAILURE WOULD BE EXTREMELY... BAD... FOR YOU.**

“Well, thank you very much, for answering our questions,” says Kibi. “Is there... uh... anything I can do to make your stay more comfortable?”

I FIND SCREE QUITE ACCOMMODATING.

“You’re a nice guest,” says Kibi. “Nicer than that Red one...”

**MY TWO BROTHERS HAVE THEIR METAPHORICAL HANDS FULL.
AS DO I – NO OFFENSE INTENDED TO ERNIE AND ARAVIS.**

Kibi frowns. He has not forgotten that without the Blue Eye’s intervention, Aravis and Ernie would revert to their evil selves, stricken as they are with the black liquid from the Rotunda. “How do we cure them?” he asks.

I DON’T KNOW.

Kibi asks the same question of Morningstar. Morningstar has been praying, and finds that she feels a much closer connection to the Goddess than she did while in Het Branoi. Still, she feels that Ell herself is weakened (from a dearth of worshippers, presumably). Morningstar is of the opinion that the Evil will not be easily broken by any of her spellcraft. After all, the power of the Evil was such that Ernie’s *dispel evil* was blasted away as if it wasn’t even there. “I doubt even *greater restoration* would be of any use,” she says with a sigh. Just for completeness’ sake, she casts *break enchantment* on Aravis.

“Is he still Evil?” Kibi asks the Eye.

I’M AFRAID HE IS.

“We’ve got a *wish*, you know,” Dranko points out. The others nod, but there’s an unspoken opinion that it would be nice to find another way to cure Aravis and Ernie, and save the *wish* for later use.

“Hey, guys,” says Flicker, who hasn’t been paying any attention to the conversation. “I think I’ve got an estimate.” Flicker has been examining the metal-framed pattern of gems he found in the Rotunda as they fled. “I’m not really sure about it. Some

of these gems I've never seen before in my life. But if we pried them all out and sold them individually, they'd probably get us somewhere between fifty thousand and a hundred thousand gold pieces! Of course, if we could find a wizard, or a collector, or someone for whom it has extra significance, we might be able to get even more." Nice!

Talk turns to the Gate of Fire, which will be plan 'B' if the Rope fails. Last time they went through, it required a special ritual to open. Dranko (impersonating a Delfirian warlord) spoke the final syllable of the ritual, but they have no way of reconstructing the whole thing from memory. It sounds like a problem they'll have to solve once they get closer.

Dranko is growing a bit bored of the conversation, and his eyes are starting to droop. He decides to experiment some more with the *flask of body pouring*. Specifically, he wonders if he can sleep in it. "Flicker, empty me out in about an hour." Dranko pours himself into the flask, leaving Flicker holding the vessel.

Flicker grins, and decides he wants to do an experiment of his own. He speaks into the opening. "Remember what this feels like!" He shakes the flask vigorously for a few seconds, before putting it in his pocket and forgetting about it.

There's not much more conversation before bed for the rest of the Company. There might be other things they could do while in Kivia, but there's not much point. "They'll just become invalidated when we change the world back," says Aravis.

"Oooh," says Ernie. "Do you think Shreen the Fair exists in this world?"

"We could practice kicking his butt!" says Morningstar, seeing where this is going. And it's a popular idea, but everyone agrees that they don't really want to spend more time here than they have to.



Flicker stays up for another couple of hours, eating some dessert and wandering around the library. He picks a book off the shelf and flips it open, but it's written in some kind of wizardish script that makes no sense to him. Eventually he heads to his room and undresses for bed. He hears the muffled *tink* of the flask as his jacket hits the floor.

"Oops," he says out loud. "Forgot about Dranko. Hey, I just thought of another experiment!" He goes into the bath chamber, and opens the flask underwater in a big bathtub. Dranko comes pouring out under the water. For a few seconds he thrashes wildly, and then lies still, bobbing face-down in the tub. Flicker looks down at Dranko, utterly horrified. "Dranko? Dranko, come on, that's not funny." Dranko doesn't move. The bathwater laps against his lifeless body.

"Oh my gosh! I killed Dranko! Help! Help, quick!" His yells soon wake the others, who come running to see what's the matter. They see Dranko face-down in the bath, but Grey Wolf just chuckles. "Flicker," he says. "Dranko's wearing the *ring of water elemental command*. He can breathe under water." The others have dragged Dranko's body out of the tub, and it's only when Ernie is about to give him mouth-to-mouth that he sits up. Flicker turns bright red, while Dranko grins at him.

There's one more piece of revenge to exact. After Flicker has gone to sleep, Dranko sneaks quietly into his room, right up to the halfling's bed, grabs Flicker by the shoulders, and shakes him violently awake. "This is what it feels like when you shake the bottle!" he shouts. "I just thought you'd want to know!" And with that, he turns and walks out.



The next morning Flicker gives the flask back to Snokas (who claimed it when the loot was divvied), but not before trying one more experiment. This time he has Dranko's cooperation, but the test is a dud: he is unable to suck Dranko into it just by moving the flask toward him. It turns out that there has to be at least some volition on the part of the pouree. "I guess our trick of putting it under the outhouse isn't going to work," says Dranko.

Morningstar now takes the time to do something she's been waiting to do for a long time. She sends a *sending* to Kay, wherever she might be, asking if she's alive and OK. She gets an answer – which is a big surprise – but it's disturbing and confusing.

Miss you too. Other Kay died. Now I'm their Kay. Their Morningstar dead too. We're lost in Het Branoi. Must go. Fighting demons.

"But that can't be possible!" Dranko protests. "We fixed Het Branoi."

"Remember when we were talking about the notion of multiple universes?" says Aravis.

"Yeah," says Dranko. "You told me that there's Hell and the Abyss. I remember."

"No, no, this is something else," says Aravis. "Here. Think of an onion."

Dranko raises his eyebrows. "Okay..."

"The onion has all these layers," continues Aravis. "The onion is our universe. Each of the different layers are different planes. Now, if I have another onion over here, it's a different onion, right?"

"Yes..." says Dranko, not seeing where this is going.

"You live in here, in this first onion," says Aravis. "And Kay is in another onion, probably very close to ours."

"Kay is on the other onion, but the same layer of onion skin as we are on ours?" says Dranko, scratching his head.

"With different onion us-es!" says Ernie, thinking he gets it.

Aravis shakes his head, thinking maybe this wasn't the best example. "Please," he says, "whatever you do, don't discuss this theory with other mages. At least, not with my name attached."

"But it's brilliant!" says Dranko. "You've explained planar theory in a way I understand!"

"Aravis's Onion Theory! You could be famous!" says Ernie.

"That's what I'm afraid of," says Aravis.

"We should *send* to her again and tell her the solution!" says Ernie. "Tell her the Red Eye is Sagiro!"

"It may not work that way..." warns Aravis.

"Yeah!" interrupts Flicker. "The other onion might have a rotten spot that ours doesn't!"

"Ask how the other onion's Dranko is holding up without you," Dranko says to Morningstar. "I want to make sure that I'm strong."

"For one thing," says Aravis. "The very fact that a *sending* worked from outside Het Branoi to inside, means that her version works differently than ours."

"Maybe their onion is really a radish!" says Dranko. This planar theory stuff is easy, once you get the hang of it.

"Are we going to use the Rope, or talk about vegetables?" asks Ernie.

Before they try it, Morningstar does send one more *sending* to Kay, describing in extreme shorthand (darned 25-word limit) how they escaped Het Branoi. Kay's short reply:

Got it. Can't talk. Fighting.

Also, Ernie casts *augury*, asking "*If we use the Rope to travel to Charagan, will it bring us weal or woe?*" The clear answer:

Weal, if it works.

So they leave the extraplanar confines of the *magnificent mansion*, get in a group, and lay the Rope around them in a circle. It immediately starts to glow, which is a good sign, but after five minutes the glow changes from a white light, to red, to green, and then mixing with purple. The Rope then begins to vibrate and shake, kicking up puffs of snow.

Something is upsetting my innards, complains Scree. And with that, the Rope catches fire, and a few seconds later the Company are still sitting in the snow, surrounded by a circle of ash. There is much disappointment and gnashing of teeth. "If I get my hands on them, I'm going to kill those Eyes of Moirel," grumbles Aravis.

"They're right there," Flicker points out. "You could pick one up right now!"

"What happened?" Kibi asks the Blue Eye.

**I'M SORRY, KIBI. IT TURNED OUT THERE WAS MORE EARTH MAGIC THAN THE ROPE COULD HANDLE.
IT MUST HAVE BEEN CRAFTED BY SOMEONE WHO DIDN'T TAKE THE PRESENCE OF
QUITE THIS MUCH EARTH MAGIC INTO THEIR EQUATIONS.**

"Abernathy," says Ernie. "He never understood Earth Magic."

Dranko stands up and shoulders his pack. "Time to walk to Charagan," he grunts. But that's not really the plan. Unlike the last time they trudged on foot across most of Kivia, they have the *wind walk* option. They pull out their map of the continent, and guess it's about twenty hours of flight to the heart of Delfir and the Gate of Fire.

"Mr. Blue Eye," says Kibi, "do you have any sense that the people who made the Gartine Arches took Earth Magic into their equations?"

I DON'T KNOW. I HOPE SO.

Morningstar casts her *wind walks*, Kibi grumbling all the while, and off they fly, with a cruising altitude of about fifty feet. The snowy tundra of northeast Kivia races by beneath them. But only about ten minutes in, Ernie is suddenly struck by an odd thought. It would be easy, he thinks, to fall to the back of the group and then ditch them, leaving them without the Focus, and unable to travel nowhere after all. That would show them.

About the same time, Aravis is struck by a pang of annoyance, at just what a goody-goody Yoba is. He wonders if there'll be a good opportunity to be rid of her at some point. But both he and Ernie still have the presence of mind to understand what's happening. "Kibi!" says Ernie as they fly. "I think I'm having some trouble with the whole "evil control" thing..."

Of course! The Eyes are in Scree, and Scree is in an extradimensional *familiar pocket*, as he always is when they *wind walk*. And with the Blue Eye on a different plane... "We have to land and become solid again!" Kibi answers. (Gosh, isn't *that* too bad?)

They do land, and as soon as Scree emerges from the *pocket*, Aravis and Ernie feel the "edge" to their personalities vanish. "The Blue Eye says that they need to stay close to the ground in order for his power to work. He also says he doubts he can become windy, even if we cast the spell on Scree."

Alas, this last opinion turns out to be true. While Scree (to his great displeasure) can be made of wind-stuff, the four Eyes of Moirel are left behind, still solid, lying on the ground. "That's it," says Morningstar. "We need to use the *wish* to get rid of the Evil."

They could still walk (which is Kibi's preference), but Ernie points out that time is of the essence, what with the universe still hating them. On the long trek across Kivia, could they really avoid all circumstances that could result in them getting separated? Also, Dranko doesn't want to make Eddings, still holed up in the Greenhouse (they hope!), wait any longer for rescue than is necessary.

Dranko gets the *luckblade* out of the *bag of holding*, and holds it high above his head while making the *wish*. "I wish that Ernie and Aravis will return to the morals, ethics and alignment that they had before they came in contact with the evil black goo."

The weapon glows a bright yellow, and Ernie and Aravis both go rigid. Their bodies exude droplets of black liquid, which land on the ground next to them. Everyone backs off. Feeling is soon restored to Aravis and Ernie, and the Blue Eye confirms that they have been restored to their normal selves.

NOW I CAN TURN MY FULL ATTENTION TO KEEPING YOU COMPATIBLE WITH THE UNIVERSE.

On the one hand, they're loathe to leave Evil Goo just lying on the ground. On the other hand, hey, this universe won't exist soon, if they succeed. Still, Dranko shovels some dirt over the goo before they leave.

"I may not be evil anymore," says Aravis. "But I'm still angry, you know. At both of you." He points at Dranko and Morningstar.

"We had to disable you," says Morningstar.

"You can rationalize it any way you want," says Aravis. "But you attacked me without provocation."

"Wouldn't you have attacked you, if you knew that you were as evil as you were?" says Flicker.

"I think I would have tried to talk first," says Aravis evenly.

"Remember when I was *charmed* by the beholder?" asks Morningstar, her voice rising just a bit. "Would talking have helped then? It was a magical effect. I would have expected you to try to take me out, in order to keep me from destroying the universe, had that been a danger."

"Being *charmed* is different. And you could very well have *harmed* our chances of saving the universe by your actions."

"I don't see how being *charmed* is any *better* than being turned evil by Black Circle goo. You're suggesting that's safe?"

"We didn't know what it could do," interjects Kibi. "Given the stakes – how powerful you are, and that you had the Crosser's Maze – we couldn't take the chance."

"I'm sorry, Aravis," says Morningstar. "I think your attitude is extremely selfish. The greater mission is more important than any one of us."

"And again," says Aravis, "I think what you didn't consider was that taking *any* of us out, at that moment, without bothering to find out for sure, could have *harmed* our chances. As I said."

"But you were evil!" says Kibi.

"Aravis," says Dranko. "I understand you're upset. But let me just say, if anything like that ever happens to me... take me out. We thought you were going to flee and disappear. Who knows what could have happened to you? I like you too much to have taken that risk."

"I'm just tired of having party members act against me. That's all. It happened before, you'll remember. When I was carrying the poison pill, and *some* party members decided to steal it from me, when we had all agreed that I should carry it." He glares at Grey Wolf, and Edghar slinks sheepishly behind his master.

There's an awkward silence. Ernie tries giving Aravis a hug, but the wizard doesn't seem mollified. But the tension has played itself out for the moment, so they turn back into wind-stuff and take off.

energy One: At last! The post in which we learn just what makes Aravis 'like a cat'...
I keeding.

QR SO

Five hours later they are flying over the halfling country of Appleseed, having used the rivers to make minor course corrections en route. Any thoughts of landing and visiting the local halflings are dashed, however, when they realize the dwellings they see there are not halfling at all. They look more like... "Ogres!" says Kibi. "Appleseed is inhabited by ogres."

"Which makes sense," says Grey Wolf. "The dwarves are thriving here, in the place the ogres used to live."

"So the ogres just moved north and kicked out the halflings," finishes Dranko.

"I hate this world," says Ernie.

"It doesn't matter," says Aravis. "It's all going to go away. And we'll be back to the dwarves being oppressed."

"Yeah, just the way it should be," says Dranko.

"Excuse me?" says Kibi angrily.

"Er, I meant, it'll be like our world!" stammers Dranko. "Restored to normal. I don't mean it *should* be like that, I just..."

"I heard you," says Kibi. "You can try to talk your way out of it if you want, but..."

"That *was* my intention!" interrupts Dranko. "Look, I didn't mean that was the way I *wanted* it to be. And fixing it is on our list. Those Guild of Chains guys really piss me off."

"Well, okay then," says Kibi, but he glares suspiciously at Dranko nonetheless.

For the rest of the day's trip they fly over the country of Anlakis, though the cities marked on their map don't seem to exist in this version of Abernia. Anlakis is an extremely rugged country, with steep, jagged hills and deep scrubby valleys. While the countryside seems at first to be empty, the Company soon become aware of groups of humans moving around below in bands. After a couple of hours, they get the sense that the Anlakis are nomads, with no permanent dwellings. As the light fails, the Company land on the top of a hill, in an area that doesn't look inhabited. (It's hard to tell, though, since the rocky hills are riddled with caves.)

Aravis casts a *secure shelter* on the hilltop and Dranko takes the first watch while resting on the roof. He uses *endure elements* to keep warm. As the sun sinks behind the hills, he catches a glimpse of someone cresting their hill, some hundred feet off. He hunkers down behind the chimney and watches as three men, savages it looks like, approach. They are dressed in hides and furs, and carry spears. They haven't seen Dranko, but they have seen the *shelter*. They are approaching with accomplished stealth; good thing Dranko is an even more accomplished spotter.

The three men circle the hut at a distance of fifty feet, then retreat for a huddled conference. Dranko can hear them well enough to know he doesn't speak their language. A moment later their huddle breaks up; one of them goes back down the hill and out of sight, while one of the remaining two approaches the hut. He bangs loudly on the door with the butt of his spear, which wakes everyone up inside. Dranko leans down and speaks into the chimney. "We've got a couple savages up here, but I don't understand the language."

“Nice of him to tell us *now*,” complains Grey Wolf.

Aravis casts *tongues* and says, “Hello?”

“Come out!” shouts one of the savages.

“Why?” responds Aravis. “We’re trying to sleep.”

“You’re trespassing. Come out!”

“You really *don’t* want us to come out,” answers Aravis. “Trust me on this one. We’ll sleep, and then we will leave.”

“Come out, or we will force you out!” is the response.

“Ooooookay,” says Aravis, rolling over and trying to go back to sleep. “You do that.”

Dranko, still unnoticed by the savage, looks down from the roof. Using his whip, he deftly divests the man of his spear. The savage looks up and growls, then takes several steps back from the hut and draws a knife. Dranko drops down next to the door and kicks it with his foot, still facing the savage. “We told you that...” starts Aravis.

“It’s me! Let me in!” Before the savage can leap forward, Flicker opens the door and Dranko hops inside. They slam the door shut in the savage’s face.

They hear the sound of many feet outside, as the Anlaki who retreated returns with thirty of his fellows. Soon after, they smell smoke, as the savages start a fire around the base of the hut. It gets a little warmer inside, which is most welcome. But the *shelter* doesn’t burn, and before long the fire burns down. Dranko hears more angry talking outside, followed by renewed thumping on the door. “Go. Away!” shouts Dranko, though the Anlakis don’t understand him.

One of the savages reiterates his original demand. “Come out!” he shouts.

Aravis rubs his hand through his hair. “No!” he shouts back.

“Can we just launch a *fireball*?” suggests Grey Wolf. But both Kibi and Ernie object to that plan, preferring not harm the locals if possible.

“I’m not going to hurt them,” sighs Aravis. He opens one of the shuttered windows just long enough to cast a *fireball* as a warning shot, exploding thirty feet above the savages’ heads. **KABOOM!** Alas, it doesn’t have the effect they want. Instead, the angry shouting gets louder, and they can hear the word “Delfiri” mixed in with the shouts. “We’re not Delfirian,” shouts Aravis out at them.

“Liar!” screams one of the savages. “Come out and fight like men, fire-scum!”

Aravis sighs. “I should have made it sonic,” he laments.

Flicker sees the bright side. “At least they’re not ice demons!”

Dranko comments dryly, “I wish I could say in their language: ‘We’re just going to eradicate your whole world anyway, so stop wasting your time.’”

Eventually the banging stops, and the Company are able to get some sleep. The next morning they prepare their spells, eat a quick breakfast, and *wind walk* out through the chimney. Not a single Anlaki tribesman notices their departure. Next stop: the Gate of Fire!

shilsen: [This planar theory stuff is easy, once you get the hang of it.] WotC absolutely needs to make the above the basis for the planes in 4E! Very nice update, as usual.

el-remmen: Nice to see some of your shiz on a semi-regular basis. Keep it up, sir!

Zaruthstran: Nice update! The whole “It doesn’t matter; this reality will be wiped out soon” mentality is pretty funny. The savages, for instance, might have been cultivated as allies – but they’re just not worth the time, since they and their world will be eradicated.

the Jester: I find the level of intraparty conflict to be very interesting. Normally the group mostly gets along well, but the strain of a couple of them turning evil seems to have strained things...

Graywolf-ELM: Their experiences in Het Branoï have strengthened them.

Piratecat: They certainly have. We’re *levels* higher than when we went in! Stay tuned for an example of Sagiro’s true ratbastardliness. Hoo boy.

Graywolf-ELM: He didn’t put you all back at your level that you were, when the timeline changed, when you get it all fixed, did he? Because then all of what happened, didn’t really happen?

Sagiro: The very fact that I’m still alive to post should tell you that I didn’t stoop that low.

Piratecat: It's worth noting that despite the joy of the "onion peel" discussion (and it's an analogy that we still use consistently in the game, much to Aravis's distress), this game session is an excellent example of why a Story Hour author takes the time to edit his game transcripts. We had a twenty-minute long riff when we moved from onion layers to... parfaits. "Everyone loves parfaits!" It degenerated from there, until we finally ended back at onions. Lots of laughing, but not exactly high drama.

Sagiro: How true! There are actually two reasons for paring down a long multilogue like that:

(1) As Piratecat implies, particularly long ones can derail the story; they're funny, but the pacing is terrible for a Story Hour.

(2) Time savings! One of the most time-intensive parts of writing a Story Hour from tape is snappy multi-character discussions. There's lots of stopping and rewinding, since I can't type as fast as people speak. It saves me lots of time to let the tape run, and only stop for particularly good or relevant bits. In the end, the reader gets a streamlined version of the scene that retains the flavor of the moment, still uses actual dialogue, but doesn't take me ten times as long to write. Which is important, since my free time for Story Hour work isn't what it used to be.

el-remmen: Reminds me of the times in my own Story Hour I have included a line or two of each character's dialogue to lay out each one's position on a matter, followed with something like "and then they argued interminably"...

Everett: Sagiro, do you find there's a balance to be struck regarding how minor NPCs propel the plot along? What I mean is, when do encounters become too insignificant to be worth mentioning in the Story Hour?

Sagiro: I will almost never skip a scene with an NPC that has even the slightest relevance to anything. If it's relatively unimportant, I may summarize it in narrative with no accompanying dialogue, so yeah, there's a balance to be found. The number of words spent is generally proportional to an encounter's length, importance, and good one-liners.

Everett: So... everything that happens has some relevance to something else? I've never DM'd, so I wonder, cuz random is random as far as I'm aware.

Sagiro: I didn't say that everything was relevant; just that if something *is* relevant, I almost always include it in the Story Hour.

spyscribe: For me, one of the joys of writing a Story Hour is that you have a record of the fun bits that happen in the game, even if they aren't relevant. It's a distinguishing feature of the genre.

Raging Epistaxis: Wow. Just finished reading this entire Story Hour – first half in .pdf, second half in this thread. I am in awe (and more than a bit jealous) of the DM and players in this Story Hour. I wish I was part of a dedicated group like that. Heck, I'd settle to be a part of almost any regular group at this point, but I digress... Aw, who am I kidding... I'm not worthy.

Sagiro, congratulations on weaving such a deep and fascinating world. And most of all, sharing it with us so we can adventure vicariously through the Company. I certainly understand how real life can limit time for things like writing Story Hours, but let me add my voice to those saying "Write and post when you can. No hurry, I'll be here to read and enjoy."

Heh. Now that I'm caught up with this, I need to catch up on everything I've been slacking on in order to read this for the last couple of weeks...



And now, an update which ends with one of the more rat-bastardly things I've ever done to my poor players...

Arch Villainy

The Company soar high over the western half of Anlakis, the wind rushing through and around them as Morningstar's *wind walk* speeds them toward Delfir. And speaking of Delfir, they spy a large Delfirian army camped out on one of the few flat stretches of land – somewhere between 500 and 1000 soldiers, by the look of it. Morningstar thinks to herself that they could use this as an opportunity to practice airborne battle-tactics, on bad guys who (if things go well) won't exist for much longer anyway. But she knows the idea won't gain any traction with most of the party, so she keeps it to herself.

Up in the hills, a mile or so from the encampment, there is a flash of red light that the seasoned adventurers recognize instantly as a *fireball*. They veer off and fly a bit lower to investigate. What they see are mostly Anlaki tribesmen, scrambling and darting up and down hills, into and out of caves. The others wear the red-orange Delfiri uniforms. It seems that the Delfirians have sent a force up into the hills to root out their nomadic enemy. Which is all interesting, but not worth the delay of getting involved. They fly onward.

When the Company reach the border between Anlakis and Bederen, they see below them the huge wall that separates the two countries. But while in their own timeline the wall is still sound, here it is crumbling, with enough smashed gaps to quite literally march an army through. "We missed a good fight," comments Grey Wolf.

"It was good," agrees Morningstar. "Good, because we weren't a part of it."

The picture becomes even clearer as they fly over Bederen, and see that in the towns and cities the guards wear orange uniforms. It seems that the Delfirians here have conquered Bederen and have moved on to adding Anlakis to their empire. The Nifi worshippers have certainly benefited, it seems, from their alliance with Naloric Skewn.

Soon the mountains that separate Bederen from Delfir loom large in front of them. Morningstar warns, "It's very likely that the Black Circle are still looking for us. They've known in the past where we're going to show up. We should be careful." There are windy nods of agreement all around. They fly on, now only a couple of hours from their destination.

At the back of the group, Sagiro follows the rest. He hasn't spoken since they emerged from Het Branoi. He eats when food is placed before him, and sleeps when the others sleep, but other than that he might as well be catatonic. He answers questions only with head motions, or not at all. No one knows now what he would do if there was combat. The Company pity him more

than anything else; who knows what the long-term effects will be from his possession by the Red Eye? There's no precedent for gauging his prospects of recovery.

QR 80

Finally they find themselves in what they dub "Hookbat Pass," the long valley through the mountains on Delfir's eastern border. "Note to self," says Dranko out loud. "Inform the Spire that in the future, when someone has to send a group of low-level adventurers on a long trip, give them some scrolls of *wind walk*."

They are only half an hour now from the Arch, and while they saw some guards down below in the pass, they've seen no large military force other than the one camped in Anlakis. Dranko wants to *scry* the Black Circle devotee who ambushed them last time, the one who first warned them that the universe would not abide them. (*His name is En Oru, though the Company don't know it.*) But they have no mirror or other scrying device, so that's not an option.

"Do we want to tackle this tonight, then, or tomorrow?" Dranko asks.

"Tomorrow, I think," answers Aravis.

"I'd like to do some scouting before we just fly down to the Gate," says Grey Wolf.

"If so, we should do it tonight," adds Ernie. "In case we find something that will change the spells we'll want tomorrow."

"Maybe we'll get lucky, and they just leave the damned thing open all the time," says Dranko. "After all, in this world, they're friends with the people on the other side." The others look skeptical.

They talk about sending a small scouting party ahead, until Kibi points out that everyone has to stay within a hundred yards of Ernie to prevent the universe from unraveling. But Kibi also has the idea that if they can get within a mile, he can cast *prying eyes* and send them to scout the place out. The Company are happy with that plan.

Ernie sees some ruins down below them, and a tear comes to his eye. "It's right around here that Tor left us," he says with a sniff. "Oh, I hope he's all right."

At last they reach the end of Hookbat Pass (though they weren't actually flying directly above it, for safety reasons). Before them is the flat plain on which stands the Gartine Arch connecting Delfir and the Balani Peninsula back on Charagan. They rise to a height of a thousand feet and cruise westward. A few minutes later they arrive at (well, high above) their destination. Below them is the Gartine Arch, just as they remember it.

What's less like what they remember is that, in this timeline, the Arch is surrounded by a huge stone wall. The wall is about a hundred yards in diameter, thirty feet high and twelve feet thick, with the Arch in the middle as if it's the center attraction in a huge arena. Two closed iron portcullises at opposite ends are the only ways in and out at ground level.

From their high vantage the Company see buildings down below as well, some clustered around the outside of the wall, and others inside, up against the wall itself. There are people moving about on top of the wall, and a few more inside the grounds, milling around in the general vicinity of the Arch. There are not enough people or buildings for this to be a town or a keep; there is no stream of traffic waiting to enter or leave, though there is a (currently empty) road that snakes away from the western portcullis and into the heart of Delfir.

Outside the wall is a flat, grassy plain. The sun is low on the horizon, the air clear and cool. There is no snow, as there was when the Company were last here. Carawell, the Tevian spy they rescued, had told them it had been winter for over two years running, a punishment from the god Nifi for not sowing enough destruction. It appears that in this timeline Nifi is well pleased with the Delfirian efforts in that regard.

The Company spend the last half hour of daylight peering down, gleaning as many details as they can from a safe height. They don't think the buildings are any kind of fortification; other than the wall itself, there is no protection for the Gartine Arch. It doesn't look like a military installation, and some of the buildings are probably warehouses (which makes sense, if trade goods or supplies are brought in from Charagan). There are no guard towers. None of the buildings are as tall as the wall itself.

Dranko makes the suggestion (and to his surprise, it meets with general approval) that they make "camp" in *rope tricks* placed high in the air above the Arch. The logistics are a bit tricky; Aravis has to soar upward another thousand feet, become solid, and cast *fly* as he plummets. Once flying, he casts the *rope tricks*, and the others float into them before solidifying themselves. But that sort of thing is fairly common for powerful adventurers like themselves, and a couple of minutes later the Company are breaking out the bedrolls and preparing a cold supper. Kibi casts *prying eyes* and sends them out to scout the Arch with some detailed instructions: half will scout generally and come back staggered, while the remaining ones will watch the Arch all

night and come back in the morning. The only annoyance for Kibi is that he has to keep a hand or foot dangling out of the extradimensional pocket the whole time, or else the *prying eyes*, being suddenly more than a mile from their caster, would vanish. As time passes eyes come back to deliver their reports directly into Kibi's brain. When the last eye from the first shift has returned, Kibi shares their findings with the others.

First off, the Gartine Arch looks just like they remember. A dozen Delfirian soldiers lounge around in its immediate vicinity, some sitting on benches that have been dragged out onto the dirt. They're armed but clearly not expecting trouble. Some of them are playing at dice, their weapons lying on the ground nearby.

The buildings inside the wall are entirely uninteresting from the exterior; since the Delfirians were generally not going in and out of them, the eyes didn't have much chance to slip inside. One Delfirian did emerge from a small kitchen, carrying a pot of stew to the dozen Arch guards.

A couple of Eyes chose to examine the wall itself. A paltry number of guards patrol atop it, and they only occasionally glance left or right to check for trouble. They look bored. Every fifty feet or so along the wall is a small stone protrusion sticking up, like a miniature stone tower. From these protrusions jut metal sticks with gems at their tops. They look like glass-topped lightning rods.

Outside the wall, the buildings are slightly more interesting. There are a couple of smithies, a shrine to Nifi, and what looks like a small grain silo. Most intriguing is a house, built in a different architectural style from the rest of the buildings, with an insignia over the door. Dranko and Flicker remember the sigil from Pyke Vale; it indicated some noble house there. The same symbol appears on a flag fluttering on the building's roof. Not a soul is seen going in or out, of this building or any other outside the wall. Basically, the whole place looks dead. It gives the impression that it could (and maybe did, once) house many more people than it does currently. Some of the buildings inside are probably barracks, but there aren't enough soldiers on hand to fill them. Now there's just a skeleton crew.

Dranko listens to Kibi's report. "I'm thinking that it's just normal guys doing their jobs. The important folks are probably inside that building with the flag." They discuss options, but until the second set of *prying eyes* comes back in the morning, there's not much point in making travel plans. "I hate to be boring," says Dranko, "or – worse – bored, but we should stay another full day and attack at four in the morning tomorrow."

"Do we have to stay here so high off the ground?" asks Ernie plaintively.

"It's great!" Dranko exclaims. "Hey, from here, when you pee, you pee on birds!"

Flicker rolls his eyes. "And what could be better than *that*?"

"Someday," says Ernie, "I'm going to find out why everything for you comes down to peeing."

"Not so!" Dranko retorts. "Everything comes down to licking. If you don't lick things, you won't know how they taste, and you won't understand the world."

"If you don't lick things," adds Flicker, "how do you expect to become addicted to them?"

Dranko glares at him. "Flicker, do you have a *ring of feather falling*?"

"With my new armor I got from the Cleaner Cave, I can cast *fly*!"

"Oh, yeah, that's right." Dranko sounds disappointed.

"You were going to push me out?" cries Flicker.

"The thought had occurred to me."

OR SO

The next morning arrives, and to everyone's relief no one has dispelled the *rope tricks* in the night. "That would have been an embarrassing way to die," says Aravis. "Probably more embarrassing than when we ended up buried beneath the sand in Het Branoi."

"Hey, we've never woken up to find ourselves under water!" says Dranko, looking at the bright side.

That gets the Company reminiscing about the various times they've found themselves facing unexpected submerging. Most recently was their run-in with the Transient Sea of Limbo. Before that was when Grey Wolf's plane-attuned innards brought a block of ocean crashing down on their heads, and even farther back was the collapse of the Yrimpa's prison in God's Thorn. Good times! But the nostalgic breakfast conversation ends when Kibi's second wave of eyes returns.

The news is good; while the eyes looking in one direction saw nothing out of the ordinary, the eyes looking in the other direction saw a forest through the Arch. It was dark, and uninhabited, kind of shadowy, but definitely not anything that exists out here. And back in Charagan, the Arch there was in a forest, so that makes sense.

Overnight, the soldiers on watch had lit a number of torches on poles stuck in the ground, but that's the only real difference from what the first group of eyes had noticed. "It's live!" exclaims Dranko.

"It's about time we caught a break," says Ernie. Then he adds, "Er, I'm going to regret saying that, aren't I?"

"I still say we wait here, and make our move at four in the morning," says Dranko.

"I want to know what those gems are on the walls," says Kibi. "They might be some kind of anti-invisibility measure."

"Hey, that's right!" says Flicker, dredging up an old memory. "When you guys sent me invisibly to scout the Arch back in Charagan, I started glowing blue when I got close. It's probably a standard Delfirian precaution."

The four-in-the-morning plan wins out. The Company spend a day of excruciating boredom cooped up in *rope tricks*. But eventually the sun sets outside, and when the time comes, they start casting their buffs.

"Should we set a place to meet, if things go badly and we have to scatter?" Dranko asks.

"No one is scattering!" Aravis snaps. "Not unless you want the universe to unravel!"

"Oh, right."

The plan is simple: fly straight downward in *wind walk* form at a screaming sixty miles per hour, zip through the Arch before anyone can react, and then head straight up again once through to Charagan.

"Be prepared for a trap on the far side," warns Dranko, "where we can't get out and have to do something clever."

Down they go, air rushing past them in the night. Below them is the Arch, surrounded by torches and bored-looking soldiers. Only when the Company are less than a second from the ground does one of the Delfirians, perhaps looking up to admire the stars, notice a bunch of blurry humanoid shapes hurtling downward out of the darkness.

"Hey..." is all he has time to say, before the Company fly through the Arch...

...and right into the both the cunning illusion of a forest, and the *Otiluke's greater dispelling screen*.

oliverhenshaw: Man alive.

Jackylhunter: Oh... you're a stinker, the looks on your players' faces must have been priceless... Mmmuuwwahhhh...

apherius: Long time lurker; thanks for the update. Love the story. The PCs couldn't have thought that it would be that easy?

Piratecat: Well, we did until we found the gate unattended and all the guards apparently bored. If anything, we expected the real danger to come on the other side. Nothing looked out of place, and we missed the few warning signs that might have existed. We were well and truly suckered, so we blithely charged headlong into an ambush prepared by an absurdly organized Black Circle diviner who knew exactly when we were coming. It's not just that our characters were surprised; we were surprised, and that makes all the difference! It didn't help that we ran into the wall at full speed, having many of our spells stripped off us in the process.

Really, if I hadn't been intimately involved with the debacle, I would have applauded. And if any of you doubt the power of cliffhangers, this is where Sagiro ended the gaming session.

Gold Roger: Huh boy, and they even thought of the guy in the very same session. And the last ambush set by that guy they only got out of thanks to a bunch of angry giants...

Jackylhunter: I must be losing it, but why does the group need to stay within 100 yards of Ernie?

Piratecat: We're still in a nightmarish version of our world somehow controlled by the evil Emperor Naloric Skewn, only having survived the time change by virtue of being in the Greenhouse with the Eyes of Moirel when it occurred. The universe cannot abide us, and tries to destroy us with little tiny spherooids of annihilation. The Eyes of Moirel and perhaps Ernie's wild magic *belt of security* (the item first found as a bracelet on the Wilburforce statue that we found buried under the inn in Ernie's hometown of Dingman's Ferry, waaaaay back near the start of the game) are damping out this effect... but only if we stay near them.

Jackylhunter: Ah, thank you PC, now I remember. Well, I'm sure I'm not alone when I say I can't wait to see how you guys get outta this...

el-remmen: Hot damn! I can't wait to read about the serious Company ass that is about to be kicked!

Sabriel: Oh boy. That's a true Rat-Bastard moment, oh yes. Sagiro must have a far better poker face than I. I would've been smirking helplessly the moment they started talking about the diviner...

Dawn: No doubt. There's no way I could have held that back. Must have made you proud to pull something like over on such an experienced group!

Zaruthustran: It may be just me, but I caught a *Holy Grail* reference with that guard and "Hey..."

You'd Think They Do This For a Living

En Oru, servant of the Black Circle, is cautiously optimistic. Tasked with overseeing the divinatory efforts on the Company, he had almost given up hope. Every divination was coming up empty, as if the quarry had simply vanished from reality. Had they stumbled upon a sovereign means of foiling divinations entirely?

(Yes and no, was the answer. For all that Het Branoi was a Black Circle creation, it afforded the Company immunity from prying spells in a way that few other places in the multiverse could.)

Then, just days ago, the enemy had emerged from their hiding place, wherever it had been. He had set to work at once, but while the Black Circle may contain in Itself all knowledge of all things, Its servants were imperfect lenses of its predictive powers. Having such short notice didn't help. Frantically he had directed the efforts of the Circle's finest, to learn what the enemy were up to.

What they learned was horrible. It wasn't the matter of the invaders' presence posing a material threat to the fabric of space-time (in fact, the divinations seemed to indicate that that was no longer an imminent danger). No, the enemy were going to attempt to return to Charagan, and from there use the power of an ancient ring of obelisks to wipe out history, and rewrite it in such a way that the Black Circle would fade into obscurity. And by the time his team had cast their auguries and peered into the future well enough to pin down the particulars, En Oru had less than twenty-four hours to figure out a way to stop the Company from proceeding.

Never had he been faced with such a logistical nightmare. The enemy were going to try flying through the Gartine Arch in Delfir, which had the unfortunate property of being controlled by Delfirians. He expected little cooperation from the fire-worshippers, and that's what he got. Only by promising a near-fortune in obsidian and rubies did En Oru gain access to the Arch, and retain the services of (he hoped) sufficient Delfirian military muscle to pull off a decent ambush. And the locals could not or would not supply any clerics to the cause; the cadre of Nifi priests usually assigned to the Arch had departed for Charagan without even talking to him.

Worse still, after the fiasco in the jungle, he didn't even have the full support of his own organization! Some in the Council had the gall to doubt his team's divinatory accuracy, damn them. And the crowning, appalling detail was that so much of the Black Circle's arcane might was tied up in Ocir and Seresef, fighting off what must be the most ill-timed attack of undead in the history of Kivia. He gnashes his teeth at the thought, and mouths a silent curse at every single deity in the Kivian pantheon.

Now, as En Oru counts down the final moments to Round Two, he wonders if what he has here is enough. His foot-soldiers are stashed in the storerooms below the barracks, waiting for the signal to emerge. He's got dozens of invisible archers waiting on the walls. The Arch itself has been filled with an illusion, and covered with a *dispelling screen* that should start the ambush off on the right foot. And his enemies might find it unexpectedly difficult to make a quick getaway.

Not a bad job on such short notice, he thinks. And it's comforting to know that they don't have to actually *kill* the interlopers, though that would be best. No, just driving them away should be good enough. Keep them away from Charagan, and all will be well. Any minute now...



The *dispelling screen* is like a strainer, letting adventurers through but peeling back enchantments. It doesn't get them all, but it gets enough. Grey Wolf, Aravis, Morningstar, Ernie and Flicker are stripped of their *wind walks* and go tumbling painfully into the dirt on the far side of the Arch. The people still *wind walked* come to a stop, unwilling to leave the other half of the party behind.

As the trap is sprung, lights come on inside the compound, as each of the glass gems on the wall projects a fierce illumination into the interior. It's like a sports stadium at night, with the Company as the main event. Grey Wolf, having rolled to a sitting position, squints up at one of the lights and realizes immediately what has happened. "This is not our finest moment," he mutters.

Indeed not! From somewhere above them a flying invisible mage blasts them with a *cone of fire* (an energy-substituted *cone of cold*, for those wondering). A second later they are hit with a second, from a different direction. And these are followed by a *chain lightning*, centered on Aravis, that crackles painfully through the Company. It's a miracle that none of the party are killed by the assault, but a few members are perilously close to unconsciousness. (At least they're better off than the slaves that En Oru had dressed up to look like soldiers, and set to "guarding" the Arch. They're entirely incinerated by the first *cone of fire*.)

"We've got to get out of here!" gasps Aravis, who fortunately avoided the worst of both *cones of fire*. "We can *teleport* back to the hilltop with the savages." From somewhere high up, a voice booms out: "The one with the hat!"

Dranko knows that voice: it's the same Black Circle devotee who trapped them when they first came to Kivia after time had changed! "I HATE that guy!" he growls. His hatred grows no less as the air fills with a storm of arrows, targeted at the hat-wearing Aravis. Grey Wolf and Dranko, nearest Aravis, get plinked with a couple of arrows each. Aravis sprouts nine, and a dozen others bounce off his *robe of rock*. Dozens of archers, having launched an attack, become visible up on the wall.

Ernie moves to stand next to Aravis and casts *obscuring mist*. The Company are enveloped in a circle of thick white fog. With practiced efficiency the Company arrange themselves in "teleport formation," clustered around Kibi and Aravis.

Dranko uses his new *ring of water elemental command* to put up a *wall of ice* (most of which is in the mist), protecting them from attacks from at least *one* direction.

Kibi casts *teleport*. Up on the walls, the gems on their metal rods glow green. Kibi's group is bathed in the green light of a *dimensional lock* and doesn't go anywhere. Morningstar can't help but notice that they're still standing in the *obscuring mist*. "We're screwed," she concludes. Horrified understanding dawns on Kibi. He moves off to the side, realizing that "teleport formation" has just become "fireball formation." Aravis doesn't even bother with his *teleport*; he casts *true seeing* and also moves away.

Speaking of *fireball*, one strikes the *wall of ice* from somewhere outside their misty enclave. The wall is flashed instantly to steam, and the warm vapors become mixed in with the magical fog. From another direction a *lightning bolt* crackles into the cloud at ground level, but the caster guesses poorly about his targets' locations, and only Morningstar is struck. She joins the "barely conscious" club.

A distant voice shouts in Kivian Common: "What do we do?" The voice of En Oru responds: "We know they're in the cloud. Just shoot into it!" And with that, another hail of arrows flies from the wall. Everyone is struck by an arrow or two, while others skip on the ground or bounce clankingly off the Arch.

Ernie and Grey Wolf guzzle healing potions, while Yoba *lays hands* upon Morningstar. Dranko uses a wand to further heal Ernest. Kibi puts up a *wall of force* to better protect them from spells and arrows. Yes, it's full-on defensive mode, while they start to enact escape plan 'B.' Which is: they'll summon the genie (who can cast *wind walk*), and Morningstar will recast a second *wind walk*, and they'll all fly the heck out of there. It's just a matter of surviving a few more seconds.

Aravis uses his ring and summons forth the genie Al Tarqoz, who appears lying on the ground in purple silk pajamas. He looks up blearily and sets to speak, but Aravis interrupts him. "This is not the time to argue with me. Please cast *wind walk* on everyone within arm's reach."

Al Tarqoz gets to his feet, looks around at the surrounding mist, and bows perfunctorily. "My master, what is going on?"

"We're all about to die," says Aravis.

"And you brought me here so I could enjoy it? How thoughtful!"

"You're welcome," grumbles Aravis, as Al Tarqoz starts to cast.

Morningstar doesn't want to cast *wind walk* until the other half of the Company are next to her, and since they might not last that long if she just waits, she casts *mass cure critical wounds*, which is very popular. And just in time, too, since it fairly well cancels out the *fireball* that explodes in their midst. (Kibi grumbles about a lucky shot vis-à-vis his *wall of force*, not knowing that said wall has already prevented the *obscuring mist* from being dispelled.)

From somewhere distant at ground level, they hear the sound of dozens of heavy boots, getting steadily louder. Kibi smiles as he realizes that the sound is coming from the direction that his *wall of force* is blocking. Dranko grins in spite of the dire circumstances. "It's a shame the mist will keep us from seeing them all smash face-first into the *wall of force*." And in case it wasn't already abundantly clear that the *wall* was paying off after all, a *lightning bolt* ticketed for Kibi, Yoba and Sagiro crackles against it, dissipating without effect.

There's one of those two-second pauses that happens every so often in battle, during which Snokas launches a single arrow blindly out of the mist. They hear a distant *tink!*, followed by a gale of laughter from the archers on the wall. "The 'make them underestimate us' plan is working well," Morningstar observes.

Wanting to inflict at least a little bit of pain before fleeing with tail 'twixt legs, Grey Wolf fires a *cone of cold* at the spot he thinks the last *cone of fire* originated. Dranko uses his ring to blanket the same area in an *ice storm*. From the edge of the storm's area, they hear a distinct "oomph" of pain. Aravis targets his own *cone of cold* in that direction, and the Company are rewarded by a dying scream, followed by the thud of a frozen body striking the dirt.

Al Tarqoz looks around, and casts his *wind walk*, being sure to include himself. To Aravis he says dryly, “You should be more careful, my master.”

The Company rocket upward at 60 miles per hour. Below them there is mass carnage as a hundred footmen plow into the *wall of force*, crushing their own front line. The last thing they see before soaring away is the black-robed figure of En Oru, bathed in the light of the glowing gems, waving them goodbye with a sour expression on his face. “I HATE that guy!” Dranko reiterates, in case anyone doubted him the first time.

“I just want to have a chat with him,” says Aravis. “In the Maze.”

Tamlyn: Bravo! I love it when a DM can make mid/high-level PCs sweat. And when I’m playing a mid/high-level PC I love it when a DM can make me sweat.

el-remmen: I was expecting something a lot messier. But still, sounds like a great ‘Holy CRAP!’ moment for the PCs.

Graywolf-ELM: Yep, sat here reading this, and the moment is still biting for the characters, but at least there were no deaths. Just a reminder that not everything is what it appears.

Plane Sailing: For the second time the lowly, underrated *obscuring mist* proves its worth! (Somebody will be claiming it is overpowered for its level next...)

el-remmen: The players in my last campaign would never naysay *obscuring mist*. They used it many times to slow down fights to their pace and figure out how to handle the situation.

shilsen: Damn – I was pulling for poor lonely outmatched En Oru!

What?

Jackylhunter: Wow, not bad; I was sure they’d either turn the tables and lay the smack down, or we’d lose at least one. So, holding even is great, for the DM, and for the players.

Piratecat: It was a rude awakening for us. We were feeling all fat and happy, and this ambush came perilously close to killing more than half of the party. At this point we were 14th or 15th level (we’re 16th now), and it’s inherently galling to run from a fight... but it was either that or die.

And really, the look on En Oru’s face when he realized that he had failed was pretty much worth the price of admission.

Now the real question is, how do we get back to Charagan? We were quite chuffed with the think-outside-the-box solution that we ended up hitting upon. I’ll be interested to see how many other folks think of it while reading the Story Hour.

Plane Sailing: My first thought is *plane shift* somewhere else, *wind walk* x-hundred miles in what you think is the right direction, then *plane shift* back to Abernia and hope that you are on the right continent to *teleport* back home.

MavrickWeirdo: Is there a way Morningstar could get them there through the “realm of dream” similar to a *shadow walk* spell?

Everett: I like that, but something tells me it wouldn’t work... Consider that they’re in an alternate universe controlled by evil.

Actually, I remember something mentioning that Morningstar’s goddess has much less power to draw on here.

Fimmtiu: The first thing that springs to mind is just doing the *wind walk* travel trick across the separating sea. Of course, that might be too time-consuming if the continents are on opposite sides of the globe, so... Well, since you’ve got this handy pet genie... and he’s got unlimited *plane shifts*... then just shift from one continent to the other, through the Astral or something!

Now, *plane shift* can only take a max of eight people. This could be solved in two ways: reducing or otherwise rendering party members portable (such as with that handy bottle you just got!), or by doing it in two shifts. A wizard goes with each shift and uses *teleport* to get everyone to a designated location – pesky *plane shift* inaccuracy and all that. That has the disadvantage of temporarily splitting the party, though.

Use a *planar binding* spell to call a formian myrmarch, since they have unlimited *greater teleport*. Long shot: find a friendly wizard (or titan) who’s willing to *gate* you. Maybe Aravis can use the Maze’s largely untapped abilities to somehow move the party or create a *gate* or otherwise do transgressive things with planar boundaries.

And there’s always the straight-ahead approach, which might have made a good initial plan: since the Black Circle are diviners who have ambushed you at the gates before, dispense with subterfuge and assume that they know what you’re going to do. Show up at the gate and kill until your arms grow tired, until there’s no living creature left within a mile of the arch. Rest. Then use it, and do the same to the buggers who will inevitably be on the other side. It’s certainly less efficient than the other methods, but hey! Loot!

Zaruthustran: The above statement gave me the idea to try some *Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure*-style logic. Given: (1) you guys are very smart with a ton of resources, and doubtless have the ability to get back to Charagan; and (2) the Black Circle is able to divine your next move; then (3) in the future you will have doubtless figured out how to get back, but the Circle will know all about it and be ready to counter you. Therefore (4) just capture one of the diviners and get *him* to tell you your clever, foolproof plan...

Plane Sailing: I like the cut of your jib, sir!

MavrickWeirdo: But wouldn’t a diviner who was able to predict their plan, also see that they were after him and so evade capture?

KidCthulhu: Yeah, funny you all should mention *plane shift*. What follows is one of the plans that had the party giggling behind their hands for a week in anticipation. We actually got Sagiro to throw his notes in the air and make *that* face. You know the one...

OR SO

An End Run Around the Gods

The Company are still *wind walking* back toward Tev when Aravis hears a *sending* in his head:

You will never reach Charagan. I know what might happen, and we would die before opening the Arch. Stay away, and you will be spared.

Aravis graces En Oru with a brief reply: *We shall see.*

They don't stop until they're above the mountain pass separating Delfir and Tev, and rather than land in the pass itself they find a small enclosed canyon a mile to the north. Out comes the Divination Sink, still working, to thwart any attempts by the Black Circle to track them here.

Ernie sets about making breakfast. While choosing ingredients from his pack, he mutters, "I wish there was a way to go to Charagan without going through the Arch. Gosh darn it!"

"You know that Black Circle guy who always knows where we're going?" says Dranko. "We can hold his toes in the Elemental Plane of Fire until he agrees to let us through."

"We're not in Het Branoi anymore," Morningstar points out. "I don't know that we can *do* that here."

"Well, how about a real fire then?" says Dranko.

"We could hold his toes in a fire elemental," suggests Flicker.

"I wish I had learned the spell *plane shift*," sighs Aravis. "That would do the trick."

"We can do that," says Ernie, perking up. "It's a divine spell."

Aravis leaps to his feet. "You can?! Well then, we can avoid the arch altogether!"

Dranko looks up from his plate. "What do you mean?"

"It's simple," says Aravis. "We can shift to some other plane – any other plane – and then shift back to Charagan."

"Does it involve onions?" asks Dranko suspiciously.

blargney the second: Ba-dum ching! That's funny stuff.

"Sort of. We won't arrive exactly where we want, but we should end up on the right side of the Uncrossable Sea when we come back."

"Where would we go?" asks Dranko, now growing excited.

"You need the right tuning forks," says Ernie. "And when we trained at the Eye of the Storm, we picked some up. We could go to the plane where the Inn was."

Flicker splutters. "But... but if Posada and Brechen would really allow that, how come powerful casters weren't pulling this trick all the time?"

"How do we know they weren't?" asks Aravis.

"Because if they were," says Flicker, "then why didn't the Spire just do that for us, instead of giving us that stupid rope?"

No one has a good answer to that. There's a minute where the only sound is that of chewing, both literally and figuratively.

"Posada wouldn't know where we started, right?" says Dranko. "And we know people can get to Charagan from other planes – like Farazil. And the Seki. And frikkin' Meledien."

"And I doubt Posada would stop *all* planar travel into and out of Kivia," adds Aravis.

And so, a cunning plan is hatched. The Company will *plane shift* to the vicinity of the Eye of the Storm, and then *plane shift* back, with the Greenhouse as their target. They'll have to split into two groups, which has some potential danger from a "universe hates them" point of view, but it still seems a safer option than trying to get through the Arch.

¤¤¤

Being parano... er, being safety conscious, and thinking En Oru might still be too close for comfort, the Company decide to *teleport* hundreds of miles east – to the Anlakis hilltop where they were attacked by the nomadic locals. Grey Wolf shakes his head as Kibi dons his *helmet of water breathing*. "I think I'll go with Aravis," he says.

When Kibi looks hurt, Flicker adds, "The fact that you put that helmet on every time you *teleport* does not inspire confidence."

"It shows I'm taking proper precautions," Kibi huffs. "Unlike Aravis, who plays fast and loose and would *teleport* anywhere on a whim..."

"I'm confident I can get you out of anything I get you into," says Aravis with a smirk.

Soon the party are together on “savage hill,” though the Anlakis are nowhere in sight. They move off the high ground and camp in a secluded valley, whereupon they take out the Divination Sink as a protective measure. As expected, the *Rary’s telepathic bond* many of them share drops out. What’s not expected is that less than five minutes later it cuts back in for a few seconds. Aravis gets a fleeting thought that Dranko has a fierce itch in his...

“That was disturbing,” he comments, wincing.

“What?” asks Grey Wolf.

“I caught a thought from Dranko.”

“I can see how that would be *very* disturbing,” agrees Flicker.

“I meant, it means either the Divination Sink is starting to run out of juice, or the Black Circle is breaking through it.”

Nyarlathotep: Didn’t Kibi make a vest of water walking and breathing a while ago after Wellington(?) commented about his density, sinking and pressure killing him despite the ability to water breathe with the helm? Or am I just bad at the memory thing?

Sagiro: No, your memory is clearly above average. Kibi did make himself a vest that allows him to cast *water walk* once per day. Why he still chooses the helmet, I’m not sure. Maybe because the vest is 1/day while the helmet is limitless, so he wants to save the vest until after he knows he needs it? Since I’m married to Kibi’s player, I’ll try to remember to ask her.

Piratecat: Betcha a nickel she forgot he had it. I only say that because *I* forgot he had it!

For the remainder of the day the Sink seems to sputter, though it never dies out entirely. At night, while they sleep in a *secure shelter*, Morningstar enters a trance and checks out the local Dreamscape.

There is no menacing black palace as there was in Pyke Vale – in fact, it’s quite empty. No one nearby has a presence in *Ava Dormo*, including Ell or her worshippers. She stays for a while, practicing, making objects appear and vanish, warping and shaping the environment. It feels sadly abandoned here – stale, disused. She leaves an Ellish symbol behind, carved in a boulder.

“Everything all right?” asks Dranko, when she returns to her waking body.

“Yup. It’s quiet there. Empty.”



Over breakfast, a lively debate breaks out about just whom the Company hate the most: Octesian, Shreen the Fair, or King Farazil. There are good arguments for all of them. “Why isn’t Meledien a part of this discussion?” asks Dranko, glowering. Meledien gets his vote, though Morningstar puts Octesian at the top of the list. Aravis casts a surprise vote for the Council of Nine.

“Who cares about a bunch of rodents?” asks Dranko, laughing. “Grey Wolf, I imagine the Silver Shell is on your short list.” Grey Wolf nods, silent on the subject.



They *plane shift* in two groups, one with Ernie and one with Morningstar. Their destination: the Eye of the Storm. Morningstar’s group arrives in a body of water that extends as far as they can see in all directions, but Dranko had thoughtfully cast *water walk* on the entire party before the cross-planar journey.

Ernie’s group’s trip has a hitch. They feel a blurring of space around them as the spell is cast, but then they stop – somewhere. Somewhere timeless, somewhere unknown. Scree is agitated. The Purple Eye speaks to Kibi.

THE RED EYE IS RESISTING.

“Can you coerce it?” asks Kibi, alarmed.

YES. IT WILL PUT PHYSICAL STRAIN ON THE REST OF US,
THAT MAY HAVE IMPLICATIONS IN THE FUTURE.
HOW WOULD YOU LIKE US TO PROCEED?

“Do what you have to do,” says Kibi. “Get us where we’re going.”

Ernie’s group snap out of their odd stasis, and find themselves in a corn field. With both groups on the same plane, the *telepathic bond* kicks back in. With Aravis in one group and Kibi in the other, they both attempt to *teleport* to the Eye of the Storm.

Both fail. “The location’s not where we thought it was, apparently,” says Aravis.

“Crap!” says Dranko.

"I hope they made it back," says Morningstar. Is it possible that, even with the Blue Eye no longer powering Het Branoi, the Slices are still... sliced? The sun overhead and the tint of the sky are the same as they remember from their stay at the inn, so at least they're sure of having arrived on the correct plane.

Aravis thinks to Kibi: *Describe where you are.* Kibi describes the cornfield well enough that Aravis is able to *teleport* his group from the ocean to the farm. Kibi, still *wind walking*, floats upward out of the corn to get his bearings. Not thirty feet away an old farmer, seeing a ghostly dwarf rising up out of his field, drops his hoe and runs screaming toward a distant barn. Kibi sighs.

"It's possible," muses Aravis, "that we only know where the Eye of the Storm is relative to Het Branoi, and the location we know just isn't correct here."

Kibi shares his disturbing experience with the Eyes of Moirel with the others, a tale which elicits many groans and worried faces. Dranko half-jokingly suggests they just bury the annoying Red Eye right here in the corn field. Morningstar thinks they could safely leave it with Mercury, if they could just find the inn.

Then the discussion turns to Eddings – if the party really are able to fix the world, what will happen to the Greenhouse and the people inside it? "I'm sure our butler will be safe," says Dranko. "If he's in the Greenhouse when whatever happens happens, he'll be okay. I have faith in Abernathy."

"I'm not so sure," says Morningstar, shaking her head. Her concern for Eddings shows on her face. "You know, I kind of thought that if we just used the Eyes of Moirel to go nowhere, that would just fix things."

"You cute little naïve thing, you!" says Dranko. "That is really adorable! I find that level of naivety refreshing!"

"I'm not usually the optimist here, but come on..." answers Morningstar.

"I'm with Morningstar," says Flicker. "Aren't we almost done with all this crap?"

"If going nowhere isn't going to fix things," presses Morningstar, "then why are we going at all?"

"That's what we do to *get* to the spot, where we'll do whatever it is we have to do to fix the world," says Dranko.

"How do you know?" asks Flicker. "All we know is that going nowhere is something we have to do to set things right. Maybe it's the going that fixes things!"

"I think the Sharshun went back in time and stopped the world from becoming the good place we know," says Dranko. "And we have to go back in time, to stop the people from stopping the world from being good." That provokes a profoundly thoughtful silence from the others.

"Ack," says Morningstar, a few seconds later.

"Ack," agrees Flicker.



There's one last item on the agenda before they *plane shift* back to Charagan. Morningstar intends to cast a *commune* to clear up some nagging questions. Since the farmer is showing no sign of returning, she casts her spell right there in the cornfield.

She drops into a trance. An avatar appears before her, Ellish, obviously divine in nature, but somehow ragged, tattered. Impoverished, Morningstar thinks, though the creature radiates great power.

YES, MY HOPE

Morningstar is taken aback by the address. "*Is it appropriate for me to commune with you?*" she asks.

INDEED.

"Has the safety of the Greenhouse been compromised?"

NO.

"Is Eddings healthy and safe?"

YES.

"Will enemies be waiting for us at the Mirrors of Semek?"

ENEMIES? YES. WAITING? NO.

"Do we have everything that we need in order to go nowhere?"

YES.

"Do we need to take the Red Eye of Moirel with us when we go nowhere?"

DO NOT LEAVE IT BEHIND.

"Does our diviner enemy know our plans for the next few days?"

NOT AT PRESENT.

"Are the Mirrors of Semek where we need to go to go nowhere?"

YES.

"Has Kay escaped from Het Branoi in her reality?"

I CANNOT SEE.

"Is our Divination Sink starting to fail?"

YES.

"Were people trying to break through our Divination Sink?"

YES.

"Will the stress put on the Eyes of Moirel compromise our ability to go nowhere?"

I DO NOT THINK SO.

"Is going nowhere all we need to do to restore our own world?"

NO.

"If we restore the world to what we knew, will the Greenhouse and the people in it safely make the transition as well?"

YES.

"Had the reality we grew up in already been altered from another time line?"

The avatar takes a deep breath before answering. It looks at Morningstar with a dull gleam in her eye.

ELL IS DYING HERE. RESTORE WHAT YOU KNOW.

Morningstar trembles at the words.

"Is... is there anything else that I can do to assist you here?"

NO. BUT IN WHAT YOU ARE DOING, YOU MUST SUCCEED.

The spell ends. Morningstar finds that there are tears on her cheeks.

shilsen: [And so, a cunning plan is hatched.] It's never good when the DM says that... Nice update, as usual. And can I say again that I love Dranko?

Tamlyn: Shiny! Thanks for the great update, Sagiro. I know it's been said before, but you could give professional authors tips about the effective use of a cliffhanger. Marvelous and frustrating at the same time. Keep it up!

Piratecat: Man, were we gleeful when we figured out the *plane shift* workaround. Waiting is the thing that we do least well; it leads to bickering, and bickering leads to annoyance, and annoyance leads to suffering. I think that for most of us, a fast and suboptimal solution is better than a loooong solution. Luckily, though, this one seemed to be both fast *and* optimal.

Shows what we know. We just got lucky.



Joshua Randall: Several years ago, shortly after I joined EN World, I started reading Sagiro's Story Hour. This was around the time of the Battle of Verdshane, and while the story's coolness factor shone, I was completely lost about who was doing what to whom, and more importantly, why. Daunted by the sheer size of the backlog, I gave up on reading the story. Hoo boy. That was a mistake I won't make again!

So, a few weeks ago, I discovered Steven Cooper's PDF compilation of the story, which surely deserves some kind of award for making Sagiro's tale accessible. Six hundred and forty pages later, I'm (mostly) caught up. What a wild ride - from 1st level when no-one knew what the hell was going on, to mid-/high-level when we sort of know what's going on but we're still in awe of the plot.

Despite the unmistakeable greatness of Sagiro and his players, reading this story always makes me sad. Sad because I've never played in a campaign this rich in detail, this carefully crafted and nurtured by its DM, this enthusiastically explored by its PCs. Judging by some other comments in the thread, I'm not the only one who feels this way. Still, I get a vicarious thrill from reading about the Company's exploits - and that takes away the sadness.

Well, enough maudlin rambling. On to some questions regarding our favorite artifacts, the Eyes of Moirel (and apologies if these were already answered somewhere in the last 48 thread pages... I'm dedicated now to the story, but not *that* dedicated).

(1a) Who was the Sharshun who disappeared during Flashing Day waaaaay back in session 14? A named villain, or some random flunky? And, did he definitively use an Eye of Moirel to disappear, or...?

(1b) If the Sharshun did use a single Eye of Moirel to disappear, does that give the lie to the theory that three Eyes are needed to "travel nowhere"? Or is what he did different than "traveling nowhere"?

(2) What happened to the Eye that was bought by Sarai - the one that was in a cyclops statue? From session 29: Dranko calls up to it, offering to keep it safe in a storage room in the Greenhouse, but it claims that it would rather be set prominently on a mantelpiece. Sarai jumps in and offers to do just that, and the Cyclops agrees to go with her.

(3) Other than flavor, is there any significance to the colors of the Eyes? I realize, Sagiro, that you're not going to come right out and answer this one, but maybe some of the players have some thoughts.

Piratecat: Answering Joshua's questions:

- (1a & 1b) He definitely used an Eye of Moirel to disappear, that stinker. You'll find out more about him in an upcoming update. We wondered the same thing, but I can't tell you what we found out without some spoilers. Same for 1b – we eventually find an answer to that as well, more or less.
- (2) Sarai's Eye was stolen when the gnolls attacked and invaded Calnis. Presumably, Sarai was killed in the process. When the crystal shell surrounding Calnis dropped and we fought the small army of escaping "stinkwiggles" (a.k.a. "s--t beasts" or "otyughs" – this was right before Dranko and his grandfather reconciled), the most powerful of the otyughs was part crystal. We believe that Sarai's Eye of Moirel was imbedded in this otyugh for at least a little while, and that the Sharshun managed to steal it and use it in their nefarious plans. Jerks.
- (3) Other than encompassing the colors of the spectrum, I'm not sure that the colors of the Eyes have any major plot relevance. Sagiro can correct me if I'm wrong!

Sagiro: A full chronology here, for those interested. The order in which things happened was:

1. Early in the game, the Company are called upon to transport an otyugh from Calnis to Tal Hae. The otyugh was captured in the streets, having apparently wandered up from the undercity.
2. Sarai wins the yellow Eye of Moirel in an auction in Minok, and takes it home with her to Calnis.
3. While the Company are finding the horned spycrow skull in the Black Circle bestiary, Calnis is sacked by gnolls and kobolds raiding from the nearby mountains. The survivors flee into the countryside, many relocating in Tal Hae. Sarai is not among the survivors.
4. After returning to Tal Hae from God's Thorn, the Company hear various rumors. The rumors say that the leader of the gnolls in the sack of Calnis was a legendary warrior in red armor – but that he was driven out of the city by another, more powerful gnoll with a crystal eye. That second gnoll and his own forces still occupy the city, and they've built a huge crystal palace in the center of the city. Draw your own conclusions from (3) and (4).
5. While the party are in Kivia, Ozilish communicates with them using the magic boxes stolen from Gluefoot. In addition to telling the sad news about Grawly and Thewana's deaths, Ozilish mentions that the walls of Calnis have become covered with crystal, and the gates blocked by pulsing crystal masses. Hordes of gnolls patrol the walls. No one has been seen going in or out of the city since.
6. A few weeks before the Battle of Verdshane, the crystal seal around Calnis vanishes overnight, and the remaining gnolls inside flee back to the mountains. The most likely explanation is that the Sharshun sent their own adventuring party in there to get the Eye of Moirel. Dang.
7. Soon after stopping Mokad's plot to fuse Volpos and Abernia together (using Grey Wolf as glue), the party are alerted to a veritable army of otyughs on a mass exodus out of Calnis. During the battle, the Company note that one of the otyughs has some residual yellow crystal on it.

Bonus fun backstory for both players and readers: you know how the Emperor Naloric had maintained bestiaries in stasis (like the one the Company ventured into early on)? Well, the good Emperor maintained a whole *warehouse* full of otyughs-in-stasis under Calnis. With the Masking starting to fail, some of the otyughs had been coming out of stasis; the one the party were asked to transport had wandered from its bestiary up to the street.

During the sack of Calnis, the gnolls unwittingly broke the seals to the already-failing stasis prison, and hundreds of stinkwiggles got loose. Many of these took to the streets, and one of them found the Eye of Moirel in Sarai's ruined home. Alas, its existence as an Eye Host was short lived; before it could grow too powerful a gnoll warchief tore the Eye out of the otyugh's body and took it for itself.

After the Sharshun "rescued" the Yellow Eye and the gnolls fled, the stinkwiggles remained, roaming the streets. Eventually they found themselves running out of food, so they started a southern migration, led by the one-time host of the Eye. And that's when the Company slaughtered them all.

Road to Nowhere

"Morningstar... Ell can't really be dying. Can she?" Dranko doesn't understand it, but he holds the hand of his betrothed, who is still shaking after telling the others what she learned through her *commune*.

"All of the Gods as we know them may be dying," says Aravis.

Yoba nods. "We're taught that Yondalla is as strong as her worshippers. How many worshippers do your Gods have left in this world?"

"Ell says we have to succeed," says Morningstar, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Then we'll succeed," says Dranko.

"It changes nothing," says Aravis. "Failure has never been an option."

"Then let's go," says Ernie. "I'm ready to cast."

Once more, he and Morningstar cast *plane shift*. This time Ernie's group winds up in the ocean, standing on the surface as it undulates beneath them. Morningstar's group arrives on the mountainous coastline of northern Harkran, not more than two hundred yards from a large group of goblins clustered around a mine entrance. But the goblins don't see them, and a few seconds later both groups have *teleported* to the Greenhouse roof.

Their nostrils are quickly filled with the smoky reek of Pyke Vale. Morningstar tries to smile. "Ah, home sweet... evil alternate reality." Ernie wants to head straight away to the Mirrors of Semek, just to get things over with, but the others convince him that they should replenish their spells before the final dash.

Morningstar casts a *sending* to Eddings, so as not to surprise him too badly:

Eddings, we're on the roof. We're coming in.

Eddings replies:

It will be nice to see you again, Morningstar. I trust that everything... oh, just come in and tell me in person!

The Company swing open the door, still boarded up to all outward appearances, but with the planks cut to allow it to open. Eddings rises from a chair in the living room, where he has been sitting across a chess board from Carp. The cats come running up to rub against Ernie, who reaches down to pet them. "Yoba," he says happily, "this is my home."

"It's lovely! Who are those people?"

Before Ernie can answer, Dranko says to Eddings, "You knew we were up on the roof, and you didn't even get up from your game? Boy, you can't get good service around here!" And with that, he seizes the butler in a ferocious bear hug.

"Has everything been okay here?" asks Morningstar.

"Boring, but good," says Eddings. "I've had time to work on my carving skills." He gestures at the chess set. All of the pieces have been hand-carved from the leftover bones of various meals from the magical Icebox.

Carp stands up. He looks healthy and fit. "I hope you haven't been too bored," says Dranko.

Carp gestures to the chessboard. "I have learned this fascinating game. We have played it hundreds of times."

"Who's better?" Dranko asks.

"We win with equal frequency."

"He's being charitable," says Eddings. "I lose two games out of every three. But enough about us. What have you been up to all this time?"

"Let's talk over dinner," suggests Kibi.

Ernie runs into the kitchen. "Oh, how I've missed you!" he exclaims. "No Icebox tonight. I'm making dinner myself!" Soon he and Yoba are happily preparing a homecoming feast.

"We need more trophy cases!" announces Dranko. He has started to pull out an assortment of objects from their *bags of holding*. The floor is soon covered with junk. There are Nightmare Beast tusks, giantish coins the size of dinner plates, statuettes of Kibi, gears and springs from the Scree, slaad teeth, a bottle with the sapphire dust left over from Flicker's imprisonment, a Black Circle lantern from the storeroom, fifteen adamantine hoops, obsidian bricks, the fake key from the giantish village in Surgoil, eyestalks from a tundra eye, a vial of quicksilver taken from the Abyss, the crystal head of a Black Circle devotee taken from the rotunda, some blood fox hair...

"Wow," says Kibi. "You really *do* collect a lot of crap!"



Kibi does most of the storytelling, and does everything possible to embellish his own role and (when possible) make fun of Dranko. He delights particularly in telling about their time spent with the Vree, who had assumed he was a luminary and the rest of the Company his servants.

Carp listens intently to all the stories. He seems much happier now, and for good reason, than when the party had last seen him – regular meals, good company, and not being burned alive in a huge furnace will do that to a man. He has heard from Eddings every story of the Company's exploits, and so considers his hosts as near demigods.

Aravis wonders privately what will happen to Carp if they restore the world. Will the universe tolerate him? He whispers his concern to Dranko while Kibi regales, and Dranko answers that if he proves "incompatible," they can always *plane shift* him to a different Prime.

When the meal is over, Morningstar stands swiftly and goes to her room. Dranko watches her go but doesn't follow. "I should, uh, replenish my stock of cigars. Flicker, you in?"

Alone, Morningstar prays fervently in the darkness for her dying Goddess.



The Company wake comfortably in their own beds, though what wakes them is a new morning of distant shrieking from the streets of Pyke Vale. Without unnecessary delay they start to prepare for the journey to (and they hope through) the Mirrors of Semek. "Will we have to wait for a Flashing Day?" asks Morningstar nervously.

"I think the Eyes will create a Flashing Day just for us," says Dranko.

"And we'll need Ernie's belt, and Kibi's... self," adds Morningstar. "As the Opener."

"And the Maze, as a power source," says Aravis. He taps his head.

They start *wind walking* from the roof of the Greenhouse, and for good measure are disguised as sparrows courtesy of a *veil* from Kibi. They have left Sagiro behind with Eddings and Carp, though Yoba and Snokas are still with them.

The journey is short as such trips go – it's only two hours at top speed between Pyke Vale and the Mirrors. In their own world the flight would take them over many halfling villages, including Ernie's home of Dingman's Ferry. Here the lands below are desolate, with no sign that there had ever been peaceful folk tilling the fields.

The Mirrors of Semek first appear as black dots on the horizon. Dranko drops to ground level and flies forward to scout, a misty sparrow zipping along at sixty miles per hour. Soon he is close enough to see the clusters of tents just outside the ring of plinths, and a number of humans milling around – between fifty and a hundred, he thinks. There are patrols which don't seem rigorous. One tent is conspicuously large.

Dranko, says Morningstar over the *telepathic bond*. *You're too far away. Remember that the universe still hates us.*

Stupid universe, Dranko grumbles. He returns to the others, and they all fly in toward the Mirrors en masse.

The party have various divinations working: *greater arcane sight, see invisibility*, even a *true seeing*. While most of the Company hover two hundred feet above the Mirrors, a few drop down low enough for their spells to play over the scene. To Aravis's *arcane sight*, a huge amount of Earth Magic is radiating out from the towering obelisks, obscuring all else. Ernie remembers his long-ago dream of black giants, and idly touches the golden belt around his waist. *Cranchus' Gift*.

Everyone's attention is drawn suddenly to a figure emerging from one of the smaller tents. It's a tall warrior, with thinning hair, a goatee, and powerful muscles. There's a black sword strapped to his back and, most notably, familiar red armor strapped to his body. The warrior stretches, looks around, waves to a passing soldier, and moves toward a group of men hovering around a cook-pot. The closer party members can hear the sounds of sparring, smell the odor of oatmeal.

Dranko does a quick scout around the camp, and while a cluster of covered wagons seems like it might be interesting, they only hold uniforms, spare weapons and armor, and general supplies. There's no sign of anyone being on alert for the Company or anyone else. "It's a trap," says Morningstar, thinking of their recent debacle in Delfir.

The party regroup high above the camp to talk strategy. They have some ideas, but always there is the problem of not knowing how long it will take the Eyes of Moirel to do... whatever it they have to do, once they've landed inside the Mirrors. But they talk through the problems, inventory their assets, and eventually settle on a plan that meets with everyone's approval.

"Wow," says Morningstar. "We're actually going nowhere. How long have we been waiting for this?"

"I'm excited!" says Flicker.

"I'm worried," says Ernie. "I'm supposed to do something, but I don't know what it is. I've never gone nowhere before. What if I do it wrong?"

"Ernie," says Dranko, grinning. "In this regard, it'll be a lot like sex. You know, like the bull knows what to do with the cow, without anyone telling it how. Sooo, in that same way..."

In a small voice, Ernie answers: "I'm not going to have to get naked... am I?"

"No, no," Dranko assures him. "Ernie, this is a homespun parable here."

Aravis smiles at Ernie. "You're going to rise to the occasion. I know it."

"Are we still talking about the bull?" asks Dranko.

Aravis blinks, entirely guileless. "No."

"Not a good choice of words," Grey Wolf chuckles.

The Company cast their spells. Everyone is made to be flying (without the *wind walk*, which doesn't allow for fast aerial maneuvers). Aravis scrutinizes the red-armored warrior with his *greater arcane sight*, and sees that he's under a number of spell effects: *nondetection, spell resistance, fire resistance, spell turning*, and *true seeing*. Aravis gulps as he realizes the warrior would see them hovering, if he happened to look up.

Kibi starts the ball rolling, reading from a scroll, and the red-armored warrior (whose name is **Teskin**) is sealed in a *forcecage*. Teskin is jawing it up with a grunt, but he catches sight (and perhaps hears) Kibi reading his scroll. He looks up and gives a

shout – which is heard by no one save the soldier at hand, since the *forcecage* blocks all sound. As the Company swoop downward, Teskin barks an order at the soldier, who takes two quick strides before smacking into the invisible wall of his force-prison. The hapless soldier lies on his back, blinking. *Are those birds? How odd...* Teskin looks down at the soldier, draws his sword, and swings it to no avail against the wall of the *forcecage*. Some fifteen feet away a second soldier, seeing Teskin's odd behavior, asks, “General? Are you all right?”

Once the final member of the Company has landed in the center of the Mirrors, Ernie casts *obscuring mist*, and Morningstar casts a circular *blade barrier* just inside the outer edge of the mist. “Kibi!” she says in a low but impatient voice. “Tell the Eyes to get started already!”

“Hey, Eyes?” says Kibi. “We’re ready. Any time now!”

WE LACK POWER.

Kibi shares this fact with the others. There is a sound of tremendous commotion outside the mist, and a confused babble of questions.

“What is that?”

“Should we investigate?”

“Could be dangerous!”

“Maybe we should fire arrows into it.”

“No, I think the Mirrors are *supposed* to do that.”

“Wasn’t Flashing Day months ago?”

“I don’t know; I wasn’t part of that rotation.”

“Why is the General flailing around like that?”

Yoba draws her weapon and moves to protect Ernie. Snokas likewise stands between Kibi and Aravis, picks drawn. Aravis drops into the Crosser’s Maze. In an instant he is there, high above the three-dimensional map of the multiverse. With practiced precision he zooms down to his own location on Abernia. The Mirrors glow brightly, seven luminous rectangles that in the Maze are not black, but hued like the colors of the spectrum. One is red, one orange, and so on through to violet. In the center of the Mirrors, Aravis sees four glowing lights: green, purple, blue and red.

“I think I saw a bunch of birds land in there, right before the fog.”

“What? Birds?”

“They must have been attracted to the mist.”

“No, the birds were there *first*.”

“Boy, Teskin looks really pissed about something. It looks like he’s shouting; has he lost his voice?”

Morningstar casts *magic circle vs. evil*, and Ernie pops a scroll of *antilife shell* into his *quickscroll tube*.

“We’re under attack!” shouts a soldier with a more level head than the rest. “The General is trapped in some kind of... force cage!”

“Then somebody go break the stick!”

Er... what? That gets everyone’s attention. The worst interpretation is that they own a *refuge* token that will summon the Emperor himself!

An arrow comes flying into the fog; it bounces off Grey Wolf’s armor. It is followed by a dozen more, which either miss their targets or are deflected by the whirling blades of the *blade barrier*.

“Hey, something in the fog is mutilating our arrows. Don’t go in there!”

Grey Wolf activates his *vest of greater invisibility* and flies up high enough to clear the top of the mist. He sees that soldiers are running around, grabbing weapons out of tents, forming up ranks. Some bark orders. Teskin sees Grey Wolf and points, but no one else can see the invisible and illusion-bound enemy. Grey Wolf conveys all of this to others over the *telepathic bond*.

Morningstar grimaces. *Nothing can get in our way. I can’t allow it.* She flies upward until she is next to Grey Wolf. *The way must be clear. Ell is dying.* She casts *fire storm*. Coal-black flames rip through the ranks of the enemy soldiers, leaving charred bodies and incinerated tents behind. Thirty smoking heaps of armor are testament to Morningstar’s wrath. Dranko follows this with an *ice storm* that pulverizes most of those who somehow survived the flames. The few remaining soldiers take cover behind the Mirrors themselves, though Grey Wolf catches a few of these stragglers in a *fireball*.



Aravis first tries to draw energy from the Mirrors themselves, but in a split-second he realizes he risks a catastrophic feedback loop that would annihilate his mind. *Never mind.* Instead, he draws upon the life-force of his fellows. Each member of the Company feels the chilling tug of the Maze, and without hesitation they give willingly of their own souls. Aravis channels the energy into the Purple, Green and Blue Eyes (while conspicuously avoiding the Red).

Scree flares up. Blue, green and purple beams shoot from his body at three of the Mirrors, and then start bouncing between them. The *obscuring mist* is illuminated from both without and within as rays of light slice through it. The light glows brighter as more life-force is channeled from the Company to the Eyes.

Grey Wolf sees that a third person has appeared inside the *forcecage*. Probably a spellcaster, there to rescue the red-armored warrior. Directly below him he sees the mist glowing as if a rainbow had exploded inside it.

Kibi feels a deep shudder run through his body, and then a surge of saturating power. *Earth Magic.* He feels immensely solid, stable. And here, at the center of the Mirrors, with the Eyes blazing, he realizes that something is wrong with the fabric of space. He realizes that he could reach out, part the air with his hands, but that his arms are shaking. In fact, everyone in the Company feels a growing vibration in their bones. Everyone, that is, except Ernie. The belt around his waist grows warm, and the halfling feels stable, anchored.

Kibi puts his hand on Ernie's shoulder, and for him too the buzzing vibration stops. Back in control of his limbs, Kibi extends his other hand and *pulls aside* something essential about the space here in the center. He's not exactly sure of what he's doing, but he feels something part beneath his fingers like wet paper.

Those others on the ground reach out to touch Ernie, and they too become stable. The flyers come down and do the same. Morningstar touches Aravis's shoulder to bring him into the chain – Aravis, who's still in the Maze, directing energy into the Eyes. The light inside the Mirrors has melded into a uniform white radiance, almost blinding in its intensity.

Ernie looks down curiously at the ground. Small rocks there are jumping up and down on the ground as if there's an earthquake, but he himself is solid as stone. One of the rocks cracks and flakes into fragments. Dust is shaken loose from the ground and rising into the air in puffs.

The *obscuring mist* vanishes, dispelled. Teskin steps into view, just outside the ring of blades. Something or someone has freed him from the *forcecage*, and now he glares worriedly at the Company. Ernie tries to cast *antilife shell* from his scroll but he's trying too hard to concentrate on being stable. The spell fizzles out, as Teskin takes the plunge through the blades and toward them.

Kibi is still making clearing motions with his left hand, as if he's brushing away invisible cobwebs. The more he clears, the brighter grows the light reflected from the Mirrors. Now it has become as bright as the light that shone outside the Greenhouse when the history of Abernia was rewritten.

He realizes what he's doing. Kibi is clearing away residual arcane energies. The Earth is the source of all magic, he knows, and as an Earth Mage he taps directly into that. Most arcane casters are not capable of direct contact; they rely on the residual, wispy magical emanations that rise from the earth and permeate the air. But here, that insubstantial half-magic is only getting in the way. He clears it away, leaving nothing but the pure power of the Earth to affect the Mirrors of Semek. The light shines white and blinding around them; they can no longer see even as far as the blades, let alone the Mirrors themselves.

Teskin steps into the light with them, black sword drawn. With one swift motion he swings his blade directly through Kibi, Aravis and Snokas. It passes harmlessly through their bodies. Dranko remembers that the Sharshun who once stood inside the Mirrors was similarly immune to their own attacks, and he smiles at the comeuppance. Teskin realizes his impotence and rages around in the light, slashing his sword futilely through the Company.

Then he realizes his armor is cracking. Being here in the Mirrors, without Ernie to stabilize him, is a bad, bad idea. He starts to back away, just as Kibi clears away the last of the hindering half-magic. The light somehow grows brighter, and Teskin falls to his knees, screaming in pain. The rocks and pebbles around him are being vibrated into dust. Blood is pouring out from between the plates in Teskin's mail, and he falls face first into the dirt, pieces of his armor literally breaking off his body...

...and then the body fades away, and the world around them fades, and the bright light grows dim, and goes out, leaving the Company in a strange twilight. There is nothing but the Company, and the Mirrors, and the Eyes of Moirel. They are floating in the midst of the mirrors, but at the same time they feel firmly anchored in place. Earth Magic suffuses them, and the landscape itself is blurred, but the Mirrors of Semek stand out sharply. Scree is floating in the center of the group, though he doesn't seem to mind.

The world around them grows more and more blurred, as if the twilight is in strobe so rapid they cannot discern its flickering. Every few seconds one of the Eyes flashes its color. Kibi senses that the Red Eye is trying to stop what's happening; one particular flash of red almost causes him to become unanchored.

The Green Eye floats slowly over to hover before Ernie. The young halfling flinches but finds he cannot move, is not sure his body is real. A voice sounds in his head.

YOU ARE DOING REMARKABLY WELL.

Thank... thank you, thinks Ernie. I'm doing my best.

WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

Ernest Wilburforce Roundhill.

IT'S NICE TO MEET YOU, ERNEST WILBURFORCE ROUNDHILL.

Who are you? Do you have a name?

WE DO NOT TAKE NAMES TO OURSELVES. THAT IS A POWERFUL ARTIFACT YOU WEAR.

Cranchus gave it to me.

A WISE DWARF HE IS. HE KNOWS OUR WAYS.

The Green Eye is bathed for a moment in a red glow.

I MUST CONCENTRATE ON THE TASK AT HAND.

IT WAS NICE TO MEET YOU. PERHAPS WE WILL MEET AGAIN SOMEDAY.

A shape appears and disappears in their midst, so quickly that no one gets a good look. It was the size and shape of a person, and it was there in the center of the Mirrors, as if it were one of them. But before the Company can even begin to speculate, the shape appears again, and this time does not vanish.

It's a Sharshun, and one they recognize. Floating among them now is Inivane, the Sharshun that the Company rescued from beneath God's Thorn! He wears a glowing gartine circlet around his head, and out from that circlet shine three short, thin beams of white light, like spokes on a bicycle tire. At the ends of those beams are three Eyes of Moirel – Yellow, Orange and Indigo.

"Hey!" says Ernie. "We rescued him!"

Inivane stares at the Company confusedly; his expression indicates that they're the last thing he expected to see.

"You should put time back the way it was!" shouts Ernie.

"What... what are you doing here?" asks Inivane.

"We're here to make things right," Ernie answers.

"That is also why I am here."

"Yeah, but our right is better than your right!" says Ernie. "Our right doesn't have people enslaved. It doesn't have an Emperor. The... the Gods are dying!" Inivane doesn't answer, and a moment later he blinks out of existence.

OUR TIMING MAY BE OFF. THE RED...

A sudden flare of red light fills the twilight, there is a cracking sound, and the four Eyes drop to the ground. The flickering twilight resolves into early evening. They are standing in the middle of the Mirrors of Semek, and the world around them looks much like it did before, albeit without soldiers and tents and spell effects. "Er... was that it?" asks Ernie to no one in particular.

Dranko reaches down and picks up one of the Eyes of Moirel. It is just a diamond now. Without color, he can't tell which one it is. He peers closely at the white gem, and goes pale as he sees that it's veined with deep cracks.

The Eye of Moirel is broken. All of them are.

Gold Roger: BLAMM!!! What more can you say? That's bad, real bad. And quite spectacular.

the Jester: It's cool to see the party finally 'go nowhere' after all this time! And, as always, you end on quite a note...

Any chance of seeing a list of the party's classes, levels and alignments?

Fimmtiu: Well, at least nobody else has to worry about having their eyes scooped out now...

Tamlyn: Yeah, but how do they get back now?

el-remmen: Hmm, I don't know what I was expecting, but that wasn't it... But then again, I get the feeling the PCs didn't quite know what to expect either...

Piratecat: Interestingly, this is what's on the tape, but it isn't what I remember happening. Or at least, not exactly. I suspect that the next tape will have the piece on it that I remember. And yeah, it's interesting. Yes, indeedy.

We had no idea what to expect, although I had some suspicions. I really, *really* didn't expect the Eyes to shatter. And you know, this is a direct result of Kibi putting strain on them just recently!

By the way, long-time readers will soon appreciate Sagiro's subtleties. Does anyone notice something odd about the conversation that the Green Eye had with Ernie while we were traveling nowhere?

Kid Charlemagne: [from session 42 (see page 71 of Part One):] Before the head snaps off at the neck and falls to the floor, it swivels around to face Ernie, and says in a rasping voice: "Ernest, how nice to see you again."

I thought that reminded me of something... (And just in case anyone was wondering, it was the Green Eye that was animating that soon-to-be-decapitated head...)

Seule: Might I venture to guess that in whatever alternate timeline they have shifted to the Eyes already exist, and they can't exist in two places at once? If I'm right, they are out there again, waiting to be found and used.

I'm probably wrong, though.

Mishihari Lord: The Orbs are Dragonballs!

Sagiro: Given that I have no idea what you're talking about, that probably isn't right...

el-remmen: Uh, how do you think baby dragons are made?

Mishihari Lord: I was referring to the very popular anime and manga *Dragonball* and *DragonballZ*, in which the main characters quest for the seven Dragonballs. When they get them all, they are granted one wish, then the Dragonballs disperse across the globe to await the next quester. Given that the target audience is probably ten-year-old boys, I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you didn't recognize it.

LightPhoenix: While I missed the Green Eye bit, it struck me as a bit odd how it talks about itself (and the other Eyes). The way it's written almost makes it seem like there are more than seven of them.

MavrickWeirdo: [from sessions 9 & 10 (see page 29 of Part I):]

The Company head into the town of Dingman's Ferry. ... Murgy Thorn was digging himself a new wine cellar under his tavern, and found protruding bits of a large statue buried under his place. ... The hand has a gold bracelet around the wrist, which would be large enough for a person's belt.

...
The digging is nearly finished. By now, it's clear that the statue looks almost exactly like Ernie! Halfling records show that Wilburforce was once a family name in the area.

I'm guessing that Yoba does not go "back to the future"...

thatdarncat: Ouch... good catch!

MavrickWeirdo: Imagine a plot hook, introduced at 2nd level, resolved nine years later...

KidCthulhu: Imagine, hell. Sagiro does that to us on a regular basis. It's gratifying, frustrating and spooky.

MavrickWeirdo: Well yes, you don't have to imagine it. I was suggesting to the rest of us poor souls who aren't in Sagiro's game that we try to imagine such a thing happening.

Everett: I can imagine it... Do I win something? Gumby doll, maybe?

MavrickWeirdo: A vivid imagination is its own reward.

Everett: This is nothing to do with the last two updates, but are we ever going to find out why Aravis is 'like a cat'?

Piratecat: We now know why, but you can bet your socks we don't know why... and we sure as heck don't know what to do about it.

In other words, we have learned why it is that cats like him. The answer is so unexpected, though, that there's going to be a fascinating explanation somewhere down the line. We just haven't found it yet.

Zaruthustran: Dibs on "Aravis is an awakened cat (former familiar) that's been polymorphed into a human"!

Seis: Dibs on the whole "nine lives/multiple incarnations/was a cat that's been reincarnated" thing.

OR SO

The Beans are Withheld

"Did we do it wrong? What happened?" Ernie is almost frantic. Dranko stares at the cracked Eyes, unbelieving.

"This must have been the price of doing that *plane shift*," says Grey Wolf. "The Eyes couldn't hold themselves together."

"Um," says Dranko. "How are we going to get back?"

"I don't know!" answers Ernie. "Where are we?"

Then two things happen in quick succession. First, the Sharshun Inivane appears again, standing next to the Company in the circle of Mirrors. His three Eyes of Moirel – Yellow, Orange and Indigo – immediately fall out of his magical circlet and bounce lifelessly on the ground.

Inivane looks down at them, then looks up at the Company, who are staring back at him. Everyone, Inivane included, now has the same "*Oh, shit*" look on their faces.

Second, there is an extraordinarily bright flash of light from the center of the Mirrors, followed by a shockwave that blasts outward, setting the air rippling in an expanding circle. All assembled are knocked backward, lifted slightly off their feet, and rendered swiftly unconscious.

Presumably, some time passes.

QR SO

Aravis blinks. He's lying on his back, staring upward at a partly cloudy sky. *I've lost my empathic link with Pewter. But if he's dead, I'd know it.* He sits up and looks around groggily. Around him are sprawled the bodies of his companions, as well as that of Inivane. His head feels like it's stuffed with sawdust, and not only in an I've-just-been-knocked-out kind of way. His brain feels dull, like he's lost his intellectual edge. His *greater arcane sight*, working fine before the shockwave, is no longer active. Come to think of it, no one looks like birds anymore, though Kibi's *veil* should have lasted hours yet. Lying a few feet from him are two of the now inert Eyes of Moirel. He grabs them and puts them in his pack, where Pewter also lies, unconscious but breathing.

Kibi is the next to come around. Like Aravis he has lost his empathic link with his familiar; Scree is just a jumble of rocks next to him. To his great relief the earth elemental stirs a little bit as he watches. Kibi watches as Snokas sits up and rubs his temples; the half-orc immediately points at the still form of Inivane. Kibi pulls a rope from his pack, and the two of them start to tie up the Sharshun.

Aravis looks around for more of the Eyes, spots a third and pops it in his pack. This time Pewter's eyes are open, and the cat is looking at his master with obvious concern. Aravis picks him up and sets him on his own shoulder, whereupon Pewter starts to purr.

Dranko groans and get to his knees. "Oooooh, my head."

"I've found three of the Eyes," says Aravis, still searching.

"Find the others," suggests Dranko. He looks at Inivane, who still hasn't stirred. "Hey, can we kill him?"

"I wouldn't," says Aravis.

"We might need him," adds Kibi.

"Nah, I'm sure we can find food elsewhere," says Dranko. Aravis rolls his eyes. Seeing that Kibi and Snokas are doing something of an amateur job with the rope, Dranko calls to them, "Hey, I have manacles. Hold on a minute." He opens his *Heward's wide-mouth pouch* and says, "Manacles." Nothing happens. He tries again with the same (lack of) result.

"I don't think magic is working here," says Aravis.

"Ahhhhh!" says Dranko, aghast.

"I feel the same way," adds Aravis.

"No magic? None?"

"None."

"No."

"Yes."

"Wait," says Dranko. "Are our magic items ruined, or just... turned off for a while?"

"I don't know," concedes Aravis.

"No magic," says Dranko, utterly horrified. He thinks of all the items, magic and otherwise, he keeps in the now defunct magic pouch.

"Stop whining and help me tie up this Sharshun," says Kibi.

It takes Dranko all of five seconds to realize that Kibi's knots are hopeless, and that Inivane will escape without even trying when he wakes up. Dranko does the job right, taking the time to hog-tie the Sharshun such that any attempt by the prisoner to straighten his legs will result in self-asphyxiation.

He finishes just in time; Inivane wakes up, tries to stretch, and nearly chokes himself to death. Dranko chuckles. "Just stay there for a little while, pal. So, how are you doing? Oh, wait, let me just relieve you of those weapons."

While Inivane slowly regains consciousness, Dranko starts removing the dark elf's weapons. Inivane's eyes widen and he attains an expression of great concentration. The Company then remember (and fear) that their foe might have a poison sac, and is trying to commit suicide. But the Sharshun doesn't die, and instead, when nothing happens, he looks down at a ring on his finger. Dranko quickly moves to remove it, along with every other magical-looking item on his person (although, when he attempts to cast *detect magic*, it fails to function).

Over the next minute the rest of the Company wake up, all with angry headaches. At Aravis's direction they hunt around on the ground for the remainder of the Eyes, and soon they have a collection of seven cracked diamonds. "OK, brilliant wizards," demands Dranko. "What just happened?"

"Not sure," says Grey Wolf. "But perhaps we should move outside the Mirrors." So saying, he staggers out of the ring of obelisks. To everyone's disappointment his magic items do not regain their function, though Grey Wolf thinks his armor may have become a bit lighter.

Dranko picks up Inivane and carries him out of the circle. The rest of the Company follow. The wizards' empathic links with their familiars are still gone, the Eyes are still cracked, and all magic remains out of commission. Dang. Dranko shakes his *wide-mouth pouch* in frustration. "Damn it! All of my stuff is in this bag. Well, at least no one can steal what's inside."

"See?" says Grey Wolf, smiling wryly. "You're looking at the bright side."

"That's just great." Dranko looks down at Inivane and nudges him with his foot. "So, can you talk?"

"Yes," answers Inivane, speaking Charagan Common.

"Nice to see you again," says Dranko, smiling.

"I wish I could say the same."

"I'm sure," says Dranko. "You've been a busy boy since we let you free. Can I ask a question?"

"I can't stop you," says Inivane pleasantly.

"Did you end up killing Grawly and Thewana and that parrot?"

"Who?"

"Did you assassinate any archmages?"

"No. But if I had, I wouldn't tell you, so my answer is meaningless."

Dranko sighs. "Listen, I'm sorry we currently have you hog-tied. It may not have to stay that way. But we need to talk, and understand what's going on here."

"I'll be happy to help you in any way you want, as long as you let me live," says Inivane.

"That sounds reasonable," says Dranko.

"So, you'll let me live?"

"Um. Let's say we have no immediate plans to kill you. If we did, you wouldn't have woken up."

Inivane purses his lips. "*Immediate* plans."

Dranko nods. "We need to understand what's going on. But no guarantees. I mean, if you tell us you came here to start a giant drought that would kill everyone in Charagan, that would make it tougher for us to let you live."

"Not knowing if you are going to let me live, I cannot promise to tell you anything," says Inivane. The Sharshun looks at Dranko's holy symbol to Delioch, God of Healers. "You are a holy man, I see. Swear on your God you will not kill me if I am honest with you. You, or any of your friends."

Morningstar interrupts with her opinion about that. "No."

Aravis adds, "If we discover that you are jeopardizing our mission, we will kill you."

"And the last time we bargained with you, it didn't go so well," adds Morningstar.

Inivane blinks. "We had no bargain," he points out. "You let me go without any conditions for my release." Morningstar frowns, but is silent. Thinking harder, she recalls that, against her own opinion, the Company *had* just released the Sharshun into the wild.

Dranko looks up idly at the nearest Mirror while Morningstar and Aravis banter with the prisoner. On a whim he starts to scramble up, the rocky backside of the plinth offering an easy climb. Soon he's sitting on the top, and his gaze is immediately drawn westward. Smoke is rising from beyond the distant hills – in the general direction of Dingman's Ferry.

Morningstar stands over Inivane, glaring. "Are you going to tell us why you're here?"

"Only if you promise not to kill me."

"You might as well just say 'No,' then."

"Very well," says Inivane coolly. "No."

"Dranko!" calls Morningstar. "Here's a thought. No magic includes no *healing* magic, for things like broken bones after a hundred-foot fall." Good point. Dranko carefully descends.

The Company need to talk strategy, so Yoba, Flicker and Snokas are left to guard the prisoner while the others move a ways away to converse. "So, is this a different onion, or a different slice of the same one?" asks Morningstar.

"I think it's the same slice," says Kibi. "But just at a different time."

"Basically, we don't know where the hell we are, or when," says Dranko. "But you know, if Inivane came back to change the world, and he hasn't done it yet, then if we kill him now, doesn't the world stay the same, and everything becomes all friendly again?"

"If we're really before he changed the world, yes," says Aravis. "But I don't think that we can just make that assumption."

"Maybe we're here before the Eyes were created, and that's why they're broken," muses Morningstar.

"We're here before *we* were created," says Dranko. "We're not broken."

"Well, we'll kick ourselves if we kill him now, and later realize we need to talk with him," says Kibi.

Before Ernie can stop himself, he blurts: "*Speak with dead!*" He immediately glances guiltily toward Yoba, and adds: "No, I don't think we should kill him."

"I don't either," says Aravis.

"Then we should promise not to kill him," says Dranko, "and find out what he knows."

Morningstar says flatly, "I'm comfortable with telling him we won't kill him, hearing what he knows, and then killing him anyway." When Ernie looks upset at the idea, Morningstar glowers at him. "If that's what needs to be done... Hey, Ell's dying, remember?"

They continue to talk in circles for a while, and after a few minutes Dranko, Ernie and Grey Wolf decide to go for a walk for an hour, to determine if distance from the Mirrors will affect the function of magics. As they discover upon their return, it's time and not distance that's the key factor. During their return trip magic (thankfully) starts to come back for both groups. The wizards' empathic links to their familiars kick back in, magic items flare to light and life, and spellcasting becomes possible. This offers a new avenue to explore. Morningstar casts a Still, Silent *detect thoughts* and starts to scan the surface of Inivane's mind.

Gold Roger: So magic works, but they lost everything magic they had. Does that mean they have to rebind to their familiars?

Piratecat: Magic was just suppressed. When our spellcasting abilities came back, so did our magic items. I wouldn't put it past Sagiro to junk all our stuff, but luckily it didn't come to that.

"Are you *sure* you don't want to tell us why you're here?" asks Aravis.

Inivane offers the same riposte. "Are you going to promise not to kill me?"

Morningstar, standing behind Inivane, shakes her head. His surface thoughts simply mirror his words.

"Who are you here to assassinate?" asks Aravis.

"I'm not here to assassinate anyone... as far as you know." He's thinking: *I'm going to be cagey, and not actually answer any of their questions.*

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about your mission?" reiterates Aravis.

"Yes."

"That was really surprising when the Eyes stopped working, wasn't it?" asks Aravis, hoping the indirect approach will lead to more revealing thoughts.

"Yes," agrees Inivane, and Morningstar frowns again.

"That must have really screwed up what you were trying to do," prompts Aravis.

"Maybe it did, and maybe it didn't." He's thinking: *No matter what he's trying to get out of this, I'm not going to answer any of his questions.* Morningstar shakes her head again. Inivane is not thinking the answers to any of the questions. His mind is remarkably disciplined and well-ordered, as if he's been trained not to let his surface thoughts stray.

"Why are *you* here?" asks Inivane.

"We think to stop you," says Aravis.

"And what do you think I'm here to do?" continues the Sharshun.

"We can't tell you," says Aravis, smiling.

Inivane just nods. "Of course you can't. So, you must know why I can't talk either. I'm glad we've come to this understanding."

The three walkers soon return, and Dranko checks Inivane's ropes. He finds that the Sharshun has been loosening them all this time, without anyone noticing. Dranko retightens the knots and then plants a foot in Inivane's back. "I'm not surprised you've tried to break free," he says. "I'd have done the same in your situation. But that's just not going to fly."

"Not any more, I see," says Inivane, cool and composed despite his face being pushed into the dirt.

"Is he going to stop trying to escape?" asks Ernie.

"I doubt it," says Dranko. "Inivane, are you going to stop trying?"

"Of course not. I'm already starting to loosen the ropes again."

"Stop that!" barks Dranko. "I appreciate the honesty, though."

Kibi steps into Inivane's line of sight. "Don't you feel any obligation toward us, since we rescued you from eternal torment?"

"Of course," says Inivane. "As such, if you free me, I wouldn't attempt to kill you, or harm you in any way. I do feel thankful that you rescued me from God's Thorn."

"I'm going to ask you a question that's pretty innocuous," says Dranko. "Maybe you'll answer it. What was the date yesterday?"

"That's a fascinating question," says Inivane.

"No, that's a simple question," says Dranko. "A *fascinating* question would be: 'What's better for explaining planar theory: onions, or parfaits?'"

"Planar theory? Onions or parfaits? I wouldn't use either of those things. I would use diagrams, of actual planar formations."

"If you were trying to explain to Dranko here, though, which would you use?" asks Aravis, smirking.

"I wouldn't attempt it," says Inivane.

"I did. I used onions," says Aravis.

"To make him cry? I would imagine that someone of his intellect would cry no matter what you..."

"Hey!" shouts Dranko. "I'm standing right here!" Inivane smiles at him. "What was yesterday's date?" repeats Dranko.

"I'm not going to tell you," says Inivane simply.

"Why won't you?" asks Aravis, growing impatient.

"Because you want to know."

"He's starting to annoy me," grumbles Grey Wolf.

Morningstar casts *memory read* on the prisoner, attempting to share his memory of when he was sent into the Mirrors. It fails, and Inivane, unable to look at Morningstar because of his bonds, says to no one: "Excuse me. That is extremely impolite, whoever is doing that."

"Yes it is," agrees Morningstar. "Here's the thing. My Goddess is dying. I will do whatever I have to, to learn how to set things right. So, we can either get information out of you the easy way, or the unpleasant way."

"What is the unpleasant way?" asks Inivane, his voice indicating nothing more than idle curiosity.

"I don't think you need to know that right now."

"Well, if I thought it was unpleasant *enough*, I might be willing to talk."

But yet more of this banter goes nowhere. Inivane won't talk. The Company refuse to bargain, but are unwilling to kill him outright. Impasse.

Finally a light goes off over Kibi's head, and he pulls out a scroll. As he reads, Inivane stiffens. He sees what's coming, and tries his hardest to resist. If his mind succumbs, he knows it's over. Kibi finishes casting, and says earnestly to the prisoner: "I suggest that it would be better for everyone, especially since we're all old acquaintances, and since we did save your life, if you just answer all our questions."

Inivane blinks. *It's over.* "That sounds reasonable," he says.

Piratecat: The look on Sagiro's face when he rolls horribly low on a saving throw is truly, truly a thing of beauty.

shisen: Silly man! He clearly needs to get better trained players. Mine make sure to make half a dozen low rolls at crucial times, so the ones I do roll never hurt. (By the way, I really like Inivane now.)

wedgeski: I bet that whole sequence was a blast to RP. It sounded like a session with a hack therapist: "Why the hell won't you answer any of my questions?" "I don't know, why do you *think* I won't answer any of your questions?"

Now, Sagiro, answer the damn questions!

Everett: That was almost like a good slapstick routine. I quite enjoyed it.

KidCthulhu: I'm slapping stick *right now*, IYKWIM...

Everett: *weak laugh*

Gold Roger: Inivane has just become my favorite NPC from this Story Hour.

Piratecat: Not ours. We hate the bastard, partially because he's opposed to everything we love and partially because he made us have another one of those moral debates. (You think I'm kidding? Consensus decision making is tough when one of the group (Ernie) believes in happiness and light and redeeming people, and one of the group (Morningstar) is utterly pragmatic and believes that a good defense involves killing the offense so they don't offend.)

Speaking of pragmatic, how 'bout that Inivane? Totally amoral, but highly ethical. He could have been one of us, if we had different loyalties. You can tell he's a bad guy because we kind of liked him at first, too. Sagiro's NPCs are maddeningly complex.

el-remmen: Reminds me of how the players in my "Out of the Frying Pan" game decided they were going to take out one of their foes before he spoke. Not because they were afraid of his spells, but because they were certain he would reveal some piece of knowledge that would cause them to question their choices and argue about it for three hours...

That is when you get players asking themselves, "Hmmm, has this guy been evil enough in the past that we know of so that we can just kill him right now and not have to justify it to ourselves later?"

And of course, my answer to that is, "Well, if you have to ask, maybe he hasn't..."

Everett: I went back through the first couple of posts of the campaign this morning and noticed that of the original party, only Dranko, Morningstar and Ernie are still in the game. I find that interesting – I don't know quite why I find it interesting...

Sagiro: And Flicker!

QR 80

The Beans are Spilled

Morningstar is unconvinced; she casts *detect thoughts*, but the Sharshun resists. Kibi continues under the assumption that Inivane will now be more forthcoming. "So, what *are* you doing here? What are you trying to accomplish?"

Inivane shifts himself into the most comfortable position he can, smiles at Kibi, and answers. "I'm here to change the course of history," he says amiably. "Into something more... palatable."

Well, *that* confirms a few suspicions! "What do you have to do, in order to do that?" Kibi continues.

"Warn the Emperor, of course."

"Do you know *when* we are?"

Inivane thinks a moment. "We weren't exactly sure. I suspect we're in the vicinity of the year 200."

The Company know that the numbering of years was reset when the Emperor Naloric was first driven out of Charagan, so all this really tells them is that they're probably more than 2000 years in the past. Yikes!

"What do you want to warn the Emperor about?" asks Kibi.

"Oh, you know how things went, back in the future. Goodness, you were there, you saw how history ended up. From what I gather, you were personally instrumental in some of the later failures."

"Wait," says Dranko. "You're warning the Emperor about *us*?"

"Of course not!" laughs Inivane. "If I succeed, things will never get to that point. In fact, you'll never be born. For that matter, neither will I. Of course, the success of my mission is highly in doubt at the moment."

"Did you have a plan for getting back to your proper time?" asks Dranko. "Or were you planning on living out the rest of your life here?"

"I wasn't sure. It appears I'm stuck here. I thought I might be able to use the Eyes to get back, but that seems unlikely now. But it doesn't matter. My duty is to the Emperor. My personal welfare is of little import."

Kibi speaks again. "Have you done anything to fulfill your mission *other* than end up here?"

"My intention had been to arrive here, and activate a ring that I was wearing," says Inivane, glancing at his finger.

"What would it do?"

"It would have teleported me to the Emperor."

"Really?" exclaims Dranko. "That's brilliant!"

"How would you have activated it?" asks Kibi.

"It's thought-activated," explains Inivane. He frowns. "It should have just worked. I don't know how they made it, so I can't be sure what went wrong."

"Very impressive," says Dranko. "But tell me. I could have sworn that, a long time ago, we saw somebody go through the Mirrors on Flashing Day, holding an Eye of Moirel. Did..."

"You don't mean a long time ago," interrupts Inivane. "You mean a long time *from now*. Yes?"

"Yeah, that's what I mean. Did that not work? Clearly you managed to get that Eye of Moirel back."

"I wasn't there for that test, but I read all the materials. It worked. It worked just fine. It was spatial travel, not temporal, since our agent only had one Eye with him. Again, I'm no expert, but I gather that was an important step toward calibrating some enchantments that were later placed on my circlet."

And so, another mystery is explained. The Company by now are satisfied that Kibi's *suggestion* has taken fully.

"If you don't mind my asking," says Inivane, "what are *you* doing here? I'm quite curious."

"Truth is, we're not quite sure," says Dranko. "We were following a prophecy, and we found ourselves here, kind of at loose ends."

"I hope you like it here, because you're stuck here too," says Inivane.

"It does seem that way," says Kibi, nodding. "We hoped you had some sneaky back door way of getting home."

"There is no 'sneaky back door way' of getting back. I'm sorry. I wish there was, for all our sakes."

Getting back to an earlier line of questioning, Kibi asks, "Tell us more specifically just what happened to the Emperor, that you were going to warn him against."

"I was going to warn him about the group that would defeat him, if he didn't do something about them. I was going to warn Naloric about the Spire." That produces a chorus of '*Ahhhhh*'s from the Company, which prompts Inivane to ask: "Don't you people read your history?"

"We couldn't!" Dranko gripes. "There was the Masking!"

Inivane laughs. "Oh, yes, I see. Well, as you probably know, the reason Naloric tried to come back from Volpos was because he had been driven there after ruling Charagan for many hundreds of years. The Spire had been plotting against him in secret, planning their little war, and they somehow got the upper hand, and they drove Naloric into exile. Things will go much better if that never happens, so I'm here to warn him not to let the Spire... fester."

"You know," Ernie chimes in, "you succeeded. In the future, the Emperor won."

"He did? Splendid!" Inivane's face breaks into a grin for just a second, but then it fades. "But, no, that was before you showed up. Now there's no way to be sure. It's possible that your being here is all part of the history that leads to Naloric's victory, but I'm not betting on it." There are a few seconds of silence, during which Inivane shifts his weight again so that his legs stop falling asleep.

"Say," says Dranko, thinking of another question. "Naloric had a big digging fetish. He always had lots of slaves digging. Do you know why?"

"No, I'm not sure. He's always been very interested in that, though."

"What did Darkeye do to that guy with the moustache?" asks Ernie, thinking of poor Sagiro.

"I'm afraid I don't know who you're talking about," says Inivane, shaking his head. He glowers, though, as if the subject pains him.

"Hey, remember the bitch who was with us when we freed you?" asks Dranko.

"Yes, I do. Rosetta, her name was, right?"

"Did you kill her?" asks Dranko. "Or do you know who did?"

"Killed her when?"

"In the future."

"She's dead?"

"We don't know. She disappeared while investigating... you know, Sharshun stuff. We just figured..."

"Had she crossed my path," says Inivane, "I would have tried to kill her. But she didn't, and I didn't."

"Darkeye must be a truly impressive leader," says Dranko. "What do you think the most impressive and..."

Inivane interrupts sharply. "I'm not going to talk about her, I'm sorry. I wish that I could, but I've made some promises, and, you know how things are."

"Aw, that's okay," Dranko assures him, smiling. "What have you been up to since the time we saw you last?"

"I rejoined the Sharshun," answers Inivane.

"Were they glad to see you?" Dranko asks.

"Yes, they were. In fact, as soon as they saw me, they knew I was a natural to go on this mission, since I might actually know the people here, if the timing worked out. Plus, they wanted someone without a poison sac, and mine had been removed before I was locked away in God's Thorn."

"So, did the Sharshun just start you training for this mission, or did they make you prove yourself first?"

Inivane looks offended. "I didn't have to *prove* myself. In fact, they trusted me in part because they had read about me in certain historical records."

"Oh, right," says Dranko with a laugh. "See, the Masking... We don't have books about the Sharshun lying around. Were there really books about you?"

"A few passages," says Inivane.

"Was it funny, reading about yourself after all that time?"

"Yes. They exaggerated some points, got some details wrong. I offered corrections. But I spent a lot of time relaxing. I deserved it, after centuries of torture."

"Absolutely!" agrees Dranko.

"Any other missions?" asks Morningstar.

"No, this was my mission. But as I said, I'm not sure if I've succeeded or not. There's no way for any of us to know. Say, I'm curious about something else. How did you manage to travel back in time, with only the Eyes that you had?"

"We had three ourselves," says Kibi. "Just like you."

"Four, actually," Dranko corrects. "We found two of them in the Hets."

"Hets?"

"You don't know what that is?"

"No," says Inivane. "What's a Het?"

"It's like a henway," explains Dranko.

"A henway? What's a he..." Inivane barely avoids the set-up. He sighs. "Must you be so banal?"

"Yes," says Aravis. "He must."

"Sooooo," says Kibi, "why do you think your three Eyes would let you go back in time, but our four wouldn't?"

"I personally don't know much about them," admits Inivane. "But we have the books that Condor wrote."

Flashback, to several months earlier...

The Company have returned from Kivia with the Crosser's Maze, and have just completed their mission to find out what happened to the Spire agent Carbuncle. Now, back in the Greenhouse, they find their two Eyes of Moirel have lodged in the eye-sockets of their new orcish torchbearer, Skorg. Most of what they portend concerns Grey Wolf and the Black Circle plot to merge Abernia and Volpos, but there is also this:

CONDOR IS A NAME YOU HEARD LONG AGO, GREATEST OF NALORIC'S INNER CIRCLE. HE DROVE A SPIKE THROUGH THE FABRIC OF ALL THINGS, AND LOCKED THE HOLE WITH SEVEN KEYS. HE TOLD NALORIC THAT IT WOULD BE NECESSARY, TO CORRECT FUTURE MISTAKES THAT COULD NOT BE CORRECTED...

"You do?" asks Dranko. "Really?"

"Where are they?" asks Kibi eagerly.

"I really shouldn't be telling you these things," says Inivane. "I could get in trouble. Like I said, there are things I've made promises to keep secret. I've probably said too much already." (No, really? You don't say!)

"Our Eyes pretty much just told us what to do," says Kibi.

"They talked to you?" says Inivane in obvious surprise.

"Didn't yours talk to you?" asks Dranko smugly.

"Of course not. They're rocks!"

"No, they're intelligent," says Dranko.

"Really? Intelligent?"

"Absolutely," says Aravis.

"Well, that's galling!"

"They only talk when they feel like it, which isn't often," adds Kibi.

"In theory, they didn't like what you were doing, and were willing to help us stop you," says Aravis.

"I was under the impression that they had to be forced, if you didn't have all seven," says Inivane.

There's another ten seconds of silence, after which Inivane asks softly: "Can I go now?" There's more silence, and the Company move off again for a final brief conference. Everyone realizes that it's harder now, having seen Inivane so pleasant and cooperative. Harder, but not too hard.

"Have we promised not to kill him?" asks Yoba, her face grim.

"No, we have not," says Aravis. "And, literally, millions of lives hang in the balance."

"I understand," says Yoba. "Still, we should make it as quick and painless as possible."

"I'll do it," says Ernie, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Yoba holds his hand. “Are you sure?”

Ernie nods. “I can do it with mercy, and without rancor.”

Without giving himself time to hesitate, Ernie draws his sword and moves behind Inivane. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“Sorry for what?” asks Inivane.

Ernie stabs him swiftly through the back of the neck. The Sharshun does indeed die quickly, though not without a last expression of utter betrayal.

wedgeski: Heavy stuff.

Fimmtiu: Ouch. Poor Ernie. A pity – as usual, the party’s nemeses are more sympathetic than their allies.

On a lighter topic, I suppose the whole “back in time” thing is why there’s a giant statue of Ernie buried underground in the present?

Gold Roger: Interesting. You know, I may be alone with this, but I consider the killing of a helpless/captured foe an evil act in general. Not one that will shift your alignment, but evil nonetheless. (On the other hand I’m totally liberal with manipulating the free will, which seems to be considered evil in some games – does that make me a fascist?) A strong layer of enchantments could have made that guy a valuable ally.

Piratecat: In truth, it was an execution, and it was necessary if we were going to prevent the world where people like Carp get thrown into ovens. Truly, we had no choice. No matter how many enchantments we put on the guy, if he ever slipped them even once our world was doomed. It just wasn’t an option.

The fact that Ernie took it upon himself to do it, when he could have abdicated the responsibility, was in many ways a character-defining moment.

el-remmen: I live for this! You know, those heavy dramatic moments where doing the good thing means doing the bad thing? Yeah, that.

Anyway, it is not as if they just decided this guy living was inconvenient and bashed his head in without a second thought. It looks like Abernathy’s Company had a discussion of decent length on the matter and if they could have done anything else they probably would have.

And, if they feel really guilty about it they can always *true res* him later once the danger is permanently avoided...

KidCthulhu: I think of this as one of Ernie’s defining moments too. He had to die, that much was clear. And if he had to be executed, it had to be done by the person who least wanted to do it. That was the only way to make it right. If it had been done by someone who felt the slightest satisfaction in it, it would be murder, not execution. I think Pratchett says something like this in one of the Discworld Guard-based books, and it always rang very true.

Everett: I agree, it was really nice. Not *nice*, but you get my meaning. I only wish I hadn’t been scrolling upwards before I read the post and accidentally seen “Ernie stabs [Inivane] through the neck... The Sharshun does indeed die quickly,” which had a way of wrecking the effect, you know.



Full Circle

Aravis doesn’t waste any sympathy on the fallen Sharshun. His first comment upon Inivane’s death is: “Oh, I *so* want those books. Condor’s books.” To his credit, he doesn’t drool.

Everett: I love that guy.

“Kibi,” says Dranko, patting the dwarf on the back. “You just saved... everyone. You stopped people from being thrown in ovens. You stopped them from being enslaved. You stopped every bad thing from happening that was going to happen.”

Kibi smiles with satisfaction. He’s traditionally had poor luck with mind-affecting spells; his *charm monster* spells in particular seem never to overcome his victims’ resistances. But this time, a single-target *mass suggestion* had done the trick marvelously well.

Ernie wipes his sword on a rag, the grass being too sparse here for cleaning the blade. “Given what Inivane told us, maybe we should find the Spire and warn them that they really need to stay strong, and stay the course.”

“I’m not sure I understand everything,” says Flicker, “but at this point aren’t we risking screwing everything up just by being here?”

“Maybe we should just kill ourselves,” says Dranko. Flicker can’t tell if he’s kidding or not.

“Dranko, no!” exclaims Ernie. “We just need to figure out how to get home.”

“Maybe by killing him, we actually *did* screw up the past,” muses Kibi. That earns him some worried glances, but it’s hard to imagine that letting Inivane warn the Emperor Naloric would have been the right thing to do.

“Here’s the problem,” says Dranko. “We have something big – maybe a town – on fire. I saw it while I was up on the Mirror. We should go investigate. Buuuuuut, by definition, if we do anything, that might be messing up history.”

The Company mull that one over for a minute. Dare they act? Dare they *not* act? Morningstar momentarily gives them something else to think about, nudging the body of Inivane with her foot. “Can we make sure he stays dead?”

"I guess we can make it more difficult to raise him," says Dranko.

"But can't they use the miracle of *true resurrection*?" asks Yoba. Dranko frowns at that.

"Does anyone even know he's here?" asks Flicker. "I mean, who would know to even *try* raising him?"

"And in the future," says Dranko, "he'll have been dead for too long."

Ernie picks back up the thread about meddling with the past. "We know there's a big battle sometime, right? Where the Spire defeats the Emperor? Maybe we need to stick around for that."

"But don't we know that that battle was won *without us*?" asks Flicker.

"No, we don't!" says Ernie. "Because of the stupid Masking, we don't know the details. For all we know, we might have tipped the balance in the Spire's favor!"

Flicker throws up his hands. "But... but Dranko's saying that we might screw up history by doing stuff. And now you're saying we might screw up history by *not* doing stuff? Which is it?!"

"If Inivane's date is correct," says Aravis, "the long war against the Emperor doesn't happen for centuries to come."

"Maybe we're the ones who *start* the Spire!" says Morningstar.

"Nah," says Dranko. "If it was, I'd have made sure we used the symbol I picked for the Oracle."

"No you wouldn't!" says Flicker. "We know what the symbol is; we've seen it. We would have told them to use the symbol we already know they picked! Er... wouldn't we?"

"I refused to be paralyzed by indecision!" Dranko barks.

There's a bit more of this, which ends with the Company reaching a general agreement that history as they know it will take their actions into account, and that they shouldn't just sit on their hands until they die of old age. Morningstar intends to cast *commune* to try to clear some things up.

Aravis *disintegrates* Inivane's body, and they bury the ashes in a short service. Inivane was at least an upstanding villain who fought for a cause he believed in. After Inivane's dusty remains have been interred (some distance out from the Mirrors, just to be sure), Morningstar turns to her fiancé and says, "You know, we're not going to get married for centuries, now."

"I will *not* wait that long!" says Dranko vehemently. "In a thousand years I'll be old and wrinkly, and you won't want me."

"I could marry the two of you right now," says Ernie.

Kibi laughs. "Then you'll be able to say: 'We've been married for a thousand years!'"

But the betrothed couple don't ask for an impromptu ceremony just now. Instead, Morningstar closes her eyes and enters the trance of a *commune*.

In her trance, an Avatar of Ell stands before her. This one is not ragged and impoverished as was the last one, from a *commune* cast in a future where worship of Ell had all but vanished. The Avatar looks curiously at Morningstar. Customarily, the servants of the Goddess simply wait for the questions and provide what answers they can. This time, it's the Avatar who starts the questioning.

WHO ARE YOU?

"I am Morningstar. I am from the future, and I was sent by Ell."

FROM THE FUTURE? HOW IS SUCH A THING POSSIBLE?

"We used the Eyes of Moirel and the Mirrors of Semek."

The Avatar pauses and cocks her head, as if listening to another speak in her mind.

THERE IS NO BETTER EXPLANATION FOR YOUR PRESENCE – SOMEONE SO POWERFUL IN THE MIND OF ELL, WHO HAS NOT EXISTED BEFORE NOW. YOU DO NOT APPEAR TO BE A TRICK OR RUSE. YOUR QUESTIONS WILL BE ANSWERED.

"I come from a future where the Emperor was banished. There was one who sought to change the world, by traveling back in time. I am here to stop him from changing history."

YOU ARE A PLEASANT SIGHT IN THESE DIFFICULT TIMES. ASK YOUR QUESTIONS.

"We just killed a Sharshun by the name of Inivane. Have we done what we needed to do to restore time to its proper course?"
I BELIEVE SO.

"Is there anything more that we can do to keep Inivane from being resurrected?"
UNLIKELY.

"Will interacting with the people of this time cause our future to become damaged?"
ONLY DRASTIC MEASURES WILL HAVE DRASTIC RESULTS.

"Should we contact the Spire and tell them what we know?"
NO.

"Is there a way for us to return to our proper time?"
YES.

"Do we currently have the means to return?"
PARTIALLY.

"I was told by one such as you that Ell was dying. Is that no longer the case?"
SHE IS WEAK, BUT NOT DYING.

"Is there anything else I can do to aid her?"
YOUR PRESENCE HELPS.

"Should we return Ernie's Ring to Dingman's Ferry, for Ernie to find in the future?"
I DON'T KNOW.

"Do you know where the additional things we need to return to the future might be?"
YES.

"Is what we need to return, in Kivia?"
NO.

"On Harkran?"
NO.

"On Nahalm?"
YES.

"Thank you, dark lady."
I HOPE YOU FIND YOUR WAY HOME. YOU DO NOT BELONG HERE.

The first conversation engendered by Morningstar's divine query is what exactly defines "drastic." The consensus is that the term means potentially world-changing actions, like seeking out the Emperor, or telling the Spire about how the future unfolds. Everyone agrees that their long-term goal should be finding the way to return to their own time. As for the short term, there's a fire that wants investigating.

Gold Roger: Do we know yet why the Sharshun are so damn devoted? They're nothing but slaves themselves as well, aren't they? Why do they think Naloric's world is so much better? (Naloric and the red armored guys are pretty obvious – they were the overlords of the world, while the Black Circle used to be the accepted great religion.)

Piratecat: The Sharshun are the servants of the Emperor, and they always have been. We're suspecting that this has a whole lot to do with Darkeye. We're starting to make some really disturbing guesses about who or what Darkeye is, and we're not liking them one bit.

Zaruthstran: Dibs on "Darkeye is an undead beholder."

Another guess: do we yet know who Moirel is? Could Darkeye = Moirel?

Piratecat: This is our current theory, which Sagiro will neither confirm nor deny. If Darkeye and Moirel are one and the same, that means she's over 2000 years old back in our old time. That's a *bad* thing.

Mind you, rumor has it that the halflings mistook her for a Morel mushroom and ate her after they found her wandering, mad. That's what we're hoping, at least, and as Ernie says, "It isn't cannibalism if she isn't a halfling!"

The Story Hour will reveal more about Moirel reasonably soon. I'm just upset by how we came by the information.

shisen: Ooh – sounds like there's an interesting story in there.

Everett: I don't remember who Darkeye is/what role they play in the campaign. Who is they?

Seis: Enigmatic higher-up of the Sharshun. Performed some very bad mental mojo on the in-game Sagiro, and is attributed to various other works of nebulous evil.

Piratecat: In addition, no one has ever seen her; she addresses people from behind a screen. We thought she was a medusa as a result, and she very well might still be. We're just guessing with the Moirel theory. But she's bad news.

KidCthulhu: Bad enough news that Sagiro has informed us, in a metagame way, that she's not in our league right now and a direct frontal assault would be suicide (my paraphrase, not his). Which only makes us want her more!

Sagiro: I said no such thing! Well, not recently. I may have smiled innocuously when you mentioned finding and killing her, but that shouldn't serve as a deterrent...

el-remmen: [...] I don't think that word means what you think it means...

Piratetacat: "You want to... assault... the Sharshun stronghold?" *He makes that face* "Huh." *He bites his lip* "I guess you could do that, sure! If you think you're ready for it."

shilsen: Sounds like Sagiro doesn't trust you guys' abilities. So go on and prove him wrong with a full frontal assault. You know you wanna.

No, of course I'm not trying to get you killed. What would be the fun in that?

Everett: HEY... You're doing that one where you pretend to not be saying what you're sayin'! You is sneaky!

MavrickWeirdo: Do you suppose that she wears red armor?

Everett: I wouldn't SUPPOSE nothin' about it, bee-yatch!

Mishihari Lord: My intuition tells me she's someone you know, maybe even a party member.

Everett: I see where you're coming from, but I think it's unlikely to be a party member.

Destil: I've been thinking high level illithid with levels of telepath myself, just because she messes with minds so well...

Mila: A random thought: it is the Anti-Ell, or rather what Ell could have become in the re-written future because Morningstar "dragged" her into a reality where she shouldn't have existed.

Kind of silly now that i write it down, but well, there it is.

Everett: Nah, not that silly. It's definitely ponder-worthy.

Sejs: Lle?

LightPhoenix: One big piece of evidence that could support Moirel = someone in the party is that the stones recognized Ernie in the group's past, but just met him at whatever time now is. My pet theory is that it's Yoba, based on the belt.

I'm not convinced Darkeye and Moirel are the same person. My current theory is that Darkeye is whomever has the Crosser's Maze right now, since IIRC Aravis has starfields for eyes.

Lord Pendragon: Given the rainbow coalition of Eyes of Moirel, I'd always thought that perhaps Darkeye was the host to a *black Eye* of Moirel, or perhaps an anti-Eye, if that makes sense.



The Company *wind walk* low to the ground, to reduce the chance of being observed. Dranko occasionally zooms up a couple hundred feet to get a good look around, and so is able to report via an increasingly accurate series of visual snapshots, spaced about thirty seconds apart.

The first snapshot: A large force of distant bipedal creatures – perhaps two hundred, it's hard to tell – marching toward the fire from the north.

Second: The fire is coming from a large (burning) village, and the force of humanoids is just arriving there. They're riding mounts that don't move like horses.

Third: There's a pitched battle going on in a distinctly halfling town, and many of the outlying farms have been put to the torch. The arriving force is halflings, some mounted on war-dogs. It's still hard for Dranko to tell who they're fighting against, but they're clearly taller than the halflings. As Dranko flies down for the final time to report to the others, he catches the word "burn" clearly from the melee – spoken in Orcish. "We have to go help," says Dranko. "Halflings are being attacked, by orcs!"

All of the *wind walkers* now fly up high enough to get a decent look. There's an extremely brief discussion about whether rendering aid will qualify as "drastic," which is cut off by Dranko complaining, "I want to kill things, dammit!"

"Hey," says Flicker, pointing. "Are those dwarves down there, fighting with the halflings?" Sure enough, mixed in with halfling warriors are a handful of dwarves, laying waste to orcs with large axes.

"That would explain the dwarves we found buried near Dingman's Ferry," says Morningstar, recalling one of the Company's earliest adventures.

They quickly form a plan. The halflings and Kibi will join in the fighting. In order to not to call undue attention to themselves, the others will wait in an abandoned and half-burned farmhouse at the edge of town. The two groups are connected by a *telepathic bond* and the 'short fightin' group' runs to join the fray.

Alas, by the time all of this scouting and organizing and spellcasting gets done, said fray turns out to be in the mopping up stages. Yoba, Flicker and Ernie do get in some satisfying orc-hacking, and Kibi is especially pleased with the results of an *unbuckle* spell on a trio of orcs mounted on wolf-back, but the orcs are being routed and driven off. Ernie and Yoba meet up at

a crossroads near the center of town, sweaty from combat and lightly spattered with orc blood. They grin shyly at one another, but Flicker, standing nearby, is spared any potential mushiness by a formation of halfling warriors that rounds a corner.

There are about twelve of these halflings (along with three dwarves), girded in masterwork chain and marching in formation. Ernie stares at them and blinks. The soldiers likewise slow, peering curiously at Ernie. Yoba opens her mouth in surprise but says nothing, gripping Ernie's arm. For at the head of this band of warriors is a middle-aged halfling who looks exactly as one might expect Ernie to look, were he about twenty years older. His cloak is of green and gold, and has prominently displayed the holy symbol of Yondalla.

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Over the telepathic bond, Ernie whispers urgently to the others. *I think I'm about to meet Wilburforce!*

Well, go tell him 'Hi,' says Dranko.

The halfling leader is staring as intently at Ernie as Ernie is at him. The halflings and dwarves are pointing and whispering. The leader walks his war pony closer and draws his sword, as the other halflings and the dwarves form around him in a protective aspect. Ernie bows low to him.

"Oh, get up, get up," snaps the halfling impatiently. His voice is strong and commanding – and not Ernie's voice, which wasn't likely but still a relief.

Ernie straightens. "Ernest Wilburforce Roundhill, at your service."

"I wasn't aware that there was any halfling of that name," says 'Wilburforce.'

"It's a very common name where I'm from," Ernie improvises.

"And where is that?"

"A place called Appleseed. Far, far from here."

"I've never heard of it."

On his rooftop a few blocks away, Dranko hops down and uses his robe to assume the aspect of a tall halfling warrior. Ernie continues. "My colleagues and I are wanderers, and saw the smoke. We thought you might need help, but it seems like you have it under control."

"Wanderers?" asks Wilburforce, raising his eyebrows. "Wandering where?" He looks around him, then turns back to Ernie. "We need to have a discussion. There's something going on here."

Ernie takes a step back, turns to Yoba and whispers: "We need to get out of here! I think he's my great great great great great grandfather, and if he finds out who we really are, we could really... break... things."

"Oh, I think things will be fine," Yoba whispers back. "This is fascinating! Who gets the chance to talk with their great great great great great grandfather?"

Ernie looks up to find Wilburforce still staring at him, so he clears his throat. "This is Yoba Stoutheart, and Kibi Bimson. And this is... uh... Dranko Smoketallow." He adds this last introduction as Dranko strides forward, smiling.

"Are you all in disguise?" asks Wilburforce.

"No," says Ernie.

"Then why do you look just like me?" It's much more an accusation than a question.

"I couldn't tell you," says Ernie. "Vagaries of bloodlines? Blessing of Yondalla for especially handsome halflings?"

"Or maybe," adds Dranko, "your mother, your father, and his mother, all got together and..."

Ernie kicks Dranko solidly in the shin. "You'll have to pardon him," he says. "Part of the reason he's wandering is as penitence. He insulted a high priestess, and now he's trying to learn some *manners!*"

"Er... Yes. I am. It's true," admits Dranko.

Wilburforce whispers to a halfling next to him. It's meant to be private, but with his absurdly keen senses Dranko is able to overhear. "This could be a trick. Spread out and see if the Sable Guard are coming." Two halflings immediately break from the group and stride away into the town.

"Any of your men hurt?" asks Dranko. "Or any of the locals?"

"Many, I'm sure. We have healers attending to them now."

"I'm happy to help out!" says Ernie.

"Me too," says Dranko. "And hey, since we're all friends here, what's your name?"

The halfling commander says nothing for a moment, stroking his chin and staring unnervingly at Ernie. "Santo," he says, having decided on trust. "**Santo Wilburforce.**"

Flashback, to more than two years ago...

The Company have returned from a short job, transporting an otyugh from Calnis to Tal Hae. At the Greenhouse they make the awful discovery that their two Eyes of Moirel have burned themselves into Eddings' eye sockets. The Eyes commence spouting prophecy, mostly about the Ventifact Colossus, but they finish with words about 'traveling nowhere':

YOU HAVE THE FOCUS, IN WHOSE VEINS RUNS THE BLOOD OF SANTO. YOU HAVE THE OPENER, WHO BRIDGES THE LIGHT AND THE EARTH. YOU WILL STILL NEED THE TALISMAN TO PRESERVE YOUR SANITY. YOU WILL STILL NEED A SOURCE OF ENERGY, FOR WE WILL BE OTHERWISE OCCUPIED...

Ernie's eyes grow wide – here indeed stands the prophesied Santo, and his own ancestor of untold generations.

Dranko stays cool. "That's a nice name."

Santo ignores him. "Come. We will find a more private place to talk. You will come with me."

He motions, and his retinue surround Dranko, Ernie and Kibi before herding them down the street. Along the way Santo stops briefly several times to coordinate and receive updates on the battle's aftermath. Dranko and Ernie manage to heal some of the wounded townsfolk as they walk. Over the *telepathic bond*, Dranko warns Morningstar: *They're sending out search parties, so now might be a good time for you to come out and join us.*

But Morningstar and Aravis are still unsure of the wisdom of all this meddling in what might be a delicately mended history. Aravis in particular – given his unique physical characteristics – is worried that word of their presence here will make its way back to the Emperor. As a result, those hiding in the barn return to *wind walk* form and retreat quickly from the town. They hide behind a nearby hill.

"You'll have to give him the thing before we leave," whispers Dranko to Ernie as they're marched through the streets.

"Nuh-uh!" protests Ernie.

"But it belongs to him."

"It's mine now!"

But it has to end up on that statue, right? chimes in Morningstar. Otherwise, how are you going to find it later?

Irrelevant! says Aravis. *It's already been found.*

Santo stops the group in front of a tavern that has survived the orcish raid without much damage. One of his guards goes in for a couple of minutes, returns, nods, and Santo motions his guests/prisoners inside. They are made to leave their weapons at the door, which they mostly do, though Dranko uses some sleight of hand to drop his more potent whip into his *wide-mouth pouch* before handing over a non-magical one.

The tavern is empty; Santo motions for the three of them to sit down. Some light refreshment is brought in. When all are settled and seated at a long table, Santo asks Ernie: "How many of you are there?"

"Quite a few, but most are hiding outside the village. We didn't want to cause too big a commotion."

"We're professional monster hunters," Dranko explains. "Say, can I call you Santo?"

"Yes, you may."

"You can call me Dranko."

"Yes, yes I can," says Santo dryly. "Now, Dranko, on whose behalf do you hunt monsters?"

Over the mind-link, Grey Wolf groans. *Why did we send him? Why does he always end up doing the talking?*

Everett: ["It's true," admits Dranko.] Is it?

When did that happen?

Piratecat: It didn't. Dranko was lying.

We never send him, Aravis sighs. *He just goes.*

Ernie sort of answers Santo's question. "We fight to help people in trouble. We do it on our own behalf."

"Do you often find people menaced by... monsters?" asks Santo, taking a sip of water from a mug.

"You'd be surprised!" says Ernie.

"And where do you do the majority of your monster hunting?"

"In and around Dir-Tolia," says Ernie. "We've come a long way since then. It's across the ocean."

Santo steeples his fingers. "I'm well versed in the geography of the Islands of Charagan. On which island is Dir-Tolia?"

"It's kind of far away," says Ernie, squirming just a bit. He's not much used to this sort of extemporaneous invention of 'facts.'

"Stop being evasive!" snaps Santo.

"It's across the Uncrossable Sea, okay?" says Ernie irritably.

"And stop making up fanciful lies, also," says Santo, rising to his feet and leaning forward across the table. "Why do you think it is called the 'Uncrossable Sea'?"

Aravis thinks over the mind-link (to the great amusement of the others): *Because the Gods think it's uncrossable.*

"I'm not lying to you," says Ernie flatly.

"I've never seen this man lie, in the years I've known him," says Dranko. (If anyone in the mind-link notes that, just moments ago, Ernie claimed that they tend to monster-hunt around Dir-Tolia, they wisely keep silent.) "Plus," he continues, "this lady here is a paladin of Yondalla, and she cannot lie. So, before you go making the claim that my friends are lying, you might just want to take a step back. Treat us with the same respect we're treating you, okay?"

Santo scoffs. "I have not sensed much respect. I have sensed evasion, and half-truths, and fear. You are all clearly hiding something."

"The truth of the matter is, we're on a very secret job," says Ernie in a calmer voice. "And if I tell you too much, I will jeopardize the most important thing that's ever happened on this world."

Santo graces Ernie with a look of pure skepticism. "On whose behalf are you *on* this job? I still don't..."

"Yondalla's!" shrieks Ernie, fed up both with Santo's suspicion and his own need to dissemble. "You want to ask her?"

Santo remains unperturbed. "Yes, I think I'll have that arranged," he says.

"Please do."

For a moment the two nearly-identical halflings regard each other, the air between them cold with tension. Santo looks away and nods to one of his retinue, who casts *detect evil* (negative) and *detect magic* (whoa!) and whispers the results to Santo.

Dranko, who's seen *detect magic* cast enough times to know what's going on, takes off the ring that prevents the spell from working on him. The halfling caster's eyes go wide again, and he amends his whispered report.

"They're not kidding about the Uncrossable Sea," says Dranko, barely managing not to smirk.

Santo sits up straighter. "So, what brought you from Dir-Tolia to our part of the world?"

Morningstar, already uncomfortable with this whole meeting, essentially dictates Ernie's response to that one over the mind-link. "We had a mission," says Ernie, "and we succeeded, but as a result of that mission we ended up somewhere we didn't expect. Now we're trying to get back."

"There's a vast gulf we have to cross, and we don't know how to do it yet," adds Dranko.

"We're very far from home," says Ernie. "I'm sorry if we worry you, and we'll go if we're causing any sort of problem."

Santo sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "No, you're not causing a problem... yet. You've caused me some worry, though, I admit. The Emperor has tried to set traps for me before."

"I can tell you that we're no friends of the Emperor," says Ernie.

"So they've heard of him in Dir-Tolia, then?"

"We've heard of him," sighs Ernie, "and done nothing but try to stop his plans and schemes for years."

Santo leans forward again. "So, Ernest. You really don't have any idea why we look like identical twins?"

Ernie shifts nervously in his chair, but answers truthfully. "I think we might be distantly related."

"Given that there is – present company perhaps excluded – no travel between the Isles of Charagan and the lands beyond the Uncrossable Sea, how do you suppose that we are related?"

"I'm not sure," says Ernie.

Santo stands suddenly. "Right, then. I'd like you to come to Greenshire with me. I need to return there, and I'm not done with you yet. It's just a few hours' travel from here."

"Do you want the rest of my companions to come?" asks Ernie.

"I'd be interested in meeting them. Yes, they may all come. It's still early and we can be in Greenshire before sundown."

After the others have left the tavern, and only Santo and Ernie remain, Santo leans in and whispers. "Ernest, I appreciate that you have secrets to keep. But I *know* there is a connection between us, more than us being 'distant relatives.' I'm not quite prepared to tell you *how* I know that. I also have secrets. Perhaps we will talk about it back in my home village, in private."

Ernie nods, and they go out.



The group that marches down the road to Greenshire consists of Kibi, Ernie, Flicker, Dranko, Santo, about twenty mounted halfling soldiers, and a half dozen dwarves. Dranko glances down at the dwarf nearest the front of the group, and his blood goes cold. He has seen this dwarf before – dead and embalmed in a tomb not far from where they currently walk. He relays this to the others mentally. *That's creepy*, says Morningstar.

The dwarf, deep in his own thoughts, doesn't notice for a few moments that Dranko is staring. When he does, he stares back for a second before grunting, "I'm Hurthin. **Hurthin Hammersmith**."

Dranko pauses for a second; will a dwarf recognize an Orcish name? Ernie jumps into the gap. "Ernest Roundhill, at your service." He bows, and Hurthin nods.

"Where are you from?" asks Kibi.

"It's a long story. Karth, originally."

"Hey!" says Dranko. "I almost got blown up once by Karthian Oil!"

"How'd you get your hands on Karthian Oil?" asks Hurthin.

"I didn't. Someone was trying to blow me up."

Hurthin frowns. "You know that stuff has been outlawed for decades." He says nothing as they walk a few more paces. Then, sounding solemn, Hurthin tells them, "It's been twenty-seven years since I've been in Karth."

"Why so long?" asks Dranko.

Hurthin doesn't answer for a long minute. "To make a long story short, we paid for our rebellious ways, and I'm one of the lucky few who got out alive."

"I'm sorry to hear that," says Ernie.

"I don't want to talk about it," grumbles Hurthin. But under his breath, he adds, "Damned Emperor and his damned air demons."

Flashback, to several years ago...

Kay, in her old home in Cyric, becomes aware of the meaning of the elvish poem her mother sang to her as a child. The next to last verse goes as follows:

**In the days of our slavery, we slew with the Warlord,
Bound like our spirits were bound, and the Dwarves fell before us.
The Hammer drove us to fight, even as it fell upon the earth-folk;
Though we were weak beneath the earth, the Warlord's Maul gave us the strength of death.**

The verse is about the Yrimpa – air spirits. Ernie thinks to the others: *The Emperor enslaved the Yrimpa and made them kill the dwarves, remember?* Everyone does.

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By agreement, the remainder of the party meet Santo's group on a flat stretch of road halfway to Greenshire. Snokas, with his unmistakably half-orcish features, agrees to have his hands tied behind him, as if he were a prisoner. That will avoid awkward questions later. Snokas is miffed that Dranko (looking like a halfling thanks to his *robe of blending*) doesn't require similar treatment. Dranko smirks and offers to hold Snokas's rope. "Hey," he jests. "I can scratch my head. Can you?"

"No, but I can kick you in the junk," replies Snokas with a snort. "They haven't tied my feet, you know." Dranko takes a few steps back.

After three hours of walking, Ernie starts to recognize some coarse terrain features, and realizes that Greenshire must be built on the same land as Dingman's Ferry. They crest a final hill, and a large halfling town spreads out before them. It's easily ten times larger than the Dingman's Ferry he knows.

Atop the hill, Ernie's *belt of stability* – Cranchus' Gift – starts to tingle and grow warm. Next to him, Santo brings his hands swiftly to his head as if stricken by a sudden pain, but he shakes it off and makes nothing of it.

My belt's tingling, says Ernie over the mind-link.

So that's why you're smiling, says Dranko.

Does Yoba know? asks Flicker.

For crying out loud, people! It's my belt, not my shorts!

I'm shutting down the telepathic bond in five seconds if this doesn't stop, warns Morningstar.

Greenshire has a distinctly militaristic feel to it, with guards and soldiers in particularly high numbers. When Ernie comments, Santo answers simply: "Orcs."

The tingling of Ernie's golden belt grows stronger as they enter the town, and grows stronger still as they march down a wide cobblestone street. As they draw even with a side-street, Ernie looks down it and into a large plaza past the far end. There's a statue there, and though he can't make out any details, he feels a powerful jolt from the belt as he looks at it. He shares this revelation over the mind-link, and Dranko asks: "Hey! Who's that statue of down there?"

Santo looks embarrassed as he answers, "That's me. I couldn't stop them. There was a battle many years ago, and we won, and they insisted on building that statue. Funny, now that I think of it, it looks a lot like Ernie here."

As they pass the side-street, the feeling in the belt start to fade a bit. *Don't you see?* thinks Dranko excitedly. *The belt starts and stops here! It never actually gets created. It came back with us, and now it goes on the statue so we can find it in the future.*

"Then how can it be 'Cranchus' Gift' if it never actually got created?" asks Morningstar.

"We don't have to leave it," insists Aravis. "Ernie already has it. We're an anomaly here!"

Santo leaves the Company outside under the guard of his soldiers, while he goes into Greenshire's large town hall. Twenty minutes later he comes back out. "I have a place we can go and talk." To Ernie alone, in a quiet voice, he adds: "Is there anything I might tell you that you wouldn't want your friends to hear?" Ernie shakes his head.

The group head back toward the plaza with the statue, and Ernie's belt start to grow warmer again. This time their route takes them along the edge of the plaza itself, and Ernie feels an actual physical pull on the belt, as if it were a lodestone attracted to an iron block. Santo looks at him quizzically, then stumbles and almost drops to his knees. Just as quickly he stands straight, and stares at Ernie for a second before walking on.

I wonder if the statue is magical, thinks Kibi.

Cranchus could still be alive here, thinks Ernie. *He could have given the belt to Santo.*

Kibi perks up at the thought of meeting Cranchus. Yes, they're a long way in the past, but Abernathy lived to be 900, and dwarves as a rule live longer than humans.

Dranko wonders what would happen if he were to carve something on the statue, right underneath where they found the gold circlet back in the future. They know that when they found it, there was no such carving. He speculates that he'll suddenly remember things differently. Aravis disagrees; *he* thinks Dranko will be *unable* to carve anything, even if he tries.

Ernie resists the pull of the belt, and once again its warmth grows less as they move away from the statue. A few minutes later they arrive at a large nondescript building. Santo knocks, gives a password, and they are admitted into a stone edifice whose interior seems mostly to be one large meeting room.

Only three halflings and Hurthin accompany Santo; the rest of his entourage wait outside. The halflings and dwarves sit in chairs, while the large folk sit on the floor. More food and drink is brought in.

“So,” says Santo, when everyone is comfortable. “Am I going to get anywhere trying to get more information out of you?”

“No,” says Aravis simply.

“Are you withholding information because you don’t trust me? Or because you promised someone you wouldn’t tell?”

“No,” says Dranko.

For a few minutes Santo grills the Company about the Emperor, but on that subject they really don’t have much to divulge.

Finally Dranko says, “Listen, are you OK with most of your friends leaving, so it’s just you and the dwarf?”

“Ernie said that there was nothing I could tell him that he wouldn’t mind the rest of you hearing. He and you are very close, yes? I feel the same way about those in this room. These four are my loyal and close friends. What you can tell me, you can tell them. If you swear them to secrecy, they will keep your secrets.”

Morningstar doesn’t like that, and reminds the others that the Sharshun can read minds. But Ernie opts for trust. “The Emperor’s actions do not just concern the here and now. He has used his sorcerous minions, the Sharshun, and powerful magics to try to affect other places and other times. If we tell you too much, that might *cause* the Emperor to win.”

“You’re saying that Naloric has a plan, but the simple act of telling me what that plan is may cause him to succeed? Is that right?”

“Yep,” says Ernie. “That’s what I’m saying.”

Santo rubs his temples, and takes a long drink of water. “Fine. It’s clear that there are things you are highly reluctant to say, but not because you don’t trust me. Rather, you fear some greater evil that will befall if you talk. Fine. I’ll ask questions, then, and you answer as much as you can. Do you know about the Black Mirrors?”

“The ones that flash?” asks Ernie.

“Yes, those. What do you feel you can tell me about them?”

Ernie glances at Aravis before answering. “They’re a magical convergence of some kind. Powered by Earth Magic. We don’t know how they work.”

“What is Earth Magic?” asks Santo.

“Wild Magic,” says Dranko. “Dwarf magic.”

Hurthin clears his throat. “Santo, it’s a crock. Dwarves don’t do magic. You know that.”

Kibi opens his mouth to protest, but Santo saves him the trouble. “Hurthin, I don’t think the normal rules of things apply to these people. Speaking of which...” And he turns back to the Company. “Are you really from across the Uncrossable Sea?”

“We come from a very different place,” says Aravis. “We came through the Black Mirrors. They’re a portal.”

“You can cross the Sea using the Black Mirrors?”

“No, not really.”

“Then where does it go?”

“Nowhere,” says Aravis, straight-faced.

“Have you had anyone come through the Black Mirrors yet?”

“Like a woman named Moirel?” adds Ernie. “Please tell my friends she wasn’t eaten.”

Santo fixes Ernie with an intense stare. “Why do you ask about a woman?”

“Because... um... we’ve heard of a woman having traveled through them.”

"You've seen her, haven't you?" says Dranko. "How long ago was it?"

"About twenty years," says Santo.

"She came through, then!" exclaims Ernie. "With the Eyes!"

"Eyes?" asks Santo. "Would you be talking about seven colored gems, rotating around her head?"

"That would be them," says Grey Wolf.

"I'll tell you," says Santo. "It was twenty-one years ago. The Mirrors flash once a year, as I'm sure you know. It is somewhat of a tradition among the young and impetuous among our people..."

"...to run out into them when they flash," finishes Ernie.

Santo nods, smiling. "I had been running the Mirrors for several years. The year I saw her, I was the only one who ran. I thought I saw a ghost, which had never before happened. I saw a woman inside the bright lights. She had seven small colored gems around her head, in an orbit. I was young, and impetuous, and... well, I thought I'd try to take one. I reached out and tried to touch the orange one. I woke some hours later with a pounding headache. The halflings who were watching had seen nothing. Ever since then, I have... felt... something."

"Did she ever show up?" asks Dranko.

"No. I thought I must have dreamed her. But that feeling has been in the back of my mind ever since. The very nature of my being had been changed, though I didn't know how."

Santo's voice has been rising through the story, and he looks straight at Ernie as he finishes. "Over the years the feeling has subsided but has never gone away completely. But today I feel it as strongly as I did the day I reached out for those gemstones. That feeling is coming from you, Ernest. I felt it when you first looked down on Greenshire. I felt it when you stood near my statue. And here you are, a relative I've never seen or heard of, unable to tell me anything specific, and you look exactly like me. *Why... is... that?!*"

Ernie looks imploringly at Aravis and Morningstar. "In for a penny," sighs Aravis. But he holds up his hand to stop Ernie from answering, and says to Santo, "We fear word of our visit will get back to the Emperor."

"I doubt that will happen," says Santo. "We are beneath his notice. To him, we are just playthings for his orcs."

"What kind of creature is the Emperor, anyway?" asks Dranko.

"I don't know. I've never seen him. But I've heard the story of his father, Hagdan – King Hagdan the Just. A couple hundred years ago, I've read, King Hagdan of Harkran was seemingly overnight transformed. He was a good man, running the kingdom wisely. The next morning he was a monster, larger, changed in some way. From that moment on, he sought to wage war. And while he was killed by Queen Daynell Kalkas, his son Naloric took up his reign. Naloric was like his father, I hear, and his armies have since conquered all of the Charagan Islands."

"Why didn't anyone overthrow him?" asks Dranko.

"Not for lack of trying," says Santo.

Hurthin speaks up. "The dwarves tried. Not long after they conquered Karth, we rebelled, and had our independence for about twenty more years. Then... the air demons came. Don't know where they came from or what they were, but I've never seen anything so horrible in my life."

Joshua Randall: ["A couple hundred years ago, I've read, King Hagdan of Harkran was seemingly overnight transformed. He was a good man, running the kingdom wisely. The next morning he was a monster..."]

Um, wow. Did we know this? I don't remember knowing it. (Maybe it's the Masking affecting me.)

Piratecat: We didn't; this was the first the Company had heard of it as well.

Joshua Randall: So Naloric's father was originally good, then became evil. How? Just your run-of-the-mill demonic temptation/illithid domination/*helm of opposite alignment*? Or maybe something more... convoluted, like... time-traveling Sharshun swapping the good king with an evil imposter.

Piratecat: Our current theory is that someone used something akin to the black fluid on him, transforming him into an evil monster. We don't know this for a fact, but it's our leading theory.

Joshua Randall: The black fluid that spilled on Aravis and Ernie didn't make them monstrous, just evil. But King Hagdan became a monster (literally?). Which seems to indicate that the black fluid the Company is carrying is not exactly what was used. (They are still carrying it, right? It's too dangerous to leave lying around.)

KidCthulhu: Josh, I will tell you that Aravis got only a drop of the black stuff on him, and Ernie only touched Aravis. And we turned very evil. Think what a whole lot of black stuff could do!

I also remember that in the story about the Emperor's transformation, it was mentioned somewhere that the Black Circle had been a new addition to the court just before he went all "funny," but not funny-ha-ha. We're pretty sure it was the black ooze, introduced by our dark spherical friends.

Sagiro: A quick correction on this: Aravis got sprayed in the face by much more than just a drop of the black liquid. Ernie became evil not because he touched Aravis, but because when he cast *dispel evil*, his hand came into contact with a single droplet of the black stuff that was still on Aravis's shoulder. Clearly, it doesn't take much!

Joshua Randall: Also, have we ever heard of Queen Daynell Kalkas before? If so, what role did/does/will she play in the story?

Piratecat: We haven't heard of the Queen before or since. You know, it might be interesting to find out exactly *how* she managed to kill him. You know, just in case. (In case we're absolutely screwed and the Emperor breaks through, that is!)

Joshua Randall: Indeed, how *did* she kill him? If the Company had traveled further back in time, it might be that they were the ones who joined with the queen to kill Hagdan!

Everett: I think those [*time-travelling suggestions*] are unlikely. Somehow, neither one gels with the colors you see in Sagiro's world.

Hammerhead: Kalkas? As in the Kalkas Peaks?

Everett: I believe that's it, yes.

Sagiro: Hammerhead and Everett are correct: the "Kalkas" in "Daynell Kalkas" is the same as in "Hae Kalkas," "the Kalkas Peaks," etc.

It's probably not spoiling things to point out that in the future the Company come from, in which the Emperor had long ago been defeated and driven into exile on the "prison Prime" of Volpos, many place names had been renamed. For instance, "Pyke Vale" was renamed "Tal Hae," "Poal Cathan" was renamed "Hae Charagan," "Kinnet Vulthani" became "Verdshane," etc.

It's a safe bet that when the renaming happened, many famous personages were given the honor of having new places named after them. Who better to honor than Queen Daynell Kalkas of Nahalm, the mighty warrior queen who slew the monstrous Hagdan Skewn on the field of battle?

Graywolf-ELM: Did "ultimate evil" or "concentrated evil" from the old movie *Time Bandits* contribute to your concentrated evil? I'm just curious. Loved that movie, and love this Story Hour.

KidCthulhu: Well, Ernie does like toast...

Graywolf-ELM: The last piece in the toaster oven. Yes, that is it...

Ernie hands the *belt of stability* to Santo. "Have you ever seen this before?"

Santo's reaction is unusual. Instead of taking the belt from Ernie, he flinches back. "So strong," he says. He leans forward and takes the golden circlet with a trembling hand. As he grips it, as both he and Ernie hold Cranchus' Gift, his eyes grow wide with wonder. "It goes on the statue, doesn't it," he says. "It's what I've been feeling all these years. It goes on the statue."

And as Santo speaks these words, Ernie hears in his mind the sound of waves crashing upon the shore, and the scent of brine fills his nostrils. His heart is at peace, his promise to Brechen fulfilled at last.

Flashback...

You are charged to look to your own safety, to let wisdom always guide you through the dangers life will set at your feet. For in your veins, and no other's, runs the true blood of a Wilburforce, and thus a link to the past is forged. Do not let that life-blood be spilt without reason! For before all is done, you must wear the circle, and you will come full circle, and only then can the Circle be broken. Promise to do your utmost to keep this appointment, as your part in bringing back the life of Isabel Horn.

"I thought I'd always have that promise," says Ernie. "But now I've come full circle."

Tamlyn: Wow! That's just amazing. Very impressively laid out and executed.

carpedavid: Sagiro – you just made my brain explode. Excellent work.

Miln: It's not every day that someone thanks you for exploding their brain...

sniffles: Oh, this is awesome. I love time travel stories. I'm so behind now. I've got a lot of catching up to do!

MavrickWeirdo: Thats all right; so are they...

Thornir Alekeg: No, no, you are not behind. Its time travel, you are ahead of the story by a few thousand years.

Great update, very satisfying and nice and long... I am amazed by your ability to weave a story.

Piratecat: I can't begin to tell you how cool this session was. Plot hooks tossed out eight, nine, ten years previously all went "KLUNK" into place. It was incredibly moving for us.

It's also a good example of how a DM sometimes has to say things out-of-game. We were really worried that anything we'd do would upset the past. Bless him, after 45 minutes of us fretting I think Sagiro told us that he wasn't going to ruin the fun of playing D&D just to screw us over. We were then able to relax enough to actually interact with the world and the NPCs, although we were still erring on the side of caution.

Lord Pendragon: I once created a magical "factory" that had been buried under rock and earth for a thousand years. The PCs followed some tunnels down into the complex, and eventually came to the front door (from the inside). They spent a good half hour trying to figure out a way to open the doors, until I finally had to tell them out-of-game that there was nothing but rock on the other side...

energy One: It seems to me there's still a question of why the belt was referred to as Cranchus' Gift. Or... did I miss something?

Zaruthstran: Super satisfying post. And thanks for the note about the session. The frustration and caution came through in the narrative, but also the eventual openness to action. It seems that a time travel adventure is just asking for headaches, and that once the DM picks a certain paradigm he has to stick with it. Glad to hear that you guys are still having fun.

el-remmen: Nice long post – so long I almost forgot to turn on the TV to watch the Mets (hopefully) pound on the Phillies.

I have some time travel stuff coming up in my Story Hour and the players had similar worries – but I handled allaying them in a different way. Great work.

RangerWickett: Care to provide a quick overview? I'll be honest. Your Story Hour's too far along for me to start reading now, but I'm interested in hearing tidbits.

el-remmen: Well, if Sagiro will humor us... Basically, the party traveled to a demi-plane where they met "The Tree that Grows Backwards" and they were given magical items as gifts from their future selves who met the tree and convinced it to help them in order to complete the anomaly or else the fabric of the Prime might tear – of course, something about the tree's difficulty thinking "frontways" made it impossible for it to tell them what they had said to convince him to help.

The campaign finale featured a running fight that takes place in past scenes (or suggested scenes) of the campaign through the present and then into the future (and back).

wedgeski: Great update, Sagiro, thanks! I'm interested in knowing something about the time travel angle: once you had decided that the party was going back in time, did you then sit down and decide on what rules you were going to play by, or make it up as you needed to? Did you for example decide that paradoxes were impossible (the universe finds a way, etc.), or even contemplate what would happen with specific items, such as Ernie's belt, if Ernie gave it away, or kept it, or put it on the statue, or whatever?

Sagiro: I agonized pretty good ahead of time about my time travel mechanics, vis-à-vis paradoxes and continuity issues. In the end I came up with a simple set of "rules" that were (fairly) easy for me to keep track of. (I won't spell them out here, for fear of spoiling things. But, yeah, I did decide that the universe simply wouldn't let paradoxes happen.) The real fly in my temporal ointment was the Greenhouse, but I solved that via a kind of "Gordian Knot" solution that will later become evident.

As for what Ernie would do with the Belt: I just took it on faith that Ernie would still have it with him in time for the time travel, and bring it to Greenshire. Let's face it – a lot of my plot is a house of cards that could come toppling down if the PCs take certain specific unexpected actions. I just have to pick my spots in terms of managing risk, and so far, so good. I readily confess to a moment of smug satisfaction combined with immense relief when one of my players said to me: "Wait a minute. Are you telling me you knew this would happen *nine years ago*!?" Because the answer was, no, I didn't know. But I sure did hope...

wedgeski: Good answer. Thanks.

Dawn: Geez. And I have trouble keeping my plots straight month to month... I have to say the prophecy writing you and PKitty do is truly inspirational.

KidCthulhu: [Nice long post – so long I almost forgot to turn on the TV to watch the Mets (hopefully) pound on the Phillies.] Rem, if you want more posts from Sagiro, you might want to lay off on the Phillies pounding. They were Sagiro's childhood team! Mentioning that you're a Yankees hater, that might get you an update.

el-remmen: I know they are, thus the dig... But at least the Phillies slapped the Yanks last night.

One of the announcers on the Mets game last night asked, "Who do you think the Mets fans will root for in the Yanks vs. Phillies games?" And Keith Hernandez replied without doubt or hesitation, "The Phillies." Which is saying a lot since Philly is in our division, so their wins mean more in the long term than anything the Yankees can do.

Lord Pendragon: I am not a big baseball fan myself, but I would like to point out that my brother wears a Mets ball cap, not particularly because he loves the Mets, but specifically to express his hatred of the Yankees.

Now then, can we have an update, sir? ☺

blargney the second: I don't like baseball at all... Does that help? ☺

P.S.: I'm actually just not a fan of spectating sports – I'd rather be out there *doing* it!

Plane Sailing: I hate the Yankees! (Who are they, anyway? ☺)

I've had a bit of catching up to do, but it is great seeing so many past threads being drawn together at last. Interesting too to see major enemies not so much defeated as sidestepped (the diviner back in the 'wrong' future, the red-armoured general likewise).

Tamlyn: My wife's a Yankees fan. Summers around our house are not pleasant. There've been a few times we've almost had to divorce for irreconcilable differences. I'm ashamed to admit that I root for the Mariners.

Lazybones: Like another poster above, I came late to the party; I tried reading the story a few years ago but it didn't grab me (too complicated, difficult to follow). This last week, though, I'd finished my own Story Hour, so with little to occupy my brain I downloaded the PDFs onto my USB drive to read during slow stretches at work. Needless to say, I was very unproductive this week.

Having just finished, I'll echo the general kudos on the fine quality of the story. While the writing has gotten stronger over time, the plot twists and the way that many of Sagiro's hooks and threads kept recurring (often in jaw-dropping ways!) were excellent throughout. The characters are very clearly defined, although having read the entire story in a short span of time, I did think that Grey Wolf has sort of faded into the background recently; obviously Dranko hogs the spotlight somewhat but I've found that characters of his type always tend to draw a lot of strong sentiment (either love or hate!) from readers. I find myself drawn in and interested in what happens to these people, which is a mark of good fiction.

My only regret is now that I'm caught up, it looks like the pace of the posting has slowed up some (understandably so, from what Sagiro's posted of his RL situation!). But I did want to thank Sagiro and his players for sharing.

MavrickWeirdo: [...]obviously Dranko hogs the spotlight somewhat but I've found that characters of his type always tend to draw a lot of strong sentiment (either love or hate!) from readers.] You've never met PC in person have you? Let's just say he has his own way of encouraging the other players to "take it to the next level"...

Everett: [...]I did think that Grey Wolf has sort of faded into the background recently...] Well, his plot piece is over; their adventure currently puts Ernie into the spotlight more.

Piratecat: Grey Wolf's actual player is a slightly quiet guy, and he plays Grey Wolf as more private and self-contained than the rest of us are. The combination of the two, I think, result in less Grey Wolf focus in the Story Hour. In contrast, however, the player doesn't fade into the background at all during games. He's an amazing guy.

One of the things that Sagiro does really well is focus on individual character arcs, skipping from one character to another. It's clear that Ernie is in the middle of one right now, what with Santo Wilburforce – but we'll soon find out that he isn't the only one. It's a DMing trick of Sagiro's that I also try to emulate, with mixed success.

We're experiencing withdrawal right now; with the wedding of Grey Wolf's and Morningstar's players, we didn't play at all in June. Twitch. Twitch.

Duncan Haldane: To each other? If so... wow, I didn't know that was in the works. Congratulations any which way!

Piratecat: Right! Player marrying player, as opposed to Morningstar and Dranko. And nah, the table dynamics aren't actually weird...

Along with Fajitas and wisdomlikesilence, and Sagiro and Kodiak, that makes a couple of marriages to come out of our games.

MorningstarofEll: Oh... that made me laugh. I was here lurking because we are finally playing again tonight and I am waiting for Grey Wolf's player to get out of work so we can head over to Sagiro's. MISS GAME BADLY.

Anyway, it seemed rude to read congratulations and not respond so I finally joined in order to say thanks!

KidCthulhu: Hey, welcome! Come on in, the water's fine.

Serenity: Wow... uh... wow! I just spent this week reading the entire Story Hour (thanks StevenAC for the PDF!!) and all I can say is Wow! Thank you Sagiro and crew for some great entertainment. You all definitely show us how it can (and should) be done! Can't wait for the next update!!

Brogarn: Having never read this Story Hour, I've been spending the past week off and on reading the archives of PDFs. I just finished Part One and had to come here and say, Wow, Sagiro, you really are a Rat Bastard...

So, what does that say about me that I'm insanely jealous that I don't get to play in his game? Some deep dark inner masochist that has never presented itself before. I must ponder this over coffee and the beginning of Part Two.

Spatzimaus: It says you're normal. Well, relative to the rest of the people around here, anyway.

Here's the thing, and it's going to sound vaguely stalker-ish. A while back, I realized that whenever I made a new character or big NPC, the first rules of thumb I'd use were based on the Story Hours on these boards. First, I'd think how this character would fit into Abernathy's Company, or the Defenders of Daybreak, or Wulf's gang, or the Savage Sword of Meepo, or the Halmae guys, or on rare occasions the guys and gal from the Drunk Southern Girls thread (oh, and the original *Return to the ToEE* meatgrinder, of course). Then, I'd think of how this character would contribute in the encounters these groups had faced. I made a half-elf Psychic Warrior, then immediately wondered what she'd have done against the Necropede, or when the DoD were ambushed in their mansion by Soder's pet. I made a halfling paladin, then wondered how badly Wulf would have tormented him. I made a psion (Constructor) and wondered how useful he'd have been in Het Branoi. And so on.

The reason is that these Story Hours excel in two (not unrelated) ways:

- (1) *The DM*. Anyone can come up with generic encounters, facing a lone orc guarding a chest in a 10x10 room. We talk about the ratbastardliness of certain DMs, but really I'm just impressed with anyone who can continually come up with encounters that confound experienced players without being simple unwinnable death-traps. Sure, there exist certain threads-which-shall-not-be-named, but no one would ever claim these guys are just sponging off everyone else. Besides, it makes me feel better about using concepts, er, "inspired" by these Story Hours in my own world.
- (2) *The Players*. Many of these have become the iconic characters to me, the ideal that groups should be aiming towards. It's not because they have good stats or are optimally built; I've played with way too many people who viewed their characters as just sets of numbers to screw around with. If the character had any personality at all, it was just a carbon copy of the player's own. This clearly isn't the case in the good Story Hours.

Anyway, don't feel strange about being jealous. It's perfectly natural.

KidCthulhu: Ernie for Iconic Halfling. Cast your vote now! Tell your congressman that you want a return to the jolly, round-bellied fellows of JRR's dreams, not these weird, skinny kender-wannabes. A vote for Ernie is a vote for hairy toes, waistcoats and second breakfasts!

el-remmen: What about elevensies?

Spatzimaus: Well, I can see this one both ways. The Tolkien-style hobbits were utterly unsuited for adventuring, which was basically a key point in the stories, and so they had to change them for D&D. On the other hand, I just think they took it way too far in 3E by making them half-kender.

I think the various halflings in this Story Hour are good examples of the range of the middle ground. Even Ernie would never quite fit in in the Shire; he doesn't seem to mind fighting, he gets along well with other races, and he acknowledges that the battle of good vs. evil is more important than what's for dinner (well, most of the time anyway). But contrast with Flicker and Yoba? Or how about TomTom (not this Story Hour, I know, but it's most of the same people involved)? To me, Flicker and Yoba would never fit into the Tolkien mold. And TomTom's focus on money, spying, psionics, and squirrels?

Brogarn: I think I'm the only one in the universe that vastly prefers the new halflings as opposed to the old hobbit wannabes. Ah well. Anyways...

I just read "I cannot remember the password." Were those bread rolls *vorpal*, perhaps? Because that was just evil...

Oh, and the party needs a bard to spread the song "I am the Very Model of a Halfling Personality."

StevenAC: I can't help but agree with you – and I'm still waiting for an Original Cast Recording...

As you'll see in the next chapter, I ended up doing a number of G&S-inspired songs around that time. I blame KidCthulhu for the encouragement. But I think "I am the Very Model of a Halfling Personality" remains the best of them.

Everett: Me have no comment until update. Update scatter mana across the skies. Update sit in eye of raven as it struts across the barnyard. Update lie in shadow on cave wall, in buffalo on plains, in point of spear, in eye of needle. Is easier for rich man to enter kingdom of heaven than for un-updated thread to work on needlepoint. Yes? Update good.

Piratecat: We played last night, an "interim" session where we trained (to 17th level!) and cast *communes* (man, are we in trouble, but it's that vague sort of trouble that means something horrible is coming although you won't be able to identify it until it is possibly too late) and made items. Lots and lots of items. In fact, we spent 235,000 gp in making items – woot! We're now poor but mighty, festooned with magic gewgaws.

Which is sort of a shame, considering that we ended the game learning that someone stole from us the evil cauldron that summons null shadows...

el-remmen: Jeez, man! I just borrowed it! I'll have it back next Tuesday. That's the last time I borrow an evil artifact from you!

Brogarn: Woot. I'm completely caught up! Thanks StevenAC!

Er... crap. I'm completely caught up. Now what am I supposed to do at work? *twitches a bit*

Thinking about taking up an ad in the paper. SWRPer ISO RBDM. Enjoys peril, plot twists, and wind walks on the beach. 10 yr. hanging plot hooks pref. Contact XXX-XXXX...

In Search of Cranchus

Hey there. Sorry again for the long delay, which occurred for two main reasons:

- (1) My wife and I became hooked on *Lost*, and for a while we spent every evening watching an episode or two until we were fully caught up.
- (2) Seventeen months straight of averaging five hours of sleep per night finally caught up with me, and lately I've been unable to stay up as late as I used to. The two hours during which I often worked on the Story Hour, I now usually spend sleeping.

But I do still chip away at the story, word by word, tape by tape. I'm still only about a year behind. And in real life I continue to run the game a couple times a month, as the story barrels relentlessly towards its still distant yet seemingly horrifying conclusion.

Wait, did I say "horrifying"? I meant "exciting." Exciting, I tell you!

A Wedding, a Slaughter, an Introduction

Santo and Ernie stare at one another for a few seconds while the others look on curiously. Santo breaks the silence by exhaling loudly through pursed lips. "This is like those colored gems, isn't it?" he says. "Dwarf magic. Earth Magic."

Hurthin Hammersmith, standing at Santo's shoulder, snorts in derision. Dwarf magic, indeed! There's no such thing as... Kibi smiles, casts *xorn movement*, and sinks into the ground. Hurthin leaps back in shock. "Holy boulders! What the hell was that?"

"A dwarvish wizard," says Dranko.

Hurthin blinks, and squints at the ground through which Kibi vanished. A few seconds later Kibi pops back up a few feet away. "Well, okay then, I take it all back," says Hurthin.

Someone points out that, if Santo is going to put the golden circlet on the statue for Ernie to find in the future, there's no good reason to call the thing 'Cranchus' Gift.' That engenders some brain-twisting discussion about the nature of time and causality that not even Aravis can make sense of. Santo excuses himself part way through, desiring to see his family. The debate ends without resolution.



So, for the first time in a while, the Company find themselves in a safe haven of sorts. They have a lead, albeit vague – Morningstar's *commune* indicated that *something* on the island of Nahalm could return them to the future. But that future isn't going anywhere, so to speak, and thus in the bustling town of Greenshire, which centuries hence will have given way to the tiny village of Dingman's Ferry, the Company settle in for a couple of months of vacation and training.

It is the very next day that Santo, without fanfare, affixes the *ring of stability* to the arm of his statue. Without anyone telling him, he places it on the exact spot where the party has found/will find it in their own time. Dranko and Morningstar hold hands, watching as Santo connects past with future.

"You know what?" says Dranko. "I want to get married here. Right here, before anything else happens to delay things."

Morningstar smiles in surprise. "Ell doesn't even know who I am here," she reminds him.

"She'll figure it out!" says Dranko. "She's pretty smart."

"Our families aren't here," Morningstar points out.

"We've got the rest of the Company. Hey, I promise, when we get back home, we'll have another ceremony and invite everyone. But we've been putting this off for far too long. We can have Ernie perform the ceremony."

Santo turns to them. "The Black Circle is the only legal religion – it's been that way for decades, since Naloric conquered Charagan following the death of his father, Hagdan Skewn. But Yondalla is still here, all around us, and a wedding in Greenshire would honor her, halflings or not."

And so, after three weeks of hurried preparations, Ernie marries Dranko and Morningstar on a clear evening under a sky ablaze with stars. He's had the best smith in town forge a pair of wedding rings from one of the gartine planks he still carries in his *bag of holding*. "They resist time," Ernie tells them. "It seems fitting."

Standing before a large assemblage of halflings, and with all of the rest of the Company in the wedding party, Ernie joins the two in matrimony. "Yondalla's grace is about having a place, a home, and protecting it. What's special about my friends is that while it seems we're never home, we're also *always* home, because each of us is a home for the rest. Dranko and Morningstar,

you have built a home together in each other's hearts, and in the hearts of those who love you. May Yondalla make you fruitful, and may her shield always protect you. Also, may Delioch and Ell look down upon you and smile at the worthiness of their servants, worthy both to Them, and to us."

Morningstar and Dranko kiss under the stars, and the halflings cheer. Aravis finds himself crying. "I've never been to a wedding before," he whispers to Kibi standing nearby.

Dranko beams at his new bride. "You're now entitled to fifty percent of all the loot I've ever stolen from the party."

¤¤

The celebration goes on deep into the night and the following morning. Ernie imbibes a good deal more than is good for him, and thus emboldened asks Yoba for a dance. Afterward, still within her earshot, he slurs to Dranko, "The... the problem is, she's got to back and help her own people. If I asked her to marry me, she'd have to stay here, or I'd have to go there." Yoba pretends not to have heard.

"Plus," continues Ernie, "I can't ask her until she's met my parents, and we can't do that right now!"

"Aren't your ancestors good enough?" asks Dranko.

Aravis, whose own parents were killed by bugbears, looks alarmed. "You mean, I can't get married unless my bride-to-be meets my parents?"

Ernie looks at Aravis. "There's always *speak with dead*," he says.

"Thaaaaat's enough," says Yoba, swooping in. She grips Ernie's shoulder and leads him firmly away.

¤¤

The next day Ernie wakes with a pounding hangover. "I know there's an orison for this," he moans at breakfast, "but I can't remember what it is." Dranko fixes him up, and Ernie goes from bleary to anxious. "Did I say anything... embarrassing... last night?" he asks.

Yoba overhears but merely says, "I didn't hear anything."

"I thought you couldn't lie," says Dranko.

"Who says I am?"

Ernie looks sheepishly at Yoba. "You're a patient and tolerant woman, and I'm lucky to know you. Er... I was kind of an idiot last night, wasn't I?"

"I've seen worse," says Yoba, smiling.

"I hadn't had good halfling ale in a while," Ernie explains. "I think I've had enough for now."

"You've had enough for several nows," laughs Yoba.

¤¤

For a week or so after the wedding, nothing much exciting happens in Greenshire. Kibi and Dranko do conspire for the dwarf to chisel **KIBI WAS HERE** on the foot of the Wilburforce statue, via flagrant misuse of *xorn movement*. And Dranko and Morningstar settle on a new family name: Brightshield.

One morning, soon after Ernie's *heroes' feast* has ended, there comes the sound of a loud horn blaring over the quiet streets of Greenshire. "It's the orc-warning horn!" exclaims Ernie. And indeed, within moments the town is bustling with activity and shouts. Dranko pops a last bite of buttered roll into his mouth, turns to Morningstar, and comments, "Nothing says 'marriage' like beating up bad guys."

Into Grey Wolf's mind speaks the sword *Bostock*. *I'm so close! I wish to hew these evil orcs! Wield me in battle!*

A very brief discussion follows in which someone counsels caution – too many area-effect spells, and word will get back to the Emperor that the mostly-ignored halflings have powerful wizards. Dranko counters that if no orc escapes, no one will learn anything.

The halflings are rushing out to meet the onslaught of orcs. The humanoid force numbers in the hundreds and is spread out along a long line, so Santo orders the Company to take the center to meet the orcish vanguard.

¤¤

The orcs are about to have a pretty poor day. For as long as any of them can remember, the halfling lands have been a sort of gifted playground for the orcs, granted them by Emperor Naloric. That the halflings have lasted so long is a testament to their superior organization and fighting prowess, born of a desperation to survive. Even so, many halfling villages have been razed by marauding orcs, and Greenshire has been the target of occasional raids for decades. They know that the halflings don't have many wizards among them, and maybe expect a *magic missile* here and there, possibly a *flaming sphere*.

Aravis opens up with a crackling *chain lightning* that causes fourteen orcs to explode. The one survivor pulls up in horror, turns, and flees screaming back through the ranks of onrushing orcs behind him. The rest of the Company then rush in to join the melee that has now been joined all along the advancing line.

It cannot be said the orcs learn an important lesson about what powerful adventurers can do to lowly humanoid grunts. Oh, they learn the lesson, but it's not important *per se* because none of them survive. Yoba and Ernie chop them down left and right, while Dranko and Flicker operate as a flank-n-sneak attack duo to devastating effect. Morningstar kills as many of them with her potent *fire shield* as with her weapon. Snokas, who already comes complete with a healthy hatred for orcs, lays waste with his dual-wielded picks.

Grey Wolf, despite the exhortations of *Bostock*, casts a new spell he's researched: *summon the pack*. Three dire wolves and a dozen more ordinary wolves appear and start tearing into the orcs. Kibi, not to be outdone, *summons* a large earth elemental who immediately smashes half a dozen orcs to paste.

It's ugly. It's grasshoppers-in-a-blade-barrier ugly. The Company move up and down the line inflicting casualties by the dozen. Ernie actually kills a bunch with *castigate*: "SHAME ON YOU FOR PICKING ON HALFLINGS FOR NO GOOD REASON! GO HOME!"

But they can't, because they're dead. "Now *that's* a stern talking to!" says Dranko.

Aravis has *dimension doored* behind and above the orcish lines, so that he can pick out and eliminate the orcs who try to flee. And Grey Wolf, having summoned his wolves, draws *Bostock* and starts laying down the smack. Orcs fall before him, and as he hews the head from a particularly ugly specimen a bloom of powerful blue light erupts from *Bostock*'s blade. The voice of the sword sounds clear in Grey Wolf's mind. *At last! AT LAST! At last, I'm... still in the sword. Well, I'll make the best of it. But I was hoping I'd finally emerge from this cursed prison.*

I was trying, says Grey Wolf.

And I appreciate it! answers *Bostock*. *Clearly there must be something more we have to do. But this is not the time to talk – there are still more orcs to slay!*

As Grey Wolf continues to chop down orcs, the full powers of *Bostock* come to his mind, and his pulse quickens as he realizes its potential.

Bostock is now a +5 keen defender, and it grants the Maximize Spell feat to Grey Wolf, usable 3/day but only on spells channeled through the sword.

OR SO

"That was excellent!" Santo and the Company meet outside the town after the battle. The halfling leader is flushed with exertion but obviously pleased with how things went. "I wish all the villages around here had a set of... of you, to help with defense."

Back in Greenshire, after the Company help with healing the wounded from the combat, Santo joins them for drinks in the Rollicking Rabbit, the only tavern in town with ceilings high enough for humans to stand straight up. Santo can hardly stop talking about the Company's fighting prowess, which is well beyond anything he's seen before. But eventually talk turns back to Santo's experience in the Mirrors, and the Company's own travels through them. "Do you realize," says Dranko, "that Ernie's ancestor Santo here met Grey Wolf's grandmother, Moirel, in those very mirrors?"

Santo nods. "My own grandfather remembers the Mirrors being built. It was seventy-odd years ago now, when the Emperor's men came to the area. It was a huge endeavor, and many halfling villages for miles around were razed. For all that effort, the Black Mirrors were abandoned not long after they were finished."

"They sent Moirel through," says Aravis. "When she didn't come back, and nothing happened, the Emperor must have decided the Mirrors were a failure."

Grey Wolf is silent through all of this discussion, which is not unusual. But in his head he hears the voice of *Bostock*. *Grey Wolf*, says the sword, *I can't thank you enough for what you've done.*

You're free, right? asks Grey Wolf.

I was hoping that by 'free' it would mean 'free from this sword.' Though I have all of my memories back, this appears to now be what I am. I don't know if there's a way to get me out, but as time passes I find my current state quite satisfying.

Who are you? asks Grey Wolf.

My name is Sir Tennin Bostock. I was... am... a holy warrior of Palamir. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Your friends, on the other hand, have a peculiar attitude, particularly in regards to my alignment. You may wish to insulate yourself from it, in the future. Though they do have a light-hearted spirit that you seem to lack. Even in my former state, I noticed that you have a dour and pessimistic attitude that does not match your heroism.

Yeah, agrees Grey Wolf.

I think you should act with more confidence, more bravado, suggests Bostock.

Grey Wolf just nods, smiling. When Dranko notices his glassy-eyed look, he smirks. "So, still talking to your evil sword? Have you slaked its insatiable thirst for blood yet?"

It's baffling, really, says Bostock. Your comrades continue to insist that I am evil, when the truth is that I am just the opposite. I am only here due to the machinations of evil Vinceris-worshippers.

Vinceris? asks Grey Wolf. I'm not familiar with the name.

God of assassins and treachery, Bostock explains. He's only a demigod, really, hardly worth the name. But you are not familiar with the Kivian pantheon. Perhaps someday we can go back to Djaw, and we can winnow that den of killers and thieves.

I would enjoy that, says Grey Wolf. But you still haven't told me how you ended up in a sword.

I was captured, and my essence was put into this blade. They were hoping to have themselves a mighty weapon, and given my power and reputation that wasn't such a strange thing to think. But I foiled them. I suppressed myself, denying them the full power the sword could bring to bear. It could only be brought out by someone worthy, and that would appear to be you.

I'm honored, says Grey Wolf, bowing his head.

I was wielded for many months by a blackguard of Vinceris, who thought that by using me in battles he could draw out my power. Right idea, but I resisted. And eventually he was defeated in battle by some kind of tiger-monster, who afterward kept me as a souvenir on his wall until you came along.

Grey Wolf notices now that the rest of the Company are staring at him, awaiting an explanation. "Sir Bostock is a paladin," says Grey Wolf. "A holy warrior."

"Get out of town!" exclaims Dranko. "Sir Bostock? He's a noble? And now we've traded one full-sized paladin for two tiny ones?"

Paladins of Palamir are afforded the title of 'sir,' says Bostock, but we are not nobility.

When Grey Wolf relays this, Dranko replies, "Yeah, well I'm a 'Sir,' and I have a land grant, so at least I outrank the sword."

Bostock chuckles in Grey Wolf's mind. I don't understand the motivations and priorities of your friends. They are a mysterious lot.

Fimmtiu: Uh-oh. Bostock is far too nice and polite – he must be a bad guy. No other explanation.

LightPhoenix: Theory time... I bet one of those orcs did escape, and that's why Greenshire "becomes" Dingman's Ferry. Or is that too morbid?

Ashrum the Black: Actually, I'd bet the party were very very thorough. Which unfortunately could have worked against them. When nobody comes back from the raid on the poor little halfling village... Well, wouldn't you get a wee bit curious and send either a small scout force, or an overwhelming army to stamp out any resistance? Either way, bad things come back to the town, and the PCs can't stay forever.

Zaruthustran: No, it's not the orcs. Didn't you notice the bit about Santo loudly proclaiming the prowess of the heroes? Halflings are a chatty bunch. The whole "no witnesses" plan falls apart when you leave one entire half of the battle's combatants not only alive, but actively singing your praises...

QR 80

Exit, Pursued by a Dragon

It has been over one hundred years since Naloric Skewn slaughtered the elves of the Greatwood and took Kinnet Vulthani as his capital. After razing most of the exquisite elven buildings and cutting down swaths of ancient trees, he ordered the construction

of a towering stone fortress which would be his seat of power. Now, high above the surrounding forest, in a stark throne room lacking in the traditional opulence of royalty, the creature **Guztha** stands humble before his Emperor. Towering above him on a raised throne of obsidian the mighty Naloric, fell ruler of Charagan, takes a sip of wine from a cup carved from an elven skull.

“You smell them, don’t you?” says Naloric.

Guztha is one of a small cadre of servants to whom Naloric has bestowed especial honor and power. Black lesions crawl on his skin, a mark of extraordinary favor. That he is allowed to stand in the same room as Naloric, that Naloric is actually *speaking* to him, demonstrates his exalted status.

“Yes, my Lord,” says Guztha. “You know that I do. It is faint, but there is no mistake.”

Naloric leans forward in his throne. **“They need to be brought into the fold, like the others. You know that things can be... confusing... in the beginning.”**

Guztha shudders. He remembers.

“I did not expect that there would be any more Blood-touched...” says Naloric, frowning.

Guztha says nothing. If he agrees, he is acknowledging that the Emperor is not all-knowing, which would be a mistake. If he disagrees... well, one does not disagree with the Emperor.

“No matter. Take Shivertooth. He is young and lacks experience in the field. Find these Blood-touched and return them to me by any means necessary. If they resist, kill them and bring back the corpses, as whole as possible.”

Guztha bows his head. “Yes, my Lord.”

“They are near Condor’s Folly, possibly in the company of orcs or halflings. Do not become distracted – the Blood-touched are all that matter. You will have no difficulties locating them. You are brothers, after all.”

Guztha nods and turns to go.

“One more thing. There is something different about these, different from you, different from the others I have... blessed. I don’t know what, but I sense that the difference is important. Do not fail me, Guztha.”

“I will not, my Lord.” Guztha turns and hurries from the throne room.

❧ ☽

All good things must come to an end, and the Company’s stay in Greenshire is no exception. It is nearing sunset on a day almost a week removed from the battle with the orcs, when the bell once again starts ringing a clamorous call to arms.

The Company rush out of the Rollicking Rabbit expecting another invasion of humanoids, but no orcs are in evidence. Many halflings are pointing upward, where a small shape can be seen swooping high over the town. Dranko squints into the dusk and thinks he discerns a dragonish shape, with the speck of a rider upon it. The flying creature drops and lands abruptly about a quarter mile outside of town, spurring the halflings to muster at Greenshire’s eastern edge. Morningstar casts a *telepathic bond* that includes the halfling militia leader **Torbolt**, so that the party can keep tabs on what’s going on without making themselves evident to the new arrival.

It’s not long before the heavy thumping of a walking dragon can be heard approaching the town. It looms large in the failing light, a dull yellow winged lizard with dagger teeth and a snaking tail. From Torbold’s description, it’s the same species of dragon as appeared near the end of the Battle of Verdshane. As it reaches the line of stalwart halflings, the dragon’s rider calls out: “Make way, in the name of the Emperor!” When Torbold relays that to the Company, there is quick agreement that it’s time for the party to make a hasty getaway.

Santo Wilburforce steps to the front of the halfling line and speaks to the newcomer. “What is your business, sir?”

“None of yours,” says the rider. “Make way.”

Morningstar casts *wind walk* on half the party, while Torbold narrates. The rider has leapt gracefully off the dragon’s back to the ground. He wears a black military uniform. *We don’t want to call any more attention to your village*, thinks Dranko to Torbold. *If they ask, we’re headed east.* (In fact, they’re heading to Nahalm, which is to the southwest.)

A second *wind walk* gets the remainder of the Company into traveling mode, and they take off at sixty miles per hour, staying as low to the ground as possible. Torbold wishes them luck, and promises to continue to relay what’s happening with the dragon and its rider.

The guy is asking questions, thinks Torbold, even as the party start to put miles between themselves and Greenshire. I'm not right up front, but I can sort of hear what's being said. He seems angry. Yeah, he's asking about you, all right. I think he means you, anyway. He doesn't have a description. I hear bits and pieces. He's asking about... strangers, someone unusual.

Interesting, says Dranko. *He's not asking about wizards, or people who slaughtered the orcs.*

There's a pause while Torbold listens intently. *Somehow he's figured out more about you. Someone squealed, maybe? Now he's asking questions more specifically about you. He wants to know more about someone with star-fields for eyes.*

He may be reading minds, says Dranko.

That would make sense, given the way he's asking questions, says Torbold. If that's the case, he's going to find out a lot about you. Santo's talking to him. He's making up some story about you and the orcs. He doesn't seem to be worried about having his mind read.

There is a brief flurry of discussion about going back and killing this black-clad soldier, but that would *clearly* tip off the Emperor, so the plan is quickly discarded.

Hm, says Torbold. The guy seems satisfied. Hold on. I think he believes Santo. Ah. OK, it sounds like Santo is claiming you arrived with the orcs, and were bad-mouthing the Emperor, and he fought you off. The soldier seems sure that you were just here, which is stretching Santo's story. Hm, he's walking away. I'll try to follow, but I don't want to get too close. He's not showing any sign of attacking. Ah, stupid dragon. Crushed some rain barrels with his tail. Oops, he's getting back on the dragon, and is taking off. He must have been satisfied. He's spiraling up, not in any particular direction. Crap, I've lost him in the dusk, couldn't tell the direction.

Troubling as all this is, the Company are pleased that the dragon didn't just destroy the town out of spite. Soon enough they are out over the ocean, flying at top speed toward Nahalm while settling in for a boring five-hour trip. Kibi is especially inclined to grumble, as being (a) in the air, and (b) above water, is no place for a dwarf. The full moon shines out in an open sky as below them the dark waves undulate gently.

Hours later they reach the northern coast of Nahalm, though there's no sign of the town of Kynder Hold (not surprising). Even at its fastest a flying dragon would have been left behind long ago, but still there's a sense of unease among the Company. They fly ten miles further inland before landing and making camp, and set about reviewing their anti-scrying possibilities for the night. Dranko suggests the *divination sink*, but it's finally stopped working. Aravis, whom the dragon's rider seems to have identified by description, will wear an *amulet of nondetection*.

Coincidentally, just as they start wondering if the dragon will find them (or, more realistically, how long it will take), a dark shape passes in front of the moon high above. "Crap!" exclaims Dranko.

"That was fast," adds Flicker.

"We should prepare to fight," says Aravis, and Dranko agrees. "Let's just get this over with." Grey Wolf uses a wand to get Aravis flying, while Morningstar makes him invisible. The others start hurriedly casting buff spells. There's a loud whooshing sound from nearby, and the heavy thud of the dragon landing somewhere out of sight.

A voice comes out of the darkness from the direction of the dragon's landing. "Put down your arms. I wish to talk."

"OK!" shouts Dranko. "Go ahead and talk!"

Guztha wonders to himself how this will go. These people have some formidable magic abilities, clearly. Where did they come from? Why hadn't the Emperor known about them before now? Maybe he had, and this is a test for him? Strangest of all, there are many of them, and yet only two are Blood-touched. Perhaps, having grown in power, they have enslaved a cadre of servants.

"I'm going to approach," says Guztha. "You would be wise not to attack me." Aravis responds to that by casting *greater arcane sight*.

"Is that because of your dragon?" asks Dranko.

"Among other reasons, yes," says Guztha.

"How'd you find us?" asks Dranko.

Guztha strides into the Company's clearing. He appears human, just over six feet tall, a dour and soldierly looking fellow holding a short sword. His skin is olive, and covered with strange dark lesions that crawl across his hands and face.

Kibi activates *xorn movement* and sinks into the ground. Snokas moves to protect Morningstar while Ernie inches closer to Yoba.

Invisible and hovering above the ground, Aravis peers intently at the soldier with his *arcane sight*. He has two magical auras upon him – one is allowing him to *detect thoughts*, and the other is an illusion spell that covers his whole body. He also has a spell-like ability with which Aravis is wholly unfamiliar, and when Aravis concentrates on that ability, he gets a waft of concentrated Evil. “Drop the illusion,” he says sternly.

Guztha looks up, straight at the invisible Aravis. The lesions on his skin quicken their movement. “You might want to look into some kind of skin care option,” says Dranko.

Guztha looks away from Aravis and stares intently at Ernie. Then he points, first at Ernie, and then back at Aravis. “You. And you. You are coming with me. The Emperor very much wishes to speak with you.”

“Well, he knows where we are,” says Dranko. “We can probably fit him in on Friday.”

Guztha was prepared for many things, but this kind of impudence toward the Emperor is simply unthinkable. “Are you coming willingly or unwillingly?” he asks through clenched teeth.

Aravis and Ernie do start moving towards him, but Guztha holds up his hand. “Stop. I wish first for you to divest yourself of weapons and magical items.”

“Um...” says Aravis. “No. I don’t think so.”

I figured it would come to this. “In that case,” says Guztha, “I suppose we’ll figure out how you became Blood-touched in the post-mortem.” And with that, the hostilities begin.

Grey Wolf pegs Guztha with an *enervation* that drains away a small amount of strength. Guztha hardly seems to notice, as he focuses his attention on Aravis. The lesions on Guztha’s face start to squirm riotously, and Aravis feels a palpable force of Evil strike him, similar to that of the Evil Book in Mokad’s library, and more recently from the black goo in Het Branoi. Pustules rise and burst all over Aravis’s skin, and he grimaces in pain and disgust. And before anyone can react, Guztha takes a quick step into the shadows and melts away.

Aravis *dimension doors* about fifty feet up and a couple hundred feet in the direction of where the dragon landed. He sees that the dragon is still a good sixty feet further away, and flapping its wings, preparing to take to the air. Yoba casts *protection from evil* on Ernie, while Kibi starts *summoning* some celestial owls. Aravis then reports that the dragon has gone airborne.

Ernie, also flying, rises upward and spots the dark shape of the dragon in flight. He casts a *blade barrier* directly in the dragon’s space, but as Aravis sees from his vantage, the dragon is entirely unaffected by it. Morningstar follows this with a *darkburst* on the dragon, but as she’s several hundred feet away, she cannot tell if it had any effect.

“Hey Flicker,” says Dranko. “Jump on my back.” Flicker does so, after which Dranko flies upward, straight toward the dragon.

“What are you doing?” asks Flicker nervously. “Are you mad? We’re going to end up in its mouth!”

“Actually, if this works, we’ll end up in his belly.”

“What?!”

Aravis sees that the rider has somehow gotten back onto the dragon, which is circling around toward the majority of the party. *How convenient.* He casts *maze*. On the dragon. The huge lizard vanishes from under the rider, and Guztha plummets a hundred feet into the scrub below. Grey Wolf and Yoba take off in that direction.

“Stay with me,” says Dranko to Flicker. “We have to get eaten when that thing returns.”

Kibi’s celestial owls arrive but there’s no enemy in sight. Kibi points in the direction of where Guztha fell, and the owls swoop over. Kibi *dimension doors* over there as well, making his best guess as to the landing spot of the dragon-rider. Aravis flies over the general area but can’t spot Guztha in the moonlight.

When Kibi appears, he finds that he didn’t take the hilly terrain into account, and drops ten feet to the ground. Before he can get up, he sees a humanoid shape emerge from the shadows and stand over him. Guztha feints with his shortsword, Kibi flinches predictably, and Guztha uses the opportunity to land a perfect sneak attack.

The dragon reappears in the air, only seconds after his trip into the *maze*. Ernie flies forward and pegs the dragon with a *flame strike*. Morningstar does likewise, and follows it up with a Quicken *searing darkness*. Smoke rises from the dragon’s body. Snokas fires his bow up at the dragon but his arrows mostly bounce off its hide.

“Flicker,” says Dranko. “I want you to look horrified, like you don’t want to be eaten.”

“I am horrified!” shouts Flicker. “For just that reason! You’re gonna share the good part of this plan with me at some point, right?”

“Sure,” says Dranko. “We’re gonna fly into its mouth. It’s gonna swallow us. When we’re good and deep in its guts, I’m going to activate Step’s *immovable rod*, and you’re going use your cape to *dim door* us out of there.” Flicker gulps, wonders if Dranko has taken “chewing” into account as part of the plan, and sees that they’re now at dragon-mouth level.

Aravis, alerted to Guztha’s presence by Kibi’s cry of pain, casts *reverse gravity*, with the lower bound of the effect a few feet off the ground. This means that Guztha is caught in the effect, but the prone Kibi is not. Guztha doesn’t bother to grab on to anything, but falls back up into the air. He’s like an evil yo-yo. At the top of the gravity column he tumbles gracefully into a fighting stance, upside-down, hovering.

Grey Wolf casts *reciprocal gyre* on Guztha, who doesn’t even flinch (which is probably an indication that he doesn’t have too many spells active upon his person). Kibi casts a Quickened *coldfire* straight up at the rider and dragon both, follows it up with an Empowered version of the same, then quickly sinks back into the ground.

Guztha can’t hide his worry. These people are even more powerful than he had guessed at first. Naloric will not be pleased if he returns empty-handed, but he should prepare for escape just in case. For now, though, the fight is not over. Shiverooth has never been in a combat like this before, but he should still be a force to be reckoned with. And at this very moment, there are better places for him to be...

Aravis sees the rider melt into the shadows again. He thinks his foe is using an effect like *dimension door*, but he doesn’t recognize the specific ability.

Shiverooth surveys the battlefield, and recalls some of his battle lessons. *Your greatest advantage is flight. Your opponents will be on the ground, and you will be in the air. From there, your breath, your greatest weapon, can be used to its best advantage. If one foe takes flight, don’t waste time with it, but get it back on the ground if you can. Get your enemies clustered close, breathe, and fly away. Repeat until they’re dead. If they scatter, try picking one up, flying high, and dropping them.*

To Dranko’s great frustration, the dragon doesn’t try to eat him. Instead it casts *dispel magic*, ending Dranko’s flight spell and sending him and Flicker wafting downward (thanks to a *feather fall* item). “Change of plan,” says Dranko as they land.

“Here, take this.” He presses the *immovable rod* into Flicker’s hand.

“But...”

“You can still fly, with your armor. Get yourself eaten, use the rod, and *dim door* to safety.”

“But...”

“No time to waste! Get going!” Flicker sighs, activates the flying ability of his *celestial armor*, and takes off.

The dragon endures another pair of *flame strikes* from Morningstar and Ernie, cast at long range. Most of the others look about for the rider but see nothing, while Flicker flies toward Shiverooth. Aravis sees that the dragon has performed a wingover maneuver and is now headed back toward them. He moves a bit and targets the dragon with a *prismatic spray* that sears the target with acid.

Kibi is underground, but Scree is scouting, poking a sapphire eye up through the ground. *Scree, what’s the dragon doing?*

Er... flying?

Can you be more specific?

Flying toward us, looks like. Coming in a bit low. I can’t see any details – in this light the dragon looks like a silhouette. A bunch of folks are all standing near each other above us, and the dragon’s headed toward them.

Perfect, says Kibi. He pops up out of the ground and casts a wide *wall of force* directly in the dragon’s path.

Snokas and Morningstar are standing back to back, scanning the area for the elusive dragon-rider. Suddenly Guztha is standing right in front of Morningstar, sword poised to strike. Snokas’s recent training as a devoted defender kicks in, as he catches a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye. Even more quickly than Guztha can strike, Snokas whirls and grabs Morningstar, spinning her out of harm’s way. Unfortunately for him, that presents his back to Guztha, who carves him up like a turkey.

The dragon swoops in. Flicker is hovering directly in his path, unable to decide if he wants to be eaten or not. It's a moot point, as the dragon ignores him, knocking him aside as it angles toward the concentration of targets below. *I should get five of them in the blast. That'll thin out their ranks a bit.*

Shivertooth breathes a mighty cone of lightning that travels about twenty feet before impacting the *wall of force*. *What the...? Oh, crap!* Shivertooth tries to veer to the side, but there's not enough room.



The side of his snout and the base of one wing are crushed against the wall by his own momentum, as Shivertooth comes to a complete halt. With a squeaky finger-on-clean-glass kind of sound, he slides down the wall and lands in a heap on the ground.

Dranko snorts. "You're an embarrassment to dragons everywhere."

Mishihari Lord: Best insult ever!

Kibi placed the wall with enough room beneath its lower edge for human-sized head clearance. Yoba and Ernie (who has drawn *Beryn Sur*) run forward and attack the felled dragon.

Morningstar's eyes have gone wide at Snokas's sudden heroics, or maybe it's the sight of the shortsword that was seconds ago poking through Snokas's chest. She casts *heal* on him. "Thanks," gasps Snokas.

"No, thank you!"

"Don't mention it."

Morningstar then Quickens a *dimensional anchor* and nails Guztha, who is surrounded by its tell-tale green glow.

Flicker lands and joins in the attacks on the dragon, while celestial owls hoot and bounce off its scales. Meanwhile Dranko flies down to stand several feet from Guztha, where he trips his opponent with his whip before missing with the follow-through attack. Aravis casts a *chain lightning* on Guztha, but despite being on the ground he's still remarkably nimble. He manages to twist his body and actually use Dranko for cover, eluding all damage. "He's like the blood fox!" shouts Dranko. "Try *magic missile*!"

Grey Wolf Quickens a *true strike* and swings Bostock, channeling a *greater fireburst* though the sword. The sword bites deep, but Guztha manages to avoid the fire damage altogether. *That's the spirit!* cries Bostock. *Keep at it! He can't evade forever!*

Kibi Quickens a *ray of enfeeblement* and pegs the dragon, draining a whopping 11 points of Strength, then *summons* a huge earth elemental. But even so weakened, the dragon manages to avoid being grappled by the creature.

Guztha cries out something in a strange tongue. Shivertooth starts to pull himself along the *wall of force*, slowly. Weakened, with its snout crushed and bleeding, one wing bent at a strange angle, numerous rents in its scaly hide, and burned all over from *flame strikes*, it can only drag itself thirty feet. But that's all it needs. It clears the edge of the *wall of force* and casts *dispel magic* on Guztha. The green glow of the *dimensional anchor* disappears. "If he blinks out, we're killing his ride," says Grey Wolf.

And that's what happens. Guztha blends into the shadows and vanishes. The dragon endures a few more attacks – Ernie is unable to grapple it even with his *belt of equality*, Aravis's *cone of cold* does almost no damage to the cold-resistant dragon, and another *reciprocal gyre* from Grey Wolf is ineffective. Kibi ends up finishing off the beast with an *earthbolt* that flips the dragon onto its back just as it tries to get airborne again.

Morningstar casts *detect thoughts* in case Guztha is still nearby, but there's no sign of his mental signature. Dranko soars upward hoping to spot his enemy, but there's no sign of his physical self, either. They widen the search, with Morningstar giving Dranko her *daylight*-imbued shield as he flies in an outward spiral pattern overhead. Aravis flies around as well, looking for magical auras. Nothing. Guztha is gone.

Kibi strokes his beard. "I wonder how he knew you two were... what did he call it? Blood-touched?"

"He must have smelled something," says Dranko.

"And now," says Grey Wolf. "The Emperor will know that we're here."

tmaas: This'll add a little stress to your life. Another awesome update. Thanks, Sagiro!

shisen: I've always wanted to have one of my PCs swallowed by a creature and activate an *immovable rod* in its bowels, so I thought I'd get to live it vicariously here. Dammit! On the positive side, I love Dranko!

LightPhoenix: I kinda feel bad for Shiverooth.

...What?

Jackylhunter: I really would have liked to see the *immovable rod* trick in action.

Everett: So. At the end of Part One, when they got zapped into the alternate universe: as far as the evil 'verse is concerned, no one knew anything about them. And as for the 'original' 'verse... it doesn't exist. Right now. Enlighten me, please.

Piratecat: I'm not entirely sure I understand, but I'll try to sum up:

- (1) The Sharshun changed the universe by sending their assassin Inivane back in time to warn the Emperor about the Spire. Doing so ensured that the world we grew up in never occurred.
- (2) The Company journeyed into Het Branoi in order to find a third Eye of Moirel, in the hopes of fixing the universe. We actually found two. In the process, Aravis and Ernie got temporarily turned evil by spectacularly noxious and evil black fluid. We only managed to cure them with a *wish*.
- (3) Using the Mirrors of Semek, we went back in time – and arrived simultaneously with Inivane. We killed him, and so he never warned the Emperor. Presumably this has saved our future, so long as we're careful.
- (4) The Emperor and his minions "smelled" the evil black fluid that had permeated Aravis and Ernie; this seems to be a method he had used to create powerful minions of his own. He sent an assassin named Guztha to bring them back, not knowing that they weren't from this time.
- (5) Guztha escaped like a big evil deadly shadowdancing chicken – but we killed his dragon!

Everett: I see. That's what I didn't catch on to in reading the last update – how he sensed their presence.

Brogarn: According to this update, the assassin's still alive. You managed to unconfuse then confuse me again! DARN YOU!!

Sagiro: Brogarn, I think you're confused because PCat refers to two *different* assassins from two different time periods. Consider for a moment that the "normal" campaign year the players are in is, say, 1800. They traveled back to year 10.

- Inivane was an assassin by trade, who was alive in 1800. He traveled back in time to year 10 to warn the Emperor and was ultimately prevented from doing so by the Company.
- Guztha is an assassin-ish servant of Emperor Naloric who naturally lived back in year 10. When the Company arrived in year 10, the Emperor sent Guztha to find the "Blood-touched" and bring them back.

Is that clearer?

KidCthulhu: Clearly you need to have fewer people in the game trying to kill us. It's confusing your beloved audience. Not to mention your beloved players.

blargney the second: I think that's your job. I recommend hiring Wulf Ratbane...

Brogarn: Thanks for further clarifying the clarification, Sagiro.

You players really need to get on the ball! There's lots of evil afoot, yet. Slackers. *ducks and runs for cover*

Fade: Surely destroying the universe must have cut down the number of people trying to kill you. Of course, once the universe is restored they'll get right back to trying to kill you...



The Legend of Crunchy

"This dragon sucked! It wouldn't eat me! What's up with that?" Dranko complains even as he pulls hard on a tooth, freeing it from the dragon's huge maw. You can never have too many souvenirs.

"We should warn the halflings," says Morningstar.

"Let's hope they ignore the halflings and keep coming after us," says Grey Wolf.

Dranko pries off a large yellow scale. "Kibi, that was the best use of a spell I've ever seen."

Kibi puffs up with pride. "I am glad it turned out well," he says, grinning.

Dranko jumps off the dragon's back and lands gracefully next to the dwarf. "And for another thing," he says. "We've killed two of these dragons now, and I've got zero lairs. Zero! That's where all the loot is. We should go find this one's lair."

The others quickly point out that that would likely take them closer to the Emperor, while doing nothing about getting back to their own time. Dranko sighs.



According to Morningstar's *commune*, the answer to returning home is on the island of Nahalm. And the best lead there is to find the dwarven wizard, Cranchus. It's possible that he's still alive, given the strange longevity of archmages, and the natural longer lifespan of dwarves. Cranchus is/was an Earth Mage, and as such might be able to do something to fix the Eyes of Moirel. That makes their logical next stop the Kalkas Peaks, and the dwarven city of Hae Kalkas. It's a long shot, but it's all they have.

Worried about the Emperor's ability to track them, the Company first *wind walk* an hour toward the (randomly chosen) town of West Nydem, after Dranko has stated out loud (for the sake of any nearby *scrying* sensors) that they're headed to that location. Even so, Morningstar casts *nondetection* on Aravis, while Kibi does the same for Ernie. They skim low across the ground.

There's no sign of pursuit during the trip, only the gentle waving of tall moonlit grass a few feet below them. Of course, there's no town of West Nydem this far back in the past, and they see no other settlements en route, so they land at the edge of a small wood and camp under the trees, protected by a *Mordenkainen's private sanctum* and an *alarm* spell.

Nothing accosts them overnight, and the next morning they spend an hour dining on a sumptuous *heroes' feast* provided by Ernie. (In fact, this is now Standard Breakfasting Procedure whenever logically possible.) They discuss ways of protecting themselves from detection, but Aravis is extremely pessimistic on that count. He feels the dragon-rider can find them no matter what they do, and while he might be slowed down by his lack of dragon, Aravis points out that he can clearly *teleport* or something like it. The dragon couldn't have followed them so closely while they were *wind walking* across the water, after all.

Dranko casts an *augury*: “*Will casting nondetection on the whole party bring us weal or woe?*” The answer:

Better than nothing.

“Delioch approves,” says Dranko. “He thinks it’s a great idea.”

Between casters and magic items, everyone is placed under *nondetection*, and they fly off toward where Hae Kalkas used to be. (Ernie tries to *find the path* to “Cranchus’ bedroom,” but this produces no result. That could mean that (a) the spell was foiled, or (b) Cranchus doesn’t exist in this time, or (c) that Cranchus exists but doesn’t have a bedroom.)

“Can you sense wild magic?” Morningstar asks Kibi. “That could tell us where Cranchus is, or at least his direction.”

“Well, yes, I can feel it around me,” says Kibi. “But I couldn’t sense Cranchus from this far away.”

“We should just go to Hae Kalkas and start asking around,” says Dranko.

“Won’t we get in trouble?” asks Morningstar. “Remember what happened last time we just showed up in town and started asking questions about an archmage?” (She refers to their attempt to find Alykeen in Minok, way back in the early days of their adventuring careers.)

“He might not be an archmage this far back in time,” says Dranko. Then something occurs to him, and he brightens. “Hey, and you know what? I know exactly how far in the past we are! How cool is that?”

“How do you know?” asks Flicker.

“I cast *know age* on the Wilburforce statue, back in our own time. It’s 2661 years old.”

“Yikes,” says Flicker. “Doesn’t that mean Cranchus might not have even been born yet?”



They reach the eastern end of the Kalkas Peaks, and below them they spot a dwarven town in about the place Hae Kalkas used to be. It’s much smaller than the city they know, and to Dranko’s disappointment there are no archmage-y looking towers poking up anywhere in sight. They land outside of town, where Morningstar tries casting *find the path* toward the biggest source of wild magic. She gets nothing. “Let’s go talk to people!” exclaims Dranko.

Grey Wolf, says Bostock, *you should go. It will be an excellent opportunity to work on your diplomatic skills!* Grey Wolf nods and volunteers. They can’t all go in while maintaining disguises, so a small group is sent. Yoba, Ernie and Kibi will go as they are, while Grey Wolf uses Dranko’s *robe of blending* to appear as a (still taller than average) dwarf. They are linked to the rest of the party with the usual *telepathic bond*, and the reconnoitering group head on foot down the road.

They pass a fork which heads up into the mountains, toward where Kibi’s home town of Eggemoggin used to be. (When Morningstar asks, Kibi explains that while his family has been in Eggemoggin for as far back as anyone can remember, there’s no way he’ll know anyone there now.)

They meet no one on the road, and soon approach the wall of what they’re still calling “Hae Kalkas.” The wall is more of a token boundary than a real fortification – ten foot high stone and barely wide enough for sentries. There are a couple of dwarves manning the northern gate and the walls above it, and also a pair of bored-looking humans. As they get closer, they see that the uniforms on the human soldiers are the same as that of the dragon-rider – the Sable Guard. “The Emperor has a presence here,” comments Grey Wolf. “Damn.”

"Better to keep walking," mutters Ernie nervously. The humans guards have taken notice of them now, and are watching them closely. As the recon group reach the gate, the dwarven guards snap to attention while the humans barely stir.

"Halt!" exclaims one of the human guards, getting slowly to his feet. "Names?"

"Ernest Roundhill."

"Yoba Stoutheart."

"Kibilhathur Bimson."

"Axebreaker," says Grey Wolf. "Nord Axebreaker."

"Business?" asks the guard.

"We want to sell metals from my home village," says Kibi.

"Here to sell goods," says the human half to himself, writing in a small book. "Do you have any contracts with local guilds?"

"No," says Kibi. "That's why we're here. We want to acquire contracts so we can do business here. We're at the preliminary stages. We'll need money to finance our mining operations."

The soldier of the Sable Guard turns to his human fellow and they both chuckle, while the dwarves glower but say nothing.

"Do you expect to do a good business?" asks the human.

"I hope so, though it's always dicey with an untapped vein," says Kibi.

"Gems?"

"Actually, it's a bit of silver."

"If you're going to do business in Stonehold, there's a standard gate tax. Thirty gold pieces will cover the lot of you."

Oh. That's a problem. No one bothered to pick up local currency in Greenshire, and it won't do to present coins that won't be minted for another couple of millennia. Kibi fishes in his pouch and hands over a ruby worth about 50 gold. The human looks skeptical, but passes it around to the dwarves for inspection. When the dwarves seem impressed with its value, the human pockets the gem. "OK, good enough. Move along then."

Once through the gate, Yoba comments, "They didn't ask for papers. That's a good sign, right?"

As a first order of business, Kibi flags down a dwarf on the street. "Excuse me. I don't mean to bother you, but I'm looking for a place to sell some gems, to get a good value. Can you recommend me a place?"

"Sure!" says the dwarf. "It's on the other side of town, but he's good. Kendo's his name." The dwarf gives Kibi directions to a street of moneylenders and gem traders. As they walk through the streets of Stonehold on a quest for current currency, they see that the main town guard is all human, dressed in the same sable uniforms. Dwarves and humans alike look askance at the halflings, and also at Grey Wolf, whose height makes him the equivalent of a six-foot-ten human. It's clear soon enough that the local dwarves try not to have anything to do with the humans if they can help it.

Speaking of which: a human guard steps abruptly out from a shop doorway and stands before Ernie. Another pair of guards stands back in the shop, laughing. "Huh. You're a long way from home, little fellah," says the guard, smiling.

"Yes. Yes, I am," says Ernie, putting on an extremely meek and compliant aspect.

"Hm. Where you visiting from?"

"Greenshire," says Ernie.

"Never heard of it," says the guard. "I assume you people have visiting papers, then." (At this, the other guards chuckle conspicuously.)

"Of course!" says Ernie.

"Let's see 'em, then."

Ernie starts making a show of rifling through his belongings. "Now, which sack did I put that in...?" After about thirty seconds of this, Ernie looks up at the guard. "I can't seem to find my papers, but I did find something shiny that seems to have fallen into my pack. Could it be yours?" He pulls out a twenty-gold-piece piece of jade. "Could you have dropped it?"

"Oh, yeah, that," says the guard, smiling broadly. "Yeah, I did lose that. Thanks."

"You're welcome!" says Ernie cheerfully. "Always happy to help!"

"That's all right," says the guard. "I'm sure you'll find your papers once you have time to look."

"Yeah, I'm such a muddle-head," says Ernie. "I can never remember where I put things."

"Well, that's probably typical for someone your size. Now, move along. Move along."

Once they're out of earshot, Ernie turns angrily to Yoba. "Can I come back later and kick them in the shins? Please?"

"Only if I get to hold him while you do it," says Yoba.

"Someone of my size? Humph!"



Kendo is a jovial dwarf with a long white beard braided in a criss-cross pattern. He's happy to exchange some "modern" currency for a handful of gems. Ernie takes the small sacks of coins and pulls a few of them out. They remind him of the strange old square coins the Company found beneath Gohgan's basement, on their very first assignment for Abernathy.

"You know, I haven't seen you before," says Kendo to Kibi, as they watch Ernie peer at the coins. "You new in town?"

"Yeah, I am," answers Kibi.

"Where you from?"

"Oh, up in the mountains aways. We've been looking for new veins of silver. But, hey, while I'm here, I was wondering: if I wanted to find someone, someone who lives around here, but I don't know where he is, and I want to get in touch with them, who would I ask?"

"Not sure," says Kendo. "Depends on who it was, I guess."

"Do you know a dwarf named Cranchus?"

"No, not ringing a bell. What's he do?"

Ernie pipes up at this point. "Excuse me, sir. Is it true that there are no dwarven wizards?"

"Dwarven wizards?" Kendo snorts. "Far as I know, there ain't no dwarven wizard. And all that talk about the Mad Wizard's just a lot of bunk."

Ding! "Mad Wizard?" asks Ernie.

"Oh, you know, the story about the crazy wizard. But I don't remember how it goes."

Kibi turns to Yoba and says, "My friend Yoba here loves stories!"

Yoba nods, taken by surprise. "Yes! Yes I do!"

"Well, if I knew any, I'd tell you, but I don't. It's just that you brought to mind a kid's tale I heard when I was younger. But there isn't actually a mad wizard."

"That's okay," says Kibi. "It's just that she's a collector of stories, so we'd love to hear it."

"Say, you looking for a place to stay?" asks Kendo. When Kibi nods, he continues. "Try the Silver Pick. Best place in town, and if you tell 'em I sent you, they'll kick me back some coin."



More human guards eye them suspiciously as they head back across town to the Silver Pick, but no one accosts them this time. The Pick is a spacious and clean place, filled with dwarves talking, eating, drinking, arm-wrestling and playing at dice. A dwarf in an apron, standing near the back, waves them to an empty table. "Be right with you!"

Soon the four of them are drinking mugs of foamy dwarven ale, spiced differently than Kibi is used to but satisfying all the same. The innkeep finally makes it to their table, and the first thing he does is bow before the halflings. "Always a pleasure," he says. "Don't see many halflings around here, but you're welcome in the Pick. I'm **Hamstock Derring**, at your disposal." After another round of introductions, and some small talk about Kibi's accent and business aspirations ("Oh, you live up in Moggin?"), they get down to business.

"My friends here, Yoba in particular, like to collect local stories."

"Especially children's stories," adds Yoba.

"Do you know anyone who can tell us some good tales?" asks Kibi.

A big grin spreads across the face of Hamstock Derring. "You're talking to him!" he exclaims. "Hey, **Segwick!**"

"Yeah, boss?" answers a dwarf behind the bar.

"Take over! I'll be busy for a few minutes."

Hamstock pulls up a chair at the table. Kibi takes a swig of ale. "Kendo, the guy who sent us over here, said there was a story about a mad wizard in the mountains. Do you know that one?"

Hamstock laughs. "Kendo told you that story?"

"No, no, he didn't know it," says Kibi. "But I was wondering if you know how it goes?"

Hamstock makes a show of cracking the knuckles on his stubby fingers, smiles, and starts talking. "Well, the story is – and there's no truth to it, I'll tell you that right off – is that there was a dwarf who fell into a pool of lava. 'Course, everyone thought he was dead, until a week later he flew out of the pool, with magical power."

"Wouldn't he have died instantly when he fell in?" asks Kibi.

"I *told* you it wasn't true. I'm just telling you how it goes. Anyhow, he comes out of the lava and can do all sorts of magic. He calls a town meeting, and says to the people, 'Everyone, I'm going into the mountains, to find the source of the lava. I'm going to turn it into gold and send it back, now that I know the secret.'

"So off he went, into the mountains, from right here in Stonehold. 'I'll be back in a year and a day, and I'll have piles of gold,' he said.

"A year and a day passes, and they all look up, and there's the biggest volcano you ever seen, and lava comes pouring down the mountain, and everyone's thinkin', looks like lava to us, and not gold. But right before it reached Stonehold, the river of lava parted, and spared the town. Didn't burn a thing. But it hardened overnight, and the next day miners went out and chipped away at the solid lava, and underneath the outer layer of rock? Gold! Pure gold. And that, they say, is why we had so much gold here before..." And here Hamstock looks around to make sure no one's listening too closely. "...before we had the shit taxed out of us. Anyway, no one ever saw the mad wizard again. They say he died in the volcano. But like I said, it's a made up story. For one thing, there's no gold in these parts. And the reasons we had so much wealth from our mines were clever surveying and a lot of hard work, not some crazy wizard."

"That's a great story!" says Kibi. "Was there a specific mountain involved?"

"Naw," says Hamstock, taking a swig from his own mug. "It's not like there's ever been an actual volcano that blew around here."

"Did the wizard have a name?" asks Grey Wolf.

"Yeah," says Hamstock, grinning. "My kid likes that story. The wizard's name was 'Crunchy.'"

Ding ding ding! "Crunchy the Mad Wizard!" exclaims Kibi. "That's great! Yoba, isn't that great?"

"Yes, great," Yoba agrees.



It's agreed then that the next stop is the mining town of Moggin, since there might be more detailed stories there of "Crunchy the Mad Wizard." Kibi explains that there are some long-dormant volcanoes in this part of the mountains, but that none had erupted in living memory back in their own time.

After a good meal the recon group say farewell to Hamstock and the Silver Pick. Hamstock wishes them luck, along with some grumbling about the taxes he pays just to run the place. "But what are we gonna do?" he asks, throwing up his hands. The ale has made him more bold in his complaints. "End up like the dwarves in Karth? Or the Tarathi? Wiped off the map? I don't think so."

"Tarathi?" asks Grey Wolf, intrigued.

"A bunch of elves. Not surprising things didn't work out for *them*. But Karth... it's a lesson everyone learns sooner or later. Defy the Emperor or his agents, and you're not long for this world. But you didn't hear that from me. Oh, and hey, tell the Mad Wizard I said hi. Heh heh heh. Hey Segwick, take ten!"

The group depart through the west gate (having come in from the north), so as not to arouse suspicion. As they walk out the gate, one human guard puts out a spear and tries to trip up Ernie. He fails, though Ernie doesn't take the bait. Under his breath he mutters, "Man, the Spire is so going to kick your asses."

Over the mind-link, Dranko chides him. *You do not know how to start a fight.*

And you do, sighs Ernie. *I know. Which is why we didn't bring you. Look, they're bullies, and you know how I feel about bullies, but this is not the time!*

They meet up with the rest of the Company outside of town. They try a *sending* to Cranchus, but get no answer. Still, they're excited about having a lead to follow.

They *wind walk* up into the mountains, staying about a hundred feet off the ground and looking for signs of volcanic activity, as well as the town of Moggin. It only takes them half an hour at such fast speed, during which time they see not a single soul on the narrow rocky trail below. They do eventually spot a small mining outpost, not far from where the town of Eggemogglin will someday sit. "Let's land there," says Dranko, starting to descend.

"Looking like we do?" asks Kibi.

"Sure. Screw it!" says Dranko.

"But you look like an orc!" Kibi points out.

"OK, fine." Dranko changes into a human, and Snokas agrees to fly up high and wait for a hand signal when it's time to leave.

The Company land a mile down the road from the outpost and march on in. It's a tiny place, consisting of six or seven tents and two permanent structures: an open-sided dining hall, and a tiny rickety general store called Lug's Provisioners. The dining hall is empty, so they walk into the store *en masse*.

It's a musty place with a creaky door. Mining equipment ranging from fairly new to old and battered sits on dusty shelves. A couple of old dwarves sit at a table in the rear of the store, looking suspiciously at Dranko and the human-looking members of the party. "Aren't you a traveling circus!" guffaws one of the dwarves. A black-haired fellow with a triple-forked beard, he sets down a dented metal tankard.

"We are," agrees Kibi with a smile and a wave.

"More than you know," adds Aravis.

"We've paid taxes this month!" declares the dwarf.

"Oh, no. We're not... we're not here for that," Kibi assures him.

"Good. 'Cause they've already got all my profit, and then some."

"That's awful!" says Aravis.

"They'd tax our beards if they could," says the dwarf bitterly.

"We've got no love for tax men, believe me," says Dranko.

"So, what can we do for you then?" asks the dwarf.

"Do have problems with orcs around here?" asks Kibi.

"Orcs? No," says the dwarf (**Lug**, they guess).

"How come?" asks Dranko. "Don't they live in the mountains around here?"

[Joshua Randall]: I recently began re-reading this Story Hour from the very beginning, and I'm wondering the following. Is there a connection among:

- the evil black energy used to create and/or powering the null shadows;
- the evil black energy used by the Circle in their attempt to bridge the planes at Kallor; and
- the evil black liquid that sprayed on some of the party when they rescued the third Eye of Moirel?

A couple of interesting quotes follow.

[null shadows]

They are humanoid but featureless, and slightly blurry around the edges. They make no noise, and flail at her with black, fog-like appendages. Where they strike, Morningstar's skin is left with a horrible, stinging black smear.

[Black Circle ritual]

At the bottom of that pit are over twenty Black Circle clerics, most arrayed around the perimeter, with half a dozen standing in a black obsidian circle in the center of the floor. That circle, like the large one on the floor between the converging spheres above, is pulsing blackly in time with the loud thrumming sound that fills the entire chamber. Black energy is streaming out of the black circle in the pit, spilling up the wall of the pit, and across the floor above, towards its counterpart.

[Third Eye of Moirel]

The Pillar is what immediately draws his attention. It is a tall cylindrical column, stacked alternately with rings of obsidian and transparent crystal. A black liquid moves about beneath the surface of the crystal sections, as if dark oil is trapped between two pressed sheets of glass and is oozing like a living Rorschach blot.

[KidCthulhu]: They're all connected, and the party has put that together.

Lug snorts. "If they did, they probably fled 'cause of all the monsters."

"What monsters?" asks Dranko, intrigued.

"Oh, you know. You hear lots of stories about monsters livin' in the mountains round here."

"We've heard some great stories about what lives in the mountains!" says Ernie. "Some crazy wiz..."

"I met the monsters!" exclaims the oldest of the three dwarves. The other two roll their eyes.

"Really!" says Dranko. "What did they look like?"

"Oh, terrible they were. Big. Fat. Ugly. Mmmm, yes, ugly."

"So far you're describing bears," says Dranko.

"No, no!" says the old dwarf. "Big, big people. Giant people!"

"With tusks?" asks Dranko.

"No. No tusks. I only got a fleetin' glimpse and I ran. Think I'm crazy enough to stick around? I'm here talkin' to you, ain't I?"

Ernie describes ogres, and Dranko describes trolls, but the old dwarf shakes his head. "The ones I saw had big clubs, but that was years ago."

"Do they bother the miners?" asks Kibi.

"No. We don't go that deep anymore, or in that direction. I got lost you see, and wandered into the wrong parts of the tunnels."

"We heard a story about a crazy wizard who lives in the mountains," says Kibi. "Do you think he had anything to do with the monsters?"

"Ah, the mad wizard!" The old dwarf cackles. "There's no mad wizard. *But*, if you ask me, if there is a mad wizard, it's probably his *fault* that there's all them monsters!"

"Have the monsters always been there?" asks Kibi.

"Who knows? But I'll tell you this. There used to be another outpost down the path a ways, and they broke through into some underground cavern, and monsters came a-pourin' out, and wiped out the whole place!"

"Just monsters? No lava or gold?" asks Dranko.

The old dwarf looks puzzled for a minute. "Lava or gold? Lava or... oh, that. Ha!"

"I like that story!" says Ernie.

"It's a stupid story," says the old dwarf. "You ever seen any lava? Heck, you even seen any *gold* around here? Silver, iron, little bits of mithril if you get lucky. No gold around here, though."

"So you've never heard of anyone with the mad wizard's name? Crunchy?" prompts Dranko.

The dwarf laughs. "Yeah, I've heard it. You guys didn't come all the way here for that piece of crap, did you?"

"No, we came here for other pieces of crap, too," says Dranko.

"Well, I got a whole shop here fulla crap, and most of it's on sale. You buyin'? We got picks a-plenty, hammers, hand-carts, boots, shovels... you name it, we got it."

"Spikes," says Dranko. "I need more spikes."

"We got spikes."

"If you tell us where the monsters are, we could go investigate and maybe get rid of them for you," says Kibi.

Joshua Randall: My latest insane ramblings...

What if Darkeye, the leader of the Sharshun, is really "dark eye" – as in a dark Eye of Moirel?

Up to now I had just been assuming the remaining Eyes of Moirel (that the PCs don't have) fill out the remaining colors of the rainbow. But there's no reason that has to be the case. One of them could be black, or some other dark color, and it would then be the Dark Eye.

The Red Eye dominated Sagiro (the NPC), so maybe the Dark Eye is capable of mentally dominating the whole Sharshun organization.

Lord Pendragon: I suggested this theory pages ago...

Everett: No. Too literal.

Enkhidu: My guess is Dark Eye is another of the Emperor's Black-Goo assassins.

Everett: Oh come on, it has to be Mrs. Horn. You know I'm right; just accept it.

el-remmen: Mrs. Horn was actually my favorite character.

Joshua Randall: Will she be wearing tight-fitting leather garments?

KidCthulhu: Oh, man. If we didn't know exactly where Mrs. Horn is right now, that would be one *hell* of an evil idea. Everett & Josh, I may have to have you both gagged for violation of Rule One.

Everett: "Do not act incautiously when confronting a little bald wrinkly smiling man!"

From one of the Discworld books. Bonus points if you've got the title.

Ian the Mad: Given the topic, I'm going to have to opt for *Thief of Time*.

Everett: That's correct. Not too difficult, I suppose.

KidCthulhu: And I agree on Mrs. Horn, Remmen. She was always a favorite of mine, too. Very complex and not your everyday character.

Everett: As for knowing where she is – isn't she well-nigh dead? Unless I *really* missed something.

She was lots of folks' favorite, of course; 's why I chose her.

"Well, sure, I'll tell you what I remember," says the old dwarf. "But I tell you, those big guys have a regular civilization down there. I saw some of the walls. They actually built stuff. Probably built the walls to keep out all the other even crazier monsters that're down there. Craaaaazy monsters, I tell ya!"

"Like what? Crazier than giants?" asks Kibi.

"Have you ever heard of any with gems for eyes?" adds Morningstar.

"No, I don't think so, no gems. But I heard there are giant one-eyed bats down there. And I heard rumors... of eeeeeeeevil air spirits..." Here he makes an exaggerated whooshing sound. "...like the ones that did what for Karth!"

"Air spirits? Here?" asks Kibi, feigning alarm.

"They're everywhere!" exclaims the dwarf. Then, in a hushed voice: "I hear they're on a mission to hunt down and kill every last dwarf in the country. So it stands to reason that they're down there, right? And I heard that there're things with tentacles, and things with claws..."

Lug spits on the dirt floor. "**Hagglehock**, shut up! You're senile, your memory's shot, and you ain't seen no monsters. Why don't you let my customers shop in peace?"

"I can heal that, you know," says Dranko. "I'm a healer."

"You keep back a me," says Hagglehock. "I ain't senile. I'm telling you, I've heard stories, and there ain't no reason to doubt 'em. Maybe the giants keep 'em as pets. Or maybe your mad wizard has a whole menagerie of monsters down there, and he sends 'em out to do his eeeeeevil bidding."

Dranko buys ten spikes and a small hammer for a handful of silvers. "Anything you need?" he asks Lug.

"Nothing I would say out loud," says the dwarf.

"Yeah," agrees Aravis. "We need that too."

Dranko slaps Lug on the shoulder, and slips ten gold pieces into his pocket. At their request Hagglehock draws them a map to where he remembers the monsters. Next to a crudely drawn fissure he writes **I fell in here**. He draws lines for tunnels. Aravis lends Hagglehock his *headband of intellect* while the dwarf draws, which adds clarity to the map and thus makes it almost usable. The only trouble is, there's no indication of where the map actually starts, and Hagglehock cannot remember exactly where the landmarks are. Kibi tries once more to sense any local wild magic, but there's nothing. Have the Company finally reached a dead end in their search?

Not quite. They take a final *wind walk* jaunt down the road on which Hagglehock had said there used to be another outpost. And a few minutes later they see it, a small ruin on the spot where, in the future, the town of Marhold will be built. Dranko is the first to turn solid. "Tasty half-orc! Any monsters, come out and eat me!"

Morningstar casts *detect thoughts* but gets nothing, and Kibi still cannot detect even a whiff of wild magic. With nothing left to try, Aravis casts *vision*, naming the dwarf Cranchus as his subject.

All goes white. For a moment Aravis sees nothing but a featureless bright square, but then he sees lines and pictures appear as if drawn with an invisible quill. These images resolve into a copy of the map that Hagglehock had just drawn for them, but then they expand. Hagglehock hadn't drawn it, but a road appears on the map, winding its way back down the mountains toward Stonehold.

The map fills his entire vision now, and in Stonehold a blue glowing spot appears. A gold ribbon then snakes away from the dot, retracing the road, rejoining the original map, and then going further into the mountains. Is the spell showing him the route Cranchus took, leaving Stonehold and journeying into the Kalkas Peaks?

The map tilts and stretches into a three-dimensional line drawing, and Aravis watches as the golden ribbon flows into caverns and tunnels, turning this way and that in a meandering line. Then, abruptly, the ribbon is fragmented, splitting into dozens of pathways going in multiple directions. His head throbs as if something has reached out and put a sudden halt to his vision. The map fades slowly from his sight.

Joshua Randall: In my continued determination to come up with a realization that won't make KidC look down on me, try this one on for size.

What if Archmage Cranchus = Condor, the creator of the Eyes of Moirel? We know that Cranchus was a powerful user of wild/earth magic (like Kibi). We know the Eyes are wild magic artifacts. There's the whole first-letter-of-the-name thing.

Plus, this would just be a damn cool plot point – what if Cranchus/Condor created the Eyes specifically to prevent the PCs from doing what they are now doing (i.e. "fixing" the timeline so the Emperor didn't win)? There have been hints that the original timeline (i.e. the one in which the PCs are now present) is the one in which the Emperor *did* win, so I guess that if Cranchus = Condor, it would mean he's... eeeevil! Well, I think it would be cool. Hmph.

Piratecat: That would be cool! You may or may not remember Dranko's great theory (and I still think it is, darn it) that Cranchus is actually Parthol Runecarver. Great minds think alike.

But since we're heading off to find Cranchus, doubtless all will be revealed one way or another...

KidCthulhu: Sorry, Josh. Still no gold star for you. In just a few updates, you'll find out all about Crunchy and Condor.

Joshua Randall: *fumes silently*

Aravis explains his vision to the others. Kibi's heart races; Cranchus, the legendary Earth Mage, whom he is more sure than ever is his own grandfather, has trod the very stones beneath his feet. And now they follow his footsteps, to see where they lead.

"OK!" shouts Dranko, patting Kibi on the back. "Let's go dirt-diving!"

el-remmen: Very enjoyable update.

Solarious: And this update proves once more: Bribery for the win!

Fade: Was a way ever found to get Ernie and Aravis permanently un-evilized, or are they still expected to revert and start plotting behind your backs at any moment?

Everett: As I remember, the solution they found was sort of a "permanent quick fix" – it lasts indefinitely, but the evil isn't gone, it's just in suspended animation.

Solarious: I recall differently: after they had problems with them being too far away from the Blue Eye, they used a *wish* from the *luckblade* they had to expel all the black goo from them. Which is good, since the Eyes are all broken right now.

Everett: Yeah, that's correct. Not sure what I was thinking of...

Sagiro: It is true that, by use of a *wish*, black goo was physically expelled from Ernie and Aravis. It is also true that since then, the two of them have not been evil, have not felt any desire to do evil, and furthermore have maintained that state of non-evilness without any outside help (like they were getting from the Blue Eye there for a while). On the other hand, even after the *wish*, the Emperor and/or his lackey was *still* able to locate Ernie and Aravis by "smell." So, make of that what you will.

Enkhidu: Someone didn't bathe in tomato juice to get rid of the musk...

Everett: Apropos of nothing, what level is the party at now?

Sagiro: At the time of this last update, I think the highest level characters were 15th level, and the range was 13th to 15th. Right now, 17 runs and 14 months ahead of the Story Hour, the highest-level characters have recently hit 17th level, and thus have 9th-level spells. Speaking of which, Morningstar is likely to try one of them out next game. The bad news is: after the horrific events of last game, said spell is *true resurrection*.

Len: Not the result of a marital dispute, I hope?

Everett: Teasing us with a player character death that we won't get to read about for a year? Unfair, man. Totally unfair.

Sagiro: As my father was fond of telling me while I was growing up: "Nobody said life was fair."

Everett: Now what kind of example is that to set for the little hobgoblins?

Dawn: Your dad must have known my dad. That had to have been his favorite saying to me. Of course, I now use that with my kids too.

Zaruthstran: Well, seeing as how each update is, what, something like 1/3 to 1/2 of a session, it's more like 2-3 years before we witness the PC death. On the bright side, we get to look forward to another 2-3 years of Sagiro's Story Hour!

Duncan Haldane: I don't think that's really fair. The campaign has been going for over ten years, the story hour for about six (IIRC it started on an early version of the Eric Noah 3rd Edition News website, after the August 2000 release of the PHB). While it has fallen a little further behind than it had been over the last year with Sagiro's increased family commitments, it hasn't been all that much change in how far we are behind the campaign. Also, Sagiro doesn't want to get the Story Hour releases too close to the campaign, lest we start making guesses at his storylines before the PCs experience them (or possibly even worse, influence the storyline by our guesses/suggestions).

sniffles: Wow. I've been slowly reading SteveC's nice PDFs of the earlier adventures, and really enjoying the story. I'm not sure whether to be impressed or bewildered that after ten years the PCs are just achieving 17th level. I've been in a 3E campaign for three years, occurring twice a month, and our PCs are now 12th level. And I thought we were progressing slowly!

As a player, I'm not sure how I'd have reacted to being transported to an alternate reality. (That's the part I'm just getting started reading now.) I'd probably like it for a short-term story arc, but I'm not sure I'd want to spend months of play in that situation. And I know I'd be angry to learn that they had the option to try to prevent that from happening, but if they had then they wouldn't have been able to prevent the invasion. Your players are more patient than I am, I expect.

I'm just full of questions now, which were probably answered somewhere long ago. I tend to skim over the other postings – I'm always impatient to get to the next installment of the adventure. I'll go ahead and pose a couple of my questions and see where it gets me. Is Kib's Earth Mage class a homegrown prestige class, or from some sourcebook? Mechanically, how did you incorporate the Crosser's Maze into Aravis?

Piratecat: I'm glad you're reading it! None of us felt tricked or taken advantage of. I'm sure part of it was the metagame knowledge that this was going to lead to some great gaming, but we weren't mad at him – we were mad because we had purposely decided to ignore the Sharshun, since "they weren't doing anything." That'll teach us! The world is a busy place, and lots of people are striving against one another. That's happening right now in the game, too, and I'm worried that we're missing some clues to ongoing badness that are going to seem obvious in retrospect.

Kib's Earth Mage class is custom, as far as I know. Since Kib was 1-2 levels behind the rest of the party (Kodiak had gone to grad school), the class is purposely designed to be slightly more powerful than average in order to equalize him with the rest of the group.

Aravis never got stats for the Crosser's Maze, and as far as I know Sagiro never wrote them down; he just knew what it was capable of doing. Aravis made Knowledge (planes) checks when he actively tried to use it. I suspect the typical DC for those checks was around 25, but I don't actually know.

sniffles: Thanks for the answers... I imagine a lot of the experience is the 'you had to be there' effect. It's not the same just reading it. I don't mind reading about that sort of situation, but as a player I hate being in it...

Berandor: Hey there! I'm currently working my way through this whole Story Hour (I'm at session 105 or so, the party are in the Crosser's Maze), but I've got a question. With a party of six or seven PCs, is there a specific reason that there is an NPC like Flicker in the party, too? Is it to get them into trouble? How do the players take to Flicker saving the day? I can see adding Makel to the party (and keeping him for guests is nice), but when I'm DMing, I'd rather have four or five PCs, so in a party of six, I couldn't see myself adding another character.

Not that it keeps me from enjoying the adventures of Abernathy's Company. I particularly enjoy the mix of combat and story, and I mentally jot down many notes on how to throw your group a curve ball. Some day, I'll even be up to date with current posts.

KidCthulhu: Flicker is in the party for a few reasons. We don't have a "full" rogue, and everyone needs one. Also, several of the party's players have spouses who game but aren't in this game. Sagiro specifically wanted a full-time NPC so that if we had guests over we had someone for them to play.

Although we haven't done it in a while, the group likes to go away for weekends and play and hang out together. It's nice to be able to include Significant Others in the play without having to bend the world to add new PCs.

Berandor: That's cool. I wish the spouses in our group would game with us sometimes.

Gold Roger: I know I probably sound like a smartass for saying this, but reading the compiled Story Hour I kept asking myself, "When are they going to move against that Oasis Mages' Guild – it stinks to hell." I realise that noticing this was far easier when reading a compilation over the course of a week than doing so throughout years of gaming, but it still kept coming up and stuck out to me.

It was a very understandable oversight, but an oversight nonetheless and it's actually this ability to pull through the consequences in such a merciless but entertaining way that is so great about Sagiro's DMing.

Everett: And what's the Oasis Mages' Guild again? Don't remember that at all.

Gold Roger: It's forbidden to found a Mages' Guild in the city of Oasis. There was some important historical reason why that I don't remember. Anyway, quite early the PCs found out that the Sharshun had founded a Mages' Guild in Oasis, but never really did anything about it. I suspect that this would have been the critical link to find the other Eyes in time.

Berandor: Whew. I'm through. And what can I say except... Excellent! Great players, very cool characters, and of course rat bastardly schemes aplenty! What amazes me most is that this campaign has not only been going on for ten or so years, but that it still expands on the story and threads laid out all that time ago.

I wonder: what would have happened in a TPK? Would new characters follow the old Company's footsteps? Would Sagiro make up a new campaign? Or would a TPK be prevented by (a) a DM that always presents options for the players; and (b) smart players who, when it all went wrong, might have fled or turned themselves in?

CTSparky: When did you switch from 3.0 *haste* to 3.5 *haste*? Did it make a big difference in the length of combats?

How often do you guys play? For how long, also? Any chance that one of these years a guy from CT can come up and watch?

Berandor: I think if anything, you can only come up and play...

Sagiro: Hi, everyone! Sorry I don't have an update yet – I've been chipping away at the next one in my scarce free time, and I wanted you to know I haven't abandoned the story. I'm in the midst of transcribing a particularly chaotic and harrowing combat from tape, which can be time consuming. I don't have an ETA for my next post, but I'm aiming for "within the week." (This estimate can obviously be altered by work emergencies and severe toddler-induced sleep deficiency.) To quickly address some questions that have been asked and not yet answered...

If the party were to suffer a TPK (and this has nearly happened on more than one occasion), I'd leave it up to the players to decide how they wanted to handle it. I have no idea what they'd choose.

I don't remember exactly when we switched from 3.0 *haste* to the 3.5 version, but I much, *much* prefer the 3.5 version. Allowing casters to cast two spells every round was too overpowered, and slowed things down as well. I like how the 3.5 version plays, both in theory and in practice.

We play, on average, about 1.5 times a month. (And our next game, scheduled for mid-November, will pretty much mark the 11th anniversary of the campaign!) In the early days we usually played on weekends for about 6 hours a stretch, once every other week. More recently we've been playing on weeknights, for about 2.5 to 3 hours per session, and about once every three weeks. But while the pace has slowed, the game marches on.

CR 80

A Nasty Surprise for All Concerned

The Company discuss plans for their imminent subterranean journey. *Wind walk* has been their preferred travel method of late, and it's still cast upon them, but in a series of underground tunnels and caves they'd be forced into the spell's slower mode. Besides, they'd rather be battle-ready. They could be facing the defenses of a powerful Earth Mage, against whom having airy bodies might prove no defense at all.

Aravis casts *mass darkvision* so that they won't need to carry attention-attracting lights, and they plunge into an abandoned mine entrance, connected mentally by Morningstar's *telepathic bond*. Dranko, scouting ahead, notes that while old equipment strewn about has become rotten and rusted, the wood beams and walls of the tunnel are solid and withstanding the test of time. Kibi notes the quality dwarven construction with pride.

After an hour or so Dranko pulls up at the lip of a gaping hole in the ground – a small natural fissure in the rock. He peers down but sees nothing within the range of his darkvision. When the rest of the party has caught up, he hands a rope to Grey Wolf. "Here, hold this. If you hear me scream, it means something's attacking me."

The ground turns out to be about seventy feet below; Dranko descends into a large (and empty) natural cavern. It looks vaguely familiar to him, which makes sense; they've been in a very similar maze of caves and passages before, when they found and slew Restimar posing as the legendary Chun Aggrat.

It's only after Flicker has also been lowered down that they remember they still have *wind walk* going, so the rest of the party waft down slowly to the cavern floor. Once solid again, they look around the large space and see no way out of it. Kibi scratches his beard. "Aravis, which way did your *vision* say to go?"

Aravis points at a featureless wall to his right, and Kibi walks that way. "Guys, over here!" A narrow exit tunnel was camouflaged and hidden by some natural folds in the rock. He closes his eyes and tries to sense if any source of wild magic is near. Nothing.

"You know what?" says Ernie, as they walk single file into the new tunnel. "We haven't been underground since the beast cave where Step died. The first time, I mean."

The tunnel does get steadily wider, until they can walk three abreast. They hear a constant squeaking sound in the background and catch occasional glimpses of dog-sized cave rats scurrying in the darkness. “Maybe we should talk to one of them,” laughs Morningstar.

“I don’t speak Rat,” says Dranko. And to show his contempt for a rodent whose language he doesn’t speak, Dranko flicks his whip and slays the rat in a single blow.

“Well done,” says Grey Wolf dryly. Dranko shrugs, lights a cigar on Ernie’s armor, and they press on into the darkness. They hear only the sound of their footsteps, the squeaks of rats, and the distant echoes of an underground river. Despite the warnings of Haggleshock there are no signs of monsters or other dire perils. Kibi thinks that these caves have some good mining potential, mostly in iron.

They are following the map as Aravis recalls from his *vision*, but Aravis, while brilliant, has not done much spelunking recently. After an especially labyrinthine series of connected caves he’s no longer sure they’re still on target. Morningstar casts *find the path*, targeting the location of “*the last clearly-marked location on Aravis’s mental map*,” and through this discovers that they’ve been off-course for the last half hour.

They backtrack and pick up the trail, following it until the spell wears off some two-plus hours later. By this time they’ve put in a full day of traveling and decide to make camp. At Dranko’s suggestion they wall themselves into a corner with a *wall of stone* and then sleep in *rope tricks*. Ah, the comforts of home.



Nothing disturbs their sleep, and the next “morning” the stone wall is still intact. After a cramped *heroes’ feast*, Dranko listens at the stone and hears some rats squeaking.

“I hope they’re not hungry,” says Ernie. He’s mostly kidding, but he still harbors terrible memories of his very first underground adventure, in which he stumbled into a pit of live, hungry rats. Dranko makes the Company an egress with *stone shape* and crawls out. There are some rats outside – four of them – but they’re drinking from a small puddle and paying the party no mind.

“You know,” says Kibi, stroking his beard, “I could make us all look like rats. We’d fit right in.”

That’s a plan with great appeal, since something that might take exception to a party of armed surface dwellers might not bat an eye at a group of cave rats. Kibi casts *veil*, making everyone look like plain old rodents. Morningstar casts another *find the path*, and off they go.

The sounds of water get louder as they progress, and as the tunnels begin to grow damp, the rats become more numerous. Dranko, still out in front, pulls up short at a strange sound – a loud, wet thump from up ahead. He waits for the rest to catch up, and they all hear it a second time. **THUMP!**

“That was not a cave rat,” says Grey Wolf.

Indeed not! Dranko scoots silently ahead, and after a couple of turns the tunnel opens into another large cavern, over sixty feet across (the range of his *darkvision*) but with a (relatively low) thirty-foot ceiling. Near the edge of his visual range, at the left side of the cavern, a ten-foot-tall giant – or ogre, or troll, or some giantish humanoid, he’s not sure which – is pulling a net out of a small pool. A second giant is slamming a full net against the stone floor to stop the fish from flopping around. **THUMP!**

The only other interesting feature of the cavern is a giant-sized ladder, extending down from the ceiling in the middle of the cave, about fifty feet in. Dranko relays all of this to the others, and they decide that Dranko will check out the ladder and ceiling shaft while the others move up close enough to cast some detection spells. In order to get close enough the rat-looking party must emerge into the cavern a bit, and in doing so someone’s armor clinks. One of the giants looks toward them and grunts in its own guttural language. The party freeze – all the giant sees is rats, right?

The giant drops its net and picks up a large club that had been resting on the ground. It strides toward the party, licking its lips. Yoba squeaks: “Evil!”

The giants aren’t wearing armor, and while the clubs look plenty dangerous the Company are confident that they can take care of this problem quickly. A bit of that confidence wavers as one of the giants swings its club into Snokas, sending him flying backward onto his back. The giant looks a little bit puzzled – that was a surprisingly heavy rat! – but there was a meaty **THUNK**, and that’s good enough.

Dranko is about forty feet up the shaft – the ladder continues up into it beyond his sight – when he hears a strange sound.

DM: "Dranko, make me a Reflex save."
DRANKO: "Why?"
DM: "To avoid the goat."
DRANKO: "Goat?"
DM: "There seems to be a goat plummeting down the shaft toward you."

A falling goat carcass clips the twisting Dranko on the shoulder, knocking him off the ladder. He starts to *feather fall* downward and soon lands standing on the body of a large dead goat.

Kibi opts for a bit of distraction. He flips the top card from his *deck of illusions* onto the cavern floor, and up springs... another giant! This one is a classic hill giant, about a foot taller than the cave giants, and at Kibi's thought it shakes its club menacingly.

Make it give the other giants a rude gesture! thinks Ernie over the mind-link, and Kibi does just that. The illusionary hill giant backs off a few steps and waves its club suggestively from its midsection.

Aravis has a more painful salvo in mind, and unleashes a *prismatic spray* on one of the giants. Only the red beam strikes, but it gets the giant's attention away from the new foreign hill giant. It looks toward the source of the spray and sees... a cave rat. What?

There's a very quick discussion now over the mind-link, during which it is decided that rather than waste more combat resources on these befuddled giants, they should just flee squeaking into the darkness. Dranko looks into the back half of the cavern and sees that it bends in an 'L' shape, out of sight. There's a tunnel leading out of the cavern, also at the back, on the opposite side from the leg of the 'L.'

"One more distraction, to cover our escape," says Grey Wolf. He starts to cast *summon the pack*. The plan is to gather at the back of the cavern and flee through the tunnel. Morningstar first casts a *cure critical wounds* on Snokas.

Of course, as with most plans, things don't go according to plan. Dranko hears something in the dark back half of the cavern, perhaps hidden from his sight by a cluster of boulders, cast a spell. A *blade barrier* springs up across the center of the cavern, cutting Dranko off from the rest of the Company.

Plan B! thinks Morningstar.

Which plan is that? asks Ernie.

Get 'em!

I'm going invisible, and I'm going to sneak up and ambush whatever just cast that, thinks Dranko over the mind-link. But he doesn't get the chance, as a creature emerges from the shadows and steps toward him. It's an eight-foot-tall humanoid figure, covered head to toe in narrow bands of steel armor. It holds two long barbed chains, one in each hand, and the chains dance and swing of their own volition. And if that wasn't enough, the creature is surrounded by a cloud of animated swords and daggers, flashing and slicing the air. *Oh,* says Dranko. *That's bad. There's a...* Whatever Dranko was going to say tails off into silence, and then over the mind-link the rest of the Company hear Dranko let out a roar of mindless rage.

Thinking the giants are part of a carefully plotted ambush, Ernie lets loose *Beryn Sur* and then drops a *flame strike* that gets one of the giants and the chain-wielding humanoid. The giant bellows in pain (what kind of rats *are* these?!?) while the chain-thing hardly reacts at all.

Dranko, what's the plan? thinks Morningstar.

REAAAARGH! answers Dranko.

A third giant comes sliding down the ladder from the vertical shaft. It looks around in confusion, and there's some giantish blather and commotion for a few seconds. Kibi *summons* an earth elemental directly adjacent to the chain-thing; it swings a rocky fist, misses, and then starts making strange incoherent noises.

What happens next is worst of all. A small glass globe comes soaring out from the shadows at the back of the cavern and shatters on the ground in the middle of the melee. Black vapors bubble out of it, which immediately congeal into a cluster of null shadows! The wizards feel the horrific stinging nausea of the foul creatures wash over them, while the divine casters feel it to a lesser degree. "Oh, CRAP!" exclaims Aravis.

Dranko no longer has full control of his mind. He is filled with an all-consuming wrath toward all things, and only cares about inflicting the most damage possible on whatever is closest to him. Spells are out of the question – too much concentration

required – but magic items are simple enough. He uses a magical ring to drop an *ice storm* on the chain-thing and one of the giants, who happen to be the two closest creatures. Flecks of spittle fly from his mouth.

Flicker remembers what to do in the event of null shadows. He pulls out a non-magical sling he keeps for just this purpose and fires a bullet at the closest shadow. He's rewarded with a puff of black smoke at the point of impact, though the null shadow survives.

"We should get out of here!" says Aravis.

"Yeah!" agrees Ernie.

REEAAAARGH! says Dranko.

Grey Wolf's summoning spell finishes, and three dire wolves appear along with a pair of regular-sized wolves. The smaller ones immediately attack the null shadows (to no effect, they being magical creatures) while the dire trio snap at the calves of the giants.

(*At this point, things have reached a near fever-pitch of chaos. The cavern now holds three giants, an illusionary hill giant, ten null shadows, three dire wolves, two normal wolves, an earth elemental, nine cave rats with strange abilities, a chain-wielding blade-surrounded armored guy, and a dead goat. And there's still whatever it is that threw the null shadow globe.*)

Aravis's new plan is to *dimension door* to Dranko's rescue (taking as many others with him as possible), have everyone else meet him there, and then have everyone *teleport* the heck out of there. Yoba, he thinks urgently, *run over to Dranko*.

Are you crazy? says Yoba. *Through the blades?*

Sorry, says Aravis, but you see those black things? They eat spellcasters.

They're very, very dangerous, adds Ernie.

More than a blade barrier? asks Yoba.

Much, says Aravis.

I'm taking this on faith, you know, says Yoba, as she grimaces and leaps through the wall of blades to Dranko. Her scream of pain en route lets the others know she didn't dodge as well as one would hope.

Snokas, lacking a non-magical weapon, falls back to stand next to Aravis. Morningstar fires a *darkbeam* at one of the giants, blinding it. It yells and waves its club around at nothing in particular.

Somehow, it gets worse. A *second* armored chain-thing rises up from the giants' fishing pool, where it had been lurking unseen since the start of combat. It wiggles its armored fingers and another *blade barrier* springs up, further partitioning the battlefield, separating party members from one another and making an orderly escape even less likely.

One of the two non-blind giants pastes a wolf with its club, while the other actually does some good and obliterates one of the null shadows with a single swing.

Ernie takes a moment to cast *true seeing*, while Kibi dismisses his enraged earth elemental. Aravis, sticking to the grab-Dranko-and-flee plan and finding lots of his comrades within arm's reach, casts *dimension door*... blindly into the back half of the cavern! They arrive in a mostly open section of cavern, but there's a small pile of rubble where Ernie would have ended up. The spell shunts him to a near-ish open space, which as luck would have it plops him down right next to the mass of null shadows! "Sh*t!" he yells. "Aravis!" Ernie feels a wave of pure evil wash over him – and no, it's not from the null shadows – as painful black pustules burst all over his skin. *Then* he's mobbed by null shadows, which leave him covered in smeary black wounds. The pain is intense, and he screams in anger and frustration.

Dranko tries to bull rush Yoba into the nearest *blade barrier*, but the paladin holds her ground. "Dranko? What are you..."

REEAAAARGH!

"He's gone crazy!" says Yoba, in case anyone hadn't figured that out by now.

"I've got to do something about Dranko," says Grey Wolf. Since chains seem to be all the rage these days, Edghar grabs a pile of small chains from Grey Wolf's belt and drops them near Dranko. Grey Wolf then casts *dancing chains* on them, and several manage to wrap up and grapple Dranko. The half-orc bellows in anger.

“Flicker!” yells Morningstar. “Go help Ernie!”

“That’s what I’m doing!” answers Flicker. He continues to fire sling bullets at the null shadows, and manages to bring one down. Morningstar decides that Dranko needs more than a grapple if they’re going to escape. She uses her *diamond of recall* to fill an empty spell slot with *break enchantment*.

One of the chain-things moves toward Grey Wolf and Aravis. Aravis resists the descent into madness, but Grey Wolf feels the rage take over his mind. He screams in anger and then glares menacingly at Aravis. The second chain-thing puts up a *third blade barrier*, further carving up the battlefield.

Ernie notices that the *blade barriers* don’t extend all the way to the ceiling of the cavern, so he activates his *winged shield* and flies upward. Unfortunately this provokes attacks from the null shadows, attacks which leave him nearly dead.

The original giants would now like nothing more than to flee the insanity, but there are whirling blades everywhere they look. (Clearly that hill giant is the ringleader, but his army of wolves, armored chain-wielders and magic-using rats is too much!)

Kibi puts up a *wall of force*, hoping to shield Ernie from attacks by the chain-things and giants. He tells everyone where it is over the mind-link, and has just finished when he sees a shadowy humanoid form detach itself from the mass of boulders in the back of the cavern. Flicker sees it too, since the person is coming straight for him. “It’s him, it’s him!” yells Flicker. “The guy! The shadow guy that had the dragon!”

He’s right. Guztha has returned. He had waited in careful ambush for the Company to appear, and had feared that all his preparations might be ruined by a stupid giantish fishing expedition. But the added chaos doesn’t appear to be hurting his chances. Now Guztha slashes Flicker with his sword, and then does some nasty evil mojo that makes Flicker’s skin erupt in painful black suppurations.

REEAAAARGH! yells Dranko again. He’s wrapped up in chains, but still tries to roll into Yoba. She hops back as he bites at her ankle.

Grey Wolf, just as mindless, attempts to attack the nearest chain-thing through a *blade barrier*. *Grey Wolf* admonishes Bostock. *What has gotten into you? You’re going to get your hand chopped off!*

REEAAAARGH! answers Grey Wolf. He swings through the blades and Bostock is knocked from his hand. It skitters to a stop on the far side of the barrier.

There follow a couple of failed attempts to get rid of pesky enemy spells. Yoba uses the *dispel magic* ability of her *holy avenger* but it fails to either cure Grey Wolf or drop any *blade barriers*. Morningstar’s *break enchantment* also does nothing about Grey Wolf’s mindless rage. Miffed, she pops off a Quickened *searing darkness* at the closest chain-thing, leaving a clean hole in its armor. Ernie, hovering above most of the battle, heals himself.

It’s sometime around now that the giants decide they’ve had enough. Blades be damned, they flee from this nightmare of flying spells and magic rats. Aravis grumbles as they go. “Great. Our best weapons against the null shadows are running away!”

Kibi casts *hold monster* on one of the chain-things and discovers the hard way that it has spell resistance. Aravis decides to skirt that issue and casts *maze* on Guztha. The shadow-servant of the Emperor vanishes into an extradimensional pocket.

Dranko figures he can do the greatest harm to the greatest number by dropping another *ice storm* on everyone around him, including himself. Maybe it’s the pain of falling ice chunks, but immediately afterward he comes abruptly to his senses, with full realization of what he’s been doing. *Oh, for crying out loud!* he thinks to the others.

Are you back? asks Ernie, rubbing a bruise on his head.

Yes, Dranko grumbles.

Having lost Bostock, Grey Wolf draws his backup longsword, a magical blade with an *undead bane* enchantment. He swings at Aravis, but misses.

While Flicker starts to gingerly unwrap Dranko’s chains, Ernie thinks to Yoba: *I need you to keep me on my feet while I take down those null shadows!* He lands to allow Yoba to touch him. Yoba responds by laying on hands, giving Ernie almost everything she has, including a double entendre. “Praise Yondalla,” says Ernie. “Yoba, you’ve probably just saved my life.”

As if the bad guys hadn’t filled the cavern with enough annoying walls, a new one springs up. This one’s a *wall of fire*, which scorches Aravis. (It might have burned Kibi as well, but his *mantle of spell resistance* protects him.) Aravis is just patting out

his robe when a chain-thing steps toward him... and *his* mind is overcome with a blinding anger. He turns to his most immediate nemesis: Grey Wolf.

Morningstar calls down a *flame strike* on a chain-thing, though a follow-up Quickened *searing darkness* fails to penetrate its spell resistance. Ernie draws his non-magical gartine sword and hacks a null shadow with it. Snokas notes the tactic and grabs a non-magical morningstar out of Morningstar's pack.

A second goat falls out of the shaft and lands with a meaty thunk under the foot of the ladder, but no one notices.

Kibi casts *xorn movement* to go *under* the blades, emerges, and casts a Quickened *earthbolt* at a chain-thing, but he is also foiled by its resistance. The frustration and trepidation among the Company grows more and more palpable by the second, and it occurs to more than one party member that there may be no good way out of this mess.

That doesn't occur to Aravis! In a frenzy he bull rushes Grey Wolf, but merely bounces off the spellsword's armor. Grey Wolf grins a manic grin and slashes back with his longsword. Null shadows continue to swarm around Ernie, while some sense the now closer Kibi and attack the dwarven arcanist instead. Dranko casts a ranged *cure* spell on Ernie, while Flicker draws a dagger and joins Ernie and Snokas in taking on the null shadows hand-to-hand.

Yoba tries another *dispel magic* from her sword, hoping to remove at least one of the *blade barriers*. Alas, as ill luck would have it, she only succeeds in removing the effects of the morning's *heroes' feast* from Aravis and Grey Wolf. Argh.

One of the chain-things annihilates two of the wolves, and a third chain strike scrapes Grey Wolf's armor. Morningstar tries to cast a *mass cure moderate wounds* but loses her concentration amid the ever-escalating chaos of battle. Not to be denied, she Quickens yet another *searing darkness* and drills a new hole in a chain-thing's armor.

Ernie finally gets a chance to launch a full attack at the null shadows around him. One Cleave later and he's killed two and wounded a third. Snokas lays down the smack with his morningstar and kills another. Kibi fires off two spells at the closest chain-thing – *coldfire* and a Quickened *earthbolt* – and the latter gets through its spell resistance. Its banded armor rattles painfully.

Another giant slides down the ladder and lands in the middle of the melee. He looks around, blinking in confusion. He had considered a few possible explanations for all the racket he was hearing, but this wasn't really what he was thinking of.

Aravis snarls at Grey Wolf, takes out his *vampiric rod*, and strikes Grey Wolf in the chest. Life force is drained from one wizard and deposited in the other. Sensing his strong arcane nature, the remaining four null shadows converge on him. One is finished off by Snokas but the remaining three bludgeon Aravis with their black vaporous fists. Worse than the damage, his most potent prepared spell – another *maze* – is wiped from his memory.

And speaking of which, Guztha finally finds his way out of the previous *maze* and takes stock of the situation. Annoyingly, none of this pesky band of do-gooders has been taken out yet. More than half his null shadows are gone, which means his foes must have figured out their weakness incredibly quickly. Grrrr. And his fearsome armored servants look decidedly beat up. At least their rage-inducing power has resulted in two of the enemy wizards trying to beat each other up. That's a plus.

Dranko tries to whip one of the chain-things through two *blade barriers*, but all he gets for his trouble is a nicked-up whip. The armored thing ignores him and lashes Grey Wolf twice at range with its chains, badly raking his face. Grey Wolf gets even more angry, if such a thing is possible. The second chain-thing moves toward Ernie, and while the halfling doesn't become enraged, he does get a barbed chain to the chin.

Flicker pops another null shadow with a sling stone, while Morningstar makes the decision to pull out her biggest gun. She shapes a *fire storm* to scorch her enemies, and when the black flames subside one of the chain-things collapses into a smoldering ruin. (This reveals that there's no body inside the armor, which doesn't actually surprise anyone.) Guztha, however, dances between the flames and seems entirely untouched by the inferno.

Ernie finally catches a glimpse of Guztha with his *true seeing* up, and does a double-take. Guztha is no human being, that's for sure. In fact... *He's a tiger-man!* Ernie thinks loudly over the mind-link. *The shadow-hopping guy is a tiger-man!* And it's true – Guztha is of a rare species of rakshasa, less magic-resistant than his brethren, but possessed of other dark powers. One of which, apparently, is the power to get pummeled by a *holy smite* from Ernie.

(The new giant comes to the only logical conclusion, similar to the earlier giants: the hill giant must be the leader. He swings his club at the illusion with gusto, overbalances, and nearly falls over. He ends up spending the rest of the combat furiously swinging at the illusory enemy before fleeing back up the ladder. The Company never see him again.)

Out of desperation as much as anything, Kibi decides to cast *hold monster* on Guztha. He knows that his *hold* spells almost never work, and Guztha is probably all kinds of immune to this sort of thing, but he tries it anyway.

Guztha comes to a sudden halt, his features frozen in place. "I got him!" cries Kibi exultantly. "I got him!"

And after that, it's mostly just a matter of mopping up. Oh, there's some additional excitement before the end. Dranko ends up getting enraged again, but he takes out most of his anger on the conveniently stationary Guztha before moving on to the wily hill giant. The remaining chain-thing gets a few more licks in on Dranko and Kibi. Aravis and Grey Wolf continue to trade blows, all the while ignoring the fact that they're taking continuous damage from the *wall of fire*. And the null shadows get a few more hits in.

But Snokas and Flicker slay the remaining null shadows, Morningstar's mass *cure* spells keep up with the escalating damage, and the chain-thing is struck by an *earthbolt* from Kibi, a powerful magical dagger attack from Flicker, a *flame strike* from Morningstar and (finally) a *searing light* from Ernie that finishes it off.

As for Guztha, he endures attacks from Dranko and Kibi before feeling life return to his limbs, but before he can take any actions Dranko delivers a final barrage of whip-strokes that knocks him unconscious. And when Dranko's enraged attention then turns to the hill giant, Ernie grabs *Beryn Sur* and finishes off the evil Guztha with one swift stroke.

It seems incredible, but the Company have emerged from the ambush with everyone still alive.

Whew.

Jackylhunter: Holy cow, that was a tense one. I thought for sure someone was going to die. Were those null shadows somehow more powerful?

I can totally imagine Kibi's reaction to having *hold monster* stick; it almost never does when my characters cast it either.

coyote6: Sheer chaos. Those PC reflexes ("Giants! Kill 'em!") sure can be amusing...

shilsen: Brilliant! Am I the only person who thought Dranko getting smacked by a dead goat was the best part of the encounter?

Piratecat: Quiet, you.

MavrickWeirdo: No, you are not the only one...

el-remmen: "He's a tiger-man!" I love it...

Solarious: Someone has been having a lot of fun with the Monster Manuals. I believe the chain-thing (a ragewalker) and the 'tiger-man' (a variant rakshasa... the shadowdancer version, I think?) are both possessed of the 3rd generation.

And the spellcasters hate the null shadows more than the *blade barriers*. That's just hilarious. But I share the sentiment that the falling goats were the perfect touch!

Tamlyn: Gotta say, I love the 3rd Monster Manual. There's all kinds of interesting stuff in there!

And quite the session. I have kind of a love-hate feeling towards those; they're tons of fun, but a pain to run. Sagiro, sounds like you did an excellent job keeping the illusions in play through the whole thing. How many times have DMs forgotten little things like this in all the chaos?

wolff96: Yeah, more Story Hour! And I'd give a lot to have a photo of PC's face when you asked for the Reflex save to avoid a falling goat... Of all the phrases a player *doesn't* expect to hear!

blargney the second: That was brilliant! I now understand what you said earlier about this being a particularly difficult session to transcribe. Wow.

RangerWickett: Nifty. Haha, you have super-rare monsters that no one will know how to hurt. Too bad your foes are time travelers!

I hope one of the PCs invests in Microsoft while he's in the past.

KidCthulhu: Ernie and Aravis were evil for a time. Does that count?

Zaruthustran: Speaking of which... Did the murder of helpless, KO'd Guztha seem like Good Ernie to you? Or did the proximity to the shadows bring back Bad Ernie?

Gold Roger: No, he's a fiend; even I have no compunctions about this one.

Solarious: Let's see... Evil minion of the Emperor escapes one encounter, sets up second encounter which threatens to kill them all, and one of the PCs decides it's too much trouble keeping him alive to set up a second ambush (involving more null shadows, probably)?

I'd give Ernie the benefit of the doubt and whistle innocently.

KidCthulhu: You know, it never occurred to me. We knew he could come out of the *hold* at any time, and he had abilities to move and escape and summon badness that might or might not be mentally triggered, so at the time it felt very much like we were in combat with him. No feeling that he was helpless.

Solarious: Yeah, he might return like Sagiro to bite you in the ass three years later...

Seis: The guy's a walking Bad Day. Wickedness incarnate and servant of the Emperor. Slippery as you please and twice as vicious. And, as we learned, he's a fiend to boot. Just because he lost a fight (that he himself started, thank you very much) does not all of a sudden turn him into innocent little Polly Pureheart.

So, no. That wasn't a resurgence of Bad Ernie. Yondalla's boy was doing just fine.

Zaruthustran: But he was unconscious, so mental abilities wouldn't work. I guess he could have been faking the KO. That's the part that seemed weird to me. Not that you guys whaled on a *held* foe, but that Ernie beheaded him when he was already neutralized.

No worries, though. Cool combat!

Everett: I'll chime in on the dead goat. Dead goat was rockin'.

Solarious: Sorry Piratecat, the masses have decreed that the falling of dead goats on Dranko was masterful. As do I...

Everett: I can just see something really classic in there about dead goats crossing roads.

KidCthulhu: There really are just not enough falling goats in modern D&D. I blame our permissive society. And Sagiro.

QR 80

Killer Magic Rats

The first thing that occurs to Aravis and Grey Wolf when the rage subsides is that it's uncomfortably hot, standing so close to a *wall of fire*. It's not long before it and the various *blade barriers* vanish, leaving the Company in a suddenly quiet cavern. Grey Wolf takes a few steps and picks up Bostock. *Grey Wolf! What happened to you?*

"I don't want to talk about it," Grey Wolf grumbles.

You were not yourself.

"That would be an accurate summary, yes."

You seem to have recovered. Are we out of danger? Are there more foes to be slain?

It appears not. The giants fled either in the direction from which the Company arrived, or into the vertical shaft in the ceiling, and there's no sign of them returning.

"Who wants healing?" calls Dranko.

"Me!" says Kibi, eager to be first in line. Then, always practical, he adds: "Let's not forget to collect the loot!" The chain-things and null shadows left nothing of value behind, but a search of Guztha's corpse nets four magic items: a mithril shirt, a silver ring, an ebony wand, and a shortsword. What they were hoping to find – but don't – was some correspondence to or from the Emperor. (In fact, Guztha had never returned to Emperor Naloric after his first failure. One does not go before the Emperor with a vital task unfinished if one expects to live. No, having realized he was up against casters, he had gone for the null shadow globe and a pair of *ragewind tokens* before picking up the scent of the Company again and planning an ambush.)

"I told you he had a backup plan," says Morningstar.

"I wonder how he found us again so fast?" muses Aravis.

"I think it's your blood," says Kibi. "I think he just... knows where you are."

There's a flurry of random discussions while some more healing is applied. Bostock manages to convince Grey Wolf not to decapitate Guztha's body out of hand. There's talk of casting *speak with dead* on Guztha's corpse, but it never gets further than that. There's also the worry that they'll possibly be leading more pursuers right to Cranchus, but Aravis points out that there's no use worrying about that as they can hardly turn back now. They should just go as quickly as they can to minimize the danger.

These conversations cease as Dranko holds up a hand and motions for quiet. In the silence that follows, everyone hears a noise from the ceiling shaft. It sounds like a giant is slowly descending the ladder – maybe trying to sneak down and away now that the fighting has stopped. Dranko readies his whip, moves to stand near the ladder and starts counting meaningfully downward from five. The giant responds in his foreign giantish tongue, and while his voice sounds panicky he keeps descending, until he finally drops down into the cavern next to Dranko. He looks down and raises his club.

"You know," says Kibi. "You still look like a rat."

Dranko practically smacks his forehead. "Oh, for the love of..." He strikes several times with his whip, though only to subdue. The giant, faced with a vicious whip-wielding rat, grabs the ladder and flees for his life back up the shaft.

"You're going to be single-handedly responsible for putting their whole race off rats as food," smirks Grey Wolf.

A thorough exploration of the back of the cavern reveals an exit tunnel, which, after it bends a few times over the course of fifty yards, ends at a thick wooden wall with a giant-sized door. They retreat back to the battle cave where Morningstar spends fifteen minutes praying for a new *find the path*. Hiding as best they can at the original front end of the cave, they hear the sound of the giant again, dropping down from the shaft. No one thinks it's worth bothering the poor thing at this point, and they listen to its retreating footsteps as it runs toward the giantish door. They hear a loud banging, followed by some giantish talk and a door creaking open. A few seconds later they hear it close again, followed by the noise of a bar dropping.

No surprise – the *find the path* indicates they need to go through that door after all. It's only a matter of minutes to walk back to it, at which point Aravis casts *gaseous form* on himself and slips underneath to see what's on the other side. He sees a giant sitting in a huge chair with his back to the door. He doesn't see Aravis, but does seem nervous and generally on the alert. Aravis slips back under the door, and there's a brief discussion on how to proceed.

Kibi finally activates his *ioun stone of tongues* and shouts out: "Hey, Mr. Giant over there! We're going to pass through. We don't mean you any harm. Er... unless you get in our way."

"**Who's that?**" barks the giant. They can hear the sound of him jumping up from his chair.

"Who do you think it is?" asks Kibi.

"**I don't know,**" answers the giant.

"You've noticed strange things happening recently, right?" prompts Kibi.

"**Um. I haven't seen anything, but... are you a rat?**"

"Maybe I am a rat," says Kibi menacingly. "Maybe I'm the ghost of every rat you giants have ever torn limb from limb or bashed with a club!"

"**What?**" replies the giant, now sounding confused.

"I think that's too much for him to understand," says Aravis.

Kibi sighs. "Let us through, and we'll just leave you alone. We won't have to break down your door or hurt anyone."

"**You can't break the door,**" answers the giant. "**You're a rat!**"

"Are you going to do what we ask, or not?" asks Kibi. "You'll regret it if you don't..."

"**Shoo!**" barks the giant. "**Shoo!**"

Aravis cracks his knuckles. "Are we ready to go?" There are nods all around, and Aravis casts *disintegrate* on the door. The entire thing turns to dust. The bar falls with a clank and the giant leaps back.

"We warned you!" says Kibi.

The giant stares down at the pack of rats and the remains of the door. A moment later he is running away down the tunnel, screaming at the top of his lungs. "**Help! Killer magic rats! Help, help! Killer rats! Killer magic rats!**"

"That was awesome!" says Dranko.

"Most impressive," Grey Wolf agrees.

"Do you think these things work for Crunchy?" ponders Morningstar.

"I think it's possible he enjoys having them there," says Aravis, "though I doubt they work *for* him."

Dranko chimes in. "My theory is that, now, in this point in time, Cranchus is evil. That's why he has evil giants working for him. And it's going to fall to us to turn him good."

"I don't believe it," says Kibi, affronted. "I'm sure he's good."

They continue on, following the *find the path*. It leads them through a snaking giant-sized tunnel which eventually opens into a truly enormous bowl-shaped cavern, easily several hundred yards on a side. They are up near the lip of the bowl, looking down upon the wooden and stone buildings of a giantish town.

"Aha!" says Dranko. "That shaft leads to their goat farm up on the surface. They drop down the goats for food to feed the village. It also explains how the bad guys got there before us. They came down the goat shaft."

According to Morningstar's spell, the best way to proceed has them going around the rim of the cavern, avoiding the town altogether. They can hear some commotion in the town, and in the light of torches they can see a dozen or so giants gathered in a central square. Kibi strains to hear, and it sounds like one is explaining that there might be an attack of super-rats, and they need to be prepared to defend the town. There's laughter at this notion. "**Just go back and get the goats, will you?**"

Kibi stifles a laugh.

The way out is much like the way in. This time the giant guarding the door is facing them, but word of the invading rat army hasn't yet gotten this far. It eyes the rats with detached interest.

"Let us through!" demands Kibi.

The giant looks around. "**Who's there?**"

"We're the magic rats!" says Kibi. "Let us through."

Talking rats?" The giant stands and takes a step toward them.

"Open the door, and we'll never bother you again. Otherwise we'll blow your door down and rats will attack your village!"

The giant chuckles. "**You're talking rats... talking rats... heh.**"

"I'm warning you," says Kibi. "Let us..."

The giant reaches down to pick up Kibi, but Dranko is ready for this. He whips the giant's hand, and the giant yanks his arm back in pain. "**Ow!**" he bellows.

"Let us through," says Kibi.

The giant peers down at the assembled rats. "**I'm going to have to discuss this with the chief,**" he says nervously.

"He won't believe you," says Kibi. "It would be easier for everyone if you just let us through."

The giant reaches down again, this time for Kibi's nonexistent tail. "**Hey,**" says the giant, puzzled. "**What the...**"

The next warning shot is a *lightning bolt* from Aravis. "**Aargh! Hey!**"

"We warned you," sighs Kibi.

"**Er... right,**" says the giant. "**Um... wait here! I'm getting the chief.**" And with that, the giant takes off running toward the town. A few minutes later, he's going to be surprised at how seriously everyone in Smashtown takes his warning.

While the giant flees, the Company use the giant's chair to reach and lift the bar on the door. On the other side, Aravis casts *arcane lock* on the door once they're through.

Find the path leads them down yet more giantish tunnels, always sloping downward, always getting just a little bit warmer. A few minutes later they find another wall-and-door blocking the passage, but it's long been abandoned, the door hanging open and the chair rotting.

On the other side, the *find the path* starts to waver, even though it's not due to expire for many more minutes. This seems like a good place to stop for the day and set up *rope tricks*. "Ordinarily I'd complain about being stuck in this featureless room again," says Flicker, once he's climbed the rope. "But it's hardly more claustrophobic than outside, and it's much cooler."

They use the opportunity to *identify* the magic items taken from Guztha. These include a *greater ring of cold resistance* (which he had acquired specifically because of Morningstar), a *wand of spell immunity* (which was specifically to insulate himself from *dimensional anchor*), a mithril shirt, and a +3 *shortsword of sure striking*.

QR 80

Morningstar's *find the paths* may no longer be functioning, but as there's only one way to continue the Company decide to press on until they reach a branch in the tunnel. For another hour the passage heads gently downward, and everyone is starting to sweat.

Kibi! exclaims Scree suddenly. *Do you feel that? It's... it's a little like Het Branoi. There's Earth Magic coming from somewhere.*

Kibi stops and concentrates. Yes! It's faint, but he can sense it in the rock around him. "Hey!" he says out loud. "It's kind of thrummy around here."

"Describe 'thrummy,'" says Aravis.

"Like Het Branoi," explains Kibi. "There's Earth Magic here." That prompts Morningstar to try casting another *sending* to Cranchus, but there's still no reply. It's hot enough now that the casters make sure everyone has an *endure elements* active.

They forge ahead and downward, leaving the giants far behind. (Not surprisingly, there is no sign of pursuit.) They start to see beetles in greater numbers, and a thick lichen growing on the warm tunnel walls. It begins to creep into some of their

minds that they might have missed some concealed branch and be headed for who-knows-where, when Dranko (still on point) sees that up ahead the tunnel opens into another large space illuminated by a ruddy glow. Scouting ahead, he finds that the cavern is huge, extending past the range of his darkvision in all directions. More significantly, though, this new cavern is bisected by a tremendous chasm, a hundred feet across and at least that deep. A river of lava runs along the chasm floor, and it's this that provides the illumination. Dranko peers down into it and feels the heat blast upward into his face.

A bit more scouting reveals that there's no way out of the cavern (aside from how they came in) on this side of the chasm. There's a broken-off stub of a stone bridge that extends maybe twenty or thirty feet over the lava-filled ravine. Dranko casts *detect magic* and finds that the bridge is real and solid enough, for as far as it goes. He laments not having Kay around to check for traps.

When the rest of the party get the all-clear from Dranko, Morningstar arrives first and casts three *thought captures* at the foot of the bridge. The first thought: *It's going to take forever to smash this bridge*. The second thought: *I hope Smash is right about the things not flying*. She guesses that both of these thoughts are from one of the giants. The third thought is from Dranko: *Nope, not an illusion!*

Kibi examines the broken bridge, musing on its strength and construction and what it must have taken to destroy it. He makes the mistake of using the word 'buttress' within earshot of Dranko, who immediately starts to chuckle. "Buttress. Kibi said 'buttress.' Hee hee."

Grey Wolf rolls his eyes. "At least you're good looking," he says to Dranko.

Bridge or no bridge, the Company don't consider the ravine much of an obstacle. They use *wind walk* to drift out over the chasm toward the far side.

They're thirty feet across when the spell starts to fail.

blargney the second: Dun dun DUNNNN...

Zaruthstran: Wow, nice "Doh!" moment.

Brogarn: *envisions Wile E. Coyote cartoon* Tell me... the players didn't happen to have picket signs with "UH OH" written on them, did they?

KidCthulhu: No, we had tiny comedy umbrellas.

Brogarn: Either way, don't look down! Soon as you do, you fall. At least according to the physics I learned every Saturday morning.

Everett: Physics taught you that you fall if you look down while flying magically over a giant chasm? Hmm. That's some kind of new-age physics to me...

Sejs: You never read any of the works that Professor Coyote published? He's a super-genius, you know.

Everett: No, I'll take 'celebrity dirt' instead for \$200.

darkhall-nestor: I have only had a few opportunities to play D&D since high school and after reading this post and a few others I have rekindled an interest in gaming I thought I had outgrown. I recently found a large stash of all my first edition AD&D rulebooks and modules and am having a good time reading through them. I wondered if Sagiro, Piratecat or Spyscribe or anyone else of their caliber have considered publishing a printed version. I thank you for reigniting my interest. My wife, however, does not...

Dawn: Same thing happened to me. I totally missed 2nd Edition and got back into it in time to get 3rd as it came out (and then upgrade to v3.5 – for more money of course).

Graywolf-ELM: Our group was still forming when 3.5 was just coming out; we were able to skip 3.0 and go straight to 3.5 without the sidelined books. These Story Hours and this forum have helped keep my interest in the game going as well.

KidCthulhu: Welcome back! If you'd like to get your wife interested in gaming, I'd suggest starting with something like Spycraft or d20 Modern. Many people who can't wrap their heads around the concept of gaming have problems because they don't know what a wizard would do in a given situation. But most people have seen an action or spy movie. It's easier for them to visualize the situation when you say "OK, you're trying to break into the vault at the Bellagio casino" than it is to say "You're confronting the dark naga." And with familiarity comes enjoyment and willingness to try other things. Pick a movie you've both seen, like *Charlie's Angels* or something like that and model a simple adventure on that. And because they're d20 systems, when you go to move to D&D, many of the mechanics will be familiar and will work the same way!

Sagiro: It's extremely gratifying to know that our stories have inspired people to get back into this wonderful hobby. As for darkhall's specific question, trying to write out my campaign as a publishable setting would take much, much more time than I have available.

I will point out, for the few who don't know, that Piratecat is a published module author (*Of Sound Mind*).



Earth Magic

"We're sinking!"

There's panic in Flicker's voice. They're not sinking fast, and that's something, but the *wind walk* no longer seems strong enough to keep them aloft. In only a few seconds they are below the edges of the chasm and wafting downward toward the lava.

They're still closer to where they started than they are to the far side, so the Company do an about face and fly back, but it's no good – for every foot they travel laterally they sink a foot vertically. Desperately they scan the ravine wall for ledges, and Ernie spots one about forty feet below the cliff edge. It's not clear that they'll make it, but there's no better alternative.

They barely reach the shelf. It's a ledge long enough for all of them to stand on, but extremely narrow – not more than two feet wide. Soon they are all standing on the ledge, backs to the wall. Staying in wind form makes it easier to stay balanced, and that's a good thing, what with the river of lava flowing below. The heat is intense.

As dire straits go, though, this one isn't so bad. Dranko and Flicker come out of wind form and proceed to scale the cliff face until they're safely up at the top. Dranko activates the *immovable rod* given him by One Certain Step, and Flicker deftly ties a rope around it, sending the loose end over the edge to those waiting below.

Ernie goes first, turning solid and keeping his balance while tying the rope around his waist. (Every member of the Company is an expert at tying ropes around their waists, since that was Standard Operating Procedure when going through the Ways of Het Branoi.) Dranko and Flicker heave and pull Ernie up to safety. He's a surprisingly heavy load – it must be all the plate mail. “Why didn't I make you float-y armor?” grumbles Dranko.

“Because you were too busy making fart-y armor,” says Ernie with a smile. (Which is true. Ernie's armor, you may recall, makes a flatulent sound when the pinky of the left gauntlet is pulled.)

Len: Makes me wonder what sort of presents show up under the Christmas tree in the Piratecat household...

Piratecat: We have a tradition of putting funny little surprises into magic items we make. Sadly, this usually means “Kibi plays embarrassing pranks on Dranko.” One of them is related to the Kibi-made *sash of greater invisibility* that Dranko wears, and that gets revealed fairly soon. Stupid dwarf.

shilsen: Let me guess – when he activates it the sash turns invisible and remains invisible even when Dranko attacks...

Everyone is soon safely back at “ground level,” looking down at the lava and breathing sighs of relief. Dranko reverts to wind form, but while he can assume the misty aspect, he can't gain any elevation. Something has severely degraded the magic of the *wind walk*. Aravis casts *greater arcane sight* and notes right away that Earth Magic is all around them, emanating from the surrounding stone. He also sees that the *wind walk* effect on folks is weakened almost to the point of being dispelled. “I suspect this Earth Magic saturation will prevent us from doing any kind of flying,” he says.

Squinting across the chasm, Morningstar thinks she can just make out a tunnel mouth on the far side, but she's not sure. The wizards could *dimension door* or *teleport* across, but it's so dim on the other side they're reluctant to take the risk. Flicker is able to solve that problem; with his amazing climbing skills he scales one of the cavern walls and then picks his way *across the ceiling*. The rough, natural stone provides him all the hand- and foot-holds he needs, and though it takes him almost an hour he crosses the chasm and climbs down on the other side. Once there he lights a torch, and when he reports over the mind-link that the ground around him is relatively flat, the wizards are able to *dimension door* the Company across. There they find that Morningstar was correct: there's a narrow tunnel here bored into the rock wall.

“Let me just remind everyone,” says Dranko, peering down into the tunnel, “that the giants smashed that bridge because they were afraid of the monsters that live over here on this side.”

They're out of *find the paths* but since there's only one tunnel out, they figure it won't lead them astray. It's low and narrow, squeezing the Company into a single-file line in the darkness. Dranko is still on point, warning the others over the mind-link where he encounters treacherous footing. After half an hour he thinks he sees the tunnel terminate at a pit, but when he gets closer he discovers that the tunnel dips sharply down and becomes almost vertical for ten feet before leveling out again. Carefully they navigate the bend, and while there are no traps or monsters to be seen, Kibi does clearly feel the Earth Magic in his bones that Scree described earlier, in almost Het Branoi-ish quantities.

So it is that when the Company reach a T-junction with no signs to suggest one way or the other, Kibi is able to concentrate on the Earth Magic around him and determine the way from which it generally emanates. “The right fork,” he says after a time.

“Why?” asks Flicker.

“The Earth Magic is stronger that way. More thrummy. Can't you feel it?” Well, no, of course Flicker can't. Neither can anyone save Kibi and Scree, but the group trust the dwarf's judgment, and on they go.

Not long after that the tunnel opens into a large-ish cavern with three possible ways out. Two of these are at ground level, while the third is high up on the cavern wall, reachable by a narrow sloping ramp of stone. “Time to use the dwarven dowsing rod,” says Aravis.

While Kibi concentrates, Dranko hears an odd sound emanating from one of the ground-level tunnels. It sounds like a tiny rockslide, and before there can be much discussion about what it might be, a strange rat comes scurrying out of the tunnel. Everyone can see at once that it's not normal: its skin is rough, gray, almost stony, and it has no fur. On closer examination they see its rat-shape is only approximate, more like a rat-shaped collection of rocks with a tail. In fact, it resembles nothing so much as a cross between Scree and a cave rat. "That's pretty cool!" exclaims Kibi.

"No," corrects Grey Wolf. "That's just *wrong*."

"Should I check out the tunnel?" asks Dranko.

"Nah," says Aravis. "Let's wait for Kibi, and stay on target."

A few more earth-rats follow the first, and they swarm over a piece of food that Dranko tosses to them. Kibi finally decides that the Earth Magic is strongest in the other ground-level tunnel, so Flicker and Dranko go on ahead to scout and check for traps.

It's about equal parts tunnels and caverns, all highly reminiscent of the caves they traversed while searching for Carbuncle. Every time there's a question of which way to go, Kibi provides an answer with a minute or two of effort. They joke as they travel that, while they're here so far in the past, they should just write the *Prophecies of the Orcish Crusades* themselves, and leave copies strewn around the place. "Dear Okhot One-Eye," says Aravis, imagining how he'd start it off. "The Bloodseer is a traitor..."

Flicker interrupts the frivolous mind-link banter. "Dranko, look out! Back, back, back!" The tunnel they're in is narrow – maybe six feet wide and seven feet high. Dranko instinctively leaps back and catches a glimpse of movement as he does so. A few feet ahead of him something is dripping down from the ceiling through wide cracks.

No, he corrects himself quickly. *Not dripping, so much as pouring*. Black goo is spilling down from above and pooling on the floor of the tunnel. The rate at which it collects is astonishing, and as Flicker and Dranko hop further back it begins to fill up the tunnel ahead of them. It's like thick black tar mixed with gravel. It smells like acid.

Fall back! Dranko thinks urgently to the others, who have just stepped into the tunnel from a cavern a hundred feet back. The rest of the Company take his advice, retreating back to the cavern while Flicker and Dranko start to run. *Back to the cavern, and hammer it with spells!* thinks Dranko.

Flicker and Dranko are going as fast as they can now, chased by a grinding, sloshing sound and an acidic tang. Dranko looks back over his shoulder and sees that the black goo is filling the entire tunnel and spilling toward them like an acidic wave. As soon as he and Flicker escape the tunnel, Dranko buys them some time with a *wall of ice* cast a few feet in. Everyone backs up, spells ready for when the monstrous ooze emerges. They hear the hissing of the wall of ice dissolving under the onslaught...

With a tremendous **splosh** the black blob comes gushing out of the tunnel mouth, expanding as it enters the larger cavern. All told it's almost twenty feet around and piled up taller than a halfling, a seething mass of acidic goo mixed with stones. Aravis greets the Earth Ooze with a *disintegrate*, but only a tiny section of it bubbles away. Morningstar follows with a *searing darkness*, and Grey Wolf with a *lightning bolt*. To his dismay, the bolt becomes diminished as soon as it leaves his fingertips; the Earth Magic around them has a suppressing effect on it. Dranko strikes it with his whip, while Kibi casts *earthbolt* and Ernie uses a wand of *searing darkness*.

On the one hand the Earth Ooze isn't hard to hit, but on the other hand, the sum of all these attacks doesn't seem to have made much of dent in the huge thing. The Earth Ooze extends a pseudopod and lashes out at Ernie. It strikes the halfling and sets his armor smoking, but with his *belt of equality* (which grants him the same size bonus as his opponent for all opposed grapple checks) Ernie manages to break free of its oozing grasp.

Aravis smiles and casts *maze*. The Ooze vanishes, leaving only a lingering acrid smell behind. It's a good bet that the Ooze, lacking a notable intelligence, will be in there for the full duration of the spell. Dranko wastes no time in producing his *decanter of endless water* and spraying down Ernie's dissolving armor. He's in time to save it from total destruction but while it retains its magical properties, it's still full of holes. "We want to be very far away from here ten minutes from now," says Grey Wolf, gesturing back into the tunnel.

Kibi casts an enclosing *wall of stone* where the Ooze will be when it emerges from the *maze*, and the Company beat a hasty exit from the cavern. On and on they go into the darkness, and downward, always downward. The heat continues to grow steadily, becoming uncomfortable to those without *endure elements* in place. Then Dranko reports that for a second time the tunnel is sloping downward, but this time curves down to become a vertical shaft whose bottom is beyond his *darkvision*. They jam the *immovable rod* into a rocky corner, activate it, and Flicker ties one end from the *bag of endless rope* around it. Dranko then rappels down, reporting mentally as he goes.

It's fortunate that the bag has much rope as it does – it's over two hundred feet down before Dranko's feet touch the ground! The shaft is irregular in width and not exactly straight, but is consistently narrow – narrow enough, in fact, that at the bottom Dranko is obliged to stand sideways. He informs the others that he's in a cramped crevasse that stretches away in both directions, with a ceiling of about eight feet once beyond the shaft itself.

Down they go. It's not as perilous at it seems at first, since the chimney is so narrow that if one were to slip from the rope, one could simply extend one's legs and become wedged in. But it takes a long time to descend (with Flicker coming last, having retrieved the *immovable rod*), and the bottom is a claustrophobe's nightmare. They are obliged to line up in single file, and when Kibi indicates which way they should go (the Earth Magic has reached new heights of intensity down here) the non-halflings have to walk sideways in order to fit. Kibi thinks that lava has passed through this subterranean crack, though not recently.

The gap slowly becomes narrower, until Snokas has to back everyone up a few feet and shimmy out of his armor. He drags it behind him as they continue on – it's the only way both he and the armor will fit. But just when it seems the fissure will become untenably narrow, it empties the Company into the largest single cavern they've ever seen.

How, you might ask, can they tell the size of the cavern, given that their *darkvision* only extends sixty feet? It's because the whole of the cavern, eighty feet high and well over a hundred feet across, is illuminated by the green glow of an enormous emerald embedded in the center of the ceiling. It's a bit tricky to gauge accurately, given the perspective, but Flicker estimates that the visible face of the emerald is over eight *feet* in diameter.

Dranko drops to his knees. "Oh, Delioch. I know I haven't been the best cleric, but I thank you for answering all my prayers. I'll be a good half-orc from now on." Flicker just stands there, his mouth hanging open, his eyes wide.

Kibi, while acknowledging the emerald is impressive, also notes that the far wall of the cavern is unusually flat – neither exactly natural nor wholly man-made. Perhaps it's natural stone that's been magically reinforced? He's not sure.

Grey Wolf taps Flicker on the shoulder. "How do you expect to *carry* that?"

Flicker shakes his head. "I can just climb up there and start chipping bits away. They fall, we collect them, and..."

"Flicker," interrupts Aravis. "Have you noticed that the emerald is *glowing*? Perhaps chipping bits out of it would be a bad idea."

"Delioch is making it glow so that I can see it, and take it home..." says Dranko reverently.

"Don't lick it!" says Ernie, suddenly alarmed.

Dranko turns and grins at him. "Licking it is first on the agenda."

"How much do you think it's worth?" asks Snokas, putting his armor back on.

Flicker gazes upward. He doesn't have a good frame of reference for something like this, but he does some quick math in his head. "I'd say it's worth about four or five Charagans," he declares.

"How much is that in gold pieces?" asks Aravis.

"I don't know," answers Flicker. "I can't count that high."

Dranko just giggles like a little kid. "This is the best day of my life," he says. He hasn't taken his eyes off the emerald for one second since emerging into this cavern.

Ernie nudges him. "Except for the day you married Morningstar," he prompts.

"Right, right," says Dranko. "Except for that."

"I don't think I believe you," says Morningstar, grinning at her husband.

el-remmen: This struck me last night for some reason: Do you, Sagiro (or any of your players), recall at which point in the campaign you guys were at when the Story Hour began to be written? That is, how long was it until the Story Hour "caught up" to where you had been in game when you starting posting these?

Dang, I know what I am asking and my question still seems unclear to me!

StevenAC: I'm not Sagiro, but I can have a go at answering your questions...

The earliest Story Hour posts, now long since vanished, appeared some time in January 2001. At that point in the campaign, the Company had just been drawn into the Crosser's Maze – around session 106 or so (in chapter 5 of the compiled SH).

Some time in the third quarter of 2001, the Story Hour posts had completely caught up with the campaign – certainly by session 121 (the aftermath of the battle with Restimar) at the beginning of October, the players and audience alike were avidly discussing what would happen next...

So it probably took six or seven months for Sagiro's posts to get to the Crosser's Maze adventure. Hope that helps...

KidCthulhu: And at this point, the story is trailing about a year or so behind. It's gotten terrible, with Sagiro trying to have a family and a life and do his job. His priorities are so outta wack.

Dranko tears his eyes off the green gem and looks at his wife. "Morningstar, I would not throw you over for that emerald. I'd cry, sure, but I'd pick you every time."

CTSparky: This had me rolling. I wonder how many times I have been caught like that...

Having said that, he turns to Flicker. "Here's what we need to do. We rig up a harness with the *immovable rod* and some rope up there on the ceiling. I've got a pick and some chisels."

"Yup," agrees Flicker. "First order of business is getting it out of the roof."

While Flicker and Dranko scheme, the others start to cast around glances, looking for exits but seeing none. Morningstar casts *true seeing* and sees nothing hidden or illusory. The emerald is really an emerald, albeit magical. Eventually they decide to send a group, led by Kibi and Flicker, out to investigate the flattish wall on the far side of the cavern. Dranko, Morningstar and Snokas hang back in case of emergency.

Slowly the group walk into the expansive emptiness, their faces and armor green from the light of the gem above. Flicker, who's supposed to be checking for traps, keeps looking up longingly. And right about when he's underneath it, the emerald moves.

With a grinding sound of rock on rock, the emerald slides slowly out of the ceiling, but this is no falling rock trap. No, what comes out of the ceiling of this cavern is an earth elemental, a creature so large that the enormous emerald turns out to be one of its *eyes*. Another emerald comes into view as the head emerges, and the enormous body follows. The mountainous form flips around, and a sixty-foot-tall earth elemental crashes to the ground feet first, its green eyes blazing. The impact of its landing sends most of the Company sprawling onto the ground.

Kibi finds himself looking up at Scree writ large, a veritable tower of rock and magic, whose idling stance fills the air with a cacophony of grinding stone. It's the second largest creature they've ever seen – if the Ventifact Colossus had a rider suited for its length, this might be it.

Kibi gulps. "**HELLO!**" he shouts up, speaking in Terran. "**HOW DO YOU DO? WE MEAN YOU NO HARM!**" Over his empathic link with Scree, he thinks: *Smile!*

In a voice like an earthquake the Elemental intones: **EARTH MAGE.**

"**YES,**" agrees Kibi. "**IS THAT OKAY?**"

"Kibi!" whispers Ernie. "Is it angry?"

"I don't know!"

Aravis waves at the elemental in what he hopes is a friendly manner. Dranko hurriedly stows his pick.

Then, speaking again to the Elemental, Kibi continues. "**I AM AN EARTH MAGE, AND I LOVE THE EARTH. IT FEELS SO WONDERFUL IN HERE, ALL FULL OF EARTH MAGIC...**"

The elemental rumbles again, its voice rising like an approaching avalanche.

EARTH MAGE... DIE!

coyote6: Ooh, a natural 1 on the Diplomacy check!

KidChulhu: Not really. It's not so much that he failed his Diplomacy as that... well, stay tuned.

el-remmen: Awesome. I have to say I was surprised and delighted with what the emerald turned out to be.

shilsen: A sixty-foot tall elemental whose eyes are each eight feet in diameter? Ye gods – it's either an anime character or Mickey Mouse!

Joshua Randall: I thought maybe the giant, glowy emerald was somehow enchanting Dranko and Flicker. But I guess it was just well role-played greed.

RangerWickett: Okay, I feel suddenly confused. Who is Flicker? For some reason I was getting him confused with Pewter, the cat. So it was obviously disconcerting to have a cat climbing on the ceiling, 'finding handholds' and 'lighting torches'.

Sejs: The halfling that isn't Ernie. Rogue. Was imprisoned in a big sapphire once, has guilt issues about causing the deaths of former party members via trap, his folks own an inn, etc.

Everett: He's also the only remaining member of the party that's a permanent NPC, with One Certain Step having played his role out. Maybe that's what was confusing RangerWickett.

Zaruthstran: Snokas is a cohort, right? Of Morningstar?

Sejs: Yep, half-orc bodyguard. Swings a mean pick. Makes a good... palatable... makes black lizard pie.

arwink: I have to say, the thing that impressed me most about the last update was the ooze. I normally don't use oozes and other gunk monsters, primarily because they've never seemed frightening above and beyond their stats and place in D&D history. After reading the encounter above, I may have to revise my opinion.

Piratecat: That ooze scared the *crap* out of me. This was the session that was defined by "Dranko fails at everything he does"! It wasn't Sagiro's fault – we just didn't attack anything even remotely sneak-attackable, and I made some questionable tactical choices, and I had had a crappy day after which I wanted to kick ass and take names. It's really fun for me to read this after a year or two, because it's not quite as bad as I remember. But I still didn't hurt anything. Thank goodness Sagiro didn't have my whip completely dissolve.

And man, that was some emerald. Speaking for Dranko, he was downright *insulted* that it was attached to a creature.

el-remmen: Hey! I was just browsing the campaign website and discovered you have a god named after Yankees catcher, Jorge Posada! That's just not right...

Tamlyn: Especially for a bunch of Boston natives! I also seem to remember Nikolai Khabibulin the netminder in there as well.

Shmoo: Sagiro uses tons of baseball names in his campaign. Embree (before he played for Boston) and Conine also come to mind. I'm sure there are tons more.

el-remmen: *Baseball* names are one thing (I use them, too), but *Yankees* names are a whole other animal (suitable only for villains, if that)...

KidCthulhu: Agreed! Then again, Posada was the cranky god of the sea who was fighting with *our* god of the sea, so he's at least not a good guy.

When Grey Wolf's player joined the game, Sagiro had to cut down on the sports names, because that player actually has the same level of sports mania, and is likely to recognize them and call Sagiro on them.

Kestrel: Quick question: What rules are you guys using for whips? I noticed that Dranko uses his magic whip against armored foes, which wouldn't do damage normally. Is it a house rule, or a special Lasher thing? (I ask because I've tried emulate it in a few games, but the GMs generally shoot the idea down.)

coyote6: If it's the Lasher prestige class from *Sword & Fist*, then yeah, they can do regular damage with whips. I believe it was a 1st-level ability.

Piratecat: Yup! It's the 3E Lasher class, common-sense-converted to 3.5. I'd probably be more effective with another weapon, but when you're a black-clad half-orc who's desperate to look cool, whips are *de rigueur*.

Kestrel: I'll have to dig out my old books to check it out. I like whips myself, but they are hard to use as a main weapon normally (unless you go with a whip-dagger, which IMHO is just a dumb idea).

Another question, which may serve as a bump. How was Grey Wolf's sword handled? Did it get XP to open up its abilities or just DM fiat?

Everett: 'Twas XP, was it not?

Sagiro: Once Grey Wolf had used him to inflict certain damage thresholds, I'd look for the next dramatically appropriate moment to bring out his next "upgrade."

OR SO

Hi everyone. Updates are likely to be even fewer and farther between than usual for the next couple of months. We're "crunching" on *BioShock* at work, which means late nights every night and leaving me even less time than usual to work on the Story Hour. I'm still chipping away, 10 minutes here, 20 minutes there, but it's pretty grim.

And here's a very short update, but hey, it's an update!

thatdarncat: Sagiro, don't worry about the frequency of updates. We understand how work is, and we're more than happy to have updates whenever your schedule allows.

blargney the second: My sentiments exactly. Thanks for the update!

Destil: [Sagiro, don't worry about the frequency of updates. We understand how work is. We are awaiting Bioshock as eagerly as your next story hour update, and we're more than happy to have updates whenever your schedule allows...] Fixed that for you...

Solarious: You work on Bioshock. I'll support your writing by buying the game when it comes out. See? It'll all work out...

Rumbler

The enormous elemental swings a massive arm like a battering ram. Kibi feels all the breath knocked out of him as a fist the size of a kitchen table lifts him bodily off the ground. Some twenty feet back he lands with a heavy thud on the stone floor. For a moment he lies there, dazed, blinking.

A second fist swings ponderously through the air, clipping the ground and breaking off bits of it before connecting with Ernie. The halfling goes flying through the air to land with a clang near one wall of the cavern.

Dranko looks up in a panic. "What do we do? What do we do!?"

"Holy crap!" is Aravis's less-than-helpful response. "I don't know." To buy some time, he casts *maze*. The elemental vanishes.

Dranko's panic spreads to the others. Is there any way out of here? "Craaaaaaaan-chuuuuuuuss!?" calls Ernie. All of the Company are wondering: if the huge stone guardian is a servant of Cranchus, why is it attacking them? And if it's not – well, still, why is it attacking them? Why would it hate Earth Mages, who normally share a strong affinity with its kind? Has it already killed Cranchus?

The Company spread out, searching desperately for a hidden exit from the cavern but not finding one. And less than thirty seconds later there's a *whoosh* and a pop and the colossal elemental reappears in a cacophony of grinding stone.

Ernie looks up and pleads. "Please, we don't mean you any harm!" The elemental looks down and grumbles ominously.

"Should I attack it?" asks Yoba urgently. "What's the plan?"

"Wait!" exclaims Kibi, who still feels like his teeth are shaking from the elemental's fist. "I'll drop a wall." And he does so, placing a *wall of force* between himself and the elemental. It's not much given the sizes involved, but he puts it thirty feet off the ground, thirty feet high, and makes it fifty feet long. Kibi knows the creature can trivially get around the wall, but it will buy them an extra few seconds to think of something.

"What are we doing?" says Dranko, echoing Yoba's thoughts. "Are we attacking?"

"Well, he doesn't like me much..." says Kibi.

Dranko sights and lashes with his whip. The elemental is easy to hit – it makes the broad side of a barn look small by comparison – but its natural resistance to damage minimizes the effect of Dranko's weapon. A few small chunks of stone are knocked out of its ankle. "Back, back you fiend!" he cries out.

Grey Wolf's attack is more effective. He launches an *acid orb* at the elemental, dissolving a nice-sized piece of its leg. Morningstar follows up with a *flame strike* that leaves scorched, smoking rocks behind. Snokas fires some arrows from a distance, but they plink harmlessly off its body.

Yoba grits her teeth and charges, knowing what will happen. Sure enough, the elemental clobbers well before she gets close enough to swing, sending her flying backwards. Lying on the ground she groans, "I've gotten its attention..."

There's now an increasing body of evidence that spells are the way to go against this behemoth. Ernie casts *flame strike* and Aravis casts *cone of cold*. The elemental has not felt pain such as this for as long as it can remember. For a second time it brings its fist down on Kibi, but it comes up short, blocked by the top of the *wall of force*. It grumbles for a second, pondering, and then sinks bodily into the ground. Everyone prepares their responses for when it next emerges, which includes Kibi casting *Otto's irresistible dance* from a scroll.

The elemental emerges from the floor on the far side of the cavern, leaving the Company out of reach of its powerful fists. But there's method to its madness – it bends down until its head is at ground level, opens its mouth, and breaths an avalanche of boulders that rolls beneath the *wall of force* and smashes through the ranks of the party. Dranko is able to dodge, and Aravis avoids damage by using his *ring of evasion*. Everyone else is battered, with Ernie and Kibi taking a particularly severe pounding.

More spells fly at the elemental: a *darkbeam* from Morningstar, a *sonic orb* from Grey Wolf and a *prismatic spray* from Aravis. (This last one strikes the creature with two beams, one doing acid damage, and the other – ha ha – turning it to stone.) The stone beast roars and rumbles like a living earthquake. Is it starting to look unsteady, or are the Company just imagining it?

Ernie heals himself, and Dranko heals Kibi. Dranko and Snokas then both take up positions between the Elemental and Kibi. "It's like I cast *wall of half-orcs*," mutters Kibi.

The elemental swings, and Dranko goes flying backward. Its second swing is aimed unerringly at Kibi, but somehow Snokas manages to whisk him out of harm's way, absorbing the blow in the dwarf's stead. It's a particularly gruesome attack, smashing Snokas backward and off his feet with a sound of crunching bones. Kibi winces. "I take back everything bad I ever said about half-orcs!"

EARTH MAGE!

The roar is so loud that small stones fall from the ceiling from the very sound of it.

Morningstar casts a powerful *mass cure*, while Aravis and Grey Wolf both nail the elemental with *cones of cold*. Now it's abundantly clear that the elemental is riddled with cracks, with large chunks broken off or frozen or dissolved. Are they close to defeating it?

A huge humanoid figure appears in the cavern, standing forty feet tall. It looks like a cross between a dwarf and an earth elemental. It looks down upon the assembled company and its voice booms out. "WHO DARES APPROACH MY DOM... WELL, BLESS MY BEARD!"

Kibi looks up at the giant dwarf. "Why is your elemental so angry with me? Just because I'm an Earth Mage?"

The huge dwarf raises an eyebrow. "WHO ARE YOU?"

"If you'd answer *sending* spells, you'd know," mutters Dranko.

"My name is Kibilhathur Bimson," says Kibi. "What's yours? And if that elemental is a friend of yours, could you ask him to stop attacking us?"

"RUMBLER! BACK IN THE GROUND!" The enormous elemental sinks into the rocky cavern floor.

Piratecat: We didn't get the giant emerald eyes. Why didn't we get the giant emerald eyes...? *sob*

KidCthulhu: Because Greed is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, and Sagiro was looking out for Dranko's immortal soul.

Plus, no one *really* wants to know what Dranko would have done with that stone had he gotten his hands (and other parts of him) on it.

Graywolf-ELM: At the very least, he would have licked it? Or did I get my Story Hours crossed again?

"Excuse me," pipes up Ernie. "We need you to fix the Eyes of Moirel."

"WERE YOU FOLLOWED?"

"Yeah," admits Ernie. "But we killed the guy."

"WAIT THERE."

The dwarf vanishes. A moment later, at the base of the strangely flat side of the cavern, a small doorway appears as if created with *stone shape*. Out comes the dwarf, still tall for its race, standing almost five feet high. It seems made of stone as much as flesh.

"How do you do?" asks Kibi, approaching him.

"I do well," says the dwarf. "Kibilhathur Bimson, my name is **Cranchus**, but I'm guessing you know that. You'd better come inside."

Seeing the two dwarves facing one another, the family resemblance is unmistakable.

Joshua Randall: Looks like Cranchus has been taking lessons from the Wizard of Oz.

Everett: One still wonders if his beard was a blessed one, though.

CTSparky: I like the way this is going with Cranchus. Oh, to see the full family tree would be a wonderful thing.

Everett: Confused... Are we in a different time period than the last time they talked with Cranchus? If not, then I have no clue at all.

Sagiro: The party have never met Cranchus before. They've heard of him a few times – a reclusive and mysterious dwarven wizard who has helped the Spire on occasion (though no one in the Spire has ever actually seen him).

The Company is currently about 2000 years in the past, which would make the Cranchus they've heard about in their "normal present" extremely old. (Though that's not without precedent among the Archmagi – recall that Abernathy was about 900 years old at the time of his death.) The party's current quest is to find a way to return to their own time, and they think that Cranchus – an Earth Mage himself – can repair the Eyes of Moirel in order to facilitate that.

Shmoo: Perhaps you're mixing up Cranchus with the halfling (whose name currently escapes me) who looks like Ernie?

Everett: No, it was something/someone else who they *did* encounter... It's going to bug me until I figure it out.

LightPhoenix: I think I know what you're talking about, but I can't remember it either! Argh!

Everett: It was a certain scenario, certainly no more than twenty or thirty runs back... where someone important was talking to Ernie, and it wasn't Cranchus? Was it before the tentacle battle where One Certain Step fulfilled his prophecy? No... was it not long afterwards? That's my intuitive feeling about it... Could be I'm just inventing mirages, though.

Everett: On [page 357]:

IT'S NICE TO MEET YOU, ERNEST WILBURFORCE ROUNDHILL.

Who are you? Do you have a name?

WE DO NOT TAKE NAMES TO OURSELVES. THAT IS A POWERFUL ARTIFACT YOU WEAR.

Cranchus gave it to me.

A WISE DWARF HE IS. HE KNOWS OUR WAYS.

OK, then.

KidCthulhu: Quite true this is. Because in various prophecies, the belt Ernie wore was referred to as "Cranchus' Gift." We hadn't met him, but as it was his gift, Ernie felt safe invoking his name.

Everett: I'm pretty much satisfied that that's what I was thinking of...

CHAPTER 20

Back to the Future

sniffles: I've got a question regarding the Story Hour itself. I maintain four Story Hours for my group, and no non-players ever post in them. The players don't post in them often, either. Someone is obviously reading them judging by the view count, but no one is making comments. But I see an awful lot of comments in this Story Hour. Pages and pages of them. Many of them I know are from the players in the campaign, but not all.

I'm just curious: Do you think you get a lot of comments from readers because the players make comments? Is it because the story is told in third-person narrative? Or is it because this Story Hour has been running so long and has such a devoted readership?

Joshua Randall: Personally, I'm in it for the money. And BTW, Sagiro, I'm still waiting for that check you said was in the mail. Don't me me get out of my La-Z-Boy!

KidCthulhu: Sagiro has, like, 47 alts. He does all the posts himself, except for the ones from the players. We're forced to post, on pain of character death and replacement with pixies and commoners. Shhh. He's coming. YES, I LOVE SAGIRO'S GAME. IT IS THE VERY BEST!!

Everett: You're mistaken, Sniffles – all the between-post comments are from the characters themselves. It's the next stage in metaphysical literary technique, whereby we see into the characters' psyches and learn to our continual astonishment that every last one of them is hopelessly psychotic. Oh my, look at the time...

sniffles: Apparently Sagiro has cross-country mind-control ability, too!

Everett: It's a deep game the man plays, yes indeed.

In all serious-like truthfulness, though, the reason this story draws so many comments and views is because it's simply outstanding; it's clearly one of the most well-designed and complex D&D campaigns ever put together, and he also manages to make it a good *read*. When you consider the scope and the length of time (10+ years) that it's played out over, I can only shake my head in awe and bemusement. The characters are vivid and the detail given to plotting and the ultimate payoff stemming from plot would have made Tolkien happy, I'm sure.

Thornir Alekeg: I think some of the kudos have to go to the players in the campaign. Let's face it, another one of the most read Story Hours has most of the same players. Sagiro and Piratecat know how to spin adventures of amazing depth, but the fact that the players know how to make the most of adventures like these and put their own stamp on them makes a huge difference.

sniffles: Yes, I'm beginning to see that the probable reason I don't get reader comments on my Story Hours is because they're all told in first-person narrative. A couple of the other players also do journal entries in those Story Hours but they don't post as regularly as I do. Which means readers only get to see one player's perspective. I certainly enjoy the perspective of all the players in this Story Hour. I just don't see how Sagiro keeps up with it all, though. Even making audio recordings, don't you have to stop and put in new batteries or a new cassette every couple of hours? What about ambient noise, or interference when several people are talking at once?

Everett: I wondered about that when I tried to write a Story Hour for a campaign I played in. We recorded the sessions but the quality was far too grainy to make enough sense of them to write about it... We did see direct transcriptions once. Cannot remember what point in the campaign it was at, but it was when Morningstar was using *thought captures* to open the door to a tower...

KidCthulhu: Heh. If Sagiro directly transcribed the tapes, you would hear the chorus of "TAPE!" that we shout when the tape gets to the end. Or maybe you wouldn't, because we say it after the tape runs out.

The purpose of the recording is more as a portable memory than as a direct transcript. So background noise and people talking over each other aren't that important. You can get the good lines, the cool things that happened, the order of events, the results and the descriptions, and the rest is writing.

sniffles: Thanks for that info. I'm thinking of going to recordings. I take handwritten notes, so it often distracts me from the actual play, and I leave a lot of stuff out if I'm tired or distracted. It's nice to know how that works for someone who's been doing it so long.



sniffles: My curiosity is leading me to become a pest... I'm sure I could probably find the answers to my questions by reading through the comments, but I think anyone would agree that's rather a daunting task.

What I'd like to know is: What level are the PCs now? How was Sagiro able to keep level advancement at a slow enough rate to spread this game out over 10 years of real time? I've been playing in one 3.5 campaign since 2003 and our party are now 14th level. We play twice a month. I thought we were advancing slowly, but our pace appears to be lightning speed by comparison to this campaign.

How do you keep it fresh for so long? How do you keep the players interested? What makes the players want to keep playing the same characters over such an extended period?

Everett: [From page 398:]

At the time of this last update, I think the highest level characters were 15th level, and the range was 13th to 15th. Right now, 17 runs and 14 months ahead of the Story Hour, the highest-level characters have recently hit 17th level, and thus have 9th level spells. Speaking of which, Morningstar is likely to try one of them out next game. The bad news is: after the horrific events of last game, said spell is true resurrection.

KidCthulhu: Like Piratecat's, Sagiro's group was started in 2E and converted to 3E. So some of our advancement speed has come from that conversion. A 5th level fighter/cleric in 2E was very different than a 3 Fighter/2 Cleric in 3E.

sniffles: Ah, yes, I'd forgotten to take that into consideration. I've played 2E myself.

Thornir Alekeg: I wish I could say that I knew first-hand about how Sagiro and his group do it, but from the comments I've read and the Story Hour itself, I get the impression that there are many factors involved in the success of this game over the long haul:

1. Sagiro is willing to spend a considerable amount of effort in weaving the story.
2. The players are partners in this effort in that they do not purposely try to sabotage his plans (defeat them, yes; sabotage, no) and they offer up ideas from their characters for Sagiro to use (many players I know refuse to have an extensive character backstory because they don't want the DM to use it against them).
3. The players trust Sagiro to offer a good story that will respond to them and he trusts them to play along.
4. There is little of the "DM vs. the players" attitude.
5. Come on, if you were part of this, would you want to be the one to screw it up and end it?

Oh, and let's not forget that Sagiro isn't only a DM, he plays in Piratecat's game as well. I'm willing to bet that helps a bit with the DM burnout issues that often kill a game.

sniffles: Waaah!! Now I've read everything...

Shmoo: So I suddenly realized I hadn't been to this site since February 3rd and what do I find? I missed nothing here. And Piratecat's story thread is nowhere to be found.

Sagiro: I promise, the story is not dead, just sleeping. It's the nature of my job as a video-game designer that for a few months every couple of years, work rises up to consume almost all of my time. Family pretty much gets the rest.

Once work calms down, I'll return to writing the story – and running the game proper, for that matter. It's been months since we last played, and that's making me sad.

blargney the second: That's heartening! Some friends and I were just talking last night about how much we miss your Story Hour...

CTSparky: I am lamenting the fact that there haven't been any updates (I know why and I understand; I can still cry) to not only Sagiro's game but also Halmæ... Boo hoo...

Plane Sailing: Huzzah! I'm back up to date with the Story Hour again, and life is good.

Everett: Any news from the maker?

Vargo: The maker, I believe, is currently in "crunch" mode over a little game named *Bioshock*. I could be wrong, but that's what I understand...

QR 80

Hm. Huh? Where am I?

No update at the moment, but it won't be too much longer now. My crunch is drawing to a close, and so I am able to peek at the bits of life I've left behind these past five months. Apparently I have a 2.3-year-old daughter, a lovely wife with whom I am expecting a second daughter in August, and a number of excellent friends. (I overstate for effect – I have gotten out on occasion. Did you know Piratecat recently turned 40? Over in his game, he "celebrated" by making us fight a CR 27 monstrosity out of the Epic Handbook. He's not getting soft in his old age, let me tell you. But I digress.)

I also have a D&D campaign covered with dust, which I am eager to shake out and get going again. I've scheduled some sessions for June, after going several months with the entire game (not just the Story Hour) in mothballs. And I've just cleaned off my computer desk, which revealed my tape recorder with a tape inside of the session where Kibi meets Cranchus. I guess I should get down to transcribing.

If I get motivated, I may take some time to write up a "what's going on" synopsis, to remind readers of just what was going on when the Story Hour went on hiatus. In case I don't, here's the short version:

Company has traveled back in time, to prevent a bad guy from changing the past. They did that, but the Magic Gizmotrons that allow time travel broke. They figured Cranchus might be able to fix them, so they went looking for him. Hey! Here he is!

I hope to post again soon.

el-remmen: Congrats on the awaited addition to the fam, and good hear you are going to be getting some time for the more extraneous, but none-the-less fun, things of life.

I look forward to it.

Tamlyn: Indeed! Congrats on the new Sagirite!

Take care of your fam and we'll be here waiting when you have the time.

QR 80

Family History

Kibi glances over his shoulder. "Can my friends come too?"

"They'd better," says Cranchus.

Dranko looks up nervously at the emerald eye of the enormous elemental, which is now once again keeping watch from the ceiling. "Can we kill that thing, please?" he asks.

"Kill Rumbler?" exclaims Cranchus, affronted. "No!" The earthy dwarf strokes his beard. "You *were* doing a decent job at it, though. I'll have to make a bigger one."

"That seems completely unnecessary," says Grey Wolf.

"Couldn't you just make the eyes, and leave the rest out?" Dranko suggests.

"I require a guardian," says Cranchus. "There's only one other Earth Mage I know of on this entire world – present company excepted – who might be able to find me here... and I do *not* want that to happen!"

"His name's not Parthol Runecarver, is it?" asks Dranko.

"No. His name is Condor. He works for the Emperor."

This elicits a chorus of "Oooooooooo" from the Company. So Condor wasn't just a run-of-the-mill powerful servant of the Emperor. He was... is... an Earth Mage, which explains his ability to construct the Mirrors of Semek. "And thus, the Eyes of Moirel," says Aravis, understanding.

As the Company follow Cranchus through the doorway in the huge flat wall, Dranko casts one last longing glance upward. "I'd be willing to trade one of my eyes for one of his." Morningstar shakes her head.

The party find themselves in a more moderately-sized cavern. From this side, the large wall is translucent, serving the function of a one-way mirror. There is a glowing stone pedestal, like a podium, that Cranchus could use to observe any activity in the huge hall beyond.

"You could have called off your elemental any time you wanted!" exclaims Kibi, though he tries not to sound too accusatory.

"I wasn't watching," says Cranchus. "I was... busy. I came as soon as I became aware of the commotion – and certainly saw something I didn't expect."

"We're sorry to disturb you," says Aravis humbly. "But it's our belief that we need your help to get back to where we belong"

"Um... I hate to interrupt," says Snokas gruffly. "But before we get to talking, could I get some healing? I'm no cleric, but I think my ribs are usually on the inside."

A flurry of healing follows. When all are feeling better, Cranchus causes stone chairs to form, rising out of the ground from a simple gesture. Kibi whistles under his breath and sits down in a chair opposite Cranchus. The rest make themselves comfortable. Dranko lights up a cigar.

In his overwhelmed excitement, Kibi hardly knows where to begin. "I like your translucent rock wall," he says with a slight stammer.

"Thank you," says Cranchus, bowing his head. His voice rumbles deeply, as if there are stones in his throat. Which there are.

"You must be quite curious about us," says Kibi.

Cranchus nods. "What I most want to know is, how is it that I haven't noticed you before now?"

"We're from the future," explains Kibi. "About two thousand years, we think."

Cranchus leans forward, eyes glittering like gemstones. (And maybe they *are* gemstones... it's hard to be sure.) "So, you figured it out! Time travel! You'll have to teach me. It's only been a theory until now."

"We didn't actually do it ourselves," Kibi admits. "We traveled with the assistance of some wild magic items."

"Made by Condor," adds Ernie.

"Do you know anything about the Eyes of Moirel?" asks Kibi. "And the Standing Stones?"

"You mean Condor's Plinths?" asks Cranchus. "Yes. I know of them. But... time travel..."

"We don't want to do things here that will mess up our future," says Kibi, startled into remembering the dangers. "We came back to set that future back to the way it used to be. Whatever we tell you, please don't tell anyone."

"I think that the future will take things into account," says Cranchus, leaning back in his stone chair. "Maybe the very fact of you telling me things is necessary for setting the future to the way you know it."

"How old are you, if you don't mind me asking?" asks Dranko.

"I'm one hundred thirteen years old."

"You're going to live at least another 1700, 1800 years," says Dranko.

"I intend to," Cranchus says with a smile.

The Company spend another couple of minutes trying to decide what to reveal about themselves, but in the end they decide to place their full trust in Cranchus, and tell him everything – what happened on their own world, how the Sharshun changed the past, their quest into Het Branoi to find an Eye of Moirel, and their journey back in time to stop Inivane from warning the Emperor about his eventual defeat.

"And in accomplishing all of this," finishes Aravis, "the Eyes have broken. We have no way to return home."

"And we must," adds Morningstar. "My goddess has said specifically we shouldn't be here."

Cranchus has listened to the tale with unwavering interest. When the Company have finished the account, he asks to see one of the cracked Eyes, and Kibi hands one over without hesitation. Cranchus studies it carefully, turning it over and over in his stony hands. "Explain to me again," he says, running his fingers over the Eye. "When you traveled back in time... this belt of yours, Ernest... Describe it."

"Well," says Ernie. "It was a plain gold band, a circle, that..."

Cranchus finishes his sentence: "...that had rounded edges, and a hinge so smooth and subtle that it looked solid and unbroken when closed. It had the faintest glow about it, though it would shed no light in a dark place. And when wearing it you felt solid, stable, as if it anchored you to reality. And yet... I've never given one away. They're all still here, in my workshop, except for..."

He trails off. Ernie hardly knows what to say. Cranchus has perfectly described the Wilburforce Ring.

"What do they do?" asks Dranko. "The rings?"

"They attempt to stabilize," answers Cranchus. "Wild magic is inherently entropic. Chaotic. Causes things to fly apart." He looks sad for a moment, then shakes his head before continuing. "But you would need one, I imagine... I have explored time travel, you know. Condor was trying it, I could tell, with those big rocks of his. But until today, I was sure they didn't work. The Emperor was sure, too. Condor's Plinths. But I have some theories of my own I want to test."

"If it involves putting Kibi into a giant mechanical device, we'll pass," says Dranko.

Cranchus gestures, and another stone pedestal rises up from the floor in front of him. On it he has the Company place all of the broken Eyes of Moirel, as well as Inivane's gartine crown by which his own three Eyes were transfixed. "They're smart-sentient," warns Morningstar. "They have distinct personalities, when they're not broken."

"We have an item that can affect time and planes," adds Aravis. "In here." He taps his head. "The person I got it from was part of an order that knew how to use it to move through time. But that was very dangerous, and drove people mad. You may use it if you wish."

"I'll keep it in mind," says Cranchus, "but I'm not sure how I'd study it, in a way that wouldn't be harmful to you."

"Are you married?" asks Kibi. He's eager to find out more about Cranchus's family, of which more and more he suspects he is a part. "Do you have any children?"

"I was married," says Cranchus.

"And something horrible happened because of the wild mag..." says Dranko,

"Yes, yes, something horrible happened," says Cranchus testily, cutting him off.

"I'm sorry," says Dranko, responding to an elbow from Ernie.

"I'm not blaming you. I just... Yes, I was married once. My wife was also my apprentice. There was an accident. She died."

There are condolences given all around, and then a moment of awkward silence. "Was your wife an Earth Mage?" asks Kibi.

"She was, yes. You think I'm related to you somehow, don't you?" asks Cranchus, smiling.

"Well, I think one of the Eyes of Moirel here referred to you as my grandfather," says Kibi. "It sounded like it knew you."

"But I hadn't met... Ah, but I have *now*." He looks at the Eyes of Moirel, eyebrows raised. "Well then," Cranchus continues, "tell me about your mother."

"I don't know that much about where she's from. Her village was attacked by orcs, and she was the only one who survived. My father found her in the ruins of the village, with no clear memories of what had happened or how she had survived. He brought her back to Eggemoggin with him. And she was wearing a gold circlet, like the one you described."

"She was?" asks Cranchus sharply. "But..." His face darkens, as he works out the puzzle in his mind. "Tell me," he says after a minute. "What was your mother's name?"

"Her name is Gela," says Kibi.

Cranchus goes pale. "When?" he asks urgently. "When was she discovered? And where? Be specific! The day... what day was it?"

"Well, I wasn't born yet..."

"But your father must have told you," presses Cranchus. "Think! On what day was she found?"

Kibi thinks hard. "Oh, now I remember. It was the second day of October, in 1765. It was the first night of the full moon, which helped the rescue team find her. Does... does that mean anything to you?"

"No, not yet. I suppose that... Here, follow me." Cranchus walks swiftly to the opposite wall from the one-way stone window and gestures open a door with *stone shape*. He walks through, and beckons Kibi and the others to follow.

Beyond that doorway Cranchus leads the Company through a complex of caves, though the interconnectivity only comes about when the old Earth Mage opens temporary doorways with his *stone shape* ability. Most of the caves are rich with gems, and sometimes the Company hear sounds like distant picks hammering against stone. "Who's that?" asks Dranko.

"*Unseen servants*," answers Cranchus.

"They can *do* that?"

"Mine can."

Many of the caves are littered with tools, and tables covered in various experimental endeavors. One cavern has a number of iron cauldrons filled with lava. Another has baskets overflowing with perfectly round stones. There is also a constant traffic of small earth elementals going to and fro on errands, many transporting gems from cave to cave. "What a wonderful place you have!" exclaims Kibi, enchanted.

Cranchus smiles and winks, as he opens a new doorway into yet another room. This one has a large mirror in its center, surrounded by sharp arrow-shaped crystals pointing inward. Beams of light are shining at the mirror, which itself is glowing. "Don't touch," he warns.

"What's it for?" asks Dranko.

"Scrying. I can't leave this place, so that's how I keep track of what's going on out in the world."

"How come you can't leave?" Dranko presses.

Aravis ventures a guess. "If he does, Condor will find him?"

"There are number of reasons, and that's one of the best," says Cranchus. "Also, the Earth has told me not to leave. It would be dangerous for anyone to be around me if I left this sanctuary."

The next chamber is filled with stone workbenches, and on many of these are metal circlets obviously akin to the one Ernie had been wearing for so long. There are over thirty of the things, varying slightly in size and precise alloy but otherwise similar.

"These are all my attempts to find a proper stabilizing influence – things to make my work less dangerous," explains Cranchus.

"But Kibi, what I want to show you is through here." He gestures to a wall, and yet another doorway opens up. Cranchus motions Kibi to go inside.

Kibi finds himself in a tall conical chamber, thirty feet around at ground level and tapering to a point some sixty feet in the air. Silvery metal scaffolding is built up in the center of the cone, and hovering inside that metal latticework is...

Kibi gasps. "Mother!?"

Gela dun Bim is younger than Kibi has ever seen her, but it's her, there can be no doubt. And over her head, like a halo, is a golden circlet exactly like the one kept on the mantelpiece in Kibi's home back in Eggemoggin.

"Is she awake?" whispers Kibi.

"No."

"Is she... natural?"

"Yes. She's my daughter. She survived the accident... barely. She was infused with wild magic that should have torn her apart, but I was able to... stabilize her. That was twenty-one years ago."

"Is she aging now?" asks Kibi.

"No, she's in stasis. I hope the circlet will stabilize her, and I will be able to release her. But I've always known that it could take centuries, if it ever happens. The combination of that ring, and the gartine scaffold around her, is keeping her in perfect, timeless health. Though, even when the day comes that she has recovered from the accident, she'll have to keep the stabilizing circlet with her at all times."

Kibi gulps. "We thought we needed it to go nowhere, so we took it."

"You did?!" asks Cranchus in alarm.

"Yes, but it always returned to her, if it got too far away."

Cranchus strokes his beard and chuckles. "Well, then. I guess I'd better enchant it so that it does just that!"

He turns to regard Kibi, who cannot take his eyes from his young mother. "Kibi... it's an honor to meet my grandson."

He pulls Kibi into a bear-hug embrace.

blargney the second: Yaaaaay! Thank you, Sagiro!

Mishihari Lord: What he said.

Solarious: *giggles like a maniac drug addict and basks in the warmth of a new update* Ahhhhhh... *puffs the SH*

Plane Sailing: Sweet family reunion story... Plus your descriptive style is cinematic – I could imagine it all unfolding on the big screen before me!

Also – congrats on the impending arrival in August. My two daughters are 2.5 years apart, and they love playing games with each other now. It's a nice age gap.

QR 80

Explanations

"I've been looking forward to meeting you for a long time."

Kibi is deliriously happy. Learning that his grandfather is a great wizard who lives in a magic workshop with little earth elementals has exceeded his wildest dreams. "I always knew there was something special about my mother," he says. "She encouraged my magic, even when other dwarves mocked me for it, and thought it was... a bit odd. But she didn't remember anything about where she had come from, or how she had gotten there."

"She probably won't," concedes Cranchus. "She'll be lucky if she has any memory at all."

"She has the most wonderful voice. And the best sense of humor." Kibi sighs. He loves his mother, like a good son should.

"Yeah, that sounds like her," says Cranchus. "So, I guess she got it all back." Cranchus allows Kibi to gaze upon his mother for a few more minutes in silence, before they retire to the adjacent room and Cranchus seals off the stasis chamber.

"Do you know the stories they tell about you, down in the valley?" Kibi asks.

"They call you 'Crunchy,'" says Ernie with a grin.

"Crunchy?" Cranchus is appalled. "They call me Crunchy? Hrmph. Well, they can call me what they want, I suppose."

Kibi relates the stories they'd heard, while Cranchus alternately chuckles and shakes his head. "All absurd," he declares.

"Though one of my experiments did go awry early on and caused some... seismic activity. Maybe the stories stem from that. I was learning to harness my one access point to the Source. I have some gems soaking in it right now, in fact."

The what now? The Source? Without even knowing exactly what that is, Ernie exclaims, "Maybe that can restore the Eyes!"

"Yeah!" agrees Dranko. "Let 'em soak up some Earth Magic until they're working again."

Cranchus laughs. "It will take a little more fine crafting than that. But remind me: you need these Eyes to go back home, and they interact somehow with Condor's Plinths to effect time travel?"

"They controlled our getting here," says Aravis.

At Cranchus's urging the Company relate all the relevant details: what day and year they left, what the visual effects were when the Mirrors started flashing, and everything else they can think of. This leads to a discussion about whether they'll need to leave the Eyes behind, to avoid there being two sets in the future. And there's even more confusion about the Wilberforce Ring, which has also been called "Cranchus' Gift."

"Don't we have to have it, so we can travel without going crazy?" asks Ernie. "But then... we have to have left it here, so we can find it again in the future. And I don't understand exactly when it is that you actually *make* it. Oh, my head hurts."

"Ah, a fascinating topic," says Cranchus. "You seem to be suffering from the fallacy of the Fixed Prime Event Theory... an understandable misconception."

"This isn't going to involve onions and parfaits, is it?" asks Morningstar.

"Did you say 'phallus'?" asks Dranko.

"I said 'fallacy.' It means an incorrect method of deduction."

"But what is it, this... fixed event thingy?" asks Ernie.

"It's an assumption that every temporal loop needs a starting point," explains Cranchus. "That every object needs a moment of creation."

In response to the blank looks from most of the party, he continues: "Here, I'll show you what I mean." He draws the number '6' on a piece of paper. "There you are."

The party continue to stare, not as immediately enlightened as Cranchus seems to hope. "That's a six," Morningstar correctly points out.

"Er... yes," says Cranchus. He points to the 'tail' of the six. "Here's where I must have made the belt." Then he traces the rest of the '6,' but continues to draw the loop, going around and around in a circle. "Here's the loop we're in. The spur, where we started, where I crafted the belt, doesn't exist any more, but it did."

"So now it's a zero," says Dranko, scratching his head.

"Exactly! The '6' doesn't exist any more, and now we're in the '0,' but I must have made the belt back in the six. Reality has pinched it off, closing the loop, to avoid there being a paradox."

Morningstar finds it easier to simply concede. "I believe you," she says, and means it.

Sensing there's still some confusion, Cranchus keeps going. "There's no essential permanence to the spur of a temporal loop. In fact, as often as not, it has to become nonexistent to ensure proper continuity. Do you see?"

"So it can be made, even if no one actually ever made it?" asks Ernie. "Then... then how did it get on the statue?"

"Because you put it there," says Cranchus. "And you find it in the future, so that you can come back and do that. That's the loop. It seems like a paradox because you can't see the spur anymore. You can't see the tail of the '6,' when the ring was made, because you're in the '0.'"

"But how are we going to get home without it?" asks Kibi, coming back around to Ernie's original question.

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'll just make you a new one. You'll need it – otherwise the energy involved in time travel would blow you all into bits, scattered across all of Abernia."

Grey Wolf gulps. "Er, let's avoid that, shall we?"

"I'm more confused than I was before," says Ernie. "Does anyone want lunch?"

It turns out that Cranchus hasn't eaten real food in several years, though he does confess to munching on rocks now and then. "I even eat a ruby or two each month – keeps me sharp."

But Cranchus admits that while he still *could* eat real food, he's a terrible cook, and he's been alone for so long, he no longer bothers. This prompts Kibi to ask, "So, why would it be so dangerous to the rest of the world if you left this place? Why would you be dangerous?"

Cranchus sighs and rumbles, "Too much contact with the Source."

"What's the Source?" asks Dranko.

"You do know where magic comes from, right? It comes from deep inside the earth..."

"Or it comes from where the Cleaners are," interrupts Dranko. "You know, from where all those tentacles are."

Cranchus blinks. "What?"

"Remember that place with all the horrible tentacles?" appeals Dranko to the rest of the party. "Wasn't that place generating strong Earth Magic?" Aravis and Kibi explain Het Branoi to Cranchus, but also remind Dranko that the Earth Magic and the 'Cleaners' came from different sources.

"As I was saying," Cranchus continues, "Magic comes, not surprisingly, from the Earth, and not the air, as most conventional wizards believe. In some very rare places, there are vents which lead down to... well, you know that Abernia, at its heart, is molten. It's made of lava, for want of a better term."

"Really? Lava?" asks Kibi, excited by the thought.

"That's where magic is generated," explains Cranchus. "Sometimes it bubbles up close to the surface, so that we can be exposed to it directly. There is such a vent near here, where I go sometimes to augment my experiments. But I've spent too much time there, and become infused with magic directly from the Source. The accident that killed my wife... well, if I were to leave here, and go out away from the Source, that sort of accident would be happening around me, all the time."

"We know what that's like," says Morningstar. "When we were in the wrong world, the Eyes told us we had to stay near your Stabilizer all the time, or we would tear apart the universe."

"And you were only able to exist there in the first place because of what you called the Greenhouse," muses Cranchus, stroking his beard. "Hmm. That's an interesting case, right there. From what you've told me, this Abernathy sounds like quite an interesting person, and his Greenhouse... well, I'd like to study it sometime."

"You're welcome to come visit us, in the future," says Ernie.

"I will, if I can ever figure out a way to leave here safely," says Cranchus.

"Or maybe," says Dranko, "we can visit *you* in the future!"

"I wouldn't recommend it," warns Cranchus. "Just being here is dangerous."

"Because we'd get infused by the Source?" asks Kibi.

"Exactly. In fact, you'd be badly off staying here as long as it will take me to fix these Eyes of yours. But don't worry – I'll make you an extradimensional shelter. You should stay in that as often as you can."

"Is it staying here that's made you so powerful?" asks Kibi.

"That's part of it," answers Cranchus. "I've also been studying and learning for sixty years, and I was already pretty good when I left home. I might be the most powerful Earth Mage on Abernia right now. Condor was certainly more powerful, but then he... displeased the Emperor."

The Company obviously press him for more on that!

"I don't know the details – it's hard for me to scry things related to the Black Circle. But I am a powerful diviner – I have to be, to keep an eye on things out there, and make sure they're not aware of me here. But I know about Condor. He built his Plinths, and then he sent his daughter, Moirel, into some kind of gateway in their center. When she didn't come back, the Emperor deemed them a failure, and punished Condor severely. No one but the Emperor wields any significant power without his approval. The Emperor stripped Condor of much of his ability. I don't know why. The Emperor is... not of this world, is the best way I can describe it. He is, but he isn't. Something happened to him."

"We know what happened to him," says Dranko. They explain to Cranchus about the Black Goo that affected Ernie and Aravis.

"Do you know how we can get rid of the Black Goo altogether?" asks Ernie.

"You've said that you already tried casting *wish*, so I expect you'll need some kind of powerful divine intervention."

"Oh boy," says Ernie.

"But I wouldn't worry," says Cranchus, "if it's not affecting how you think or feel, and you don't detect as evil. Still, if you find a way to be rid of it, I wouldn't turn it down." Ernie and Aravis nod in agreement.

"Cranchus," asks Kibi, changing the subject to something he's been meaning to bring up. "I had a dream – a prophetic dream, I think – about Abernia having a splinter. Does that ring any bells?"

"Yes!" answers Cranchus, surprised. "The earth has said similar things to me over the decades. That it needs my help and understanding, that it's wounded and needs to be healed. But I've never been sure what that means."

"Me neither," admits Kibi. "But... if I do figure it out, could we come back and visit you, in the future?"

"We could even bring your daughter!" says Ernie.

"Please don't bring her back here," says Cranchus, growing solemn. "The accident that took my wife's life was not the last one I've had. It's just that now, there's no one left to kill. I'd like to keep it that way. It will be enough for me to know that my Gela is living a full and happy life." At Dranko's suggestion, Cranchus does promise to write a letter to his daughter, that Kibi can take back with him. He seems brightened by the prospect.

"And now, I should get started on fixing your time travel gems," says Cranchus. "Feel free to wander around, but don't touch anything that looks dangerous, and spend most of your time in the 'mansion.'"

It turns out that when Cranchus casts *Mordenkainen's magnificent mansion*, it always ends up being a series of connected caves, not unlike the one he lives in. It does have beds, and a pool of clean water, though the banquet table is covered with small rocks.

¤¤

The next day the Company spend mostly inside the *mansion*, though Cranchus invites Kibi to visit the cave in which he accesses the Source. En route they pass a room full of hourglasses, which Cranchus explains are part of his own experiments in time travel. He's never made much headway, and it's clear he feels both some jealousy toward Condor and his successes in that area, as well as some schadenfreude regarding Condor's punishment at the hands of the Emperor.

The Source Chamber is little more than a wide stone platform high above a river of lava. Kibi can feel Earth Magic streaming up from below, along with the intense heat. Cranchus has shaped himself a number of outcroppings that hang in the full blast of the Source, and on these has placed several gems, including two of the Eyes of Moirel. He warns Kibi that while the Source helps augment his spells, if he spends too much time in its direct radiance he would start to physically fly apart. Despite that warning Kibi finds it difficult to leave that place – the Source has an addictive quality that he is reluctant to relinquish even after only a few minutes. "These are forces you don't mess around with," warns Cranchus. "Spend too much time here, and you'll turn out like me. You don't want that – trust me."

The truth of this warning is well demonstrated a couple of days later, when those in the Company who are outside the *mansion* hear a tremendous explosion a few caverns over. Some stalactites are shaken loose from the ceiling and clouds of dust kick up from the floor. Minutes later a door is shaped open nearby and Cranchus stumbles through in a daze, his half-flesh, half-stone skin covered with glowing striations and smears of dwarfish blood. Dranko rushes forward to heal him. Kibi can feel the Earth Magic radiating out from him.

Cranchus shakes his head. "It happens," he whispers hoarsely. "It happens. But it will only set me back a day or two, and I've already learned something about the Eyes. I have a theory, anyhow. These Eyes, they work with Condor's Plinths to allow time travel. They would need to draw on a huge amount of Earth Magic to work, but by mathematical necessity they couldn't draw power from *this* earth – from Abernia. It would lead to some paradoxes and... well, planetary ruin. So the Eyes, the first time they were called upon, must have found another nearby Prime, and used that one. I'm guessing that they created a Slave Prime in the process."

Aha! That would be Volpos, the world that the Black Circle tried to cause to overlap Abernia in order to transfer the Emperor and his armies. The world on which the Emperor is, thankfully, still trapped.

"That's a phenomenon found sporadically throughout the cosmos," explains Cranchus. "Slave Primes. Sometimes two Primes get caught up together, and one gets cut off entirely from all the coterminous planes – you know, the Astral, the Ethereal, et cetera. The Slave Prime is cut off from all other planes save its 'master.' They are perfect places for a prison, if you want to stop someone from escaping via planar travel. I've always wondered how such places come into being. I guess it must be unique in each case."

Aravis asks, "If the connection between Prime and Slave is severed, would that cause the Slave to be cut off entirely, or freed to the rest of the universe?"

"I'd guess cut off entirely," says Cranchus. "But that would be extremely hard to do, assuming it's possible at all. I doubt Condor intended that to happen in this case. I think the Eyes did it on their own – they needed a world to power Moirel's time travel, and there was Volpos, and wham – Slave Prime."

Ernie smiles. "So the Emperor was indirectly responsible for creating his own eventual prison, and probably has no idea?"

Cranchus chuckles. Dranko lets out a loud guffaw. "Now *that's* comedy!"

Jackylhunter: I read this wonderful story, and it makes me sad. My own D&D group just spent three hours debating what the wholesale prices on dinosaurs were. Sad, really.

Anyway, great story again. Keep up the good work.

el-remmen: Great to see an update! I love the informative ones as much as the "action" ones...

Kid Charlemagne: I love the explanation of time travel *vis à vis* paradoxes, as well as the concept of the "slave prime." I may have to yoink that!

Graywolf-ELM: How wonderful to get an e-mail about an update, and not have it be a bump...

Dawn: What a truly awesome time to be able to return to the Story Hours. Happy is me.

Piratecat: We played again last night, for the first time in six months! Hooray, hooray. It's no exaggeration when I say that Dranko's character sheet had dust on it. And without giving any spoilers, I'd like to say that Sagiro is a bad, *bad* man.

CTSparky: I'm very happy that you guys started playing again and that updates are on their way. Continue the great work.

Chesspiece: Although Dranko has some of his typical impolite (cigar, age, dead wife) and avaricious (gem eye) moments, he really seemed a little light on the crude humour – all he had was his phallas-y question. Were there more comments that were missed, or is he slipping? I mean, he could have done the whole "your Mom is hot" thing with Kibi. I suppose it wouldn't be the best idea in front of an arch-wild-mage father and his flame-striking wife. But that wouldn't have stopped the old Dranko!

[Note: The above is not merely an excuse to bump... or is it?]

Vargo: Ooo, *Bioshock* just went gold! Update?

(Just kidding. Your families probably want to see all y'all after the most recent deathmarch.)

Piratecat: Thank goodness, I'm usually a good enough player to recognize when it is someone else's moment in the sun, and to shut the hell up during those times. This was Kibi's moment; interrupting such things would be rude.

Sagiro is now done with *Bioshock*, although juggling certain other responsibilities. I'll poke him!

QR 80

I apologize for the slight delay since my last posting. I'm happy to say that the family is well; my eldest daughter just had her 3rd birthday, and my youngest just turned 6 months. As for the campaign, it continues, albeit more slowly than in years past. Work and family and the busy social lives of my players have conspired to make our sessions less frequent, but the game goes on!

Eyes on the Prize

Cranchus and the Company continue to discuss the details of their strange travels, past and future. "When we got here," says Aravis, "we powered the Eyes. I used the Crosser's Maze."

"I don't know if that will be necessary for the return trip," says Cranchus. "There's a lack of symmetry in time travel. Going forward and going backward use different temporal mechanics. Still... things *should* work out fine. But here's the interesting thing, and I haven't been able to figure out the answer. This Greenhouse of yours. And your butler – Eddings. I don't know what's going to happen to him, or that other fellow you said is with him."

"If they're inside the Greenhouse, we presume they'll be safe," says Ernie, but his tone betrays this as only a hopeful guess.

"I've been trying to place them in the temporal loop, but it's got me stumped," says Cranchus. "The universe will take care of itself, I'm sure, but I don't know how."

"If our theory is correct," says Aravis, "and stopping Inivane stopped the experiment that ended up with us getting here, then the Greenhouse will be back where it's supposed to be."

Cranchus frowns. "Well, on the one hand, the Greenhouse caused you to exist in a time where you couldn't have otherwise been. But in the future you now have ahead of you, this Carp will never be born."

"Raise your hand if you trust Abernathy," says Dranko.

Everyone in the Company raises a hand (Flicker raises two for emphasis), but Morningstar still has her doubts. "But Abernathy didn't know about Carp," she says.

Ernie sighs. "But even if something were to go wrong, is there anything we could do about it?"

"No," says Cranchus. "It's all a purely intellectual exercise for us."

"I hate those," says Ernie.

"I'm sure the Greenhouse will come out fine," says Aravis. "But Carp, I don't know about."

"And Sagiro," adds Grey Wolf. "Don't forget we left him there, too."

QR 80

A week later, Cranchus announces he knows how to fix the Eyes. A few days after that, he comes to the Company with news. "I have to warn you," he says. "I could not repair them fully. I don't understand them well enough, and I doubt I ever will. But give me one more day to tinker, and they should be repaired enough to get you back."

"That's probably for the best," says Ernie. "If they were still alive and kicking when we got back, the Sharshun could presumably try this trick again."

"The Eyes remember Cranchus," points out Morningstar.

Cranchus frowns. "You say these things were sentient, but I have no idea how that could be."

"They told us that their creator didn't understand them," says Ernie.

Cranchus laughs. "Well, if Condor didn't understand them, I don't know how I'm supposed to. But I'll do some more tinkering, in case they need their sentience back to do... whatever it is they do. I've also got to warn you about a couple more things. I think I can get you back to the exact time you left, but I'm not sure. It'll be close... maybe even exact... not sure."

"As long as we don't run into ourselves..." says Grey Wolf.

"And there's one other thing," continues Cranchus. "The future is going to be... *almost* exactly like you remembered."

This is greeted with alarmed silence. Sensing there's more, Ernie prompts the stony dwarf: "But..."

"There's really no 'but.' The universe has a way of taking care of itself, but you'll only have been gone a couple thousand years, which in the grand scheme of things isn't a lot of time to smooth out the wrinkles. So, there may be one or two small – almost certainly inconsequential – differences. The people you've met will be the same, and they'll remember you, and remember all the same things that you do. Probably. But maybe someone will have a different hair color, that sort of thing. Because when the universe plays itself out from now to your present, some little things will have happened differently."

"Maybe we'll own some new houses in a second town..." muses Grey Wolf.

"That's more drastic than what I'm talking about," says Cranchus, "but you never know. I could try to work in a little excess oscillation if you want, though that wouldn't be much more than a roll of the dice." This suggestion is met with a chorus of 'No's.'

"In the worst case," says Cranchus – and perhaps he doesn't mean to say this out loud – "you'd show up to find that you'd never been born. I don't know what would happen then."

Not for the first time, Ernie says, "My head hurts." So, maybe to get some answers, and maybe just to feel better, he casts *commune*. "Yondalla, I ask the boon of an audience with thee." He feels a chill through his body, and the smell of fresh bread fills his nostrils.

YOU ARE OUT OF PLACE. ("You're telling me," mutters Ernie.) BUT YOU MAY ASK YOUR QUESTIONS.

"Can my friend Morningstar get out of being the Slayer?"

I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS.

Hm. Not a good sign.

"Can you only answer questions about this time, or can you see into the future?"

THE FUTURE AS FAR AS YOURS IS VERY HARD TO SEE.

"Then I might be wasting your time with most of these. I apologize. In our time, is our friend Tor still alive?"

Ernie expects no answer on this one either, but he feels something rooting around in his memories, as if the Divine presence hopes to piece together an answer from Ernie's own experiences.

YES, I THINK SO.

"If we break the connection between Abernia and Volpos, will that seal off Volpos?"

YES. YES, IT WILL.

"If we seal off Volpos, will anyone on that plane be able to reach Abernia, or anywhere else?"

NOT EASILY.

"Do we have the means or the knowledge to separate Abernia from Volpos?"

YOU? NOW? NO.

"Is there anyone in our time who does have that knowledge?"

I DON'T KNOW.

"If we split off Abernia and Volpos, would there be ill effects to Abernia?"

NO.

"In the future to which we'll return, are Yoba's people okay, without her guidance?"

I DON'T KNOW.

"Thank you very much. It was nice talking to you."

IT WAS NICE TO TALK WITH YOU AS WELL. PERHAPS WE WILL TALK AGAIN CENTURIES HENCE.

Morningstar also casts *commune*, though her reasons differ. With all the rampant doctrinal strife occurring in her own time, she wants to learn what Ell's policies and preferences were way back when... which is now. It's a unique opportunity that she does not let slip away. She casts, and an Avatar of Ell is there, awaiting her inquiry.

"Can you answer questions about the current practices of the church?"

YES.

"In my time, we avoid contact with the daylight, to the point where light can be used to harm and distract us, especially in combat. Is this what the priestesses do in your time?"

NO.

"Are there any who are trained to withstand the daylight?"

NOT SPECIFICALLY.

"Do the priestesses train for combat in Ava Dormo?"

YES.

"Do they open the doors of the temple during the day, to people who approach them then?"

YES.

"Does this trouble Ell?"

NO.

"Do they require that someone ask for help before providing it?"

YES.

"Do they walk in the daylight?"

IF THERE IS NEED.

"Does this trouble Ell?"

NO.

"By coming here, have we jeopardized Cranchus? Will the Emperor find him because of us?"

PROBABLY NOT.

"Is there anything we can do to keep him safer?"

DON'T STAY TOO LONG.

"Thank you."

The Avatar fades. "Not what I was expecting," she says. "The Illuminated Sisters have an historical basis for two out of three." She has much to contemplate.



Back in Cranchus's "living room," the Company gather for more conversation. "Cranchus," asks Kibi, "in the future, what will be the best way to communicate with you?"

"You'd have to come visit," rumbles Cranchus. "You can't cast *sendings* in or out. Can't *xorn move* in here either, or *teleport*, or anything like that. I'm not about to make myself any *less* protected in the foreseeable future."

"I'd say you're the probably the most powerful Archmage of our time," says Dranko, perhaps hoping to take the edge off Cranchus's paranoia.

Cranchus chuckles. "Nice to know I'll live that long!"

"If we do come to visit, is there anything you'd like us to bring?" asks Kibi.

"Another one of your pies," says Cranchus, addressing Ernie directly.

"Any advice on how to use the Gartine Arches to travel between Charagan and Kivia?" asks Dranko.

That stumps Cranchus. "There are gartine arches?"

"Yeah," says Dranko, pleased to know something Cranchus doesn't. "They link Charagan and Kivia across the Uncrossable Sea."

"You don't say! I didn't know that."

Dranko then offers to give Cranchus one of the translator disks from Het Branoi, that only work in the presence of strong Earth Magic. "Sure," says Cranchus, taking the small disk. "I don't really need it, but I suppose it's possible something could dispel the permanent *tongues*."

Permanent tongues... Dozens of lewd remarks pass through Dranko's head in an instant, and everyone knows it. "Don't. Just don't," warns Ernie.

Dranko opens his mouth, but with a great effort says nothing. "And you say I have no strength of character," he mutters.

"I'm very, very impressed," says Ernie.

"You have no strength of character," opines Aravis with a smirk. "You do have strength of *will*."

Ernie reiterates his hope that the Eyes only have one 'charge' remaining, so that the Sharshun won't be able to get their hands on them and try again. That leads to a rambling discussion of the Mirrors, and the Emperor, and Condor. Dranko points out, when the subject of Condor comes up, that both Condor and Cranchus have lost a daughter to their Wild Magic experiments.

"I haven't lost my daughter," says Cranchus sharply. "I've lost my wife. My daughter's still alive, and evidently goes on to be Kibi's mother."

"Yeah, but she's going to be a bookend for, like, 1500 years," says Dranko.

In aghast unison, all others of the Company exclaim, "DRANKO!"

Cranchus can't decide whether to be offended or amused. "It's okay," he grumbles. "At least, *now* it's okay, knowing what I know about how things turn out."

"It's still rude," says Ernie.

"What do you expect!" laughs Cranchus. "He's a half-o..."

"Don't say it," snaps Aravis. "That's rude, too."

"What, that Dranko's a half-orc?" says Kibi, instinctively defending his grandfather. "But that's true!"

"I would have said 'd*ck,'" says Grey Wolf, mostly under his breath.

"Well, I *have* thanked him for his hospitality," says Dranko earnestly. "He's been very kind to us."

"Thank you," grumbles Cranchus. It's hard to tell how seriously he's taking all of this.

"Dranko," says Ernie, "you've done a good job remembering the rule: 'Ernie's the one who comforts the bereaved.' Here's a new one for you: 'Stop at thank you.'"

"He's sort of a work in progress," Grey Wolf explains.

Cranchus nods, grunts, then stands and stretches with a sound like a small rockslide. "I'll need one more day to get the Eyes ready. I'll see you tomorrow."

¤¤

The following day, Cranchus presents a small stone plate upon which rest all seven Eyes of Moirel, restored to their unblemished state. They even emit a soft glow, which is a new trick for them in their resting state.

"I had the most fascinating talk with the Green one!" exclaims Cranchus. "I don't know how they became sentient, but they are. They all are! And this one here, on the end? It's a right bastard! If I didn't know better, I'd swear it was trying to fight me, so it wouldn't have to go back." He gestures to what the Company assume is the Red Eye, and they offer their agreement.

"And here's the other thing you'll need," continues Cranchus. He hands Ernie a gold and silver circle, a *belt of stability* somewhat similar to the one Ernie recently affixed to the Wilburforce statue. "Best I could do on short notice," says Cranchus, "but it'll do the trick. Now, about the Eyes. When you get to the Plinths, it'll take a few minutes for them to warm up once you're in the center, if I understand how they work. That could take five, maybe ten minutes."

"I recommend we prepare for an attack while that's happening," says Dranko.

"I doubt that," says Cranchus. "The Plinths have been abandoned for years, and I still *scry* them from time to time. After Condor's experiment, which... heh, heh... appeared to be a dismal failure, the Emperor punished him severely, and they abandoned the site." (Ernie notes that this does match the local halfling account of events.)

"Can you *scry* the area one more time, right before we go there?" asks Dranko.

"Of course. Condor *is* a tricky one. I'd be surprised if he could divine anything about your coming, since... I forgot to mention... I built an anti-divinatory into the Eyes when I fixed them."

"Great!" exclaims Dranko.

"And I'm prepared to do you one more favor," Cranchus continues. "I can *teleport* you out of here, up to the surface. Must have been nasty finding your way down here on foot; I'll spare you the annoyance of backtracking. I can probably get you fairly close to the mirrors, but..." – and here he turns to Kibi and winks – "...wear your *helmet of water breathing*."

Cranchus leads the group through his caverns, opening up passage after passage with his innate ability to *stone shape*. As they walk, Dranko suggests to Cranchus that he could write a letter to his daughter and actually put it on her person, so that when she recovers from the accident, she'll have some guidance.

Cranchus looks thoughtful. "Did she have a letter when she was found?" he asks.

"No," says Kibi.

"Then I'd best not."

Dranko stammers. "But... I... OK... fine. Stupid time travel."

They reach Cranchus's scrying chamber, and he spends a few minutes casting before all the Company see the abandoned Mirrors of Semek in his *scrying* mirror. The party mages are impressed; Cranchus seems to be scrying a place rather than a person, which is not normally how these things work.

"It should be simple," says Cranchus. "Aravis, you won't have to supply any extra power, and Kibi, you won't need to keep everyone grounded. Traveling forward in time is different, and simpler. All you'll need to do is make sure Ernie's wearing his belt, and that you're all touching him."

"How will the Eyes know *when* to take us?" asks Dranko.

"It's all about Ernie," answers Cranchus. "They'll try to return him to the exact moment he left. Of course, that's not an exact science either. You might get there a little early, or a little late. Late, that's not a problem. Early... well, let's say that would be very interesting."

"What happens if we meet ourselves?" asks Dranko.

"That would be the 'very interesting' part."

"And what about the Greenhouse?" asks Ernie.

"I have no idea. It might be there, it might not. Or maybe it'll still be traveling through time when you get back, and will just show up one day."

Dranko's eyes narrow as another thing occurs to him. "If things have changed, is it possible that our past selves will have done stuff that we don't remember? Like, let's say our past selves stormed the Castle of Glassamere. Then we pop in, but we haven't done that. But *somebody* must have. If the people who actually *had* stormed the castle get displaced to somewhere else – the other me, the one who's displaced, is going to come after me for revenge. 'Cause I know me. If I lived in a nice happy world, and another me came and kicked me out to someplace else, I would absolutely come back and kick my own ass."

Cranchus sighs. "No. It doesn't work like that. You won't exist in that case. I mean the other you. He won't exist to take revenge... you'll be him!"

“Oh,” says Dranko, brightening. “So, you’re saying I get his stuff.”

“*You’re him.* It’s your stuff! But don’t get worked up about it. Remember, that’s the sort of thing that should be smoothed out. It’s *theoretically* possible, of course, that you’ll have done all sorts of things differently than you remember. This is all theory. And you, you’re the practice.”

“My head hurts,” says Ernie.

“Like I said,” says Cranchus, “I’ve infused the Eyes with an anti-divinatory, but abjuration isn’t my specialty, while divination *is* the bailiwick of the Black Circle. I’m pretty confident that whatever means they have to track Ernie and Aravis, this will foil. And I *know* they don’t know where you are now. They can’t *scry* in here, and my continued existence is proof of that.”

“But we know they have prophecies where we show up at a certain place and a certain time, and there’s nothing we can do about that,” points out Morningstar.

“True,” admits Cranchus. “There’s only so much I can do.”

In the final minutes before they take their leave of Cranchus’s demesne, the Company try to remember exactly what they had been doing right before the universe changed. There was that parade celebrating Sealing Day, and King Farazil had possessed Ernie’s mom, to everyone’s chagrin.

Dranko and Ernie both cast *auguries*: “*Will going right now to use the Eyes to return to the future bring us weal or woe?*”

Dranko’s spell fails, but Ernie’s returns an answer of Weal and Woe. “Guess we’re getting ambushed then,” he says. The only question is, will the ambush come before they travel, or after?

The Company cast a final flurry of protective spells before uttering their final farewells. Cranchus crushes Kibi in a rocky bear-hug. “I’ll have a happier next thousand years, knowing my daughter turns out okay, and will go on to have a son who’s a powerful Earth Mage in his own right.”

“It’s been such an honor to meet you,” says Kibi with a sniffle. It’s not assured – perhaps not even likely – that they’ll ever see Cranchus in person again.

“Bah!” says Cranchus. “Honor? We’re family! Don’t talk like that.”

“Well, it was an honor for *me* to meet you,” says Dranko.

“That’s true,” says Cranchus. “It was.”

And with that, the old dwarf, now almost half earth-elemental, *teleports* the party back to the surface.

Next stop: the future!

Atanatotatos: Oh, so long! Great!

wedgeski: *omnomnomnom...* Aaaahhhh. *satisfied burp*

Fimmtiu: So awesome! And, as usual, Dranko still gets the best lines. Welcome back, Sagiro!

Micah: Thank You! Always a pleasure to read.

Tamlyn: Seconded.

Kid Charlemagne: Now I have this image of Cranchus as Christopher Lloyd in *Back to the Future*... “1.21 gigawatts! 1.21 gigawatts!”

blargney the second: My head hurts. It’s a happy hurt.

el-remmen: Great stuff as always, Sagiro! I look forward to more.

Question: Are you working towards a final end for this campaign? Will you go 4E?

wedgeski: Oooohhh, good question.

Sagiro: Yes, I’m working towards a final end – and I always have been! It’s hard for me to say how far away I am from that end. I’m tempted to say the campaign is about 65% to 75% done, but I could be way off in either direction.

As for 4E – no, I don’t plan to switch. I’ve already moved the campaign from 2E to 3E to 3.5E, and I can’t put my players through another system-change wringer, let alone require them to spend hundreds more collective dollars on books. That’s no condemnation of 4E, which I find quite intriguing from what I’ve read, but I’m happy with 3.5 and figure I’ll close out the campaign with it.

If I run a second campaign someday, it’ll probably be using 4E, assuming it turns out not to suck.

Condor's Folly

The Company appear in the dark, under a bright half-moon and a sky full of stars. It's a pleasantly warm evening with a light breeze ruffling the tall grasses indigenous to Harkran's southern plain region. The Mirrors of Semek, a.k.a. Condor's Plinths, are not immediately at hand. Aravis looks around with *arcane sight* and there is no magic within a hundred feet. But while Cranchus's teleportation was not spot-on accurate, things are not as dire as they might seem – as Grey Wolf's half-elven eyes adjust to the moonlight he sees blocky shadows silhouetted against a darker horizon, no more than a couple of hundred yards distant.

They are doubly protected against observers, being both disguised as small rats by a *veil* from Kibi and invisible through Morningstar's *cloak of night*. A few minutes of walking brings them within a short stone's throw of the Mirrors; they halt, and Morningstar casts *true seeing*. Neither she nor Aravis can detect any magic auras besides the overwhelming Earth Magic radiating from the Plinths. Suspicious of their inaccurate arrival, Dranko suggests they circle around to the far side of the Mirrors in case their vector of approach was specifically arranged by an enemy, but all seems just as quiescent on the far side. Only the breeze and some field mice keep company with the Company.

Cautiously they move nearer to the standing stones, expecting ambush at every step. As close an observation as they can make without crossing the perimeter shows no footprints or scuffmarks on the dry dirt within the ring. As a final precaution Aravis casts *mirage arcana*, generating a duplicate illusionary ring of Mirrors next to the real ones, and adds a fake *secure shelter* in the middle of it implying that they might be hiding inside.

They step into the ring and walk warily to its center. Kibi takes the restored Eyes of Moirel from his robes and holds them in his cupped hands; immediately they start to glow a soft white. Seconds later they rise up into the air of their own volition, forming into a flat circle some ten feet above the ground. There they begin to spin, and as happens on Flashing Day, white light flashes from Mirror to Mirror, reflecting off each polished obsidian face until it forms a seven-pointed star. Ernie concentrates on *Home*, one hand on his *belt of stability*.

A minute passes. Two minutes. To maintain the ruse of the *mirage arcana*, Kibi uses his *staff of illusion* to mimic the light show there.

Three minutes. The Eyes of Moirel spin faster in their circle, and the translucent beams of light now start to flicker with color. It is in the sixth minute, when the Company have just started to believe that the ambush will come at the end of their journey rather than the beginning, that they are attacked.



Most wizards, if asked to produce magics that could send a subject far into the future, would laugh at the very idea. For two reasons, the Earth Wizard **Condor** did not. For one thing, laughing at Emperor Naloric is not typically conducive to long-term survival, no matter how outrageous his suggestions. For another, Condor actually knew he could do it.

Time travel was, at the time of the Emperor's humble proposal, mostly a theoretical possibility. Condor had dabbled in small ways over his many years of study, pulling at the threads of causality and continuum surrounding small, inanimate objects. He had drawn up schematics for larger projects, surmised impossibly complex formulae, constructed elaborate jeweled constructs. And he had descended to the deepest hot pits beneath the Emperor's palace, there to commune with the Source and learn its secrets.

Naloric was not normally a patient creature, but he took a surprisingly relaxed and tolerant attitude towards Condor's eventual proposal – a ring of standing stones crafted in conjunction with a set of tortured and magic-saturated diamonds. Condor suspected the reason, and he was correct: for all of Naloric's malign power and formidable intellect, he didn't really know what Condor was talking about when it came to the project's details.

"I anticipate that the entire undertaking will last eight months," Condor had said at the conclusion of the presentation. "My apprentices can begin on the plinths while I prepare the diamonds. There will be seven of each, in order to preserve the essential symmetries of..."

Naloric cut him off with a dismissive wave. **"Can your apparatus be tested, before I go myself?"**

"Of course, my lord Emperor," Condor had said emphatically. "I will be able to tune the diamonds as well as infuse the..."

"Enough, Condor. I believe you. And to further demonstrate to me your great confidence, your daughter Moirel will be the test subject. I will afford her that singular honor."

Time slowed then for Condor, and he knew that the next second contained many possibilities, few of them good. His words, his expressions, his posture, these all could betray his concerns, his doubts, his unspoken fears of side-effects. Would Naloric see

into his soul, see that Condor had already considered that, were the Emperor not to return, the Earth Wizard would be unmatched in power in Charagan?

"You are generous beyond words," is what he said. "My daughter will blaze a trail for you through the centuries and return triumphant."

"Excellent." Naloric smiled, and Condor suspected then that the Emperor knew every thought in his head, and didn't care. **"I see no further need for delay. You are dismissed."**



It took a little over a year for the completion of Condor's Plinths and what he called the "Diamond Keys." Over forty slaves died during the construction, most from a combination of exhaustion and malnourishment, a few from being crushed beneath great masses of rock or collapsing scaffolds. Naloric never once complained of the extended schedule, or offered Condor anything but his full support.

Moirel was a formidable Earth Wizard in her own right, a 31-year-old woman on a career trajectory to someday match or exceed her father in arcane might. She stoically accepted her role as guinea-pig and spent most of the year studying, questioning, readying. She even assisted Condor in some of the more fiddly bits of the Diamond Keys' creation, and co-authored a spell of fusion that set the perfect spheres of jet in the very center of each otherwise-flawless gemstone.

When the time came, Moirel was confident of success. She would take the seven Diamonds, stand in the center of the Plinths, and be transported some hundreds of years into the future. She would only stay as long as necessary to ascertain the year, and then return. (The journey back would require the casting of several complex spells, but nothing beyond her impressive talents.)

Had anyone consulted Cranchus about all of this he would have suggested a Ring of Stability to prevent Moirel from losing her sanity during the excursion. But no one did, and long after Moirel vanished from the center of the flashing Plinths, Condor and Naloric still waited. The plan had been for Condor's daughter to return to a time only five minutes after she left, but Condor insisted that time travel was an inexact science at best and that it could be hours instead of minutes.

Naloric gave him one full day, during which Condor's thoughts transitioned from optimistic, to nervous, to an internal debate regarding whether he should resist the inevitable punishments or simply submit to them. Already depressed by the apparent sacrifice of his only child, he settled on the latter when Naloric pronounced his judgment.

"Condor, you have failed me. Furthermore, your inner thoughts of sedition and treachery have not escaped my notice. I am displeased but not surprised; I have had many servants reach heights of power that invited such ambitions.

"I will leave you your life, and will retain you in my court, albeit at a diminished position. But your power must be culled – it will be for your own good, in the long run."

Condor bowed his head, and Naloric placed his hand upon it.



Sometime later, Condor regained consciousness. He felt violated, angry, and in his mind and memories were now gaping holes that might never be refilled. It was especially galling that he no longer possessed the knowledge to fully analyze his failure. Still, possessed of a certainty that Moirel had traveled through time but was either unable or unwilling to return, he brooded over his daughter's fate. Excluded now from Naloric's inner circle, he found himself with abundant time for bitter introspection.

Years passed, but Condor gained scant perspective. Only his indignation and shame increased with time. Moirel had not returned, and his Plinths were long abandoned, monuments to his greatest mistake. 'Condor's Folly,' they were now called by some. Finally, heedless of the potential consequences should Naloric discover his plot, he gained a forbidden audience with one of Naloric's three Oracular Crones. The Crone, named **Tizha**, sat him in a room thick with incense mingled with the reek of fresh entrails. Like all the Crones, Tizha was Blood-touched, and her aura was so foul that Condor, no stranger to evil's palpable aspects, squirmed in his chair.

He gave his gift of gold, and his gift of blood, and his gift of kin (a distant cousin, unlikely to be missed). Tizha pronounced his fate. **"Your daughter is lost, but your legacy returns, and your Diamonds also. One chance remains to you, in the half-moon light of Grenke's heavenly journey. Muster what power remains to you, and take truth and gems from disjoint interlopers. Should you survive – a thing by no means certain – and present your proof, the Emperor will see you again with favor."**

Some months later, Tizha's prophetic words came to fruition. Condor waited on each night of the half-moon, heavily enchanted and watching with perfect perception from the secret safety of one of his Plinths. And the interlopers came, just as the Crone had foretold.



The Last Step

Condor steps out smoothly from the solid northernmost Plinth. He is *invisible*, but in case anyone can see him regardless he is also surrounded by a cluster of *mirror images*.

He is a Sharshun, or at very least a Mors Tarathi. Muscles unbecoming of a wizard bulge beneath black robes; his bare arms and face are obscured by myriad tattoos and piercings. His face has a timeless quality that belies estimates of age. And confirming the Company's worst fears, his skin is flesh and stone mingled, just like Cranchus.

"Condor," breaths Kibi in dismay.

"Hi, great-great-great-dad," says Grey Wolf. "We're just leaving."

Condor ignores this meaningless babble; in fact, he is already casting. An elder earth elemental appears much sooner than it should, towering in front of Aravis and standing nearly as tall as the Plinths themselves. The Sharshun follows this with a tactically placed *wall of force* before hissing: "This will return me to the Emperor's favor."

Condor is well prepared for this battle, but so are the Company. For starters they're all still invisible until someone attacks, and secondly many of them are sporting *protection from evil* that hedges out the direct touch of summoned creatures. As a result of this, one of the sixty-foot-tall elemental's fists strikes the ground, and the other glances off Yoba's ward.

There are three members of the party who can see Condor: Morningstar with her *true seeing* and Grey Wolf and Kibi with *see invisibility* spells. Aravis, with *greater arcane sight*, cannot see Condor's body, but can figure out his location easily enough by the miasma of arcane auras that surround him.

The *wall of force*, while not blocking the beams of light from the Eyes and Mirrors, is faintly illuminated by it. With the wall between him and Condor, Dranko decides the best way over it is by climbing the elemental's body. He's halfway up its back when Condor sinks into the ground. "Xorn movement," groans Kibi. "Of course." So saying, he casts the same on himself.

With Condor momentarily out of the picture, Yoba, Morningstar and Snokas concentrate on the elemental – Snokas and Yoba swing their weapons (with little effect) while Morningstar tosses a *fire seed* (somewhat more effective). Ernie readies a spell while Aravis takes a few seconds to check on the Eyes of Moirel. The Eyes are still spinning in place, seemingly oblivious to, and so far unaffected by, the recent violence.

The elemental notices that some small irritant is using its body as a ladder. It plucks Dranko from its back and holds the half-orc firm in a stony grip. At its feet, Grey Wolf's summoned wolves appear – a pack of speed-bumps, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. The elemental swats at them with Dranko.

Condor appears again, rising up from the ground and casting a spell. Over the *Rary's telepathic bond* Grey Wolf serves as spotter, and this triggers Ernie's *flame strike*, dropped on Condor's head. The Sharshun wizard winces but maintains his concentration well enough to catch the entire Company in a *horrid wilting*. Water is forced painfully from their bodies. He follows this with a Quickened *slow* that only affects Flicker and Yoba.

"Just so you know," says Grey Wolf, his voice pained, "you just sucked the moisture out of one of your own kin."

Condor continues to ignore him. *Kin? Absurd.*

Kibi casts *Evard's black tentacles* with Condor at its center, and one of the writhing black pseudopodia wraps the enemy up tight. He follows it up with *coldfire*.

"I know how you feel," calls out Dranko.

"Use the half-orc as a club!" Condor shouts to the elemental. It's good advice, as this will circumvent the hedging effects of *protection from evil*. Dranko feels the wind pushed from his lungs as the rocky behemoth tightens its grip.

Aravis puts an incipient *dimension door* on Pewter and sends his familiar scampering up toward Dranko in order to free him. Morningstar casts the first of many *mass cure* spells, restoring some vital fluids to herself and her friends, before Quickenning a *searing darkness*. Worse yet for Condor is a *reciprocal gyre* from Grey Wolf, which does damage commensurate with the number and strength of active spells on the target.

Condor is heavily enchanted and so his scream of pain is certainly genuine. He gulps, and vanishes, only to reappear on the far side of the circle. He absorbs the pain of a readied *ice storm* Dranko casts through a magic ring, and blasts the majority of the party with a *delayed blast sonicball*. Then he sinks into the ground again.

Kibi surfaces and uses a staff to cast *rainbow pattern* around the earth elemental's head. Such beautiful, mesmerizing lights! The elemental is transfixed, enchanted both literally and figuratively. It drops Dranko and follows the lights as Kibi moves them off to the side, stepping idly over the *wall of force* as it leaves.

Grey Wolf immediately dismisses his wolf pack, not wanting an attack to shake the elemental from its reverie. Pewter sighs as his mission is made meaningless, and casts the *dimension door* on himself to return to Aravis. Morningstar casts a second *mass cure*, while the others ready for Condor's return.

The malign wizard rises up from the ground in a new part of the circle. Ernie drops a *holy smite* on his head, just before Aravis casts *maze*. A second later Aravis finds *himself* in the maze, and grumbling about the vicissitudes of *spell turning*.

Condor gulps again, a strange and deliberate gesture that suggests something more than simple nerves, and then casts a second *horrid wilting* that leaves Flicker and Kibi nearly dead, and many others badly injured. Not a few members of the Company start to wonder if Condor might be out of their league, diminished though he might be.

(They might have been comforted to know that Condor was starting to wonder the opposite. He knew that in a one-on-many fight, time favors the many, and not a single adversary had dropped from a pair of his most potent necromantic blasts. But there was nothing for it but to battle on – what would be the point of fleeing? His foes would vanish into the future, leaving him with the unacceptable status quo. He needed time to cast the spells that would dislodge the Eyes from their current activities, and there would be no such opportunity while these strange heroes were alive. It was kill or be killed.)

Kibi gasps desperately for healing before popping most of Condor's remaining *mirror images* (and using up the last vestiges of the *spell turning*) with a *magic missile*. Then he Quickens a *glitterdust* upon Condor, whose invisible form (as well as his last remaining *mirror image*) is now coated with tiny glowing flecks. Dranko heals Kibi with a wand, while Yoba *lays on hands*, bringing the dwarf back from the brink.

Morningstar blasts Condor with a *flame strike*, followed by a *searing darkness*. *Shouldn't a wizard be dead by now?* On closer inspection, it's evident that Condor has been healing himself throughout the battle.

"So," calls Dranko. "You sacrificed your daughter for this? Was it worth it?"

Condor glares fiercely. "You wish to talk? Then surrender."

"I would have expected you to have some backup from the Emperor," continues Dranko. "Oh, but wait! He doesn't trust you, does he? Ha ha!"

Beside himself with rage and confusion, Condor snarls, "Who are you, and what do you know of these things?"

"We have a relative of yours among us," says Morningstar, gesturing to Grey Wolf.

"I have no..."

"Through your daughter, you dinglebat!" says Grey Wolf. "Haven't you been listening?"

Condor, in all of his 61 years on Abernia, has never been called a 'dinglebat' or anything like it. "That's not possible," he spits.

"I'm afraid so... grand-dad," says Grey Wolf with a smirk.

Kibi frowns. Is gloating really worth giving away information that Condor wouldn't otherwise know? *I'm sure for Dranko it is...*

Grey Wolf pops the final *image* with another flurry of *magic missiles*, and follows it up with a Quickened *acid orb* before speaking again. "If you had listened to me before, and called off your attack, you might have had a chance."

"You lie!" Condor hisses. "My daughter had no children!"

"Oh, but she did. And now I'm here. But it doesn't matter, at least not to you."

Ernie casts *heal* on the nearly dead Flicker while the others are engaged in their witty repartee. "Now stop getting so injured!" he admonishes. "Take care of yourself!"

Aravis reappears from his own *maze*, having easily found his way out. He's pleased with himself for about two seconds before coming to regret the timing – Condor blasts the entire party with an Empowered *cone of cold*. Amazingly, no one is dead; their patchwork of healing spells, potions and wands is barely keeping everyone conscious. Now, though, over half the Company are one spell away from death. Yoba herself looks like you could kill her with strong language, and Snokas blinks like he's

not sure where he is. Having cast his spell, Condor quickly steps behind the nearest Plinth, out of the line of sight of every member of the Company.

Dranko, healthiest of the party, wants nothing more than to charge over and get in Condor's face. Since the direct path is blocked by Kibi's *black tentacles* he downs a *fly* potion and flies. As he nears the Plinth behind which he expects to see Condor, he encounters Condor's *repulsion field*. With a tremendous burst of concentration and will, he fights through it. Behind the Plinth he sees Condor's glittering outline.

Kibi *summons* his own earth elemental, smaller than Condor's but big enough. It appears next to Condor's rock and grabs the Earth Wizard, grappling. Kibi then sinks back underground.

The rest of the Company keep healing, trying to keep up with Condor's prodigious damage-dealing. Potions are consumed, wands used, and Morningstar casts her third *mass cure*.

To Dranko's great frustration, Condor gulps again before casting a spell – *dimension door* or *teleport*, presumably – and vanishing from the elemental's grip. Dranko flies straight up and looks around frantically. There's no sign of Condor's glittering form – he could be hiding behind any of the Plinths. Grey Wolf and Snokas both make a quick search but also come up empty. Morningstar casts *heal* on herself and murmurs thanks to Ell.

Condor knows that it's almost over, one way or another. He has run out of healing and cannot endure more than another spell or two, but the same, he thinks, is true of many of his enemies. When he next emerges from the ground he will have to endure whatever his foes have ready and blast with his most potent remaining spell – an Empowered *chain lightning*. He has dispelled the *glitterdust*, but he knows that some of his foes can see him anyway. He dares wait no longer. *Kill or be killed*.

Condor appears and starts to cast. Grey Wolf is too far to cast his *enervate*, but Aravis casts *reverse gravity* almost concurrently with a *flame strike* from Morningstar. For the first time in memory Condor's contact with the ground is forcibly severed. His discomfiture at rising from the ground makes it impossible to dodge any of the *flame strike*, and the combined effect causes his *chain lightning* to fizzle despite his superhuman ability to concentrate. Condor falls upward, coming to a bobbing stop high above the ring of Mirrors. "He's at the top," confirms Grey Wolf.

Dranko leaps into the gravity shaft and hurtles upward, colliding with Condor at the apex. They float there together, and though Dranko cannot see his opponent, he can feel the brush of Condor's robe. And then Dranko feels something else: the plink of iron filings from Grey Wolf's *iron storm*. He grins wickedly, showing his tusks. He knows what's coming.

"You know what's sad?" says Dranko. "You lived a failure, and you're going to die a failure."

"There was no failure!" roars Condor. "My experiment succeeded. You are living proof!"

"That's not what the Emperor would say," says Dranko.

"He will change his mind when I bring him your corpses, along with my Diamonds!"

Dranko glances downward, wondering when the blast is coming. From his high vantage the light of the Plinths is astonishingly beautiful, a seven-pointed star of rainbow lights in the countryside's wide and dark expanse. "You know, if you were a *real* wizard, you could just fly away right now," he says.

"Who *are* you?" demands Condor.

Dranko's grin grows wider. "I've been waiting my whole life to say this: 'I'm your *worst nightmare!*'"

That turns out to be quite true. Aravis can't see Condor well enough to target his spell, but he can see Dranko, and with the *iron storm* in place that's all that matters. He targets an Empowered *chain lightning* on his friend, and when the stroke enters the field of iron filings the entire area is filled with raging electricity. Dranko twists, dodges, and avoids all harm.

The same cannot be said of Condor. His body explodes in a shower of rocks and gore, which, along with his magic items, rain down in a gruesome shower upon the Company below. So comes to an end one of the greatest Earth Wizards ever born on Abernia.

The Eyes of Moirel continue to spin.

Flicker and Aravis quickly collect the magic items, and there's a flurry of healing in case more danger comes. Fourteen minutes after the Eyes started spinning, a voice sounds in their minds:

ERNEST. IT'S TIME.

The Company crowd around Ernie, putting their hands on his shoulders. Ernie closes his eyes and thinks fondly of *Home*, his proper place in space and time. The *belt of stability* becomes warm around his waist.

Condor's Plinths start to blink in and out of existence. As they did when they traveled backward in time, the Company feel as if they are floating, though that is objectively untrue.

❀ ❀

Time passes in unknowable ways.

The Company are detached from the universe
as it rushes past them.

Toward the end of their journey there is a brief flash, and a snapshot
vision of their own duplicates passing in the other direction.

Then there is soft oblivion; there are parts of the journey for which it
is best to be unaware.

❀ ❀

Above them the sky is a cold and washed-out blue. Beneath them is a thick bed of snow. Before they can come to any realization of their journey's end, the sky and sun fade out together into a uniform white, and they hear a strange sound in the distance. It is the rhythmic thumping of horse hooves. Together they share a vision of a distant place:

In Djaw, greatest of the Jewels of the Plains, a stable-boy named Four Honest Thoughts stands agog. Before him is the stall of the warhorse Thunder, steed of the errant paladin One Certain Step. It was almost six months ago that she trotted into the city, alone, released temporarily from service while her master journeyed underground. Since that time it has fallen to Honest Thoughts to see to her feeding and comfort, against the day that One Certain Step would return.

"Feathers, come quickly!" he calls to his friend, a teenaged lass his own age who shares duties with him in the stables. Two Orange Feathers runs over to see what's the matter, and soon she too is standing slack-jawed. The stall is empty. Thunder has vanished, though she was there not moments ago, and it's impossible that the mare could have walked out without them knowing. But what has the two youngsters in awe is that the empty stall is glowing with a soft yellow radiance, a holy cloister strewn with straw.

On the wide slopes of Mount Celestia a holy knight in unstained armor stands facing a burgeoning sunrise. His heart and mind are at peace, and no earthly care troubles his fair countenance.

Far below him, a magnificent white horse gallops toward him through boundless fields of the greenest grass. The sound of her thundering hooves comes clear to the ears of the knight, and a tear of joy shines bright in his eye, for soon, soon, he will be riding again.

Kaodi: Holy Deja Vu! Another update! I am glad to see you back, Sagiro, even if it is only for a while. You and PirateCat write and run my favourite Story Hours, and how awesome it is to get a number of updates after a long hiatus.

wedgeski: Wow.

el-remmen: Awesome. I mean, truly.

Also, reciprocal gyre: is that from a book or a homebrew? If the former, which? If the latter, would you mind posting it? I must have or concoct my own. Thanks.

coyote6: It's a WotC spell; there's a version in the *Spell Compendium*, but I think the original was in *Complete Arcane* (and was nastier; 1d6 per spell level, where the SC version is 1d12 per spell).

Also, I just realized that I should steal One Certain Step's name (at least) for my Exalted game.

Graywolf-ELM: That was great; now I have to go back and re-read some of what I'd forgotten. Why did I think Cranchus was Moirel's daughter? Thank you for the update.

scrubkai: I've been lurking around this thread a long time... But the last couple updates made it just impossible not to post.

WOW... That is the best written fight I've read in a long time. It was well worth the build up that's been happening for what feels like years. All I can say is thank you so much for making my life just that much more enjoyable over the years.

Everett: Good stuff. But... I didn't understand two things: (a) How did Condor find them? (b) When/where did we learn that he's an ancestor of Grey Wolf's?

el-remmen: I can answer this one (I think). He didn't find them. He knew they would be coming there because of the prophecy he purchased with a cousin. Poor cousin.

Everett: Was that revealed in an earlier Story Hour?

el-remmen: Yeah, the second most recent one [see page 433].

thatdarncat: Wow. Thank you... something to distract me from my interview in the morning. Awesome.



Of Historical Significance

Snow is starting to soak into their clothes, and none of them care. The air is fresh and clean, the sky is a blinding blue, and the sun shines down upon a world restored. Ernie makes a snow angel.

The Eyes of Moirel have shattered during their final journey, their powdery remains mixed irretrievably with the fluffy snow. Ernie's *belt of stability* has turned a brittle gray, its power and magic consumed.

All in the Company are eager to return home, but after so many magical journeys made under the weight of so much responsibility, they decide to walk back to Tal Hae. It's maybe eighty miles from the Mirrors of Semek to Tal Hae, and they can stop off at Dingman's Ferry on the way. Ernie is eager to introduce Yoba to his parents.

Morningstar issues an apprehensive *sending* to Eddings before they set out; is he alive? Does he exist? What does he remember?

Eddings, it's Morningstar. We're back... we think! Are you okay?

The answer comes back almost immediately:

You're alive! You exist! I'm so pleased to hear from you! We thought that one of your many enemies had finally found a way to

Aravis frowns. "Wasn't he in the house with us when the world changed?"

"Yeah," says Dranko. "So maybe our Eddings is caught in a temporal loop, and this is a different Eddings. I wonder if he remembers being in another world, and how long we've been gone. It was October when the world changed."



As they tromp across the snow-laden countryside, the party talk about what may have happened during their absence. Dranko worries that Turlus may have found a way to take over the Greenhouse. Of greater concern (to him) is that there will be no heroes' welcome for the party, since no one will realize there had been any danger. He comforts himself by looking forward to a reckoning with King Farazil. "When we see him, I'm all for threatening him with *banishment*, after which we'll follow him to the Plane of Shadow to kill him once and for all."

"I don't understand why we'd give him any warning," says Grey Wolf.



They sleep that night in a *secure shelter*. Morningstar *sends* to Eddings again:

*We are okay. Long story. Sharshun plot. How long were we gone? How are Sagiro and Carp?
We will be home in a few days.*

Eddings replies:

You've been gone for seven weeks. Spire had determined you didn't exist. Haven't seen Sagiro recently. Who's Carp?

"I think that means the Greenhouse didn't come back from the past," says Dranko. "It just reintegrated into the current time line."

At Ernie's urging, Morningstar casts one more *sending*, this one to Sagiro. There is no reply.



In the morning, Morningstar casts *commune*. Though her questions are few, there is only one that she needs answered.

"Is Ell okay?"

YES. THANK YOU.

"Do you know where we've been?"

YES.

That's really all she wants to know, but she asks one more question for Ernie's sake.

"If Yoba stays here, will it have an adverse effect on her and her people?"

YES.

"Thank you so much."

YOU'VE HAD A LONG JOURNEY. WELCOME BACK.

She shares the news with Ernie. "I'm sorry, Ernest."

But Yoba and Ernie aren't surprised. In her own land, Yoba is a key military strategist in an ongoing campaign – it's inevitable that her own folk will be better off when she returns. "I ought to find someone to *plane shift* me back," she says.

"I'll do it," says Ernie.

Yoba's face brightens. "Then you'll be coming with me, at least for a little while. I can show you Evergreen!"

"I'd like that very much!" says Ernie.

Dranko clears his throat. "If the two of you don't get married, I'm going to beat the snot out of you both."

Yoba starts to protest, but Dranko cuts her off. "I am well aware that you have a cause, and that Ernest has one here as well, but if you let a small matter of inter-planar borders hold the two of you apart, I'm going to be *really* disappointed."

"But..." says Ernie.

"And that's my piece!" roars Dranko, who immediately turns and walks away.

Everett: LOL. Well done.

Piratcat: Wow, I had totally forgotten about this. That's great.

We just played Sagiro's game this evening – and last Monday as well. We're 17th level. There have been deaths and betrayals and surprises. And the game remains an utter delight. But man, we still have some really embarrassing combats. It was nice to read the fight at the plinths, back when we had our tactics nicely polished for a change...

"He cares a lot about you, doesn't he?" says Yoba, smiling. "Ernie, I have to go back, but he's essentially right. We can see each other from time to time – and talk via *sendings* – until one of our situations changes."

There are many ways to say 'I love you' in twenty-five words or less.

Pat: After a haiku
on a love that spans the planes,
how many remain?



It's a warmer day than yesterday, making the snow slick and exposing swathes of mud. Grey Wolf summons up horses for all the Company to ride. They make sparse and idle conversation throughout the day, preferring to quietly enjoy the return to normalcy.

But as the sun starts to set, Ernie begins to recognize landmarks at the outskirts of Dingman's Ferry. He starts to babble excitedly to Yoba. "That's the fence we would follow when the snows were heavy... We could follow it from the farthest orchard into the center of town following the bits of the posts sticking up. And there's the Longfields' farm, where we used to play tag in his cornfields until he'd come out waving his pitchfork."

Dranko laughs. "And that's the tree I fell asleep under listening to Ernie's boring lectures about his homeland."

Soon they arrive at the doorstep of Ernie's childhood home. His mother, **Rowan Roundhill**, opens the door. "Ernest!" she exclaims happily.

"Hi Mom! I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd stop by."

"You know you're always welcome, you and your friends. I know everyone here, I think..." She looks up at the faces of the assembled heroes, but stops when her eyes settle on Yoba.

"I'd like you to meet Yoba Stoutheart," says Ernie, unable to mitigate his grin in the slightest. "She's a paladin. We met her on our recent travels." Behind Ernie's mom, his dad **Hob** is looking back and forth between Yoba and Ernie, a look of incredulous approval on his face. It's clear what he's thinking: Ernie's ship has finally come in.

"Come in, everyone!" says Rowan, getting hold of herself. "You must be hungry!"

The non-halflings have to duck to get through the door, and crouch a bit inside, but soon all are seated and enjoying an incredible feast. It seems that ever since Rowan learned that her son was part of an itinerant adventuring group, she made sure to always keep an extra store of food in the cupboards and pantries for just this sort of occasion.

They talk some about their adventure, but Ernie is highly reluctant to explain the details, believing that his parents won't understand the ins and outs of time travel and alternate histories. He nudges the conversation toward lighter topics, like Dranko and Morningstar having gotten married while they were on the road. Rowan and Hob, on more familiar ground, press for details.

"We've both changed our last name to 'Brightshield,' says Dranko, beaming at his wife. "Which reminds me: we should change the name of Castle Blackhope to Castle Brightshield."

"You mean Longtooth Keep?" asks Flicker.

"Yeah. Castle Blackhope. That's the one," answers Dranko. "And if someone has taken it over, we can wait for them to fix it up and then take it back. By force, if necessary. It'll be cheaper than fixing it up ourselves."

"Isn't siege warfare expensive?" asks Flicker.

"Not the way these two do it!" says Dranko, gesturing to Aravis and Grey Wolf.

"But they way they do it," says Flicker, "you'll just have to fix it all over again!"



As they finish up dessert – home-baked pies cooked by Rowan – Dranko asks idly about the Wilburforce Statue.

"They finished excavating it," says Rowan. "They want to start a museum, since it's clearly of historic import. But the problem is, they can't find anything else to put in it." She chuckles before continuing. "Don't tell anyone I said this, but I won't be sad to see the museum fail. You remember Murgy Thorn? Technically the statue was on his property, so he owns it, and the museum is his idea. He's not as unpleasant as he used to be, but he's still a schemer. I don't like that he owns a statue that's clearly of someone from our family."

Dranko rubs his hands together. "Come on, gang. Let's take a little trip over to Murgy's tavern." Only Yoba and Ernie stay behind, happy to stay and chat with the parents.

It's not a long walk. Most of the Company sit at a long table and start drinking, but Dranko, having used his *robe of blending* to make himself look somewhat impoverished, stands at the door. Grey Wolf and Aravis stand behind him, as intimidating a pair of bodyguards as one could ever fear to meet.

Eventually an officious halfling comes bustling over. "I am looking for Murgy Thorn," says Dranko.

"Who, may I ask, is calling for him?" asks the halfling.

"I am Sir Dranko."

"Does he know you?"

"Indeed he does."

The halfling disappears into a back room, then returns a minute later. "Mr. Thorn is indisposed. Can you come back tomorrow?"

"No," says Dranko.

"We have to speak with him *now!*" barks Aravis.

The halfling looks up into human eyes reflecting endless stars. "Oh. That's different. One moment!" The halfling again dashes off.

Dranko chuckles as he listens to the raised voices coming from the back room. Soon enough Murgy Thorn emerges, the same cantankerous, middle-aged halfling they remember. "Been a long time, Murgy," says Dranko.

"Yes, yes it has," says Murgy, casting a nervous glance at Grey Wolf and Aravis.

"I think you'll want to have this conversation in private," Dranko suggests.

"Er... I think it's better out here," says Murgy. "You know... lots of people, no one would try anything..."

"If you don't mind everyone hearing your business, sure!" says Dranko.

"These people know my business," says Murgy, gaining some confidence. "I'm a respectable man of the town, and I have nothing to hide."

"Fine," says Dranko. "I understand you plan to start a museum, based around the statue that you have in your basement."

"Have you come to make any donations or investments?" asks Murgy.

"In a sense. The way I see it, you seem like a fellow more interested in a good profit and comfortable living, than necessarily in showcasing the culture of your people. Is that a fair statement?"

Murgy thinks for a moment. "No. I want to do both."

"I have learned a little bit about museums in my travels," continues Dranko. "They almost never make any money, and they take great time and expense to build. I wish to offer you an alternative. Instead of you going into debt, I wish to give you a flat amount of money right now, for the statue. Instead of a centerpiece for your museum, you will have a large amount of cash."

Murgy blinks. "You're right," he says. "We should be having this conversation in private. Let's discuss terms."

Once they're seated in the back room, Dranko keeps on with his pitch. "You will notice that, despite the fact that we are Knights of the Realm, and own a keep and several mansions given us by the king, we have no intention of simply seizing the statue."

"Oh, I know you wouldn't do that," says Murgy. "You're friends of Ernest Roundhill. He wouldn't have made friends with those who would steal." To their great credit, neither Grey Wolf nor Aravis actually laugh out loud at this.

"What do you think is a fair price for the statue?" asks Dranko.

"Well," says Murgy, "you understand its age has been estimated at hundreds of years old. It is an exquisite piece of stonework, the likes of which cannot be found for miles around. It bears an uncanny resemblance to the greatest hero of our city, the aforementioned Ernest Roundhill. I would say it's extraordinarily valuable."

He thinks for a moment, and what he's clearly thinking is: *How high can I go without being preposterous?*

"I would think... I would think a thousand pieces of gold. If I were to commission it today, it would cost nearly that much, even not regarding its historical value."

Dranko smiles indulgently. "I was thinking of more like that number with a zero removed."

"A hundred gold!" exclaims Murgy. "Surely you must be joking. For a hundred gold pieces I couldn't even attain a cheap version of the statue...."

The haggling begins, and ends a few minutes later with Murgy accepting an offer of 500 gold pieces, and an agreement that his own name will appear on a plaque to be set on its base. It's a princely sum for Murgy, and he's obviously pleased with himself. Dranko pulls out a sack of coins and counts out the gold and platinum right there on Murgy's desk. The halfling's jaw drops at the thought of anyone carrying that much cash around with them. He hands over a signed deed of ownership.



The following morning brings the discovery that the restoration of the proper timeline has come with one poor side-effect. The itchy rash that had been intermittently plaguing most of the Company has returned for Morningstar and Aravis. Yoba uses her powers to eradicate the symptoms, but from experience they expect it will return tomorrow. "I guess we still have rabid crazy dragon-it's," Morningstar sighs.

"Hey Ernie," says Dranko. "I think there's something you should see in the town square." Ernie looks apprehensive, but Dranko reveals nothing more. They walk through town until they reach the center of Dingman's Ferry.

The Wilburforce Statue, at Dranko's request, is already being set onto a base. Eight industrious halflings are working on the construction and even laying a small garden around it.

"*What did you do?*" shouts Ernie. "And when will Murgy be able to walk again?" Dranko just smiles.

"The benches were my idea," says Morningstar, grinning at Ernie's slack-jawed stare.

Yoba leans in to whisper in Ernie's ear. "Are you going to tell anyone it's not actually you?" When Ernie doesn't answer, Yoba adds: "I won't tell until you do."

"Hey Kibi," says Dranko. "Remember how you carved something on the bottom of the foot of the statue back in the past? You should see if it's still there!"

Kibi *xorn moves* into the ground, and pops up a moment later. "The inscription is still there, just like I wrote it!" he says happily.

"That's so *neat!*" exclaims Dranko.

Kibi smirks. "You don't know what I wrote."

Dranko pales. "Kibi, I trust that you would never do anything to cast one of your friends in an unfavorable light."

"Just like Ernie would never have a friend who steals?" asks Kibi, eyebrows raised.

"Ah, crap," says Dranko.

Fimmtiu: I think these are my favourite parts of Story Hours, in general... the quiet interludes of rest and relief after long and dangerous adventures, where you get a glimpse of who the heroes are when they're not busy being heroes. (Particularly long, in this case!)

blargney the second: Updates to this story hour make me do a happy dance like the carol-loving kids from *Love, Actually*.

Joshua Randall: Dang, about six months ago I had this elaborate theory worked out regarding the itchy rash, but I never posted it, and now I've forgotten all my brilliant insights.

In other news, I suspect the party hasn't seen the last of Naloric and the Sharshun. Villains that good aren't so easily circumvented.

Oversight: Well it's been done hundreds of times before but I just wanted to add to the accolades. I don't think that I've ever posted here before, but I have lurked for years. A long time ago I read Sagiro's story hour and, as everyone here likely agrees, found it absolutely fantastic. Two weeks ago I came across it again and started reading the compiled PDFs and now here I am at the end.

At the risk of being redundant let me just say that Sagiro you are the kind of GM that players dream about and your players are the kind that GMs dream about. I look forward hearing more about Abernathy's Company. Back to my lurkdom I go.

Sagiro: Oversight, I'm honored that you'd blow your first post on my Story Hour, and I appreciate the compliments. And you're at least half-right – I do have awesome players.



The following run is definitely one of my five favorites in all the time we've been playing (and in case you're wondering, I've run 208 sessions of the campaign as of today). I think you readers will understand why.

Contents May Have Shifted During Flight

The Company make only one additional stop on their way to Tal Hae. Having purchased flowers in Dingman's Ferry, they take a small detour to the nearby dwarvish tombs discovered so long ago. Because they are accessible only by a small crack in the back of a cave, Ernie doffs his armor and crawls inside with the flowers, leaving them at the foot of Hurthin Hammersmith, recently visited in the distant past. He murmurs a prayer for those who have died a long way from home.



The sun is setting once again when the Company reach the outskirts of Tal Hae. "You can smell the fish from here," comments Dranko. "But I'm more looking forward to checking in with the church." Morningstar winces, imagining how awkward it's going to be, sharing her newfound knowledge of how the Church of Ell used to operate...

They ride up to the gates of Tal Hae in full Knights of the Spire Guard regalia. "We're Ernest Roundhill and Company, Knights of the Realm!" announces Dranko. Yoba beams, though she also looks puzzled as she examines the walls.

"Interesting choice," she says. "The wall is made out of wood?"

"It's a long story," says Ernie.

"Welcome back to the city," says one of the soldiers manning the gate. It's clear he recognizes the Company.

"Any news?" asks Dranko.

"Things have been quiet since the war, thank the Gods."

Ernie spreads some coins among the guards. "Get yourself something warm to drink," he tells them. He's thinking of hot cocoa, personally, though the guards probably have different ideas.



They make no detours on the way back to the Greenhouse. Dranko pulls out his Greenhouse key, and finds that, oddly, there are two keys on his keychain. One opens the door to the Greenhouse, but he's never seen the second one before. "Flicker?"

"Don't look at me!"

"I think it's a time key," says Dranko. "I guess when time changed, it gave me an extra key."

They open the door, and Eddings greets them with a smile of intense relief. He's already in pajamas, and the cats Argol and Smeggy, looking particularly well fed, weave excitedly around his feet. "Thank the Gods you're alive!" says the old butler.

"How long have we been gone?" asks Aravis.

"Didn't I say in the *sending*?" says Eddings. "Seven weeks, give or take a day or two."

"And when was the last time you saw us?" asks Dranko.

"When you all went down into the basement. You had some important thing to do. I went to check on you a few hours later, and you were gone."

"Do you know what Eyes of Moirel are?" asks Morningstar.

Eddings looks a bit peeved at the question. "Yes, of course I do." He extends a finger into one of his illusionary eyes to make the point.

"It's not as stupid a question as it sounds," says Morningstar. "You see, when we vanished, you came with us."

"Er... to where, exactly?" asks Eddings.

Ernie looks up from the cats before Morningstar can answer. "Eddings, I want you to meet our friend Yoba! She has to go back home soon, but I wanted her to see where we live."

"Charmed," says Eddings, bowing.

"Say, where's Skorg?" asks Dranko.

"He's... traveling. I don't know exactly where. Once we got word that you... had been annihilated, he decided to explore more of the kingdom."

"Annihilated?" asks Aravis.

"I thought you said we went into the basement and disappeared," says Dranko. "We teleport around all the time. Why would you think we were annihilated?"

"Ozilinsh confided in me," says Eddings. "The Spire... they cast some divinations, and discerned that you didn't exist. I told Ozilinsh you were back after I received your *sendings*. He warned me to be suspicious, but I knew it was you."

"Oh, and Morningstar and I got married," adds Dranko.

"Right," says Eddings. "You were annihilated, and the two of you became married. Of course."

"Well, we were gone for the better part of a year," explains Dranko.

"Nooooo," says Eddings slowly. "You were gone seven weeks. Like I've already told you twice now."

At this point it's easier to just tell Eddings everything, and so they do. It's hard for him to get his head around it all, especially the part where he went with the party to the past. They also tell the sad part about losing Kay, and that they don't know where she's gone. Eddings is confident that she'll be back someday.

When they get to the bit about possible small changes to history as they know it, Eddings scratches his beard thoughtfully.

"That... that explains it," says the butler. "I don't want to say anything else. Just go visit Turlus's shop tomorrow morning. I don't want to say anything else. Dranko, you'll need to... just go."

Dranko is intrigued, but doesn't push it. "Does it have anything to do with why I have a second key on my key ring?"

"I don't know anything about that," says Eddings. "But that does remind me of something else. There's a gentleman who has called upon you while you were gone, Dranko. I swear I've never met him before in my life, but he's been here three times. He wouldn't tell me his name. I flashed a light on him in case he was Farazil, but he merely told me to stop. He's tall, with a neat goatee, and handsome. Very polite. Well dressed. I don't think he liked me very much. He thought I should recognize him. The last time he visited, he asked me to tell Dranko that 'we miss him at the Manse.' I answered: 'And you are...?' He said 'Very funny... just tell him.' And then he left. That was about three weeks ago, and I haven't seen him since."



The Company then call upon Ozilinsh using the crystal ball in the secret room. Ozilinsh is wide-eyed and overjoyed to see them. "You exist!" he shouts.

"Remember how we had three enemy power groups?" says Dranko. "The Sharshun, and the Black Circle, and Naradawk? We stopped two of them. But the third one? The Sharshun? They won."

"What?" says Ozilinsh, alarmed. "When? How? And... why don't you seem worried?"

They spend the next hour giving Ozilinsh a huge info dump of their entire adventure. Ozilinsh listens with rapt attention.

When the narrative is over, he says in a hushed voice: "Do you realize the implications on temporal mechanics? Think of the paper we could write! But regardless, I'll tell the Spire all about your journey. They'll be overjoyed to know that you're back and alive. High Priest Cornwall *communed* with Pikon when you had been gone for two weeks, and he learned that you didn't even exist. We figured one of your many enemies had finally figured out how to do you in. Some of us held out hope that something odd was going on; I'm glad that our faith has been rewarded."

Besides the apparent reality of time travel, the part of the tale Ozilinsh finds most intriguing is their visit with Cranchus.

"We've always wanted to know what he looks like," he says.

"He looks like a cross between me and an earth elemental," says Kibi.

"He's very smart – he has very good ideas," adds Ozilinsh. "But he's always been mysterious, and not very communicative."

"And he's not actually Parthol," Dranko admits grumpily.

"Just like I told you he wasn't," says Ozilinsh with a smile.

"He stays apart, because he's afraid of what will happen to those around him," adds Aravis.

"He's expressed that sentiment to us before," says Ozilinsh. "He doesn't even want us to know where he is. We haven't heard from him at all since the Battle of Verdshane – we can no longer cast the spells to speak with him, and he hasn't made contact with us."

Ozilinsh shares a few tidbits of information from the party's missing seven weeks. Wellington, Glade and Royce cleared out another Black Circle bestiary, this one in Forquelle. The Delfirians have now entirely retreated back through the gartine arch at Seablade Point; a few stayed behind to cause trouble as highwaymen and bandits, but Jerzembeck, Junaya and company are cleaning them up.

"This sounds strange to say," concludes Ozilinsh, "but right now, I have nothing for you to do. You're on your own for a while. And now I really ought to go and inform the rest of the Spire that you have not, in fact, been obliterated from existence."

Exhausted, the Company go to bed.



The next morning, it's Grey Wolf, Dranko and Ernie who are suffering from the mystery rash. Yoba cures them before breakfast. All the Company are curious about Eddings' cryptic comments about Turlus, so after eating Ernie's now daily *heroes' feast*, they take a stroll down the Street of Bakers to visit Fine Baked Goods.

The inside of the bakery is no different than they remember; Turlus is a formidable baker, of a skill nearly equal to Ernie's own. There are a handful of customers who regard the decked-out party with understandable curiosity. There's no sign of Turlus, but there's a woman behind the counter who is indisputably and stunningly gorgeous.

Dranko stares at her. She stares back at Dranko, her eyes wide. Before she can speak, Dranko regains his composure and asks: "Where might I find Turlus?"

"Who?" asks the woman.

"Turlus."

"Dranko," she says with a throaty chuckle. "Come here."

Far be it for Dranko to deny this heavenly creature such a simple request. Her voice is low and rich, as lovely as the rest of her.

"We need to talk for a moment," she says, leaning in close to him. Then she shoots a quick look over his shoulder and winks at Morningstar. Morningstar blinks.

"May I... uh... may I introduce you to my wife?" says Dranko.

"You got married? How lovely! I'm very happy for you." She gives Dranko a light peck on the cheek, then winks again at Morningstar. Morningstar gives the woman a wan smile.

"Sooooo," says Dranko, unsure how to proceed. "What's your name?"

"Excuse me? What's my name?"

Then, leaning in so close that her lips graze his ear, she whispers, "I guess we're playing that we're strangers, then? I'm curious where this is going." With that, she straightens up, smoothes her apron, and in a clipped voice asks: "So, what can I get for you today, sir?"

"Your name," Dranko insists.

The woman smiles sweetly. "**Turlissa.** Now. What can I get you?"

At this point the entire table fell into helpless laughter for over a minute.

"Turlissa, it's a pleasure to see you again."

At this point the half-dozen or so patrons of the bakery have all stopped their shopping to observe this unusual exchange. Dranko walks swiftly to the door, turns the sign to read CLOSED, and announces: "Get them whatever they want, and I'll pay for it!"

Soon enough the bakery is empty save for the Company and Turlissa. Morningstar decides it would be prudent to pop off a Silent, Still *detect thoughts*, but finds that Turlissa is somehow warded against the spell.

"Dranko, may I speak with you in private?" Turlissa asks.

"I... I think we... er..."

"Dranko, you're so cute when you're at a loss for words. Not that that happens very often."

"Turlissa, how... how, in twenty or thirty words, would you best describe our relationship?"

Turlissa looks pointedly at the rest of the Company. "Our relationship? You mean our... working relationship?"

"I mean our... uh... every aspect of our relationship?" Dranko answers tentatively.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" asks Turlissa.

"Every aspect of our relationship!" Dranko decides.

"Do you really want to be talking about that in front of your friends?" she presses.

"Oh, my word," mutters Grey Wolf.

"Yes," says Dranko. "I trust these people absolutely."

Morningstar bails him out. "Dranko, would you like some time alone with her?"

"Sure!" says Dranko, lunging. "That would be great."

He nudges Pewter, who jumps up on his shoulder, but this does not go unnoticed by Turlissa. "Are you sure you want your wizard's familiar listening in?"

"Oh... familiar? No, no, of course not. Let me shoo him out." He picks up Pewter and walks outside with the rest of the Company, at which point he gestures wildly for Morningstar to cast *Rary's telepathic bond* on him. Morningstar does this, and also mentions that Turlissa was warded against her *detect thoughts*. Yoba adds that Turlissa is not detecting as evil.

As Dranko reenters the shop Ernie comments mentally (and with a hint of disapproval): *She's very... friendly.*

And she's way, way hotter than the old Turlus! observes Dranko.

And she's clearly into you, adds Kibi, which makes me think she's not in her right mind.

"Dranko," says Turlissa, once the two are alone in the shop. "You're acting very strange. What has happened to you these past few weeks?"

She motions to a door in the back of the shop, then disappears inside. Dranko follows her, and after she closes the door to the back office, she swiftly grabs Dranko's head and plants a long, deep kiss right on his lips. Dranko carefully keeps his thoughts to himself.

He breaks off the kiss before it gets too intense, steps backwards, and says, "I've been gone for seven weeks."

"Yes, I know," says Turlissa.

"Yes," agrees Dranko. "Right. Yes. That's correct. And in that time, uh... I... it would be useful for you to give me a full description of what's been going on."

She whispers, "Didn't you tell Lucas where you were going?"

"Lucas..."

"You are playing with me, Dranko, and I don't appreciate it."

Dranko improvises wildly. "Do you think it's appropriate that I tell everyone my business? No. So why would I have told Lucas where I was going?"

"Dranko... who did you *expect* would take over in your absence?"

Hm. Good question! "Um... Turlissa, how loyal are you to me?"

"How can you even ask that?" she shoots back. She's clearly growing tired of the games.

"Let us assume, if that is true, that I have come back from my trip without a clear memory of some of the things from my past."

A light goes on in Turlissa's head. "How do I know it's really you?"

Dranko belches.

"I'll need more than that. Do you expect me to believe that you have no memory, and that now I should start coughing up secrets?"

"I see your point," concedes Dranko. "What would prove it to you, Turlissa?"

The lovely baker thinks for a moment before answering. "A year ago you saved someone's life in a smuggling ring operation. Who was it?"

Over the *telepathic bond*, Dranko asks the others if he should level with her about the whole 'changes in the universe' thing.

The answer is a unanimous **NO!**

When Dranko doesn't answer, Turlissa says flatly, "I think this interview is at an end."

"I saved your life," guesses Dranko, but his guess comes too late, and is seemingly wrong as well. Turlissa walks to the door and opens it.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way," she says. "I don't know who you are, or who you're working for, or what you think you're doing, but... get out of my shop."

Dranko laughs. "This is funny for reasons you don't understand. And I appreciate that you're confused."

"I'm not confused," says Turlissa, thunder forming on her brow. "You're attempting to impersonate Dranko, and you're doing a terrible job of it. You've done some research..." – she points to his cigar – "...but not nearly enough. Out!"

"If I was going to go through all of the trouble to research, don't you think I would have filled in all the cracks?" asks Dranko.

"You just figured I'd believe the utterly convincing personal appearance and... and crude mannerisms. But no. Please leave."

“What would the hard way be?” asks Dranko.

“The hard way is, I summon the city guard and they throw you in jail.”

“That’s not going to happen,” says Dranko.

“True... because I’m giving you the opportunity to leave now. But... given that I’m going to report this to my superiors...”

“Which superiors?” Dranko can’t help asking.

Turlissa decides that the conversation is at an end. She walks out of the shop, leaving him behind. Dranko hustles out after her. The Company have wisely moved off to a different block, but Dranko scrambles up to the rooftops, curious as to where Turlissa is really going.

It turns out that she’s really going to get some town guards. She finds a pair only two blocks away and leads them back to Fine Baked Goods, at which point Dranko decides to make himself scarce.

Grey Wolf comments over the mind-link: *Time has changed in a very interesting and bad way for you.*

“What could we possibly have done,” Dranko wonders out loud when reunited with the others, “to make Turlus turn into... into smoking hot Turlissa?!”

This sets off a wave of laughter; Flicker nearly busts a gut. “Dranko, you could say ‘smoking hot Turlissa’ a million times before I die, and it’ll be funny every time.”



HERE ENDS PART TWO

OF

THE ADVENTURES OF ABERNATHY’S COMPANY



EroGaki: Wow!! A few weeks ago, I started reading the Story Hour via the PDFs, and I just caught up. This is an amazing campaign! Great job to Sagiro and all the players! I’m looking forward to the next update.

KidCthulhu: Ah, Turlissa. Sagiro is right to call this one of his favorite moments. DMs live for the look that was on all of our faces at that moment. And it only gets better...

Everett: You know, Sagiro, you really ought to look at making your Story Hour over into a full-length novel. I know people have suggested it half-jokingly on this thread in the past, but you should give it some serious consideration.

Sagiro: I do appreciate the sentiment, and I *have* considered it, but it’s just not possible. For one thing, with kids and work and chores and wanting to actually spend some time with my wife, I am left with something like 2-3 hours a night (and not every night) that gets divvied up among many hobbies. I simply don’t have the time. For another thing, teasing out all of the WotC-owned stuff would be a nightmare. For a third thing, I’m not convinced that a D&D campaign, however compelling, would translate well into a novel. Now, there’s probably a good book to be written that’s *based* on my campaign, but that would only add to the enormity of the undertaking.

In short, when someone sends me a check in advance for about 2 million dollars, thus allowing me to retire and freeing up 40-50 hours a week of my time, I promise to get writing immediately!

el-remmen: The check’s in the mail...

