

Sagiro's Story Hour

PART ONE



CHAPTERS 1 TO 10
OF
THE ADVENTURES OF ABERNATHY'S COMPANY



Sagiro's Story Hour, Part One

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Overview

Note: This section is retained only for historical interest; it was last updated in February 2002, when the story had progressed to not quite the end of Chapter 7. The campaign would eventually conclude in September 2011, after a total of 266 sessions.

Greetings, and welcome to Sagiro's Story Hour!

The Charagan Campaign is a high-fantasy “large story arc”-style Dungeons & Dragons game. It takes place in a homegrown setting; the PCs are from the Island Kingdom of Charagan (about the size of Great Britain), and most of their early adventures took place there. About 30% or so of the game took place in Kivia, a large continent that can only be reached via a magical gate. They are now back in Charagan.

As the party’s power has increased, so has their knowledge about the events into which they were abruptly thrust at the start of the campaign. About 40 runs or so (about 10 months of game time) were spent in a long-term quest to find the Crosser’s Maze, a legendary device that has great (but unknown) powers concerning planar travel. (They succeeded; the Crosser’s Maze is now in the possession of one of the PCs.) Meanwhile, the Great Enemy™ is approximately a year away from breaking through a long-sealed planar gate and invading Charagan.

All of the human gods are creations of either myself or my players. For halflings, dwarves and such, I’ve used Greyhawk gods such as Yondalla, Moradin, etc.

The game is what most would call “high magic.” The party have lots of magic items (though generally of low power), and the story itself, especially the background, involves lots of “custom” magic use.

The original PCs started at 1st level. All PCs are given 76 points to spend on the six stats, with no restrictions or sliding cost scale. The first game took place in November of 1995, and there have been 127 runs since then [as of mid-February 2002]. Slightly more than three years of game time has passed. The PCs who started at the beginning are now 10th or 11th level. All in all, I’d estimate about 600 hours of gaming. Woo hoo!

The game started using 2nd Edition AD&D. We started playtesting 3rd Edition in early 1999, and have used the latest version of 3E from that time on.



House Rules

- We retained the 2E *identify* spell, finding it more satisfying than the 3E version.
- Half-orcs are allowed to take either the skill bonus usually afforded to humans, or the feat bonus usually afforded to humans.
- In lieu of the two-weapon fighting “virtual feats,” rangers may take Point Blank Shot and either Precise Shot or Rapid Shot.
- Morningstar is a cleric whose *modus operandi* revolved around many Thought Sphere spells from the 2E *Tome of Magic*. Although these spells did not make it into 3E, she still can cast several of them, including *thought capture* and *memory read*. Furthermore, we have invented two new clerical domains: Thought and Darkness. Lastly, many of the cleric spells based on fire or bright light are, for her (and others of her religion), based on cold and darkness, but are otherwise identical. For instance, *searing light* is *searing darkness* for her, while *flame strike* produces black flames which do cold damage instead of fire damage.
- Other spells still allowed from 2nd Edition: *know age* and *fist of stone*.
- The spell *polymorph other* has been changed to *polymorph friends*, which is in all ways identical except that it can only be used on willing targets.
- The *disintegrate* spell only works as written on non-living matter. Living creatures take 10d6 points of damage (Fortitude save for half).
- The *harm* spell allows a Will save for *cause critical wounds* damage, but this cannot bring the target below 1d4 hit points.
- The *discern location* spell will cost the caster 500 XP per use.
- The following spells do not exist in my campaign world: *phantasmal killer*, *finger of death*, *circle of death*.
- I have allowed Kay to take “orcs” as her favored enemy three times (giving her a total +6 bonus vs. orcs).
- Contradicting the official ruling, the *haste* spell does not grant an extra partial action on the same turn as it is cast. It’s a powerful enough spell as it is!
- I am not enforcing the standard experience penalty on multiclass characters. In my opinion, this rule is meant primarily to prevent munchkin abuses of the multiclass system, abuses that my players are not perpetrating.
- Spells from class book supplements, as well as from *Relics and Rituals*, are allowed on a trial basis. For each spell taken by clerics from new sources, another spell must be removed from their list of available spells.



Characters

The characters at the start of the game are:

Tor Bladebearer (*Human Fighter 1*)

Tor Bladebearer was the son of a nobleman, determined to avoid his destiny (and attendant responsibility) as heir to the Barony of Forquelle. As such, his summons by the Archmage Abernathy was quite well-timed. Brave and strong, Tor was the epitome of the well-muscled but not-so-wise fighter, with high ideals, a trusting nature, a love of counting and stacking coins, and very little fear of anything. He kept a trophy case full of monster parts in the party's house. Tor left the party (when his player moved to Texas) after session 75, and is currently serving as a double-agent/spy in the midst of an army hostile to his home kingdom.

Mrs. Isabel Horn (*Human Mage 1*)

Isabel Horn was a married middle-aged woman, whose husband had been lost at sea a few years before the game began. She learned a bit of magery from a passing wizard who desired her goat as a familiar. Mrs. H was not at all the stereotypical adventuring sort, but was extremely resourceful. She was able to put all sorts of common household objects to good use while adventuring, and proved an invaluable party member. Mrs. Horn left the group (when her player moved to California) to become a powerful wizard's apprentice, after session 37.

Morningstar, Shield of Ell (*Human Cleric 1*)

Morningstar is a young cleric of Ell, the Goddess of Night. She has always been something of an outcast, from her inappropriate Goddess-chosen name, from her near-albino pale skin, and from her white hair, unique among Ellish priestesses. She is direct and to the point in her dealings with others, and can be ruthless when that is called for. She has had difficulty adapting to a lifestyle where she must walk daily beneath the sun.

Dranko "Coaltongue" Blackhope (*Half-Orc Cleric 1/Thief 1*)

Dranko Blackhope is a half-orc, the result of an orcish assault on the small human village of Tal Korum. His father died in the attack, and his mother died giving birth to him. Dranko was raised by his grandparents, and when his kindly grandmother died, his less kindly grandfather took him to the city of Tal Hae and gave him to the Church of Delioch for his upbringing. He found a small amount of piety there, but left the church as a teen and took to the streets as a rogue. Dranko is gruff, crude, surly, irreverent, and often lacks tact, but a good heart lurks beneath the rough exterior.

Ernest Wilburforce Roundhill (*Halfling Fighter 1/Cleric 1*)

Ernie Roundhill is a short, pudgy but stout halfling from the village of Dingman's Ferry. He traveled to the city of Tal Hae to seek adventure, and found it in short order. Ernie is kindhearted and brave, willing to see the good in nearly everyone and everything, though he has no tolerance for bullies. As a priest of Yondalla, Ernie is an excellent cook, and is thus the most valuable member of the party.

Kay Olafsen (*Half-Elf Ranger 1*)

Kay Olafsen is a half-elven ranger who was raised by human parents in the forest village of Cyric. Her elven father left her mother (who has since remarried) soon after Kay was conceived. She grew up learning the ways of the woods with her three human brothers, and expecting that nothing extraordinary was ever going to happen to her. Kay is extremely practical (though a bit naïve), and isn't afraid to play either the good cop or the bad cop with anyone.

Flicker Proudfoot (NPC) (*Halfling Thief 1/Fighter 1*)

Flicker Proudfoot is a young halfling, raised in the city of Tal Hae. His parents own and operate a halfling inn called the Smoke House, and it was there that Flicker honed his roguish skills. His job was to observe the patrons, to make sure no funny business was going on, and to "liberate" valuables from the particularly rude, obnoxious or troublesome. Secretly, Flicker had aspirations of joining the Tal Hae city guard, and taught himself some basic shortsword skills. Flicker's lack of wisdom often gets him into trouble, but his quickness and dexterity usually get him out of it again. He often talks the talk of a coward, but when it comes right down to it, he puts his life on the line as willingly as anyone in the party.



Before They Were Famous**Paths of Destiny**

March 2004

As I promised a while back, I'm now posting a campaign prologue on which I've been working on and off (mostly off) for a few months now.

Full disclosure: while I did run each character through a 30-minute pre-game session, that was in November of 1995, and my long-term memory is awful. What's written here is loosely based on those sessions, incorporating what I remember, but with plenty of extra detail that makes it read better. And the stuff at the start is background fiction that never saw the gaming table at all.

Lastly, while I wrote this partly out of dissatisfaction with the current early parts of the Story Hour, I also wrote it as thanks for all of you readers out there who've been following the adventures of Abernathy's Company. You've given me support and ideas, kept me honest at times, and made me think about what makes a good campaign – not to mention that you've given me an excuse to keep my writing skills honed. Enjoy!



Do you hear that sound? That is the inexorable whirring of fate's gears spinning on axles greased by the gods.

The multiverse is very much a vast machine, consuming time in its furnaces and spewing death from its vents. A trillion souls are its working parts. But the deities in their heavens did not set the gears to motion, for they are part of the machine themselves, loath though they would be to admit such. Even with power and knowledge unguessed by mortals, they have no more control over destiny's engine than does anyone else.

OK, it was a loaded question. You probably *don't* hear the sound of reality's relentless progress. Neither do most living things. But there are exceptions, born here and there every few generations, and the choices and actions of those beings can send the courses of worlds careening off in new (and invariably more interesting) directions.

The Archmage Abernathy is one of these people. He sits in the comfortable study on the top floor of his tower, leaning over a piece of parchment, quill in hand dripping ink. In a metaphorical sense he is listening to the whispers of the Machine, though in practice he is writing down the names of people he has never met, has never heard of. There are already four names on the page, but he knows... senses? Believes?... that there are three more still to be written.

Ernest Roundhill

Hmm. Sounds like a halfling name. Could be someone right here in the city of Tal Hae. And there's already a halfling on the list; "Flicker Proudfoot" is certainly also of that diminutive race. Two out of seven? Abernathy's intellect is troubled but his gut is sure. Those two belong with the others.

For another few minutes he stares at the parchment, quill hovering. Most of his mind is occupied elsewhere – he has important duties to perform, and as vital as this interlude may be, he cannot neglect his primary task for much longer. His able apprentice Thewana can hold things down for a few more hours yet, but Abernathy is thinking ahead. Abernathy is always thinking ahead. So much depends on him.

He looks down to discover he is writing another name.

Isabel Horn

He gets a peculiar chill as his pen inks this sixth name on the list, but it passes as soon as he is done.

Only one more to go. Abernathy knows there will be seven names on the paper. He doesn't know *how* he knows. His astounding prescience will never be confused with omniscience. It might be a god who guides his pen. It might be something greater. Perhaps he is simply mad.

No, I'm not mad, he thinks. *That would have implications too dire to contemplate.*

For an hour more he stares at the page, waiting for the final name to come. Only when his mind starts to drift back to his centuries-old obligations does his pen stir and write the last name.

Dranko Blackhope

Dranko? That sounds like an Orcish word. Abernathy's brow furrows as he reviews the seven names. A small pang of guilt stirs in his heart. All of these people are about to give up their old lives and start new ones, and the latter are likely to be much more dangerous than the former. But the time has come when he – and by extension the rest of the Archmagi, and by further extension the whole Kingdom of Charagan – are going to need help. And these seven – they are the help.

(Don't misunderstand – Charagan already has some elite fighting units, including at least one experienced and formidable adventuring group. But these names on Abernathy's parchment are different. He doesn't know how, but they are laced in tightly to the fate of the kingdom in ways that are as certain as they are unknowable.)

Has his pen chosen ordinary folk who will find their slow way to greatness? Are they already true heroes of the realm? Abernathy has no idea. He's been out of touch for a while.

He stands up and his old bones creak. *No point in waiting*, he thinks. *I already have tasks to set for them. Simple ones to start with. It will get more complicated later on.* On a nearby table are a long scroll and a vial of clear fluid. Inked onto the scroll is an impossibly complex spell that combines powerful divinations and illusions and conjurations and something to do with teleporting. Abernathy doesn't know who wrote the scroll, or what's in the vial. Not even Alander knew. But his old mentor had told him that when the time was right – and Abernathy would know when that was – he should read the scroll while pouring the liquid over a list of names.

"What names?" the young Abernathy had asked.

"I don't know," said Alander, smiling. "But you will."

So now, as the chill winds of late March blow outside through the streets of Tal Hae, Abernathy places his list of seven names down beside Alander's old scroll and starts to read. As he utters the syllables of power, he trickles the fluid over the names. The casting takes about five minutes, and when he is done both pieces of paper, scroll and parchment, are blank white.

"That's it then," mutters the Archmage. "Best get back to work."

He turns toward the door. It will be several days before he returns to this room, at which time he will find to his great consternation that there are three new names on his piece of parchment, written in what looks like his own hand. It's a mystery that will make more sense in time.

But in the present, Abernathy leaves the study and descends to a strange room in the heart of his tower, where he settles into an old wooden chair and resumes his task of saving the world from destruction.



IN THE FOREST OF HARKRAN, NEAR THE TOWN OF CYRIC

Kay Olafsen puts down her bow and drops to one knee. For a moment she just stares, taking in the bloody details of a savaged deer carcass. Then she reaches out to pull back a flap of torn skin, bends down even lower, and peers intently at the bite marks. She makes a careful study of the dead body and the tracks around it.

Wolves. A small pack. Four, I think. The deer was old, and they didn't have to chase it far. The largest set of tooth-marks is scarcer. The alpha male ate first, leaving the others to gnaw at the bones. Nothing surprising here; the wolves are still hungry enough to range this far in, after a long cold winter.

Disappointed that the wolves got there first, Kay picks her way back through the forest to her family home, a well-built cabin surrounded by small cleared fields. Her little brother Melly, nine years old, comes tearing from behind the house as she approaches. "Kay, Kay! Look! Look what you got!"

There's a folded piece of paper in his hands, which he waves frantically as he approaches. "See?" says Melly. "Those words on the paper say 'Kay Olafsen.' I asked Mr. Miller and he said it's your name written down! It's a letter for you!"

That doesn't make sense, Kay thinks to herself. I can't read. Neither can most people in Cyric. Who would be stupid enough to send me a letter instead of just coming to talk with me?

"Mr. Miller said he'd read what's inside for you, if you wanted."

"I guess he'll have to," says Kay. There are few other literate souls in Cyric – Mayor Torbel for one, Apothecary Sam for another. And old Mya who runs the general store, Kay's pretty sure she can read. But the Miller house is closer, and Mr. Miller is a good friend of her father.

"Did you see who brought the letter?" Kay asks her little brother. "Did they say who it was from?"

"It was a kid, about my age," says Melly. "I hadn't seen him before. Maybe a new family moved into town? He handed me the letter and ran off. I told mom, and she told me to take it to the Millers to see who it was for."

Kay pokes her head into the house. "Mom? Do you need me for the next hour? I need to go into town."

"Go ahead, dear," calls her mother from the kitchen. "The boys are giving me all the help I need right now."

"You just go scamper around in the woods some more," calls her eldest brother, Lars. Kay can hear the friendly mockery in his voice. "This time try to come back with more than skinned knees."

Kay's mom pokes her head through the kitchen doorway and smiles at Kay. "I hear Apothecary Sam is paying good coppers for woodwort, if you can find any. And pick up some potatoes at the market while you're out. Oh, and tell Mrs. Baker that we'll have extra cabbages for her if she wants to buy them. And come back as soon as you can; Lars and Karn are helping old man North rebuild his barn this afternoon and I'll need some help with chores later on."

"Got it, mom. See you later!"

Kay dashes out the door. Twenty minutes later she is standing in the Miller's living room. Old Mr. Miller, a kindly codger with most of his teeth and a wrinkly smile, is breaking the strange wax seal on the letter.

"Don't know who it's from, hey?" says the old man. "Maybe you got a secret admirer among the young lads in town, hey?"

Kay rolls her eyes.

Mr. Miller opens the letter and reads. His face goes pale as his eyes scan the parchment. He reads it a second time just to be sure.

"What does it say?" asks Kay impatiently.

"You set yourself down then, missy. Where'd you say this letter came from?"

"Melly said some new kid brought it by our house while I was hunting," says Kay. "Why? Is it something important?"

"Yes. I'd say that it is. You may not believe it, but here's what it says: '*You will appear at the tower of the Archmagus Abernathy in the city of Tal Hae, at sundown on the first day of April, the year 1828.*'"

"That's it?" asks Kay.

"It? It? Missy, do you know what this means? You've been summoned by an Archmage! That's quite an 'it'!"

Kay, like most everyone else in the kingdom, has heard rumors about the Archmagi. They're powerful, mysterious and notoriously reclusive wizards. Sometimes they emerge from their towers to demand tasks of citizens, and by an ancient law there is no gainsaying their requests.

"That's not what it means," sighs Kay. "It means someone is playing a joke on me, that's all. No Archmage is going to be interested in me, I promise."

The two look at each other for a long moment. A stiff breeze blows through Mr. Miller's living room, stirring Kay's long brown hair. "Or maybe this Abernathy guy meant to send this to someone else," she continues. "There must be a lot of girls named Kay in a city as big as Tal Hae. Well, thanks for the help, Mr. Miller. I've gotta go. Lots of errands to run for mom."

After she has gone, Archibald Miller frowns and squints over at the window looking out onto the street. It's a chilly March afternoon and all of his windows are sealed tight, as was the door just moments ago. He knows the story about Kay's birth, the way some crazy wind had kicked up and bowled over the midwife. It's why some folks still call her "Windstorm." If it were up to him he'd say that letter was no joke, that Miri's headstrong daughter ought to go to Tal Hae and not risk agitating some great wizard. But it's none of his business, and with a cough and a shrug he goes back to work.



A SMALL BEACHFRONT HOME ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF KYNDER HOLD

Isabel Horn rocks in her porch chair, looking out over the bay. Perhaps she is admiring the way the setting sun's glint makes the tide seem to slide over itself. Perhaps she enjoys the early evening breeze coming in off the water, tousling her hair and stirring the crystal wind chime hanging from the lintel. More likely, though, she is simply waiting for her husband to come home.

For three years she has been waiting, trapped in the terrible limbo between widowhood and desperate hope. Willam was a competent sailor, a trader with his own ship and crew, who had roamed the coasts of Charagan for years. Isabel had married him with the begrimed blessing of her noble family and moved with him into the small house on the coast.

Tonight she reflects on the choices of her life, where they've led her, where they're going to lead her. Isabel Horn, née Boxwood, is no longer a young woman. She's in her mid-thirties and unlikely to remarry. Her family would take her back, but the thought of living out stifling decades into spinsterhood on the Boxwood estate steals her breath at the mere thought.

There is an unsolvable paradox in Isabel's heart. She cannot imagine that Willam is alive somewhere and not returning to her. Nor can she imagine that her husband is truly dead. On many evenings she has dwelt upon this paradox, finding no answers.

The wind dies down. Idly, Isabel reaches out a hand and effects a small cantrip that makes the wind chime dance. She has learned a little magic since her husband last sailed away. A young wizard named Thomas had come up the hill to her house a year past, on a quest for a familiar. In return for allowing him to call one of the ravens that liked to frequent her yard, Isabel had requested that he teach her a spell.

Thomas had replied that magic was not something just anyone could learn. It took a particular kind of mind, and an attitude that tuned one's inner being to the mystic forces of the world. Isabel insisted, so Thomas showed her how to cast *unseen servant*. To his surprise, she picked it up with only a few days' instruction. Then he went into her backyard and summoned a familiar, whereupon the ravens flew off, and Isabel's old goat Nana walked up to him, introduced herself, and began to chew on his hat.

Thomas paid Mrs. Horn for the goat and left with thanks. And Isabel Horn had started on her strange career as wizard, prisoner, and savior.

On this cool night in late March, thinking about her husband, her magics, her future, Isabel finds that she has unexpectedly made a decision. Tonight she will pack her bags. Tomorrow she will take the first ship to Tal Hae. No longer will she wait for word of Willam to reach her. She will go out into the world and find out for herself what has happened.

Had only she turned around and looked back toward home, as the ship set out the following morning to cross the Middle Sea between Kynder Hold and Tal Hae, Isabel Horn might have seen the speck of a small child standing on her pier, waving a piece of paper in his hand.



ON THE STREETS OF TAL HAE

Dranko Blackhope lurks in the mouth of an alleyway, watching citizens of Tal Hae hurry along the streets through the rain. It's the perfect day for this – people pay less attention to their surroundings in a rainstorm. Their eyes will be on the ground, looking for puddles, and their minds will be on their destinations, thinking of a warm fire and a roof above their heads.

He's been waiting for half an hour when a likely mark walks past his alley. A fancy umbrella is keeping the rain off the man's fine clothes, and his only bodyguard is walking in front of him. A pouch dangles from the man's belt. Dranko smiles. *They never learn.*

He slips out of the alley and starts the tail. Ignoring the rain, Dranko scans ahead the next two blocks. He takes stock of everyone coming toward him, noting how fast they walk, how observant they are. He notes where city guards are posted, and where the side streets are. A few seconds later he makes his move, drawing a small dagger but keeping it concealed within the folds of his clothes. Quickly he catches up with his prey. The dagger flashes. He cuts the strings on the man's pouch, catches it with his free hand, and slips into a second alleyway.

The merchant keeps walking, oblivious.

There's always a chance that such thefts will have been witnessed by a meddling third party, so Dranko runs to the back of the alley and scales the wall, then hops from rooftop to rooftop for a couple of blocks before sitting down against a chimney. He pulls open the liberated pouch and takes inventory. It's not as much as he expected given the man's fancy outfit and bodyguard, but the handful of silvers and coppers will pay another week's rent and keep him fed for a few days. And speaking of the rent, he'd best get home.

Dranko is four blocks from his apartment when he hears an anguished groan from below. He peers down from the roof and sees an old beggar crawling into a narrow empty side street. The man slumps against wall and clutches his ankle. The rain soaks him.

For a moment, Dranko is frozen with indecision. He too is drenched from the cold rain and wants nothing more than to get someplace warmer and drier. As he watches, the beggar tries to stand but collapses in a puddle, crying out in pain.

"Crap," mutters Dranko. He unslings his pack and pulls from it a rumpled cream-colored robe with fading gold trim. It's a bit of a struggle to get the wet fabric sorted out, but he gets the robe pulled on over his street clothes. He fishes a necklace from a side pouch of the pack and hastily fastens it around his neck. Both the robe and necklace feature the stylized design that indicates Delioch, God of the Healing Hand.

Properly attired, Dranko climbs carefully down the wall and approaches the beggar. He sees that the old man's ankle is broken, a compound fracture with bone poking out through the skin. Blood is mixing with the rain puddling beneath his body.

"What happened?" asks Dranko gruffly.

The beggar looks up, but the first thing he registers is not the robe or the necklace – it's the tusks. Dranko Blackhope is a half-orc, not so ugly as many of that hybrid race, but ugly enough. Two thick teeth like small boar's tusks protrude from his lower jaw. His other features are thick, flattened, almost cruel. Frightened and injured, the beggar shrinks away from Dranko.

"I'm not gonna stand here in the rain all day," says Dranko. "You want me to heal that ankle, or would you rather slowly bleed to death?"

Rain runs down the vagrant's straggly hair and into his eyes. "I was begging for coins," he croaks. "All I wanted was a copper or two for a meal, but he pushed me aside. I slipped in the rain and fell against the curb. My ankle..."

Dranko leans down and examines the break. He'll need to set it, but it should heal properly. "Put this in your mouth," he says, handing the beggar a leather strip. "This'll hurt a bit. If you have to bite down, bite this, not your tongue."

Dranko pulls on the man's ankle and realigns the bone. The patient cries out again, the leather strip falling from his mouth. Quickly the half-orc puts one hand on his holy symbol and the other on the beggar's leg. "Lord, I pray for healing, that this man be made sound and whole." A soft golden glow surrounds the broken ankle; bone reknits, tendons reattach, and the puncture closes. In a few seconds only a small scar remains. The beggar looks up in wonder.

Dranko fishes out five coppers from his just-acquired swag and drops them on the man's lap. "Buy yourself some food, and say a prayer to Delioch," he instructs. The beggar nods dumbly as Dranko walks away. Only after he has rounded a corner does Dranko scramble back up to the rooftops; it wouldn't do for a cleric of Delioch to be seen scaling the walls.

Dranko enters his second-story living space – two squalid little rooms – via a ceiling trapdoor he made for himself. Ironically, that trapdoor is one of the few parts of his roof that doesn't leak when it rains. Dranko has a collection of pots and buckets catching the drips that spill through on days like this. He peels off his soaked clerical robes and sits down in a rickety chair, hoping to enjoy a few minutes of relaxa...

Bam, Bam, Bam! "Drank-oooooooo!"

His landlady, a large, loud and lazy woman named Berthel, pounds on his door. The two of them share a satisfactorily caustic relationship. Dranko lets her in.

"You're soaked! What have you been up to? Out scaring urchins with that winning smile?"

"Nice to see you too, Berthel. Maybe I was finding a better place to live than this drafty strainer."

"You wish," laughs Berthel. "Speaking of which, where's the rent?"

"Maybe I should hold on to it until you fix the leaks in my roof."

"You got somewhere better to go?"

Dranko pauses. He imagines the sanctuary of the Church of Delioch, the Healing Hand, where those who need succor are given harbor and comfort. "No," he says. "I guess I don't. Here's enough for two weeks. Now get out of here; your perfume is drowning out the preferable aroma of my chamber pot."

Berthel counts her money, chuckles, and turns to leave. Then she turns back. "Oh, almost forgot. Some kid was here this morning. Told me to give you this." She takes a folded piece of paper from a pocket and tosses it to her tenant.

"Didn't know you could read," she laughs as she leaves.

Dranko cracks the seal on the letter and reads it as he returns to his chair. Hours later he is still there, brooding, wondering what it means.



THE SMOKE HOUSE, TAL HAE

The Smoke House is a bright, cheerful establishment in the heart of Tal Hae's "Halfling Quarter," catering primarily to the little folk but offering a warm welcome to anyone interested in good food, good drink and good company. It is owned and operated by a well-respected and well-liked halfling couple, Crick and Mora Proudfoot, assisted by their son Flicker.

Flicker Proudfoot is a remarkable person. Physically he is strong and wiry, and through diligent practice has become mildly dangerous with a short sword. (He still maintains a childhood dream of someday joining the Tal Hae city guard.) Flicker is also quick and agile, with as deft and skillful fingers as any rogue employed by the Tal Hae Undermen. He is mischievous in a friendly sort of way, and wouldn't hurt anyone unless they were asking for it. He's not much in the common sense department, but he scrapes by.

Flicker's primary duty in the Smoke House is what Crick jokingly calls "patron quality maintenance." When a customer becomes rude or obnoxious, Flicker will make sure they don't leave the establishment before being discreetly divested of some small possession. The theory – and it's worked well in practice – is that patrons who later on discover they've been robbed are less likely to come back to a "den of little halfling thieves." As a result, the Smoke House has a fine reputation among good-natured folk, and receives poor word-of-mouth only among the unsavory and boorish.

Not that pocket-picking is Flicker's only responsibility. He also (along with other employees) greets visitors at the door, waits tables, pours drinks, cleans mugs, and contributes to the atmosphere of relaxed enjoyment. He is engaged in just this sort of duty on the night of March the 30th, welcoming guests as they come in the door, pointing them to where open tables wait, advising them that the onion stew is particularly good tonight, and sizing them up as possible troublemakers. A knot of regulars from the early lamp-lighting shift comes in out of a drizzle; they nod to Flicker and hasten to start on the night's ale. The door swings almost shut, but a small foot wedges itself in the jamb, and a thin waif struggles to push the door open again. Flicker pulls the handle and lets in the child, who looks up at him. He clutches a folded piece of paper.

"This is for Flicker Proudfoot," says the child.

"That's me!" says Flicker, taking the paper. "Who's it from?"

"Flicker!" his father shouts from the back of the inn, his strong voice carrying over the din. "Where'd you put the mugs that came in this morning? Mora wants to have 'em washed and ready by tomorrow morning!"

"Oop... hold on, kid," says Flicker. He turns and shouts to his dad, "I stashed 'em down with the wine bottles! It was the only place I could find room!"

Flicker turns back to find the door swinging shut, the child gone. He almost opens the paper to read it, but more customers come in just then, so he stuffs it in a pocket. Five minutes later he has forgotten all about it. Thus it is that Flicker is extremely surprised at what happens to him the following evening.



THE ISLAND BARONY OF FORQUELLE, ON THE PALACE GROUNDS

"Father, have you seen Darien? Master Cawvus says he's late for his arithmetic lesson. I cannot find him anywhere."

Young Alomayne Firemount, twelve years old, grins impishly as he asks the question. His older brother Darien is going to be in some hot water for missing an appointment with his tutor. Not that he doesn't love his brother, mind. And if you were to tell the young lad that he wouldn't see Darien again for years, if ever, he'd think you'd gone mad.

Three miles away, the sixteen-year-old Darien Firemount, heir to the throne of Forquelle, is pulling his small boat onto the sandy shore of a small island. There are dozens of little islands dotting the island barony of Forquelle; this one has the advantage of being boring and uninhabited and indistinguishable from several others. Unless father convinces his wizard to use divination magic, it could take more than a day for anyone to find him. By then, if what he's read is true, it will be too late.

He has already decided on a name to use in his exile: "Tor Bladebearer." It's generic, tough sounding, and nothing like his real name. He has the longsword to back it up, and plenty of strength with which to use it. For a boy in his middle teens, 'Tor' is something of a freak of nature. He stands taller than six feet, with broad shoulders and thick muscles that would make many a seasoned warrior green with envy. His head, with its boyish face and sandy hair, looks stolen from a younger body and attached whimsically to his bulky frame.

And what is his destiny? Officially he is to be trained to succeed his father as Baron of Forquelle. As Baron he will rule the Islands, wasting his days with a daily torture of diplomacy, economics, ledgers, taxes, and various affairs of state. His sword

will grow rusty, his back will bend over a desk covered in contracts and agreements, and his true destiny will go unfulfilled. The court sword-master has all but admitted that Darien could become the greatest swordsman the barony has ever seen. And what did his father say?

“A sword is a plaything. The true weapons of a ruler are wisdom, guile and knowledge. A sharp bookkeeper will be of more value to you than a sharp blade.”

Bah! Darien knows in his deepest heart that he was made for adventure. He should be out exploring the world, fighting evil, discovering hidden treasures – anything but sitting on the throne to which unkind fate would shackle him. Months have passed since Darien first started to plan his escape. He would run away, hide aboard a ship bound for one of the three duchies, Lanei maybe. He would tint his hair, or try growing a beard, or dye his skin a new color. In some hidden place he would start to forge a new life, a new identity. Darien Firemount would be left behind forever, and Tor Bladebearer would lead a life of limitless possibility and unbounded glory!

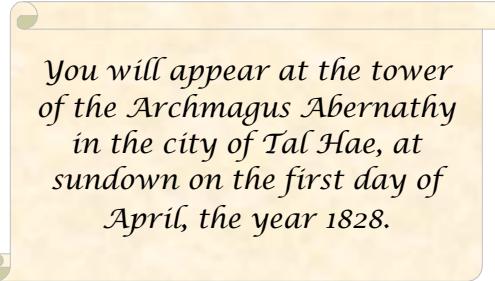
And anyway, Alomayne is *much* better suited to rule the barony. Bright kid.

Alas, for these many months past Darien’s plot to escape never got beyond the most rudimentary planning stages. His father kept him busy with duties, and that damned tutor hardly left his side! He had begun to suspect that his father knew his mind.

Two days ago, everything changed. Darien was stealing precious minutes in the sparring yard, hacking a straw dummy with his sword. A tousled-haired youth maybe eight or nine years old had wandered into the yard clutching a piece of paper. At first Darien figured that some visiting merchant’s son had been set loose on the castle grounds. As the boy walked over to him Tor had feared that babysitting duty was going to interrupt his sword practice. But instead the boy had approached him and handed him the paper. “This is for you,” said the boy.

It had a wax seal imprinted with a design like a slender tower. The textured parchment was high quality, an expensive luxury for a child to be carrying around. He turned it over in his hands looking for a sign of whom it was from.

“Who told you to give me this?” he asked, still looking down at it. There was no answer. The child was gone. Darien broke the seal and read the short message.



*You will appear at the tower
of the Archmagus Abernathy
in the city of Tal Hae, at
sundown on the first day of
April, the year 1828.*

It never occurred to Darien that this was a summons or an invitation. Alone of all the recipients, he took the words literally. He had two days to pack and prepare.

Now, as the afternoon sun drops from its height on the last day of March, Tor Bladebearer hides his boat and wanders inland to a secluded spot. Idly he munches on a cheese pilfered from the castle larder. Any minute now, he will be transported to the life of his dreams. He doesn’t know how he knows. He just *knows*.



THE TEMPLE OF ELL, IN KYNDER HOLD

“Morningstar” is not the name of an Ellish priestess.

In the halls of the Goddess of Night, many of Her servants have been granted names that reflect the nature of Her portfolio. Moondraft, Obsidia, Umbra... that sort of thing. Others have more ordinary names, like Previa, June, or Amber. But there has never been recorded a priestess named Sunbeam, or Radiance, or Dawn. All true names are born in the mind of Ell, and there has never been doubt about Her focus and purpose. The Goddess might have pointed out to skeptics that it is the morning star that heralds the dawn while the night still lasts, but She is content for her daughters to find their own paths and make their own judgements. Alas for Morningstar that her peers have not judged her kindly.

Morningstar sends Clariel staggering back with a vicious blow. Clariel, senior among the Shields of Ell in the temple at Kynder Hold, regains her balance, walks forward and sets her shield. “Again,” she says.

It wasn't enough that the Goddess had given her such a name. The name, everyone says, is absolutely appropriate to her appearance. Morningstar is tall, gangly, rail-thin, with skin so pallid her parents feared through her childhood that she was albino. Her long straight hair is a snowy white. That's not what an Ellish priestess looks like.

Morningstar pants with exertion, sweat matting her pale hair to her face. In the cool night air her breath puffs out in clouds. She swings her weapon again and again, her trainer Clariel exhorting her not to falter. It's only through a determination bordering on stubbornness that she has not. No one, not even her mother who is also a Priestess, expected Morningstar to receive the call to serve the Goddess. Even now she is regarded by some as a freak, not exactly an outcast but not much embraced among her own sisterhood, a misjudged girl in a misunderstood religion. She can count her friends on half the fingers of one hand. The rest judge her more harshly while at the same time treading more lightly around her, as if they fear what her purpose will be, placed in their midst by Ell. There is something subtly portentous about Morningstar that makes her sisters distinctly uncomfortable, and this they reflect back at her in defense.

"Enough!" cries Clariel. Morningstar is not strong, but she is quick and accurate and can spar for hours without tiring. This is not the first time she has outlasted her mentor. Morningstar lowers her weapon, a spiked ball attached to a wooden handle by a short length of chain. There is an old book of weaponry in the Chroniclers' library that shows a picture of this weapon. In modern times it would be called a flail by most, but in that dusty tome it was labeled: 'morning-star.' When Morningstar had seen that picture she knew that one day she would swing such a weapon in the service of Ell as a Shield, the martial order of the church.

Clariel's shield is scarred with the marks of Morningstar's weapon. "You have fought enough for one night," she says. "In two hours the sun will rise; you should bathe and attend prayers before bed."

Clariel treats her better than most of her sisters. At least she sees her potential, and judges her on her fighting prowess rather than her awkward appearance. She's not a friend, exactly, but Morningstar has learned to value any relationship that is entirely free of scorn.

"Thank you, sister," she says to Clariel. The trainer nods, removes her shield, and walks from the sparring yard into the temple building. Morningstar tarries, looking up at the stars and squinting uncomfortably at the bright full moon.

"Excuse me, are you Morningstar?" She turns, startled, to find a small child standing nearby. He grasps a folded letter with a wax seal. "This is for you," says the child, before Morningstar even has a chance to answer. The urchin presses the paper into her hands and runs off, leaving the Ellish neophyte confused and speechless.

She opens the letter as she walks back to her frugal bedroom in the temple, reading easily in the nearly complete darkness.

She is quite calm about it, though she doesn't doubt its veracity. If there's one thing that Ellish priestesses learn early on, it's equanimity.

The problem will be timing, Morningstar thinks as she wonders where to find a duffel bag. Even in the best case she will be late for this strange appointment by at least a day. Today is the last day of March, and it's 300 miles by ship across the Middle Sea from Kynder Hold to Tal Hae. She can only do her best. If the wizard Abernathy thought this summons was time-critical, he should have sent his messenger more than a day in advance.

After a quick rinse in the Church's baths, Morningstar dons her black-on-black robes and joins Clariel and others for services and prayer in the south chapel. At their conclusion, she catches Clariel's attention and motions her teacher over to a private alcove.

"Yes, Morningstar?"

"I have received an unusual summons, of a... personal nature. I will need to leave Kynder Hold on the first available ship and travel to Tal Hae. I'm not sure when I'll be back, but if it turns out to be anything more than a brief stay, I'll send word."

"Are you in trouble, sister?" asks Clariel.

"No. I don't think so. Please, if you could, tell Quia to take me out of the standard rotations for the rest of the week. I must secure berth on a ship at once."

"The sun is almost risen," Clariel points out. "You know the rules of our church..."

"I will ask to travel below decks," says Morningstar. "With luck I can avoid the sun entirely. But I mustn't delay even an hour more."

"Very well," says Clariel. "If you are in any trouble, you know you can always come to me for help."

"I know it," says Morningstar, grateful.

"Then may the blessings of Ell be upon you in your travels."

Despite the urgency of her itinerary, Morningstar takes the time to pen a note to her parents. She copies the words of Abernathy's letter verbatim, then adds a short postscript: *I'm going to Tal Hae in case this summons is true. Love to you both.*

Ninety minutes later, Morningstar is settling down to sleep on an old mattress, in the hold of the merchant ship *Wind's Kiss*. She had to give most of her small monthly allowance to the captain, even allowing that she was willing to travel below decks. She is more nervous than she likes to admit, even to herself. Thin bars of sunlight slip through the seams of the deck and speckle the hold.

Sunlight! The enormity of what she's doing threatens to overwhelm her, so she turns her head toward the darker shadows around her and prays fervently for Ell to protect and guide her. Soon an assuring calm settles over her. By the time she drifts to sleep, with the ship riding the waves en route to Tal Hae, a small smile has settled on her face.



DINGMAN'S FERRY

"This is *Pyknite*," says Old Bowlegs. "I've carried this blade my whole life. Like me, it doesn't care for orcs or other foul things. I want you to have it."

Standing before the old halfling warrior, young Ernest Roundhill hardly knows what to say. That Old Bowlegs should be giving him a pep talk is honor enough, but his sword? "Er, thank you, sir," stammers Ernie. "I will do my best to use it bravely, in the service of Yondalla."

"I know you will," says Bowlegs. "You're the best student I've got. I don't mean your skill, though that's good enough for a start. But you won't misuse any of your gifts, *Pyknite* included. I know it."

Ernie turns red. Old Bowlegs is the seasoned leader of the seven-halfling-strong militia of the tiny town. He has killed over a dozen orcs in his life, they say. And he's usually stingy with his compliments; today he's positively effusive. *It must be because I'm leaving home*, Ernie thinks.

In truth, Bowlegs is sorry to see young Roundhill go. He has always thought that Ernie would be the one to follow after him, to keep his town safe from harm. But Ernest Roundhill has taken it into his head that his destiny lies elsewhere, that he can do more good in a large city than in the tiny village of Dingman's Ferry. Probably true, Bowlegs concedes to himself. But Tal Hae will be like nothing Ernest has ever seen, and what the young would-be adventurer will need most when he gets there is confidence.

"Well, Ernest, you should go back and say your goodbyes to Rowan and Hob. I'm sure they'll have more advice for you before you head off into the wide wild world. Be sure to write back home once you've settled in."

"Yes sir, I will!" Ernie takes off at a run for his parents' house.

Rowan and Hob Roundhill are off the charts, if there were charts for wholesomeness and generosity. Their son Ernie inherited every bit of that legacy, and then some. He loves to cook, and he loves to practice his sword fighting with Old Bowlegs, and he loves doing nice things for nice people, and he loves his parents more than anything in the world. The only thing Ernie particularly doesn't like is bullies, of which there are unfortunately several in Dingman's Ferry. Ernie's not a naturally violent person by any means, but when he perceives an injustice in the world, particularly when the strong prey on the weak, his blood heats up in an awful hurry. Having been brought up in a proper household, the phrase "kicking the ass of evildoers" has never specifically entered his lexicon, but that's exactly what he was born to do. Well, that and cook. The kid's a natural.

It's a predictably tearful farewell scene at the Roundhill front step, as Ernie embraces his mother one last time before leaving. She has asked him half a dozen times if he's packed extra warm clothing, and the blanket she knitted for him just this past week, and his extra water-skin in case his first one ruptures, and his letter of recommendation from Bowlegs. Hob just stands behind the two of them, beaming with pride that his son is going to make a name for himself in Tal Hae. A few hugs later and Ernie is heading down the road to meet his destiny.

What's that, you ask? What about the letter? Oddly, he never gets one, despite being the fifth name on Abernathy's scroll. No child appears at his door. He doesn't even get teleported into the wizard's tower on the evening of the first day of April. Did the ancient magic fail? It would seem not, because Ernest Wilburforce Roundhill still showed up in Tal Hae on the

evening of that fateful day. Abernathy was able to locate him, bring him to his tower, tell him what needed telling, and send him off to join the others in their new headquarters. It's a mystery how such a thing was possible, but Ernie has an unusual background. There's something in his blood, and it'll probably come in handy some day.



Kay was eating dinner with her family, and specifically was passing her oldest brother the salt cellar, when she vanished from the kitchen table. She had never even mentioned the stupid prank letter to her family, so they were all quite surprised. It wasn't until later the next day that word of her disappearance reached the ears of Mr. Miller. His explanation hardly calmed anyone down.

Isabel Horn was just leaving the office of the harbormaster of Tal Hae, having failed to learn anything of import regarding her husband or his ship. By chance the only person who saw her vanish was a small child, whose story of the magic invisible lady no one believed.

Dranko Blackhope, alone of all them, was waiting outside the tower when sunset came. He had already scouted it from a respectful distance and observed its absence of doors or windows, but figured that an egress would present itself. He had a brief chat with an older man named Levec Oldbarrow who was also observing the tower. Levec had a lame excuse that Dranko didn't buy, but before the half-orc could pump him for anything juicy, he blinked away right in front of Levec's eyes.

Darien Firemount, a.k.a. Tor Bladebearer, sat on a warm beach clutching his sword. He watched the sun dip below the clear horizon, closed his eyes, and when he opened them again he was exactly where he expected to be, hundreds of miles to the west

Morningstar, Shield of Ell, was still in the hold of the ship. She was waiting until sunset to come above-decks, but she was plucked away before she had the chance. The sailors grumbled afterward that you never could trust those black witches of the Night Goddess. Probably turned into a bat and flew off.

Flicker Proudfoot was down in the cellar testing the ale before the night's busy hours. "Testing the ale" was not actually a job his parents had set for him, mind. It was one of many examples of the young halfling's remarkable initiative. His first thought upon finding himself in the high study of Abernathy's tower was that his father had hired a wizard to trap the ale casks and had forgotten to mention it to him.

And there they were, five young men and women, and Isabel Horn somewhat older, standing agog in a well-appointed if slightly untidy living room.



Hours later, after Abernathy had talked to them at length and then sent them on their way to the house he had prepared for them, and after some time spent wondering what had happened to the seventh person on his list, he felt a bit peckish. He sent his cook – a halfling named Browla – out for some food, though because of the late hour the options were limited.

Browla knew of a particularly good provisioner who tended to be open late, but that meant walking a few blocks through a less reputable part of town. On his way home, arms laden with groceries, four human ruffians out enjoying an evening of hooliganism accosted him in a narrow lane.

Ernest Roundhill had been in Tal Hae a couple of days by then, exploring and absorbing the wonders of the Great Wooden City. He was renting a room above a seamstress's shop, and since he was having trouble sleeping, he decided to go out in search of a snack. A place called Churley's was supposed to be open late selling bread and mostly-fresh produce, so off he went.

You can see where this is going. Was it Abernathy's spell at work? Ernie heard a commotion coming from an alley, peered around the corner, and saw four gangly human youths tormenting a middle-aged halfling whose arms were full of food. Bullies! Hardly even thinking about it, Ernie drew *Pyknite* and walked into the alley entrance. "You leave him alone!" he shouted, his voice shrill. "Shame on you for picking on someone so much smaller than you! But if that's what you want, come deal with me!"

Maybe Ernie's shadow was thrown large on the adjacent wall. Maybe the ruffians saw *Pyknite* gleam in the light of the full moon. Maybe they saw the righteous anger smoldering in Ernie's eyes. Whatever the case, they quickly decided that their fun was over, and they fled into the night. Ernie sheathed his sword and ran over to Browla.

As thanks for his rescue, Browla invited Ernest back to Abernathy's tower for a meal and a drink. Though Ernie didn't realize it, this was a very inappropriate thing for Browla to do. Letting strangers into the tower was strictly forbidden for a number of very good reasons, the health and welfare of every single citizen of the kingdom chief among them. Afterward, Browla

admitted to Abernathy that he had no idea what he was thinking. But an hour later Ernie and Browla were chatting away in the kitchen, preparing a meal together and talking shop about the culinary arts.

Abernathy came down later on in the evening, wondering what was holding up his supper. His eyes widened as he saw Ernie, first because here was an unauthorized visitor inside the tower walls, but soon after because recognition came to him in a flash.

“Ernest!” cried Abernathy.

Ernie stared back at him. “Uh... yes, um, yes sir?”

Abernathy fixed the young halfling with an unnerving stare for almost a full minute, during which Ernie became increasingly discomfited and Browla looked quizzically between the two of them. But at last Abernathy broke the awkward silence by exclaiming: “You’re a Wilburforce! Extraordinary!”

Which was true. Ernie’s full family name was Ernest Wilburforce Roundhill.

“Yes sir! That’s my middle name,” answered Ernie, trying and failing to look like this sort of exchange was natural.

“Didn’t you get my letter?” asked Abernathy, raising his bushy eyebrows.

“Er, no sir, I didn’t.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Browla here said you were a wizard,” answered Ernie.

“Hmph. A wizard. Yes, I am, and I’ve been expecting you. Browla, I’m afraid I need to steal your guest for a while. Ernest, please follow me.”

And so it was that Ernie was given the same briefing as the others, and sent on to the Greenhouse to join them.

Abernathy’s Company was officially in business.



Seven is Company**Pre-Game**

Before the first real session, I ran each player through a brief (30-minute) pre-game session, to help establish character, and to allow the players to feel more as though they were hitting the ground running.

Six citizens of the Kingdom of Charagan, none of whom know each other, receive mysterious letters at their homes. Each is the same:

*You will appear at the tower
of the Archmagus Abernathy
in the city of Tal Hae, at
sundown on the first day of
April, the year 1828.*

Some recipients live on other islands, several days' travel from Tal Hae, and receive the letter only a day or two in advance. Each of the recipients reacts differently to the summons. Kay, for instance, thinks it must be a joke, and makes no plans at all to go to Tal Hae. Morningstar makes emergency plans to travel by ship, even though there is no chance of arriving on time. Dranko, who lives in Tal Hae, approaches the Tower cautiously. It has no windows or doors, so he watches from outside. He meets another man, named **Levec Oldbarrow**, who also seems to be reconning the Tower, but who reveals little about himself.

All of these people have heard of the Archmagi. They are mysterious, reclusive, with power unguessed by normal folk. Rumor has it that they occasionally demand service of people of Charagan, and no one, not even King Crunard himself, dares refuse. To each of the recipients of Abernathy's letter, it seems impossible that they have been so chosen.

At sundown all of the letter recipients are abruptly teleported into Abernathy's tower. Kay vanishes from her family dinner table, in the act of passing the salt cellar. Tor vanishes from an island near his home in Forquelle. Dranko disappears from in front of Levec Oldbarrow's eyes. And so, the game is afoot...

**The Adventure Begins**

Run #1 – Sunday, November 12, 1995

Saturday, April 1, 1828 [Day of Casting (Brechen)]

Six people – Tor Bladebearer, Mrs. Isabel Horn, Flicker Proudfoot, Dranko Blackhope, Kay Olafsen, and Morningstar of Ell – find themselves in a well-appointed living room, with comfortable chairs and sofas. There is one window, and by looking out, the people realize that they are high in the Tower of the Archmage of Tal Hae. The only door to the room is locked. The people introduce themselves to each other, and speculate on why they were brought to this place. Soon after, a halfling comes in, introduces himself as **Browla**, and offers them food and drink. Abernathy, he says, will be with them shortly.

A short while later, an old man with a scraggly white beard and bright yellow eyes comes into the room. He is **Abernathy**, Archmage of Tal Hae, and he has summoned the seven of them to... hmm... there are only six. Where, he asks, is the halfling Ernest Roundhill?

(Ernie's player couldn't make most of the first game, so I improvised.)

No one knows him, or knows where he is. No matter. Abernathy informs the gathered guests that they are now in his service, permanently, and that he will (reluctantly) compel them if they do not volunteer. He is not sure himself of why he chose the people in the room – often he acts with a blind prescience – but he assures them that their selection will serve a higher purpose, and that it was no accident. He is infuriatingly vague about the actual duties they will perform, but declares that since he is almost always busy with important matters, he requires a field unit.

His first task for them is to send them after a particular piece of jewelry – a silver ring with an odd design, that he draws for them. When they have found the ring, they are to take it to a man named **Tharnius Helmon** in the nearby city of Calnis. All Abernathy knows of the ring's whereabouts is that it is somewhere beneath the shop of a rug merchant in town named **Gohgan**. He says nothing more about the ring itself, or why he wants to find it.

During this speech, the window suddenly blows wide open, and a strong wind comes rushing into the room. Abernathy looks alarmed, and immediately closes the window again, whispering spells of warding upon it. He fixes Kay with a curious stare for a moment before continuing.

Abernathy entertains questions for a while, but he offers no real additional explanations, save that the Archmagi are involved in some endeavor that is very important to the Kingdom of Charagan. He drops vague hints that knowing too much would be dangerous both for them and for himself. He apologizes briefly for tearing them away from their previous lives, but still seems satisfied that he's doing something necessary. He does seem a good-natured man generally, though both commanding and mysterious. The good news is that he has bought his Company a house, a large former bakery on the Street of Bakers, known as the Greenhouse. He tells them that they will find some housewarming presents there when they arrive. The Greenhouse, he tells them, is heavily warded with his own magic, and is thus one of the safest places in all of Charagan. He gives each party member a magical key that will open the front door.

That evening, Abernathy sends Browla out to look for the seventh party member, Ernie, whom he has determined is in Tal Hae somewhere. Browla finds him, and brings Ernie to Abernathy's tower that same evening, after the rest have gone. Abernathy gives Ernie the same briefing as the others. (All seven of the Company accept service without serious complaint, though Mrs. Horn has her reservations.) Abernathy seems to find it significant that Ernie's middle name is "Wilburforce," but doesn't say why. Then Ernie is sent on to the Greenhouse to join the others.

The party are met at the Greenhouse by **Eddings**, the house butler hired by Abernathy. He's a competent and unflappable old chap, who is clearly expecting them. Inside the house, the party find that Abernathy has put a magical Icebox in the kitchen, which three times a day produces any meal one requests. (Dranko puts an old sock inside, and closes the door. When he opens the door again, the sock is gone.) Abernathy has also left them some healing potions and a low-powered *wand of light*. In the upper floor of the Greenhouse, Eddings reveals a secret room behind a bookcase in the study, which contains a crystal ball on a table. This, he says, is a way for the party to communicate directly with Abernathy's Tower, and vice versa. They try it, and find themselves talking with Abernathy's curt apprentice, **Thewana**, whose face appears in the crystal. She tells them to use the crystal ball only in emergencies, and then departs.

Sunday, April 2

The next morning, the Company head over to Gohgan's shop and scope it out. They learn that Gohgan has no knowledge of the ring they seek, though he does try to sell them some other trinkets. Mrs. H casts *charm person* on the rug merchant early in the day...

All the Rats You Can Eat!

Run #2 – Saturday, November 18, 1995

... and so later he lets them search his shop.

They discover, beneath the wooden floorboards of a basement storeroom, an ancient underground chamber. A hole in the floor of that chamber leads to some mold man tunnels below that. (Mold men are small humanoids that are part vegetable matter.) The Company hack their way through many mold men and a strange living-thornbush monster. All the while, they hear a distant sound, like squeaking machinery, that gets louder and louder as they progress. Eventually they find the source of this noise; there is a large chamber containing four large wooden pens (presumably built by the mold men for food storage) that are filled with hundreds of squirming rats! There are some harrowing moments, as the party fight more mold men while trying to avoid falling into the rat pens. (Ernie does, slipping on the slimy floor of the chamber, but is rescued before he is eaten.)

Piratecat: Sagiro has dramatically understated (that is, understated by a lot) the horrible shock of those rat pits. As we descended levels, the squeaking just got louder... and louder... What could it be? Some huge rusty water wheel? The realization that it was rats – and the horror of Dranko accidentally tripping Ernie and sending him spinning into one of the pits – is something that we still talk about.

If I remember right, it was about this time we realised that we were in over our heads.

On the far side of the rat pens, the party discover that the tunnels are also haunted, as some skeletons and a zombie shamble out of dark alcoves and attack. They are no match for a party with three clerics though, and are soon turned and dispatched. Nearby, the party discover some ancient treasure that includes the ring they are searching for. They also find a copper ring with the same insignia as the silver, some ancient and unfamiliar squarish coins, a piece of pottery, some holy water of Uthol Inga, and a magical mirror, along with some more conventional treasure. They return to the surface that evening and retire to the Greenhouse, having triumphed in their first adventure.



Monday, April 3

In the morning, the Company are visited by **Turlus Whitecake**, a prominent member of the Bakers' Guild. He makes some friendly inquiries about the Greenhouse, and even offers to purchase it. However, he becomes outraged when he learns that the Company aren't going to open a bakery. He vows to discover what's going on with the zoning laws (under which the Greenhouse should have to be a bakery), and leaves angrily.

The party are also visited by Levec Oldbarrow, the man who talked with Dranko outside Abernathy's Tower. He offers to join the party, but they politely decline his offer.



The Man With the Golden Mustache

Run #3 – Saturday, December 9, 1995

The Company set out for Calnis, to take the ring they found to the sage Tharnius Helmon. They hire on with a merchant named **Artun Ironhead** for the journey, and meet a man named **Sagiro**, whom Artun has hired as a guard. Sagiro is a small, wiry man with a perfectly groomed curling handlebar mustache.

En route to Calnis, the merchant's wagons are attacked by a raiding party of kobolds and gnolls, come down from the mountains to the north. Sagiro fights alongside the party, and though an extremely skilled fighter (more so than any of the party), he is injured in the attack. Dranko heals him, but Sagiro did not realize that the healing prayers of Delioch leave scars behind (unlike most magical healing). Infuriated by the scar, he denounces Delioch as a false god, and his wound reopens. Morningstar and Ernie refuse to heal him after that.

That night, Morningstar has a strange dream concerning gnolls:

You are standing in the back of an immense cavern. The shadows hide you well.

Torches mounted on the walls cast harsh light onto a stone floor strewn with filth, debris, and human remains. Several tunnels curl away from this cavern, and from them comes the faint and rhythmic sound of drumbeats.

At one end of the great hall is a hideous throne, fashioned of iron and adorned with human skulls. And seated on the throne is a hideous being, humanoid, with the facial features of a jackal. Although stooped over on its throne, the creature is very large; it would likely be nearing eight feet in height were it to stand. Fangs jut out from its oversized jaw, and black drool drips from its teeth onto the floor.

It sits, waiting. You are frozen in place, watching. Minutes pass.

A shadow coalesces in the center of the cavern; the torches flicker though there is no breeze. The shadow forms itself into a huge and ugly being, similar to the one on the throne, but more immense, more imposing. It radiates a dark power. It glides silently across the hall, until it floats before the throne.

Your perspective changes; now you are standing elsewhere in the cavern, still hidden, watching the pair of beings from the side, each in profile, facing each other. The larger, more powerful being begins to speak in a strange, guttural tongue to the one on the throne. He goes on at length, gesturing often, growing more animated, more violent. The creature on the throne leans forward, listening eagerly. Its eyes gleam red in the torchlight. At last the being radiating the power finishes its tirade, and the creature on the throne nods its head.

The torches grow dim, and the cavern becomes dark; the creature and its throne fade away, leaving the mighty being hovering alone in the hall. Alone except for you, still watching, still hidden in the protection of Ell's darkness. For the first time, you notice what appear to be thin wires, attached to the being's arms, legs and head, stretching upward, vanishing into the dark ceiling of the hall.

Then you see the eyes of the being begin to glow. The light hurts your eyes.

It turns its head towards you. It senses that someone is watching. The light from its eyes is blinding.

You awaken.



Tuesday, April 4

The Company arrive in Calnis. The city is subdued, since kobold and gnoll raids from the mountains to the northeast have grown increasingly frequent in the past two months.

Wednesday, April 5 – Friday, April 7

The Company find Tharnius with little effort, and hand over to him both the silver ring and the copper ring. Tharnius is a hairless dark-skinned elf – the only one of his kind that any of the party have seen. He reveals little, save that the ring is a "signpost," and that he must study it for Abernathy to see to where it points. He also gives the Company a sack of gold for their troubles; it is their first serious cash infusion, and represents more money than most party members see in many months. Woohoo! The Company depart Calnis.



The Company arrive back in Tal Hae, and find a letter from Abernathy waiting for them at the Greenhouse:

Friends,

I have heard from Tharnius that you have delivered Gohgan's ring safely into his hands. For this I thank you.

I have also heard from Eddings of the unexpected difficulties you encountered in obtaining the ring from the rug merchant. Were my ability to foretell more finely honed, I might have anticipated your troubles, but that, alas, is a luxury afforded to none save the gods. If I did not make myself plain during our first meeting, I will say again now that danger is likely to be your frequent companion in the times ahead. For this I am sorry.

The good sage in Calnis tells me that it will be some time before the ring will yield up its secrets to him. When it does, there will be another task for you - the ring is a signpost, and we must wait to decipher it, and see where it points. In the meantime, there are two other matters that you might attend to for me.

One is investigatory - knowledge has come to me of a disturbance in the village of Verdshane, a small place of simple folk, but one of moderate relevance to my work. I would like you to travel there and learn what transpires. I will advise that in Verdshane, boxes, whatever their size and shape, should remain closed.

The other is a simple matter of obtaining for me a certain bone-handled scythe. I know from scrying done some years past that it is owned by an old farming woman, Grewla Shillside, in the village of Nutridge, and there is no reason to think that it is no longer in her possession. A note of warning - the scythe has a curse upon it, which manifests when the tool is used to strike a living being. Grewla is an old and wise woman, and she knows something is amiss with it. The scythe sits in her barn unused; I suspect she would gladly rid herself of it were you to offer to buy it from her. (A handful of gold would set her table for a month, and in truth is more than the thing is worth.)

The choice of which path to take is not a simple one. Whatever is happening in Verdshane could very likely become something greater, and more difficult, if not attended to at once. Under most circumstances I would simply send you there, for the scythe is a minor matter to me and could wait some time still. However, there is more to take into account. Since our initial meeting, I have spared some minutes to the matter of Mrs. Horn's husband. Sadly, my scrying has been muddled and incomplete, for I did not know Willam personally, and I have little energy to spare for the task. However, my modest talents and the limited prescience with which I am endowed have pointed me to the town of Nutridge. Willam's involvement with that place is a delicate and ephemeral thing, but clear; one tenuous strand of his life goes there, and at least for a short time goes no further. It is for this reason that my thoughts now turn to the scythe.

Whatever is happening in Verdshane, I will require you, eventually, to learn of it and deal with it. By not moving immediately, I fear the danger to your company will be significantly increased. However, should you strike out at once for the Greatwood, the fragile web that connects Willam's life with Nutridge will be torn before you can return there. And afterward, there may not be further opportunity, not for a long time, for you, Mrs. Horn, to follow the path of your heart. I therefore give you the choice, to make freely as a company, of what road shall be yours.

When you return with either information from Verdshane or the scythe from Nutridge, please inform my apprentice Thewana at your earliest convenience.

With deference to Ell, and to Yondalla, and to Delioch, I would that Corilayna also smile upon you in the times ahead. And if the gods are otherwise engaged, know that I myself, while no substitute for the Powers of Creation, will spare you what thoughts I can.

Abernathy

The party decide to go first to Nutridge.

It should be noted that Tor has thus far kept his true identity a secret from the other members of the Company. "Tor Bladebearer" is just a pseudonym. Abernathy *does* know who he is, and has given Tor a magical pendant that protects him from the scrying and divination spells that his royal father is doubtless going to start using.



That night, Abernathy “calls” on the crystal ball, and asks to speak with Kay alone. When they look in on her later, she’s gone. Levec Oldbarrow again visits the Greenhouse. He tells the Company that after some very thorough investigation, he has discovered for himself that the archmage Abernathy owns the Greenhouse. He then admits that he is paid for watching Abernathy’s Tower, but he does not reveal his employer. He makes a deal with the party, that he’ll be a spy for them for two gold a day, with a bonus for specific pieces of information. When asked why he’s willing to double-cross his employer, he replies that, given the choice of being on the same side as an Archmage or not, there’s only one sane choice. For ten gold, he tells them an interesting tidbit about their recent hire by the merchant Artun Ironhead. It seems that Artun had no desire to hire them, but that Sagiro convinced him at the last minute to take them. Sagiro evidently wanted the chance to spend time with the party, and so manipulated things. As Levec seems to be quite the accomplished information gatherer, the party decide to keep him on retainer.

Saturday, April 8

By next morning, Kay has returned, but doesn’t say much about what she had been doing. The Company find a ship which will take them to the tiny town of Nutridge, where they hope to find the scythe Abernathy wants, as well as some clue regarding Mrs. Horn’s missing husband Willam. In Nutridge, they meet **Grewla Shillside**, the owner of the scythe, who tells them that about six months ago she sold it to a small wiry man with an impressive mustache. Damn Sagiro!

They find a man in town who collects valuables from shipwrecks, **Mobley**, is wearing Willam Horn’s wedding ring. Mobley tells Isabel that he took it off a dead man in a shipwreck, but after some questioning they learn that it was not Willam who was wearing it. Mobley describes a big bald man (later learned to be a pirate called Captain Skand) with a red beard and a sword blade instead of a right arm. With this information, they depart Nutridge and return to Tal Hae.

**Sunday, April 9 – Monday, April 10**

The Company hire another ship (named the *Floating Stone*) and leave for Minok, the nearest port city to Verdshane.

Tuesday, April 11

The *Floating Stone* arrives in Minok. The Company stay in an inn, the Iron Wheel. Dranko finds that the city has a very small church of Delioch, run by a Woundtender named **Francissi**. Morningstar also visits her temple, which is of greater size. Tor spends some useful time gambling and collecting rumors about Verdshane. He hears that the place is a small village amid ruins, and that once a great city stood there, but was destroyed in some unremembered accident, and further that at least one attempt to rebuild it was thwarted by freak accidents.

Wednesday, April 12 [Day of St. Kemmi (Pikon)]

The Company head out east along the Greatwood Road towards Verdshane. They pass some patrols, one of which is from Calnis.

**Thursday, April 13**

The Company arrive in Verdshane, a small village among the ruins of a great but long dead city, in the heart of the Greatwood Forest. Morningstar casts *thought capture* at one of the ruined buildings on the outskirts of the village; she sees a man standing in his doorway brandishing a staff, while in the town around him fires burn and people run screaming.

Many of the townspeople of Verdshane are barricaded in the local inn, called the Shadow Chaser. It seems that goblins had been sighted in the “bad” ruins to the north, and soon after that the town was attacked by a swarm of vicious one-eyed bats with barbed tails, which killed four of the townsfolk. The bats attacked, and then (mercifully) flew in a swarm west towards nearby Kinnet Gorge.

Some in the inn are hurt; the trio of party clerics does some healing. A man with a sword comes into the inn and reports no recent sightings of the bats. The Company sleep.

Friday, April 14

The Company wake, and after some discussion of their obligations, head out to Kinnet Gorge to investigate. They travel along the high north side of the Gorge, rather than down its center. As they approach, they see some movement out in the gorge, but high off the ground, and suddenly a giant wooden crate, over fifteen feet long and eight feet high, appears in mid-air and plummets to the ground, followed by a number of small black objects. The crate smashes open on the floor of the gorge, and two huge one-eyed bats emerge from the wreckage. Also at this time, a tremendous localized wind kicks up and blows around Kay, but then dies down almost immediately. Dranko throws a rope over the edge of the gorge, hands one end to Tor, and slides down, hoping to get to the bats before they wriggle free. He’s too late. He stops about twenty feet off the ground, and

finds that a nearly man-sized one-eyed bat with a round, bulbous body, giant claws and a barb-tipped tail (though no legs or mouth) has flapped its way out of the smashed box and is now hovering at his level. It slowly turns to face him...

Elf Skeleton Lasagne

Run #5 – Sunday, February 18, 1996

In the ensuing battle, the two “eye-bats” fight viciously with their claws and tails, and both Dranko and Ernie are wounded and rendered unconscious. But the Company prevail, and they discover, amid the ruins of the smashed box, a number of the smaller bats, dead, with their claws torn and bloody. A thick rope is also there, one end still affixed to a plank of the broken crate, and there are strange metal planks lying about as well. It seems as if the smaller bats must have spent all night tearing through the rope that held the crate suspended above the gorge, freeing their larger cousins. But there is no sign of anything the crate might have fallen from, or been tied to. After some brief speculation about extradimensional spaces and the like, and some exploration of the rest of Kinnet Gorge, the party go back to Verdshane and spend a night recuperating in the Shadow Chaser.

Saturday, April 15 – Sunday, April 16

The Company spend the day exploring the “bad” ruins north of Verdshane (these, according to the townsfolk, contain weird, magical places and things, and aren’t safe or fit for ordinary folk to visit). Inside a strange, vaguely pyramid-like building, they find several dead goblins, including a shaman clutching a broken red rod. Lying by their bodies are a few dead (smaller) eye-bats. Their search is interrupted by a run-in with live goblins, arriving through the forest from the north; in a brief battle, the Company slay all but one of the creatures, and Dranko questions the survivor. The goblin claims he was part of an expedition to discover what happened to the first group of goblins, and to retrieve the rod if possible. The party give him the smaller piece of the broken rod, and let him go. The party continue exploring, and in a nearby ruined building find a large blue glowing field of magical energy. A skeleton wearing a backpack is suspended in mid-air within the field. Strange symbols are carved into the wall and floor which bracket the field. While the party watch the glowing blue space, it flickers once, and the skeleton drops a fraction of an inch.

The Company discover two more areas of note. One is a great bone chamber, filled with neatly stacked bones of elves. There appear to be two different “strata” of these bones, as if many were stacked once, and then more were stacked much later.

There is also a tower, much like Abernathy’s, protruding from a great mound of “floam.”

“Floam” is the name the party give to a strange sort of spongy rock that appears in places all around the ruins.

Two *thought capture* spells reveal great sadness from someone stacking the elven bones, and horrible terror from the person suspended in the blue light.

Monday, April 17 – Friday, April 21 [Day of Fortune (Corilayna)]

The Company depart Verdshane, heading east down the Greatwood Road towards Calnis. On Wednesday, the party pass through the small village of Woodfork.

After four days, the Company arrive in Calnis, and decide to look up Tharnius. He knows something of Verdshane and its history, but reveals nothing. He adds that he has learned something about Gohgan’s ring, and that Abernathy will doubtless tell them more when they arrive in Tal Hae. They ask him if he’s seen Sagiro, and learn that the mustachioed man was in his shop just four days ago, asking to buy magic items. Hmm.

Saturday, April 22

The party leave Calnis, heading home.



Sunday, April 23 [Lambing Week (Yondalla)]

They arrive back in Tal Hae, early in the evening. Eddings has received a letter for Dranko. The letter is from **Praska**:

Dear Dranko,

I hope this letter gets to you... I’m going to smuggle it out to a street kid, rather than give it to the church runner. Maybe I’m getting paranoid, but I think Califax and Mokad have got Tuqi showing them all the mail that goes out. Strange things are happening in here, Dranko... the Follower got sent off to run the church at the capital, and I’m not sure who’s running things here. Califax and some of the other Scarbearers have been doing a lot of political shuffling recently, which is strange for a bunch of fanatics. I’ll be glad to get out of here! On the 11th of June, the Festival of Arrival, I will finally get released. I’m going to spend some time traveling, and no matter what Califax says, I’m going to start my own branch of the Church someplace where they don’t have one now!

But the real reason I'm writing is about Harmon. He's sick, Dranko, real sick. And Califax has him in his care. I know it isn't right to say things like this, but I'm not so sure that he's getting better, and I'm not sure Califax doesn't want it that way. I wish you could come and visit him. I know he'd like to see you again.

- Praska

Praska is a willful teenage girl, and was Dranko's only friend among his peers growing up in the church of Delioch. **Harmon** was his kindly old mentor. **Califax** is a Scarbearer; the Scarbearers are the disciplinary branch of the Church. During Dranko's years at the Church (during which he was constantly misbehaving, playing pranks, and generally getting into trouble) Califax administered to him a great deal of discipline, much of it physical. Dranko's memories of Califax are not fond.

Mokad is the highest ranking Scarbearer at the Tal Hae Church of Delioch. "The Follower" refers to **Tomnic** the Follower, who was the High Priest at the Tal Hae church.

The party report in to Abernathy, who is very interested in all they saw at Verdshane. He seems surprised about the pyramid building, and the bats, but he is more concerned with the blue field and the suspended skeleton. (As usual, he says nothing specific about any of it.) He then tells them about their next task: they must retrieve a huge hammer that is mounted above the bar in a tavern called the Hammer and Tongs. This hammer is actually a powerful cursed magic item known as the *Matun Essendi* (literally, "Earth Hammer"), and Abernathy needs it for his work. Whatever Tharnius learned from the ring has confirmed the exact location of the Earth Hammer. Abernathy imposes the further restriction that they are not to let anyone know that they are taking it, which makes the task much harder. And, he adds, they should avoid hurting or killing anyone during the theft. The party decide that the next day they will first go with Dranko to visit Praska and Harmon, and then make plans for recovering the Earth Hammer.



Reservoir Adventurers

Run #6 – Sunday, March 3, 1996

Monday, April 24

Early in the morning, Mrs. Horn leaves a note for the Company and departs the Greenhouse. The note says that she will no longer work for Abernathy without certain assurances. She moves her belongings to an inn called the Glitterfish. The Company show the note to Abernathy, who is obviously concerned.

The Company then go to visit Harmon at the church of Delioch. They find that Praska has been put in isolation for punishment, and that Califax is attending to the (failing) health of Harmon. Privately, Harmon expresses to Dranko a concern over recent political maneuverings within the Tal Hae Church. His health is obviously deteriorating rapidly. Califax makes a passing snide comment to Dranko about "serving a man who thinks he is a god," but does not go into detail. (This is particularly troubling, since Dranko has not made his service to Abernathy public knowledge...) Dranko makes a suggestion that Praska is being punished for finding some sort of incriminating information about Califax, and this obviously strikes a nerve in the old Scarbearer. In the meantime, Abernathy tells something to Mrs. Horn in a private meeting, and she agrees to return to his service. When she doesn't go into detail about the meeting, the rest of the Company become skeptical, thinking that perhaps Abernathy has *charmed* Mrs. H into serving him.

The Company spend the rest of the day staking out the Hammer and Tongs, and planning their break-in to steal the *Matun Essendi*. They discover that the place can be viewed safely from the roofs of nearby warehouses. Dranko and Kay spend the entire night...

Tuesday, April 25

...and all of the following morning atop the warehouse next door. By observing the comings and goings at the Hammer and Tongs, they discover that during the early morning there is a time when only two bouncers are in the place. They make their plans to strike then – having Flicker pick the lock while Dranko bangs at the ceiling trapdoor, with Ernie and Morningstar ready to *command* the two guards to sleep once inside. Then they'll close the door, tie up the guards, and free the Hammer from its mooring at their leisure while Dranko recons from the roof. Mrs. Horn will wait down the street with a cart, while Morningstar watches out the window.

During that day, they purchase a wheeled cart, some hay, and digging tools from various provisioners. Dranko buys brass knuckles for Tor, which have the word **OUCH** embossed backwards on the business end. They all go to sleep early, knowing they have an early day ahead of them.



The Company wake at half past three, and make ready. The plan seems to go off without a hitch... they get inside and start working on the Hammer, unseen and unnoticed, except for the two guards who are *commanded* and then bound. But as Kay, Tor and Morningstar work at loosening the huge Hammer from its wall brackets, Dranko (on the roof) notices a team of six thugs coming down the alley behind the tavern, rolling a large barrel. They roll it up to a hay pile at the foot of the wall (which Dranko put there to pad any falls), and stuff a rag into it. At the last minute, Dranko figures out what they're doing... As one thug tries to light the rag, Dranko pulls out his whip, and strikes the man's arm from the roof. Eventually, the man manages to light the rag, but as the thugs frantically scramble away from the barrel, Dranko leaps down from the roof and plucks out the burning rag, scalding his hand. He then climbs back up to the roof, crossbow bolts whizzing by. On the other side of the wall, the rest of the Company have no idea of their peril. As the thugs try to get a second rag lit, Dranko pees on them. The thugs do get another rag lit, and again, at the last possible second, Dranko jumps down and grabs away the second rag. He burns his hands again. This time, he also kicks over the barrel, and the oil inside soaks the hay pile. He climbs to the roof again. The thugs, weary of the game, light the hay.



Piratecat: Foul lies!

Dranko did *not* pee on the people. He peed on the burning rag, trying to extinguish it. He just caught one of the people by mistake.

This was an unfortunate incident. He now has the reputation within the party as a half-orc who is enthusiastic about peeing on enemies. I swear, the things you have to do to be heroic...

Fortunately, Dranko had bought enough time for those inside. They had freed the Hammer from the wall, and were dragging it to the door when the barrel of highly explosive Karthian Oil went off. A fight ensues, as the thugs come in through the blasted wall, looking for the Hammer. When the fight is clearly going against them, some of the thugs run off. One seems to surrender, but tries to stab Dranko with a magical blade which springs from a ring on his finger. The blow goes wide, and the Company beat him into unconsciousness. A passer-by observes this last part of the proceedings, so Mrs. H bribes him to keep quiet. They load the Hammer and their prisoner onto Mrs. H's waiting cart, and take them back to the Greenhouse. It being pre-dawn, and with all of this action taking very little real time, no city guards have yet shown up. It's all gone quite well.

And then, only fifteen minutes later, there is a knock on the Greenhouse door.

Miscarriage of Justice

Run #7 – Sunday, March 17, 1996

There is a single city guardsman at the door. Eddings delays him until Tor can take the body upstairs and the Hammer can be dragged into the storage room; Ernie feels a tingling through his arms as he drags the *Matun Essendi*. Once the guard is inside and seated, his uniform shimmers and disappears – an illusion! The man (whom the Company later learn is named **Mulcut**) calmly tells the Company that if he does not return to his boss with the Hammer and the prisoner in fifteen minutes, the actual guards will come and haul them off to jail. He asserts that there is a great deal of evidence against them. The Company invite him to leave... without the Hammer or prisoner. Flicker follows his coach to the Three Crates Tavern, and watches the man go in. He goes in after, but Mulcut is not in evidence. He spends some more time casing the joint, but the man doesn't come out.

Back at the Greenhouse, some sixteen guards show up, and demand that the occupants of the house surrender themselves for questioning. They don't officially announce themselves as the city guard (thinking that the party can see them perfectly well through the large front windows of the Greenhouse), and after the last "guard," the Company don't come out, or even acknowledge that they're home. Over the next hour and a half, the guard continues to demand that they come out, then (unsuccessfully) tries to pick the lock, then calls for a wizard to magically open the door, and then tries to break one of the windows. All attempts fail – the wizard is actually blown backwards when he attempts to gain entrance to the Greenhouse with magic. Abernathy's wards are passing this test, at least!

Eventually the wizard figures out what must be going on, and goes with two guards to check with the Mages' Guild to find out for certain about Abernathy's connection with the Greenhouse. Meanwhile, Kay and Tor interrogate the prisoner. Kay plays both good cop and bad cop, and Tor belts him in the chops every so often, until he breaks down and confesses. He claims that he's in the employ of a man, Emberleaf, who fits the description of Sagiro. He personally was hired through a middleman, and believes that Emberleaf is a collector of some sort. Having heard what he knows (seemingly), the party agree to let him go after the guards are gone.

Meanwhile, one of the guards who left with the mage comes back, and confers briefly with the other guards. Then he announces to the House that they know who the "landlord" is, that they're not being charged with anything, and that they just want to ask some questions. After much debate and some misgivings, Ernie goes out and offers to talk with them. They politely but firmly

take him away to the Magistrates' Hall, and continue to demand that the others come out as well. Eventually they do, leaving the Hammer in the Secret Room™ with a note for Abernathy stuck to the crystal ball, and leaving Eddings with orders to free the prisoner when it's safe. All are marched to the Hall, where they have a brief "chat" with the magistrate. First, they are allowed to present their side. They admit to entering the Hammer and Tongs, but not to the theft of the Hammer. They claim that the prisoner was one of their attackers at the site, and that they took him back to the Greenhouse after the battle to heal him and then release him. They tell the magistrate about the other group and the barrel of explosive Karthian Oil, and also about Sagiro and the guard-impostor. The magistrate asks some questions, but constantly looks with frustration at some papers on his desk; clearly he'd like to take action against the party, but for some unknown reason (almost certainly related to their connection with Abernathy) his hands are tied.

After he questions the Company, there is a brief trial in the Magistrate's chamber. The two workers from the Hammer and Tongs are brought in, along with **Temble** (owner of a warehouse across from the Hammer and Tongs), Mulcut, the bystander bribed by Mrs. Horn, and a stranger named **Keertine Smith**. All but Mulcut give an identical and false version of events, one that makes it doubtful the Company did anything at all illegal; clearly, the trial has somehow been rigged in the party's favor! When it comes time for him to testify, Mulcut realizes that some fix is in, and adds nothing new to the tale. The Company are released. On their way back to the Greenhouse, Keertine Smith drops them a note and disappears inside a house. The note says:

When the Undermen come to collect on their debt, the correct answer is "Yes."

The Undermen, as Dranko and Flicker know well, is the name used by the powerful Thieves' Guild in Tal Hae.

Piratecat: A perspective on this: this was the one incident in five years of campaigning where we (well, I) felt frustrated, helpless and manipulated. The Undermen (the Thieves' Guild) stepped up to help us without being asked, and we felt like we had purchased something that we had never even requested. That meant that we could have mooned the judge and whistled "Dixie" for all it mattered, for the fix was in and we couldn't especially change how the trial went. (I'm sure that isn't really the case, but that's how it felt at the time.) Especially after Kay's and Tor's "beat up the prisoner until he talks" routine, I did *not* feel especially heroic after this session, despite my magnificent "pee-on-the-barrel" incident.

Well, I was proud of it. Hummph. In any case, Sagiro (the DM, not the NPC!) was kind enough to listen to us whine after the game, and I really don't think it has seemed linear since. It's an interesting example of how player/DM feedback improves both our play and the DM's DMing.

How we ended up dealing with prisoners was a big concern for a while, as it really defined who we were as people and an adventuring group. We didn't want to use *charm person*, as my character was vehemently opposed to the spell, so we were forced to revert to other actions. The "kill 'em or free 'em" question continues to be a concern, and over the years we've done both, depending on our consciences.

Sagiro: Gosh, PC, it's nice to know you remember my DM-ing failures from 5 years ago with such clarity... For the record, things *would* have gone differently had you mooned the arbitrator. And the peeing-on-the-barrel incident was the previous session, and it could have made a *huge* difference had you not delayed Sagiro's exploding-barrel-wielding thugs.

But I digress. The lesson I learned from this, as PC has said, is that it's **crucial** for DMs (especially newbies, which I was at the time) to talk often with their players about what's fun and what's not. And one thing that's *not* fun is a long "set piece" during which the PCs are not likely going to significantly affect the outcome. If you do have a set piece that you want to go a certain way, you *have* to make sure that, at very least, there's plenty of fun interaction with the NPCs involved. But in this case, I didn't even do that. Well, live and learn.



By this time, most party members have earned enough XP to go up to second level, so they spend a week in Tal Hae training. Tor and Ernie shop around to get the best price for the strange metal planks found in Kinnet Gorge near Verdshane. They agree as part of a deal with a smith to get one longsword at half price, and three shortswords at full price, made from the odd metal.

Weapons made from the strange metal are extra-sharp, and this is modeled by an increased critical threat range.

Tor goes to the Mercenaries' Guild for training. On the way back from a training session, his necklace (a gift from Abernathy that prevents scrying) grows noticeably warm for three minutes. Dranko goes to the Church of Delioch; Praska is still serving her punishment, and Harmon's health is actually improving under the ministrations of Califax. Ernie goes to visit the church of Yondalla in the Halfling District.

Piratecat: My character background had set Califax up to be a major jerk and a bad guy. I was thrown a little off-guard when Harmon's health started improving under his ministrations. I remember this very clearly, because it is the first time that the character ever questioned his own emotions.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Run #8 – Wednesday, March 27, 1996

Thursday, April 27 [Spring Tourney (Werthis)]

Tor competes in the Werthis Spring Tourney, a non-lethal combat tournament held each year by the Church of Werthis (God of War), celebrating one of their Holy Days. Tor, entering in the sword and shield division, ends up paired in the first round with a powerful brute who knocks him out of the ring.

Piratecat: This is one of the coolest things ever. Every year, our characters compete in this tournament. Gradually, we've been doing better and better; it's great fun, and demonstrates both our growing competence and the passage of time.

Friday, April 28

Ernie sets up a table outside the Greenhouse, providing free food for the poor and hungry, but it's not long before Turlus Whitecake shows up waving some city ordinances. The laws indicate that Ernie's practice is illegal on the Street of Bakers... so Ernie moves his table to the corner, technically not in violation of the law. Turlus leaves, grumbling.

Piratecat: We hate Turlus. Hate him, hate him, hate him. We refer to him as "Turlus the Evil Baker," and we routinely do things to plague him, since he gets right up our noses at every opportunity! Only a 0-level, but we dislike him more than some of our powerful foes. Go figure...

Saturday, April 29

During the night, Ernie feels a great anger, as if something precious was taken from him that was rightfully his, but the anger is fleeting and is replaced by relief.

Piratecat: This was Abernathy, destroying the *Matun Essendi* (the hammer). It had cursed Ernie and gotten a hold on him, but its destruction ended that.

Sunday, April 30

The Company are visited at night by a lieutenant of the city guard, who seems authentic enough. His name is **Marbury Tillerson**. He explains to the party that, after the recent fiasco at the Hammer and Tongs, the city guard has been ordered to give the residents of the Greenhouse a certain latitude in city affairs and laws. Marbury doesn't know why, and he doesn't want to know. He makes it clear that he doesn't expect the party to abuse the privilege. Marbury seems a nice old chap, who really enjoys Ernie's food. He stays a while, and promises to check in every once in a while.

Piratecat: This guardsman is a nice guy, but quite the pig; sometimes we think he visits not to keep tabs on us, but to get some of Ernie's pie. One of our enemies once used him to... but that'll be revealed in time. Heh.

Monday, May 1

Levec Oldbarrow reports in, but with no new information. He claims to have been making his faux report to his other boss, who he still will not identify. During the past days, Mrs. Horn has been looking for information about the one-armed pirate. She learns that he was a much feared pirate called **Captain Skand**, who has (not surprisingly) not been seen recently, and who is presumed dead. Captain Skand was well known for his belief in the goddess Corilayna (Goddess of Luck), and his practice of tying up the crews of sacked ships in their own holds, and letting the sea have its way with them.

Tuesday, May 2

On their last night in Tal Hae, the Company are visited in their home by Abernathy. (Actually, he projects an image of himself into the Greenhouse, that can see and hear and speak with them. Abernathy doesn't leave his tower. Ever.) The *Matun Essendi*, he reports, was even more useful than he expected (though he doesn't say what for), and he is actually taking some time off from whatever work he pursues. He doesn't have much more information for the party; rather, he himself becomes concerned when the Company tell him about Sagiro. Abernathy asks them to keep an eye open, and to let him know if they learn anything.

He goes on to admit that recent events have caused himself and the Company to become more high profile than is prudent, and so advises them to leave town for a few days. There has been news of some excitement from Dingman's Ferry (Ernie's home town), and so he sends the Company off to investigate.



Wednesday, May 3

The Company set out for Dingman's Ferry.

Thursday, May 4

As the sun begins to go down, the Company reach the far outskirts of Dingman's Ferry. They see smoke rising from a farmhouse, and go to investigate. It turns out that the farm of the halflings **Willow** and **Jack Heathertoes** has been ransacked by orcs, and their young son **Argol** has been kidnapped.

The Company go after the orcs, tracking them to some nearby caves. With careful scouting, Dranko gets close enough to hear their talk, and since he knows Orcish, overhears discussion that indicates that Argol has escaped. The party launch a surprise attack, and the half dozen orcs have no chance; Tor in particular deals out gruesome death left and right. They keep one orc alive, for questioning.

The Thing in Murgy's Basement

Run #9 – Sunday, April 21, 1996

Kay finds and explores a narrow tunnel in the back of the orc cave. It empties into an old tomb that holds a number of dead, preserved dwarves, and a scared but plucky Argol. As Kay starts her actual rescue attempt (not being able to squeeze into the

tomb herself), three huge orcs arrive, and another fight ensues right outside the cave mouth. During this fight, when Kay grabs one of the orcs, a strange wind kicks up, flinging the orc up against the side of the hill and doing serious damage. After the fight Kay plays down the wind incident and practically denies that anything happened. They rescue Argol, and loot the cave, finding among other things a magical *bag of endless rope* and a *necklace of missiles*.

They go back to the Heathertoes' farm with Argol and the captured orc. They interrogate the orc as they march, and learn that most of the orcs have gone north to fight with (not against, strangely) the gnolls and kobolds, but that their group stayed behind and was looting outlying halfling farms. When the orc promises to flee to the north, they let it go. The Company give a good portion of the coins found in the orcs' lair to the halflings, to help rebuild their barn and replace the livestock. They spend that evening at the farm, the honored guests of the grateful halflings.



Friday, May 5

The Company head into the town of Dingman's Ferry. They first visit Ernie's mom, who is very nice and feeds them well. Ernie also visits the local temple of Yondalla, and his former trainer, **Old Bowlegs**. Then the party investigate an excavation going on in Murgy's Tavern. It's the talk of the town; **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 party go to have a look, and find that only a large hand and the nose have so far been unearthed. The hand has a gold bracelet around the wrist, which would be large enough for a person's belt. A *detect magic* spell reveals that the bracelet is magical... and also that something in one corner of the room, a corner with a trace of sandy residue, is magical. Dranko, feeling put upon and out of place in the halfling village (where half-orcs aren't so popular), leaves and goes for a walk while the others help with the excavation, including a further digging out of the sandy corner.

Without warning, a strange amorphous sand creature comes shooting out of the hole. It forms itself into a vaguely humanoid shape, points a sandy arm at Ernie, and hisses the word "Wilburforce." It proceeds to attack Ernie, and in the ensuing combat, the creature attacks only him. Conventional weapons seem to do minimal damage to the creature, but it fears liquids. During the melee Dranko comes back to help fight, and Morningstar casts *protective sleep* on Ernie, which protects him both from the sand creature's attacks and from a runaway beer barrel. (Other party members dislodged a large beer barrel from the adjacent room, but it rolled out of control, into the melee, and over Ernie's recumbent but invulnerable form.) Tor attempts to body-check the thing, to little good effect. Eventually the Company kill it by spraying it with beer from the beer barrel. (The liquid hardens the sand creature, after which it can be easily damaged with conventional weapons.)

Protective sleep is one of Morningstar's Goddess-granted abilities: it causes the target to fall into a deep sleep for 15 minutes.

During this time, no harm can come to the target from either physical or magical means. It cannot be cast on unwilling targets.



We Get Scooped... Again!

Run #10 – Sunday, May 12, 1996

The party learn that two humans (named **Embree** and **Larkin**) have been in Dingman's Ferry for the last couple of days, and are planning on buying the statue's bracelet from Murgy. (This is against the express order of the mayor that the site not be disturbed.) When the Company later try to interfere physically with the sale, Larkin and Embree turn out to be mages; they cast *sleep* on some of the party, and then *invisibility* on themselves, and manage to escape the town on horseback with the bracelet. Dranko, Tor, Morningstar and Kay follow on foot for several hours, give up, and head back to town.

Saturday, May 6 – Sunday, May 7 [Night of the Shield (Eli)]

The Company decide to dig out around the corners of Murgy's basement, and help excavate the statue. Much beer and water is kept on hand. They find a hollowed out asymmetric shape where the sand creature had been waiting.

Monday, May 8

More digging in the basement. Morningstar has a strange dream that night involving her mother; in the dream, Morningstar's mom is unable to look straight at her, due to something bright shining above Morningstar's head.

Morningstar's mother is also a priestess of Eli.

Tuesday, May 9

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. The Company decide to depart the following morning.



Wednesday, May 10

An uneventful journey to Tal Hae begins.

Thursday, May 11

The Company arrive in Tal Hae. Levec Oldbarrow is at the Greenhouse, visiting with Eddings. He reports that Sagiro appears to have skipped town, though he has discovered that the mustached gentleman often frequents an expensive inn near the palace called the Duke's Footprint. Sagiro, it seems, has few (if any) close friends in Tal Hae.

The Company report to Abernathy what they discovered in Dingman's Ferry. The news that someone was already there investigating, and that someone made off with a magical item discovered there, seems to upset the Archmagus greatly. He asks for a week during which he will create a magical item to help the Company track down Larkin and Embree.

Eddings reports that a tall man named **Bavaro** had been by the house asking about Tor. Bavaro claimed to be from the Mercenaries' Guild, but a bit of investigation reveals that the Guild knows nothing of him. The shrewd Eddings revealed no useful information to the man.

Friday, May 12 – Friday, May 19

Dranko, Flicker, Kay and Mrs. Horn (who didn't go up a level last time) spend the week training.

During this time, Morningstar (worried since the dream) goes home to Kynder Hold to see her mother, taking Ernie with her. Her mom claims that everything is fine, though she is clearly holding back about something.

Also during this week, Abernathy finishes his location device, a glass ball with a miniature arrow floating in a clear liquid. At first the arrow points towards the coast, so the Company plan to take a ship to Oasis, but by the time the departure date rolls around, the arrow is pointing inland, towards the town of Tal Lor.



Saturday, May 20 – Monday, May 22

The Company set out on horseback, following the arrow generally in the direction of Tal Lor.

Tuesday, May 23

As the Company travel across the grasslands of central Harkran, another group of riders approaches. They are: a tall, rangy, black-haired swordsman who matches Eddings' description of Bavaro; a big, beefy swordsman with red hair and a red beard (**Hundley**); an older man with a receding hairline and a crossbow (**Laetner**); a female half-elf, also with a crossbow, along with a bad attitude (**Rytan**); a hunched over fellow in a grey cloak, no weapons visible (**Toad**); and a large man with a mace, garbed as a Stormknight of Werthis (**Oakley**). This group pulls up about twenty yards away from the Company, at which point Tor unexpectedly turns his horse around and bolts. Hundley calls after him "Master Tor! Come back! They miss you at home!"

Lethargy Pirates

Run #11 – Sunday, May 19, 1996

The riders chase Tor, who wheels his horse around to talk to his pursuers. There is a brief exchange between Tor and Hundley, in which the red-haired man demands that Tor give himself up. Tor respectfully declines. Before there is much further discussion, the Stormknight Oakley charges at Tor, shouting "Die, accursed Utholite!"

Stormknights are holy warriors of Werthis, God of War. The Church of Werthis bears great enmity toward followers of Uthol Inga, a mysterious Goddess generally known only as "The Watcher." Uthol Inga, as the legends say, turned traitor when the other Gods were fleeing from the Great Adversary, and became the Adversary's consort. She was then betrayed herself by the Enemy, and fled to Charagan on the heels of the other Gods. Because of Uthol Inga's betrayal, Stormknights will often attack Her worshippers on sight.

Oakley is put to sleep in his saddle, courtesy of a *command* spell, and Hundley decides a fight is going to be necessary; he tells his group to spare Tor, but to kill the others if they must. A fight ensues, and the good guys win, though not without some close shaves. Hundley and Bavaro both acquit themselves well, the mage Toad fires *magic missiles* at Mrs. Horn, and Laetner drinks a potion and then breathes a tremendous gout of fire at Kay. Nearly everyone in the Company fights well, however – Kay is on fire (sorry... couldn't resist) with her bow, and fells two of the attackers (though unfortunately she kills Hundley outright with a lucky shot through the eye). Also, the strange wind kicks up again in Kay's vicinity, a wind which pummels Laetner onto the ground, where he is then caught in an *entangle* spell. He is later found to have died of suffocation, though with no apparent cause.

Laetner, Bavaro and Hundley die in the fight, but Rytan and Toad are captured alive. Oakley is also captured, having been tied up by Dranko while asleep. A brief interrogation reveals that Hundley had hired the rest of his crew, claiming that Tor was a follower of Uthol Inga, and that his capture would bring a great monetary reward for all of them. Oakley is understandably

upset when he discovers he has been duped, and the Company free him. There is some debate about the morality of letting Toad and Rytan go, since both are mercenaries obviously willing to kill for pay. In the end, those two are released as well.

Tor reluctantly admits after the battle that his real name is not ‘Tor Bladebearer,’ but **Darien Firemount**, and that he is the son of the Baron of Forquelle. He was already planning on running away from home, to avoid a boring life of administrative duties, when Abernathy’s summons came. Hundley is a minor noble in his father’s court, and though a twit, not someone he would have suspected of murder. Flicker nearly wets himself thinking of the riches of the House of Forquelle.

Once everyone is healed up enough to continue, they continue to follow Abernathy’s Arrow™ in their pursuit of Larkin, Embree, and the magic bracelet.



Wednesday, May 24

The Company arrive in Tal Lor in the evening, though it is clear now that the Arrow is pointing past the town, towards the coast and the city of Oasis. Tal Lor is a depressing little place, where nothing seems to be of decent quality. The word “mediocre” seems adequate to describe nearly everything there. The party pay a visit to the Town Elder, and ask him if he knows or has seen Larkin and Embree. He has not.

Thursday, May 25 – Friday, May 26

Travel to Oasis.

Saturday, May 27

The Company arrive in Oasis, a large and busy city on the south coast of Harkran. They hire a teenage girl named **Cora** as a guide, who shows them around Oasis and flirts with Tor, much to his embarrassment. They ask Cora if she can learn anything about Larkin and Embree, and then go hunting around themselves. After a day of fruitless searching, they retire to their inn, called the Fool’s Trumpet.

Sunday, May 28

In the morning, Cora shows up with news. Through various unspecified contacts, and at great expense, she has arranged a meeting for the Company with Larkin and his associates.



Bald Elves Must Die!

Run #12 – Sunday, June 16, 1996

The party spend the afternoon discussing the upcoming meeting. They decide what they will be willing to admit, and what they will stonewall about. Cora gives them an address and a password, and even accompanies them most of the way. Flicker remains down the street to watch the door, while the rest of the Company go inside an innocuous building at the invitation of a guard.

Larkin is there, along with a woman with short blond hair (**Beltray**) and a younger man with a goatee (**Branson**). Beltray seems to be the leader and does most of the talking. If one were to assume that she could magically detect lies (and she strongly implied that she could), then from the conversation that follows, she learns:

- that the Company are not working for someone who (to their knowledge) is destroying magical items;
- that the Company did not go to Dingman’s Ferry because of the ring specifically;
- that the Company have no knowledge of a group called the “Mors Tarathi,” or a person called “Darkeye”;
- that the Company “are interested in magic items insofar as preventing them from being used toward evil ends.”

That much information seems to satisfy Beltray. She tells the Company that she and her companions are part of an Order of Preservation, interested in keeping magical items from destruction, and that the Wilburforce bracelet is now safe. There is at least one group of people actively destroying magic items, and she suspected that the party were involved with such a group. She suspects a group of dark-skinned elves called the Mors Tarathi, about whom very little can be learned. (There is, she says, some purposeful information suppression going on.) In general, a good deal of information is passed between the two groups, though Beltray and Larkin are unwilling to divulge anything more about the magic bracelet.

Speaking of dark-skinned elves: near the end of the meeting, a number of them attack the building! (The party also note that they are hairless, like Tharnius.) The Company and the Order fight them off, though two manage to escape. One of the Order is slain, along with the guard that had been guarding the door. One Mors Tarathi is *sleep*t and taken alive, but when his gag is released, he dies soon after, apparently from poison. An examination of the body (yuck!) shows that the dark elves have odd poison sacs embedded in the roofs of their mouths, that can be broken open by forceful poking with the tongue. This dark elf has committed a grisly suicide.

Monday, May 29 – Thursday, June 2

Following the fight, the Company ride back to Tal Hae, to report their findings to Abernathy.



Friday, June 3 – Saturday, June 4

The Company arrive in Tal Hae to find that guards and soldiers are everywhere, including members of the ducal garrison. The gate wardens report that there has been a major attack on Calnis by a small army of gnolls and kobolds, and that the security level of Tal Hae has been raised as a precaution.

The Company go to the Greenhouse to report in to Abernathy, but find to their shock that the crystal ball doesn't turn on. A *detect magic* check reveals that the wards on the house still function, and the Icebox is performing normally also. However, the High Priestess of Ell (one of the few others in the city with a correspondence with Abernathy) is similarly unable to communicate with the Archmage. Disturbed, the Company decide to go to Calnis and talk to Tharnius, who they hope has survived the attack...

Sunday, June 5

...Unfortunately, he didn't. The entire block on which Tharnius lived and worked was sacked by the humanoids, and the party discover Tharnius's body in the rubble.

Morningstar casts *thought capture*, and discovers that the sage's last thought was of his desk... In a drawer of that desk is a letter from Tharnius to Abernathy, which is full of Capitalized Nouns not known to the Company:

Abernathy -

There is much news, and little of it good. As I feared, it seems that the Sharshun were not all destroyed at Yen Hae, and in the years since have grown strong again. They have apparently come by at least one of Moirel's Eyes, which is disturbing to say the least. It shows that they were serious all along about Semek... I would send someone to the Mirrors this year, just to keep an eye on things.

Worse, another damned Seki got through, as if there weren't distractions enough. Alykeen's apprentice contacted me; they think it's in the Greatwood Hills, and once it's recovered, that it will go for Walsord first to feed. If you think your Company is ready, send them to deal with it... isn't that exactly what they're for?

And there is so much more. The Blackbloods and Flinders are driving themselves against Calnis like the tide, and for no reason other than to distract us from our task. Another attack is expected tonight. The Masking fades more with each passing day, despite all the Mors Tarathi can do. Much that slept will be waking in the weeks and months to come. Is the Kingdom ready to face such a trial? The net draws close about us, old friend, and it is held by many hands. If there is any hope, it is that our foes are not aware of one another, and that they work at odds even as they thwart us. In the meantime, I'll keep researching the whereabouts of Moirel's other six Eyes. I don't know how useful they'll be for your task, but keeping them from the Sharshun should be reason enough.

Be well, magus.

Tharnius

The party are left to ponder. They know that the Blackbloods and Flinders are the tribal names of the gnolls and kobolds. They've recently learned what the Mors Tarathi are, and they know what the Mirrors of Semek are. But they've never heard of Sharshun, Moirel's Eyes, a Seki, the Masking, or Alykeen. They decide to follow up on the mention of the Seki, taking from context that it's some sort of monster they have a duty to fight. After that, they intend to try to reach the Mirrors of Semek in time for Flashing Day.

The Mirrors of Semek are seven black stone obelisks, eighty feet tall and twenty feet wide, set in a circle a hundred and fifty feet in diameter, and each with a flat shiny side facing inward. They stand in the empty plains of southeastern Harkran, about eighty miles from Tal Hae. Once every year (June 21st, at high noon), strange colored lights flash between the Mirrors, creating an especially bright column of light in their center. The annual event typically attracts about a hundred "tourists" who want to see the spectacle.

Piratecat: I don't think it's clear in these logs how incredibly information-starved we had been. For months, we had begged Abernathy for some sort of clue about what we (and he!) were doing. "No!" he would say. "It is too dangerous for you to know." And we would worry, and chafe. Now, suddenly, we are given a glut of raw information... and it is all names that we don't understand, and bloody Abernathy is unable to be contacted!

Nevertheless, these sessions were a major turning point, moving us from "clueless servants" to people who were starting to get a grip on their own fate.

You know what is really ironic? Abernathy was right. We *shouldn't* have been told the things we eventually managed to learn, or it surely would have overwhelmed us. Kind of irritating, him being right all the time.

Morningstar, who is able to contact certain other Ellish priestesses by entering a communal “dream world,” asks for some research to be done on the unfamiliar terms mentioned in Tharnius’s letter.

This dream world is called *Ava Dormo* (or sometimes the Dreamscape) and is similar to the dream-place in Robert Jordan’s books. It’s another plane that overlaps and mirrors the Prime; most people don’t have the wherewithal to reach it, but some Ellish priestesses are called by the goddess to be “Dreamwalkers,” and are taught the secrets of the place.



Monday, June 6 – Tuesday, June 7

The party travel to Walnord, with a stop in Woodfork.

Wednesday, June 8

The Company arrive at Walnord in the evening, and ask around to see if any sort of monster has been seen in the area. They learn from a local ranger named **Teren** about an odd wolfpack seen recently in the forest. By all signs the pack is made up of large, male wolves of nearly equal size, perhaps six or seven in all.

Thursday, June 9

Bright and early, the Company get up and go wolf hunting, heading north into the woods above Walnord. Along the way they discover the remains of a deer, stripped clean, almost skeletonized. Later there is a wolf howl, that to Kay’s ears is somehow strange and unnatural.

Finally they come to a clearing, and on the far side a pack of wolves, normal in appearance save for their large size and patches of greenish coloration, can be seen devouring some large fallen prey. As the Company prepare for a potential battle, the pack stiffens, and six wolf heads swivel around as one, sensing the party. They howl in perfect unison, and rush across the clearing to attack the Company.

During the fight, as each wolf dies, the remaining wolves pause, howl – and then grow in size, strength, and even start to become humanoid in appearance. By the time only a single creature remains, it is at least as much biped as wolf. The Company manage to dispatch the pack in an extremely close combat; at the end, more than one party member is unconscious and bleeding, while some others are visiting single-digit land. After some healing up, Kay and Dranko skin the creatures, and the Company take the pelts, along with the head of the last and largest. They head back to Walnord, where Teren is extremely skeptical of their story, even in the face of the (gruesome) evidence. More healing follows.

Piratecat: The seki fight was a fairly brutal battle. We really did just squeak out of it alive, and although we have a few badly tanned Sek-ki skin rugs to remind us of it, nowadays we sort of long for that sort of fight.

Wait until you hear about what the notes were referring to. We were just getting hints at this stage, looking at remnants of something huge.



Mirror, Mirror

Run #14 – Sunday, July 7, 1996

Friday, June 10

The Company leave Walnord, hoping to reach the Mirrors of Semek by the 21st.

Saturday, June 11 [Festival of Arrival; Day of Bounty (Pikon); Calipa’s Eve (Ell)] – Sunday, June 12

Travel to Calnis.

Monday, June 13

The Company arrive in Calnis, but stop only briefly. The city is still recovering from the raid.

Tuesday, June 14

Travel to Tal Hae.

Wednesday, June 15

They stop in Tal Hae, en route to the Mirrors. There’s still no sign of Abernathy, but there is a letter for Morningstar from some Chroniclers at the Temple:

To Morningstar, Shield of Ell:

Greetings, sister, from Previa, Chronicler. I and sister Anna have been assigned to research for you on a list of names given us by the High Priestess Milanwy. I am to tell you that our efforts have been made under veil of

secrecy, and that the purpose of our research has not been told to us. Although we are still continuing with our investigation, here is a summary of our findings thus far:

There is little to be found on the subject of the Mors Tarathi, and nothing at all about persons or things called Sharshun. Disturbingly, there has been obvious evidence of tampering, even in some of Ell's more secure libraries. Two books in the Library at Minok, which might have had information on the Mors Tarathi, are missing, and in a third there were pages torn from an old Chronicler's diary. What is known is that the Tarathi were a race of elves now extinct, that had two branches: the Mors Tarathi and the Elhen Tarathi. Nothing is known of where they lived or how they perished.

The Eyes of Moirel are another story. Legend has it that Moirel was an elven mage who appeared in the Mirrors of Semek, well over 2000 years ago (exact date not known), carrying a number of highly magical diamonds, each cut round, with many facets. She was robbed of them by bandits, and she spent the rest of her days searching for them. The legends say that she was driven mad with the desire to find them, and there are conflicting stories of her fate. Some say she was killed by halflings who lived in the grassy hills near the Mirrors, for in her madness she was wrecking the little people's homes with powerful magics. Others maintain that after years of searching she walked back into the mirrors and vanished. By most accounts, however, she died a wandering lunatic, asking all she met to give her back her Eyes so that she could go home.

There is also one reference to a Sek-ki, in an old passage of a mostly destroyed Ellish scroll approximately 900 years old – a rough translation now reads: "...burn(ing) flesh. And too the lesser horrors: the Soul Eater, one as many, and the Sek-ki, many as one – these fadeth (from thought) as all things behind the Curtain. Who now remembreth such (things?) Soon the time shall be as if it had not been, and the future (cleansed with) ignorance, for the Curtain draweth close, and the Goddess doth not rend it nor part it nor..."

The parenthetical sections are guesses at unreadable portions of the text.

– **Previa**

The Company don't stay long before continuing on to the Mirrors.



Thursday, June 16 – Saturday, June 18

The party travel to the Mirrors.

Sunday, June 19

As the sun sets, the Company reach the Mirrors of Semek and make camp. There is a crowd already starting to gather, including about twenty Ducal Guards (who are regularly dispatched to keep order at the annual event.)

Monday, June 20

The Company spend a fun day at the Mirrors. One of the first things they discover is that Sagiro is also there, hanging out with a couple of friends and claiming that he is only there to watch the spectacle like everyone else. At this point the party are spoiling for some fisticuffs with the wiry little man, but Sagiro defuses their incipient violence by apologizing to Dranko for insulting Delioch at their last meeting. He even congratulates the Company on their acquisition of the *Matun Essendi*. He is so darn pleasant, in fact, that the party refrain from beating him into a pulp.

Later, the party chat with a man named **Pelidoster**, one of several people wearing green turbans and calling themselves the Disciples of Semek. This group of fanatics claims that Semek is a God of Light and Wisdom, who long ago chased a Demon to the Abyss through the Mirrors, and that after he has conquered his foe, Semek will return via the Mirrors to reward all who stand vigil there. Ummm, yeah.

Before going to sleep, Dranko decides to climb one of the obelisks, slips near the top, and nearly falls 80 feet to his death. But that's all.

Tuesday, June 21

In the time before the Mirrors flash, the Company do some *detect magic*-ing, hoping to discover an Eye of Moirel. There are several minor magic items detected among the crowd, but the Mirrors themselves are hugely magical and are masking most other magic in their immediate proximity.

Minutes before the flash, two men go out into the center of the circle; one is a ragged and slightly deranged-looking guy who runs out, and the other is a more wealthy chap who walks out and grins at the crowd. (This is to be expected; every year, one or two people run out into the Mirrors as they flash. Nothing ever happens to them.) A woman runs out and argues briefly

with the second man, and then returns. Both men are standing in the center when the light show begins... At exactly noon, bright lights flash out from the Mirrors to form a seven-sided star pattern, and concentric smaller "stars" appear within it, culminating in a bright pillar in the center that reaches into the sky.

After about three minutes (during which nothing has seemed to happen to the two in the middle) a third man, cloaked and hooded so his face isn't visible, runs out from the crowd into the lights. Dranko and Ernie run in to give chase, and Flicker fires a sling bullet. When the newcomer reaches the center, he holds something aloft in the light, though what it is isn't clear. However, when Dranko and Ernie reach him, the man has lost his substantiality, and their attacks, including a beautiful diving tackle from Ernie, pass right through him. Right before the seven minutes of the Flash are up, Dranko catches a glimpse of the man's face – he is one of the bald elves from the attack in Oasis. As the lights cease, the elf vanishes.

Afterwards, Morningstar casts a *thought capture* in the center of the Mirrors; the spell reveals a thought of someone thinking that a drastic and probably perilous thing was going to happen to him, but not sure of any specifics.

Wednesday, June 22

Morningstar casts two more *thought captures*. One cast on the spot where Sagiro's tent had been gets the thought: *Why won't he tell me anything?* The other is cast at the site of the Utholite campsite, and picks up a thought of serene watchfulness. The Company head back to Tal Hae to train.



Thursday, June 23 – Saturday, June 25

Travel back to Tal Hae.

Sunday, June 26

The Company arrive back in Tal Hae and go immediately to the Greenhouse, but the crystal ball is still dead, and there's no sign of Abernathy. There is another letter from the Temple of Ell, with some information that might be about an Eye of Moirel near the town of Medir on the island of Nahalm:

To Morningstar, Shield of Ell:

Greetings, sister, from Previa, Chronicler. I have discovered one more reference, though vague, that may have bearing on your request for knowledge. This excerpt is from Chronicler Eloa of Dimres, written 48 years ago:

"And this man, who named himself Isaac, he came at night to the doors of our house, bleeding from a dozen wounds, and with the madness in his eyes. At first he begged for sanctuary, and so we admitted him, and tended to his hurts. From his ravings we gathered that he had staggered almost fifty miles from the low hills about the town of Medir. He had been the leader of a band of outlaws, and there had been some falling out among them, and he had slain many of his own comrades, so that (in his own words) 'they would not steal his sight.'

"When we asked him what this meant, he became restless. When one of the Hands attempted to calm him further, he flung himself away, and from the folds of his tattered cloak he withdrew a strange gem. It was a clear, round-cut diamond, the size of a child's fist, and in its center was a blackness, perhaps a flaw, perhaps a bit of jet – we could not say. The outlaw held it up, and began to shout: 'Do you not know? I have the eye that sees truth! And I see the light that will come into this place, scrying out all your shadowed corners, and piercing your secrets. I can see it! I can see!'

"At that moment Verna, the High Priestess, came into the chamber, and ordered that the man be turned out of the Temple. He was, though his ravings continued, and among them he vowed to return to Medir and slay the rest of his treacherous fellows. At Verna's command the man was followed some miles out of Dimres, and he was headed east, and our sisters returned. The High Priestess would say no more about the man, and he did not come back. –"

– Previa

Levec visits in the evening, discouraged that he hasn't found any trace of Larkin or Embree, as the party had requested. He shares some news he's heard, that Calnis isn't the only city that's been attacked recently. There are rumors aplenty of other humanoid attacks on cities throughout Charagan. The Company ask Levec to find out anything about the Oasis Mages' Guild (as they think of Beltray's group), warning him that the utmost discretion should be exhibited.

Dranko goes to visit Praska. En route, he sees that there is now a seemingly permanent window high on Abernathy's tower, which typically has no visible windows or doors. At the church of Delioch, Dranko learns that Praska was caught in another crime, and rather than face more punishment, she fled the church and seemingly the city.



Monday, June 27 – Sunday, July 10

Some party members train for their next levels. Dranko learns in a letter from Praska that a large amount of gold is being diverted from the church, to fund a project of some sort in the desert near the city of Sand's Edge:

Dranko –

I'm sure by now you heard about me from Harmon or one of the others, I think that I didn't have a choice in running away. There's something really bad going on, Dranko, but I don't know what. I can't remember if I told you why I got locked up the first time, well it was because I was snooping around in Califax's quarters since he had been having weird meetings and then Wister and Palinaya and Tomic and some others got moved away. In his room I found a list of some names, which had all those clerics who had been transferred, plus some other names, but then I got caught. This second time, it was after two more of the clerics from that list, Raleigh and Trella, got moved out too, and some other priests came in from other cities. I figured something was up so I did more snooping, this time around Mokad's room, and boy did I find something strange. Well, you know I was never as good at being sneaky as you and I got caught again, but I still remember some of what I saw in some of Mokad's notes. Some of it was gold pieces counts, and they were high, tens of thousands I think. I didn't get a good look since I was caught pretty quick but I think there's some kind of expensive project going on somewhere in the desert near Sand's Edge, that they think will go for months. I guess they're using church money for it, but then why are they making it all a secret and having meetings in Mokad's room? It's weird.

I guess this means I might not ever be a priestess, with me running away from the Church. You and Harmon are probably the only ones who really understand how much that hurts. But if I learned something from all the teachings and sermons, it's that Delioch will see me through as long as I'm doing the right thing, and I am.

I don't want to say where I am yet since this letter might get stolen. I'll write again if I find out more things.

Your friend,

Praska Tellenhien



Monday, July 11

The Company have decided to go to the town of Medir, to look for the Eye of Moirel mentioned in the Ellish letter. They go by ship from Tal Hae to the city of Kynder Hold on the island of Nahalm.

Tuesday, July 12

The Company spend the day visiting with Mrs. Horn's family (who live in Kynder Hold). The Boxwoods (her maiden name) are a wealthy family with a large estate, and the party spend some fun time running around in their hedge maze. Mrs. Horn's youngest brother is simpleminded but amiable; Kay sings him an elvish song (the words to which she doesn't understand). Kay's mother taught her the song when Kay was very young; her mother doesn't know what the words mean, either).

Wednesday, July 13

The party set out for Medir on horseback.

Thursday, July 14

The Company arrive in Medir, a small but prosperous town well known for its excellent vineyards and plethora of wine merchants. The Company spend the evening at the Crying Eagle Inn. The town is still vaguely on guard from attacks by "beastmen" (later learned by Morningstar to be hostile humanoids called "greylacks") which had started up almost a year earlier, but which haven't occurred in almost a month. The party ask around, and they find themselves talking to an old and depressed mercenary named **Cassel**. He remembers the Isaac mentioned in the Ellish letter. Isaac, he says, had been killed by his own comrade Dunbar, and that Dunbar's son Wenius had gone south into the mountains years back and had not been heard from since. That seems like a decent enough lead, so...

Friday, July 15

...the Company set out south, aiming for the mountains. They stay the night in an abandoned farmhouse, since it's more than a full day's travel. That night, Abernathy visits them in a dream, channeled through Morningstar!

(Your dreams abruptly go black, and then they are filled with the sight of Abernathy, looking tired but with his eyes a bright, almost fiery blue. He is sitting in a large yet plain wooden chair. Superimposed over his face is the face of Morningstar. Both mouths open to speak, and both voices can be heard in unison. As he/she/they speak, the voice drops out every second or two, so that some of what is said is lost:)

"... friends, you should not ... about me ... taking all of my ...ength, but ... will hold. You must see Tharnius and.... Tell ... he should warn Fylnius in ... next ... an attack on me means a... him. ... must not... Thar... will know what to ... you guidance. You... ...tant role, and we will need... ever... Gods look ... you, and wisdom guide..."

(Morningstar's version of this, as one might expect, is slightly different.)

From this, the party infer that Abernathy seems not to be in immediate life threatening danger at least, which is some comfort. On the other hand, it's unlikely that they'll be able to tell Tharnius anything, him being dead and all.

Saturday, July 16

The party reach the mountains, and after some searching, find an entrance into a network of caves. They discover and fight a small group of greylacks, who seem half starved but still put up a decent fight. Some of the creatures have already died of starvation, and bodies and bones litter the ground. They do have some loot in a back cave, and among the treasures are a black sword labeled *Gorok-Nil* and a ruby-capped rod with the words *Dismay* and *Inferno* written on the side. But there's nothing fitting the description of an Eye of Moirel.

They continue down into the tunnels. Eventually they find some caves once inhabited by humanoids – probably goblins. The goblins, however, appear to have left months ago. The party do find a dog-sized lizard sitting peacefully on a rock, but it poses no threat.

Many of the halls seem to have been created via blasting (as opposed to plain digging), and there are rock shards all over the ground. In what appears to be a large central chamber, a huge lizard appears from a side passage, slithering quickly out to face them. It is over thirty feet long from nose to tail, with what appears to be crystal teeth and a crystal tongue. Embedded in its left eye socket is a small white gem. Aha!

Catch the Kettle

Run #16 – Sunday, August 4, 1996

The Company decide to flee for the time being, with Kay badly wounded from the greylack fight, and Mrs. Horn out of spells. They run back through the smaller tunnels, where the giant lizard cannot follow. Behind them, they can hear it beginning to blast after them; the sounds of *lightning bolts* reverberate through the caves. The Company flee back to the surface, to rest up.

Sunday, July 17 – Monday, July 18

They regain their strength outside the mountains, and experiment with the ruby-capped rod. They find that the rod shoots fireballs when the word “inferno” is uttered, and cloaks the user in an illusion of crackling fire and demonic-looking smoke when “dismay” is spoken.

Tuesday, July 19

The Company head back into the caves and tunnels. They find that the huge lizard has blasted out more tunnels, apparently in an attempt to pursue them. Back in the central cavern, they engage the beast (which they are now calling “Lizardo”) in battle. Lizardo fights with crystal claws and teeth, and also fires *lightning bolts* out of its crystal eye (though doing this seems to confuse it for a moment). One of these hits Flicker square in the chest, knocking him out!

As it becomes wounded, it becomes evident that the lizard’s body is made partly of flesh and partly of a strange crystalline substance, and that it is slowly regenerating its wounds. After a difficult battle, in which Kay’s gartine sword breaks on the crystal lizard, and in which Dranko leaps on the beast’s neck and attempts to pry the Eye from its living socket, Lizardo is slain and the Eye removed. Not trusting the gem (hey, what’s not to trust? The gem only got itself embedded in the eye socket of a lizard, grew the creature to fifty times its normal size, and imbued it with the ability to fire off *lightning bolts*!), the Company keep it sealed in a kettle with the lid tied on.

“Gartine” is the name of the strange metal that the planks were made of, back in Kinnet Gorge near Verdshane.

Wednesday, July 20

The party travel back to Medir with the Eye of Moirel secured. They stay the night at the Crying Eagle.

Thursday, July 21 [King’s Day]

Early in the morning, Dranko, Flicker, Tor and Ernie (all staying in the same room) are woken by a loud clattering sound. The Eye is escaping! The kettle, still roped shut, has rolled itself off a night-table, knocked open the door, and is now bounding down

the main stairs of the inn. With the party in pursuit, the kettle careens through the common room, out the door of the inn, and down the street. It makes it a couple of blocks before Tor catches up and stops its escape with a flying tackle. Unfortunately, the noise has alerted one of the town guard. In a moment of extreme awkwardness, the Company explain that they were practicing a sport called “catch the kettle” (yeah, yeah, “catch the kettle”) commonly played in Tal Hae. The guard is highly skeptical, but since no actual harm was done (and since the guard is probably not eager to spend more time than is necessary with a bunch of crazy foreigners), no one is arrested for disturbing the peace. With the Eye back under control, the party depart for Kynder Hold.

RangerWickett: You're mean to Piratecat! Go back in time and leave him alone!

Piratecat: Yeah! Damn straight!

I wish I could describe for you exactly how horrifying this whole sequence was. All things considered, we hadn't spent much time in dungeons, and were amused by the small, cute lizards lying on the rocks. Then we turned the corner and saw "Lizardo"... the *giant* half-crystalline lizard, tossing lightning bolts out of its crystal eye... and we just about plotted.

And then we manage to kill the thing and get the Eye, terrified of it enough to wrap it in a kettle and tie it closed...

...And the thing *animates* in the middle of the night, and we're in our bedclothes – for those of us who wear bedclothes (Dranko is kind of earthy) – chasing the rolling kettle out of the inn and down the street. Oh, yeah, that's easy to explain to the guards... “catch the kettle” indeed.

As far as we can tell, the Eyes are intelligent, wild-magic artifacts. Our enemies want them for some unknown purpose, so we want them first. But y'know, we never like what happens when we get them.

This one, at least, we managed to get home and locked in the basement.



Dranko of Arabia

Run #17 – Sunday, August 25, 1996

Friday, July 22

The Company arrive in Kynder Hold, to drop off the horses at the Boxwood estate before heading off to Sand’s Edge. Their plan is to investigate the “expensive project” that Praska learned about, the one being covertly funded by members of the Church of Delioch.

Saturday, July 23 – Sunday, July 24

They voyage to Sand’s Edge.

Monday, July 25

The Company arrive in Sand’s Edge, a large but poor city on the southern edge of Nahalm, and bordering a great desert called the Mouth of Nahalm. A bit of asking around reveals that there is a large archaeological dig going on out in the desert near to the city. The priests at the local church of Delioch seem not to know any more about it than the average citizen.

There is a recruiting office in the town, hiring haulers and workers for the dig, and Kay goes to find out what is required to gain employment. She convinces the recruiter, an unpleasant woman named **Claria**, that she is fit for the rigors of the job despite her size, by breaking the arm of one of the guards there in an armwrestling match. Kay is noncommittal about the job, but learns that one needs special travel kits just to survive in the desert.

That afternoon the party discuss plans at the Rusty Mug tavern. Although the details aren’t worked out, they decide to buy some of the kits, and probably to strike out alone across the desert. Dranko finds a general store that sells the desert travel kits, and discovers that one needs a special form to buy them. In a fit of improvisation, Dranko pretends to be an “official” buyer of the kits, one who thought the forms had been sent along ahead. He finally convinces the harried proprietor of the store that he’s legit, mostly because he’s willing to pay the full price for the kits... but then Dranko realizes he has no way to haul seven kits (which are quite large), so he runs off to find a cart... but then he realizes he’s not carrying enough money for a down payment, so he hands over a gold necklace for the cart... but then, when he gets back to the store with the cart, there’s someone there legitimately buying the kits!

Dranko covers by sowing more confusion (and gets his money back when the proprietor refuses to sell the kits to him), and then offers to help haul the kits out to the buyer’s cart. And although his help is refused, he keeps hanging around, and when seven kits are loaded onto the cart, Dranko hops on and drives it away! He brings the kits back to the Rusty Mug, and then ditches the stolen cart in another part of town.

Faced with this new situation, the Company decide to head into the desert that very night.

The Mouth of Nahalm is not a run-of-the-mill desert. For one thing, it’s surrounded by a tall cliff, making it more like a big bowl of sand. For another, the desert contains a number of large (50 to 100 yards in diameter) round rocks, jutting out of the sand like icebergs. Lastly, the sand is so fine that it cannot be walked upon without special broad sand-shoes (like snow shoes); without them, a person will sink in up to the waist. If they’re lucky.

After the rest of the party have been successfully lowered into the desert (sand shoes already on), Dranko starts to climb down the 50-foot cliff, but slips at the top, and falls head first into the sand. He sinks in up to his ankles, and though the rest of the group pull him out before he suffocates, he is left partially deafened from the experience. The party spend the rest of the night trekking towards the closest of the large islands of rock that dot the Mouth of Nahalm.

Tuesday, July 26

Near sunrise the Company reach the rock island. Its top isn't flat enough to camp upon, so they spike their padded hammocks into the side of the rock, and go to sleep (the travel kits come with hammocks and spikes meant for just this purpose). Not long after, as the sun begins to rise higher, a hideous creature launches itself out of the sand like an arrow, its head striking the rock, just missing some of the sleepers. It's a long, flat, mustard-colored worm with a rock-hard head and a maw full of sharp teeth.

Piratecat: I'd also like to say a few words about the Mouth of Nahalm. If you asked the party, they would say that the Mouth is the nastiest place we've ever adventured. Hot, dangerous, flat, and boring... if you discount the sand worms, of course. Plus, the sand is almost like the "lightning sand" from *The Princess Bride*, so Lord help you if you fall in. Dranko tried to clean the sand out of his ears with water, and ended up hardening it to rock-like consistency. Plus, one of those giant rocks moved while we were sitting on it... what's up with *that*?

But still, I like it there. We managed to survive (once we managed to steal the sand-walkers' kits, in a particularly half-assed fashion), and that's more than most people could say. Now, if I had just managed to lick that blood gargoyle statue...

Raiders of the Lost Gargoyle

Run #18 – Sunday, September 8, 1996

It continues to attack the mostly immobilized group, vanishing into the sand after each strike (its back end never actually leaves the sand). Kay launches arrows at the flatworm when it shows itself, and Flicker likewise fires off some sling bullets. Tor and Ernie hack at it when it comes within range (clumsily, as they're perched on precarious hammocks staked to the side of the rock), Mrs. H casts a *magic missile*, and Morningstar uses up many charges of the *Inferno* rod on it. It still doesn't die, but after taking numerous bite wounds, the party injure the flatworm enough that it vanishes into the sand and doesn't return.

Dranko has spent the time climbing up to the top of the rock and securing a rope, so that the rest of the party can be hauled to safety. The Company reset their hammocks, this time much higher up on the rock. They sleep through what's left of the afternoon. In the evening, they awaken and continue on towards the dig site.



Wednesday, July 27

In the very early morning, as the Company near the dig (taking place at the next rock island over), they spot, intercept, and subdue two armed men approaching the rock from the direction of Sand's Edge. Morningstar's *mind read* confirms that the men were sent from town to warn someone named Mistress Varliss that seven kits had been stolen, and that she should be watchful for intruders. One of them carries a signed and sealed note, authenticating that the messenger and his message are legitimate. The party march with their prisoners to the rock of the dig, as dawn approaches. There is an obvious "front door" of sorts, where a large scaffold and pulley system has been built to hoist men and equipment up to the actual dig site atop the rock. They circle around to the "back" of the rock, and formulate their plan.

Eventually, as dawn breaks and the sounds of many workers waking atop the rock are heard, Dranko, Morningstar and Tor walk around to the scaffolding, and call out for guards to lift them up. The top of the rock is round and mostly flat, a circle maybe seventy yards in diameter, covered almost completely with tents, small buildings, and some excavation sites. By flashing the confiscated paper, Dranko, Tor and Morningstar are allowed to see **Mistress Varliss**, who had not yet woken up. When Dranko claims that Mokad sent him, Varliss doesn't appear to know what he's talking about. She then gets suspicious, and asks whether Khorl or "the investors" sent him. Dranko, thinking quickly, says it was the investors, and Varliss nearly goes ballistic. Apparently, there was an arrangement wherein the investors (presumably Mokad and his group from the Delioch church) agreed to stay both ignorant and anonymous. Varliss speculates to herself out loud that Khorl must have been bullied into allowing Dranko's visit by the investors... but in the end, she assents to allowing Dranko and his "entourage" a tour of the premises.

A lowly worker named **Morris** shows the three of them around the dig. Many of the workers seem to be loafing and idle, and the reason is that the object of the dig has actually already been found. The three are shown the first couple of aborted excavations, and finally the only remaining active site. Two levels down in the rock, in a chamber that had to be broken into (having no obvious doors), stands a large (about eight feet tall) statue of a gargoyle, made of red marble. Its wings are folded back, and its head is tilted down with eyes closed. Dranko is admonished by a worker for just laying a hand on the thing... he wisely chooses not to lick the statue.

This last is actually worth mentioning, since Dranko has the habit of licking things. To answer the obvious question: no, I don't know why. Ask Piratecat.

Apparently the prime focus of the project is now to find a way to safely get the statue out of the room without harming it; since the island of rock is made of a soft stone, great care must be taken. Estimates are that it will take another week or two to get

the statue safely away. Having learned that much, the three members of the party descend back to the sand, and tell the others what they saw. They all strike out for another nearby rock, taking the two prisoners with them, and arrive late at night. They free the prisoners, after first bribing them to point any pursuit in the wrong direction.



Alive and Knowledgeable

Run #19 – Sunday, September 15, 1996

Thursday, July 28

The Company continue to march eastward and slightly northward through the early morning hours. Tor has by this time been the recipient of multiple *dispel fatigues* administered by Dranko, and, while alert, he is starting to become addicted. As dawn approaches, and they are nearing the last rock west of the river, another flatworm attacks. The party defeat it in fairly short order, but nearly exhaust the *Inferno* rod in doing so.

After vanquishing the worm (and collecting some of its teeth for souvenirs) the party make it to the rock and camp upon it. While most of them sleep, the rock shakes, then lurches a couple of feet, then stops. They all come awake with alarm... an earthquake? There is no further movement after that, but it now seems obvious that the rocks aren't actually rooted in the sand, and probably float slowly around the desert. Nothing else alarming happens, and there is no sign of pursuit.



Friday, July 29

The Company finally make it out of the Mouth of Nahalm, climbing out of the bowl of sand and schlepping a couple of hundred yards to the river. Dranko, whose hearing has been getting worse each day, dunks his head in the river to clear out his ears. Unfortunately, this only increases his deafness... now he can't hear anyone not talking right into his ears. Flicker begins to translate for him in Thieves' Cant.

The party journey upriver, hiding from barges coming down towards Sand's Edge, and waiting for one that can take them upriver to the city of Hae Kalkas. When a small forest gets in their way, Kay makes her way along the narrow wooded coast (to keep an eye on the river) while the rest of the party follow a parallel game trail a quarter mile inland. They discover the tracks of some large clawed humanoid, but choose not to investigate. That evening Kay hails an upriver-going barge, and the party pay a goodly sum for passage the rest of the way to Hae Kalkas.



Saturday, July 30

In the morning, the barge lets the Company off in Hae Kalkas, a huge city immediately notable for its grand stone buildings and its not unrelated significant dwarven population. There are many guards and soldiers about, and the city is under curfew, since there have been orc raids recently from the nearby Kalkas Peaks. Apparently the fighting is going well, and the dwarves are driving the orcs back into the mountains.

Dranko goes to the church of Delioch, and is cured of his deafness by a cleric there. Sand pours from his ears. He then speaks with a priest named **Ploken**, telling of his fears and suspicions that the Scarbearer leadership of the Tal Hae church has been embezzling church money, or at least using it in a suspicious manner.

The party stop afterwards at the Sages' Consortium of Hae Kalkas, a great library (closed to the public) out of which work a number of sages, each of whom has his or her own specialty. A sage named **Richter** offers his services, with the standard Consortium deal... 10 gold for a question he can answer right away, otherwise 50 gold per day, paid in advance, to research a particular topic. Richter tells the party a number of things, starting with the fact that **Fylnius** is the name of one of the Archmagi. He knows the names and locations of many of the Archmagi, as they are his area of specialty: there is **Alykeen** in Minok, **Cranchus** (a dwarf) in the nearby Kalkas Peaks, **Grawly** in Hydra, **Koenig** in Yen Hae, and **Salk** at Hae Charagan, the capital of the kingdom. He knows the locations of the remaining four – one is in Oasis, one is in the city of Ghant on the island of Lanei, one is in Tal Hae, and a fourth is somewhere in the Mouth of Nahalm – and he knows that Fylnius is one of these, but not which one. He does not know Abernathy's name, and he doesn't know the names of the other two.

Richter also has some information about the Sharshun, and the Mors Tarathi, though not a lot the party haven't already learned (or at least suspected) from other sources. Most oddly, Richter talks of a mighty spell cast long ago, that has caused (and continues to cause) both memories and historical writings to fade. Even as Richter speaks, he himself seems to be afflicted by this spell – he constantly loses his train of thought, especially when talking about the Sharshun or the Mors Tarathi, and complains constantly of a bad headache. In the end, he seems to forget what he was talking about. Notably, the members of the Company are able (thus far) to remember everything they're told with no ill effects.

Sunday, August 1 – Friday, August 6

The party travel to Tal Hae via Kynder Hold, picking up their horses at the Boxwood estate.



Archmage Stalkers

Run #20 – Sunday, September 29, 1996

Saturday, August 7 – Friday, August 20

Back in Tal Hae, the party train. During their recent trip, an unmarked crate has arrived at the Greenhouse. Eddings has kept it in one of the spare rooms, since it smells sort of funny. Opening it reveals (shudder) the severed head of Levec Oldbarrow, the Company's spy. It has been hacked off, and the tongue has been cut out. There is no return address. Priestesses at the Temple of Ell cast *speak with dead* upon the head, but the only information they get from it is two indistinct words that sound like "Oasis Mages."

Also during this time, the Chroniclers at the Temple of Ell find some information about the statue being dug up in the Mouth of Nahalm. The statue matches the description of a blood gargoyle, an extremely powerful and malevolent creature that once wiped out an entire city, including hundreds of trained soldiers. According to the story (told by a fugitive from the supposedly destroyed city) the gargoyle was eventually defeated by a very powerful wizard.

Saturday, August 21

During their two weeks of training, the Company decide that the best way to find Fylnius is to ask another Archmage, and since Abernathy is still AWOL, the next best choice seems to be Alykeen, the Archmage in Minok, mentioned in Tharnius's letter. Their ship departs in the morning.



Sunday, August 22

They travel to Minok.

Monday, August 23

In the morning the Company arrive at the city of Minok, on the western shore of Harkran. They spend the day asking around for someone named Alykeen, and inquiring about anyone thought to be the most powerful mage in the city. No one recognizes Alykeen's name, but a few people mention the name of **Freya**, the most prominent figure at the Minok Mages' Guild.

The party are able to make an appointment to see Freya that evening, and in the meantime they post a note up in the Mages' Guild dining hall, a note that mentions Alykeen and the Seki by name. When the party return for their meeting, Freya is of little help (and annoyed at the intrusion), but a man is standing towards the back of the Guild lobby, holding up the note and trying to subtly catch their attention. After Freya departs, the man motions for the Company to follow him back into the Guild House.

Once in his room, the man becomes extremely angry, and chews out the party for leaving Alykeen's name up in a public place. His name is **Parkitt**, and he is Archmage Alykeen's apprentice. Although he is a bit snippy (Alykeen's name and identity are closely guarded secrets), he does tell the Company that Fylnius is the Archmage of Ghant, and agrees an attack on Abernathy is likely to mean an attack on Fylnius is forthcoming. (Of course, he doesn't say *why* he thinks this...) Parkitt promises to have Alykeen attempt to contact Fylnius, but suggests that the Company go there anyway, as Fylnius is often hard to reach.



Tuesday, August 24 – Saturday, August 28

The party book a ship that will take them to Lan Hae, a port on the island of Lanei, which is where the city of Ghant and (presumably) Fylnius are.

Welcome Back, Abernathy

Run #21 – Sunday, October 13, 1996

Sunday, August 29

The Company arrive in Lan Hae, a large city with a significant elven population. Dranko (who has a... erm... thing for elvish women) manages to control himself. The party dine at a nice restaurant with many exotic and leafy elvish dishes. Ernie, always on the lookout for culinary exotica, buys some unusual spices.

Monday, August 30

The Company depart for Dal, a small town where they can get a ferry across the Steel Sea to Ghant. It's a two day journey, so they camp by the road that evening. While Ernie and Kay are on watch, they both fall asleep in an alarmingly synchronized way. Dranko is shaken awake to find a scimitar held tightly to his throat. The person holding the blade orders him to call the others. When everyone is awake, the man (now seen to be a bald dark elf) orders the others not to move, and then a second elf

walks around securely tying up the other party members. Just before the second elf gets to Tor, Dranko says, “Just remember, my life is expendable.” Well, that sure sounds reasonable to Tor; he grabs for his sword and attacks!

The first elf does not kill the trussed-up Dranko. Instead, he zaps Tor with a spell that greatly reduces his strength. Weakened, outnumbered, and without his armor or shield, Tor is slashed into unconsciousness by the two scimitar-wielding dark elves. Dranko, who has been rolling around trying to trip up the enemies during the battle, falls on Tor’s body, *laying on hands* and preventing Tor from bleeding to death. Both *command* spells and *mind read* spells seem to have no effect on the dark elves.

With everyone secured, one of the elves begins asking questions. Why do you work for Abernathy? What is Abernathy up to? What services do the party render for the Archmage? What is your association with the Oasis Mages’ Guild? When the party don’t answer the questions to the elves’ liking, they start breaking Flicker’s fingers one at a time. The halfling shrieks in pain, and the sound of snapping joints is sickening.

Piratecat: And enter the Sharshun.

The poison-sac dark elves are our bane. No one can remember their bloody name except for us (there’s a fascinating reason for this that will be revealed), they’re cruel and nasty, and they scare us. These are the folks who want the Eyes of Moirel for some nefarious purpose, and we’re pretty sure the man who used an Eye to teleport himself via the Mirrors of Semek on Flashing Day was a Sharshun. We all winced horribly when they started breaking Flicker’s fingers.

A strong wind picks up during the questioning, and starts buffeting the bald elf standing over Flicker. Meanwhile, Dranko has been discreetly sawing at his bonds with his ceremonial dagger (always carried at his belt for show, though forbidden in combat by the church of Delioch). Mrs. Horn attempts to cut her ropes with the magic sword-ring, but her angle is wrong. The wind, having beaten up some on one of the elves, has now begun to loosen Kay’s ropes. Dranko, his wrists freed, leaps to his feet and hurls both the missiles from his *necklace of missiles* at the surprised elves. **KABOOM!** Still, both elves are standing after the blast.

Kay’s hands are free; she grabs her dagger and conceals it, pretending to still be tied. She tells the elves that she has a letter on her that contains information... one elf goes to take it from her while the other covers. When the first elf comes near, Kay whips out her dagger and holds it to the dark elf’s throat. The other casts a spell (*hold person*), but Kay shakes it off. The second bald elf then attempts to leap backwards (in a magically enhanced fashion) away from Dranko, to help his friend being held by Kay, but Dranko lashes out with his whip and (critical hit!) curls the mage’s ankles in mid-jump. The elf flops to the ground with the wind knocked out of him.

The moving air has managed to free some of the others by this time, and the elves go quickly from the predators to the prey. Soon, seeing that they have been defeated, the dark elves commit suicide in their usual grisly fashion, popping open the poison sacs in the roofs of their mouths.

The Company loot the bodies. Among other goodies, they find that the dark elves are wearing pendants that shield the mind from attacks for a limited duration. One of them has a *ring of jumping*. Kay, pressed for information about the mystery breeze that keeps helping her out, admits that as a child she had been given the nickname “Windstorm,” because of a strange wind that had blown during her birth. She can control this wind, though she’s not sure how she does it.

The party regroup and continue on towards Dal.



Tuesday, September 1

A brief expedition is sent to find if the dark elves had a camp nearby. It is found that they did, and some of their supplies have obviously been bought in Lan Hae. The Company then continue on towards Dal.

Wednesday, September 2

The Company depart Dal, taking a ferry across the Steel Sea. The ferryman is concerned, as some of the other boats are late in returning from their normal rounds. As the ferry nears the southern shore of the sea, a great cloud of smoke can be seen hovering over the interior of the Ghant Forest. (The city of Ghant is in the heart of the forest, built both on the forest floor and within the boughs of the trees.) At the shore, the docks (along with three ferries) have been smashed and partly burned. The Company hurry inland along the forest path to Ghant.

They arrive to find the city half destroyed. Buildings have been smashed, trees burned, and many elves and humans have been killed. In the center of town, by the blasted remains of a great fountain, are the surviving fragments of the creature that visited all the destruction on the city. Although now in pieces, it is clearly all that remains of the gargoyle statue that was being excavated near Sand’s Edge. Dranko is pretty ticked off by the connection that can now be made between the Scarbearers of

Delioch and the devastation of Ghant. He takes a piece of the gargoyle's head, intending, as he claims, to "shove it down Mokad's throat."

The Company learn that the gargoyle was killed in an epic battle with Fylnius, archmage of the city. Fylnius himself was wounded in the battle, but still lives and is being tended by elvish clerics. The party go to speak with him. While grateful for the party's attempts to help, he is distraught, and says that he has failed, and that the attack of the gargoyle accomplished its purpose. "Something big got through," he says, but in typical archmage-ish fashion he doesn't get more specific.

Piratecat: What we saw in that small elven town made us wish we had stopped the excavation... because the statue they were excavating from solid rock managed to almost single-handedly destroy the whole town. Hey, wait a minute... that would be the blood gargoyle whose excavation was sponsored by my own bloody church! Well, that can't be good, can it?

Thursday, September 3 – Monday, September 7

The party travel back to Tal Hae.



Planet of the Ape-Bugs

Run #22 – Sunday, October 27, 1996

Tuesday, September 8 [Dicing Day (Corilayna)] – Sunday, September 20

During this time, the party train. The immediate good news is that Abernathy is back! He and the Company have a good long talk about all the events that have transpired since the Archmage's "disappearance." Abernathy seems almost overwhelmed by the amount of information the Company have collected in the past few weeks. He warns them about the dangers of knowing too much, suggesting that the run-in with the dark elves near Lan Hae could have been a disaster if the party had known more than they did. Still, he is impressed for all that, and well pleased with their endeavors. He tells the party that he has been destroying magic items – most notably and recently the *Matun Essendi* – to help him in his mysterious "work."

Mrs. Horn casts *identify* on some of the magic items the party have picked up – the glove worn by one of the dark elves lets the wearer catch missiles out of the air. The mirror found months ago below Gohgan's is some sort of communication device, and the image of a person in the mirror is somehow important to its function.

During the training period, the Company are visited by Keertine Smith of the Undermen. He carries a sack smelling of death, and the party fear another severed head, but instead the bag contains the body of a creature later to be nicknamed a 'bugmonkey' by Dranko. It is mostly humanoid, about three feet tall, and looks like a cross between a chimpanzee and a praying mantis. Apparently two of these attacked and chased Gohgan out of his shop, and the Undermen want the party to go down and make sure that no more of the creatures come visiting from below, disturbing business in the area. Keertine tells the party that they can consider this payback for his getting them out of hot water after the business with the *Matun Essendi*. Abernathy also has an interest in what's underneath Gohgan's, and wants the Company to report on anything especially strange they find down there.

Also during this time, Dranko is summoned to the church of Delioch, where he is questioned in great detail about Mokad, Praska, and the dig in the Mouth of Nahalm. He is told to keep himself available for further questioning, as Tomnic the Soulmender is due in from the capital, and Dranko will be questioned further by the High Priest.



Monday, September 21

At dusk, the Company (minus Dranko) go back beneath Gohgan's basement, returning to the site of their first adventure after five-and-a-half months away. Little has changed, but the mold-men remember to fear them and do not attack. More relevantly, one of the bigger rat pens has collapsed into some large space below. The Company descend by rope a good forty feet into this new place, which seems to be a very old (and empty of humans) chapel, with some of the walls caved in with floam (the same spongy rock encountered in the ruins of Verdshane). A bit of exploration reveals that the chapel is adjacent to a dining room – and there are two live bugmonkeys sitting atop an ancient table. At the sight of the party, both bugmonkeys flee, each through a different door of the ancient and dusty dining room. Then a bugmonkey comes back out from one of the doors, seemingly passive, but when the party approach, more of the creatures drop from the ceiling and attack!

Piratecat: A rule to remember, everyone, when facing bugmonkeys... Check the ceiling. Yes, NOW!

A fierce battle ensues, and the bugmonkeys are killed or driven off. The Company find that one of the two doors through which the bugmonkeys fled leads to a throne room, a small adjacent office, and stairway down into the darkness. In the office is a skeleton (inanimate) sitting at a desk, and a journal on the desk – and all three, skeleton, book and desk, are mostly buried beneath an avalanche of floam. The party free the book from the floam.

The party later translate the legible part of the journal. It reads as follows:

uld never come to pass. I do not understand all that is in the reports, but it is clear that this place will fall within days. I have been given the choice of going with the Emperor, and I think I will go, rather than stay to be slaughtered by the allies of the pathetic sharp-ears. How they must be savoring their ill-gotten victory.

Still, the Emperor has plans for the future. He is sending one of the Circle here to oversee final preparations for this place, and of course my mages will stay to the end. I have been assured that their sacrifice will not be in vain, though I am skeptical, and would have preferred they stay with me. Fortunately, the Circle will be with me on the journey. There is apparently one last task for them to perform at Kinnet Vulthani, of such a nature that even I am not privy to its detail.

Something worse than what is being left here, I guess. Best for me not to ponder! I will be glad of the Circle's company, for with the Lowroads choked with gases, it will be a dangerous journey to the Capital. The forest and all the lands between swarm with enemy camps. But I will make it. And someday my children's children will return and restore the glory of Hawlic's house. I ho

Featured on some of the walls and ceilings of this underground place are two symbols – one is the same circle-in-diamond pattern that was on the rings found a couple of storeys above, and the other is a large hollow black circle. The black circle seems to have some religious significance, but none in the party are familiar with it. Wounded and spell-depleted from the fight with the bugmonkeys, the party return to the chapel, intending to surface for the evening. They find that the rope has been cut.

Morningstar tries to do some dream-scouting by going into *Ava Dormo* and wandering around the Dreamscape version of the underground palace. To her great surprise there is a man there, dressed in red plate mail and taunting and threatening a small child. Morningstar demands that he let the child go, which he does, but then he turns on her. "I know how to deal with your kind," he scoffs, as he generates a powerful magic light and shines it at Morningstar. But unlike most Ellish Dreamwalkers, Morningstar has spent plenty of time out under the sun, and though she flinches from the light, it does not drive her away as he seemingly thinks it will. So the red-plate-mailed man advances on the unarmed and unarmored Morningstar and slashes her with his sword. She is jarred out of *Ava Dormo*, and wakes to find herself bleeding from a wound in her side.

As the party debate different ways of ascending, most involving clever uses of the *rope trick* spell and/or a scroll of *minor creation*, they see a light approaching the opening far above. They brace for an attack...

Return to the Planet of the Ape-Bugs

Run #23 – Sunday, November 10, 1996

...but it's only Dranko, who was told that he could leave to join the party as long as he didn't go too far away. He lowers another rope, and the party return to the Greenhouse to sleep.



Tuesday, September 22

In the morning, the party return to the under-under-under-basement of Gohgan's, this time with a number of boxes to stack beneath the hole if necessary. In the lower level of the place, the party find two dead bodies, along with a short diary:

Day One:

I am keeping this diaree since mother asked me. She says it will make my riting better, and it is sillee, but since she asks it I will do it. I tell her I may not be long, but I dont no, becaus I do not no how long the tunnell is. She is going to live with her brother in Walnord, and when I return I will joyn her there. I leve tomorrow.

The beast that killed Father fled back into the well hole. Below is a tunnell, which I followed for over an hour yesterday and it just continues. Last nite I convinced Crowmer to come with me, which was eassee. He wants exitement, and to practice what he's learned from old Cauthon. He will be useful since he can make lites without torches and even throw fire at enemees. I am also taking the items from Father's trunk, the magik things, and his sword he used. I no that father did not want me to be an Advencherer like him, but I will put the things back when I return.

Day Two:

It is strange, but when I woke today I did not remember what I was going to do. When I found my diaree on the little table and read it, then I remembered. Crowmer remembered too. We have packed lots of food for days and oil and lamps for when his magik lites run out. I have fathers sword, and the things from his trunk.

I let Crowmer practiss on them, and he says there magik things, but I new that already. I have rope and he has a nife. When we find the beast, I will cut out its heart and have revenge for Father.

All we did today was follow the tracks. It is veree dustee down in this tunnell. There were two ways to go, but we followed the tracks. It was not veree exiting, and we did not see the beast. It is dark, but we have oil still for a week plus Crowmers magik lite. The tunnell was mostly strayt and wide so we have made good tyme. I think 30 miles maybee, but Crowmer says 20.

Day Three:

Still no sine of the beast, but the tracks are still clear. We did find a branch in the tunnell that goes up to the air, that ends in a cave. Even thow the tracks did not go that way, we followed it some, and it was liter up there, but the smell was awful near the top so we did not go all the way out. We also heard strange noises. Crowmer says that if we go another 20 miles tomorrow, we cood hit the water. I forgot we mite be near the sea and maybee the Citee, we have been going mostlee south and a little west (I think) from the farm. I hope we find the beast. I will kill it.

Nearby is the entrance to a long, wide, straight and well built tunnel heading away to the north west. It goes on for at least a quarter mile, and the party turn back.

After some more exploration, there is another long fight with bugmonkeys (persistent little buggers!), followed by another period of sleep.



The Life and Death of Isabel Horn

Run #24 – Sunday, November 17, 1996

In the evening, the party take a staircase down to an even lower level, and find a row of prison cells, partially buried in floam. A bad smell emanates from the end of the row. When the party enter the room at the end of the hall, a room ankle-high in bugmonkey remains, they learn that the smell comes from a huge, ugly, rubbery humanoid monster... which attacks!

The creature is tough, strong, and fights with reckless violence. Worse, its wounds start to heal themselves almost as soon as they're taken. There is a harrowing moment when the beast grabs Morningstar, throws her into an open iron maiden (the room was once a torture chamber), and slams it closed! Morningstar is badly wounded, and only her shield comes between her and a horrible spike-driven death. Eventually the party kill the beast, hack it to bits, and keep the head as a souvenir. Rest and healing follow.

Some more exploring reveals that the only untried path (other than the "endless" tunnel) is blocked by a magical blue force wall.

Wednesday, September 23 [Festival of Winterheal (Delioch)]

At 4:30 in the morning, the party ascend to the surface, and sleep in the Greenhouse through the afternoon. In a brief talk with Abernathy, the Archmage (recognizing the description of the force wall) suggests that perhaps a mage (e.g. Mrs. Horn) might be able to deactivate the blue field simply with her touch.



Thursday, September 24

The party descend into Gohgan's under-under-under-basement one more time...

In the lowest level of the under-basement, Mrs. Horn extends her arm through the glowing blue field, and (just as Abernathy predicted) it drops, allowing the rest to continue through. When she herself is through, the field springs back up. "Ha, ha," the party joke. "Mrs. H had better not die while we're down here, or we could be trapped forever!"

Beyond the field is a room strewn with skeletons, and here the party are attacked by some shadowy undead creatures, which seem to be immune to non-magical weapons, and which drain strength from those they touch. Many are turned, and the rest cut down with enchanted weapons.

In one corner of the room is a doorway, over which is drawn a glowing and incomprehensible glyph. Dranko walks through the door, the glyph vanishes – and he loses the last ten years of his memory. He believes that he is ten-year-old **Mellendiel Brightmirror** (his real name, never revealed), and the last thing he remembers is being on his grandfather's farm. He is understandably scared and confused, being in a dark underground place with armed strangers.

While most of the party deal with him, Tor notes that in the now seemingly unprotected closet beyond the door is a cabinet, and in the cabinet is a large wooden chest. Believing that the glyph was the only protection for the chest, he flips it open with his sword before anyone inspects it for magic or traps.



A giant gout of fire roars from the chest, knocking Tor over and blasting into the room beyond. Most of the party manage to dive out of the way, or miss the worst of the flames, but Mrs. Horn is caught dead on in the center of the fiery cone.

When the smoke clears, she has died from horrible burns on her back. Stunned silence follows.

Someone raises the question of how the party can get back to the surface without her. More silence.

Flicker stands in a far corner of the room, pale faced, lips moving, talking to himself, and staring in horror at Mrs. Horn's body. Dranko, a ten-year-old surrounded by strangers, badly burned, and seeing a dead body, begins to cry.

The party take the (strangely unharmed) contents of the chest, which include a disturbing, oily-feeling book and robe, each with a black circle inscribed on them; a gray book with the infinity symbol on its cover; a green glass rod; and a large sack with a magically large interior.

In the final room of the under-basement, the party discover two skeletons, some burned smears on the wall, a statue of a man with part of the head crumbled away, and an unusually intact skeleton in a sitting position in front of a filled-in archway. This skeleton has a (burned out) metal wand in its hands, and a faint gray circle burned onto the front of its skull. The filled-in archway seems to be held with five round green glass seals; four are glowing faintly, and one is cracked and dark.



Sometimes the God Brings You Chinese Food

Run #25 – Sunday, November 24, 1996

Morningstar decides to contact Abernathy, hoping that he can help them out of their predicament. She dreams to the *Ava Dormo* parallel Greenhouse, and activates the crystal ball. Somehow Abernathy detects it, goes to sleep, enters *Ava Dormo*, and meets Morningstar there. He is shocked by the news of Mrs. Horn's death, and agrees to do his solid image projection down to where the party await. He does so, though it's clearly a strain for him. He puts his arm through the blue force wall just long enough for the party to escape, and then his image vanishes.

The party make it to the surface, take the body to the Temple of Brechen (God of the Sea, worshipped by Mrs. Horn), and ask if the priests will be able to bring her back from the dead. They are told to wait; a message will be sent.

Afterwards, they take the young-in-mind Dranko to the church of Delioch, where the priests restore his memories. He experiences a strange dream before he awakens, and the dream is this:

There is a room, a classroom, and a man getting on in years stands before you. His face is kind but stern, and he wears robes you recognize to be of the church to which your grandparents belong. He is a priest of Delioch. Beside you sits an older girl, thin, a teenager. She looks familiar, as does the other priest, but neither has ever set foot on your grandfather's farm.

The priest speaks: "Beware. Great changes have come, and a dangerous foe has been born. Scars on the flesh can be a sign that one has moved closer to the Divine. But this one... he has a scar on his soul. The wound festered, you see, and before it was cured, all the blessedness of the Healer bled from it, and something darker filled the void. He stands within the Circle now. Do not forget him, my children. He will certainly not forget you."

The priest looks at you. "Do you hear me, Dranko?" The name is not yours, but it is familiar. "Dranko, do you hear me?"

Your eyes flutter open. "Dranko, can you hear me?" The priest, your old mentor Harmon, is shaking you gently. He speaks your name.

Dranko is awake, cured of his memory erasure. One of the first things he learns is that the Scarbearer Mokad has defected from the Church of Delioch, taking about twenty others with him. Then, since he has no memories of the time since his mind-wipe, he learns of Mrs. Horn's fiery death. Not a good day for him.

That evening, the Company are visited by Abernathy in the Greenhouse, who is unsurprisingly disturbed over the death of Mrs. Horn. He is a bit brightened by the evil-feeling robe and book retrieved from the under-basement, since they will help him in his work. He admits at this time that he will use them as he used the *Matun Essendi* – he'll drain them of their magic, to fuel his mysterious endeavors.



Friday, September 25

The party are summoned to the Temple of Brechen. There they are told that the Sea God is willing to return Mrs. Horn's soul to the mortal realm, for a price. Each of the Company, including Abernathy, will be asked to make some sacrifice or promise, and only if all are accepted will Mrs. Horn be resurrected. Abernathy is actually there in person – this is the first time in a long, long time that he has been entirely outside of his tower.

Each person accepts his or her part of the price, and the Priestess of Brechen overseeing the ritual tells the party that Mrs. Horn's soul has begun its journey back, though it will take some time. The Company return to the Greenhouse.



Saturday, September 26 – Wednesday, October 7

The Company train. Each member of the party shares with the others what he or she was asked to promise to the priests of Brechen...

TOR

All times are one, but for you, it is the future. In this future, Darien Firemount, there is a throne, awaiting you. It is a great responsibility, which your heart rejects. It brings with it great peril, which your mind rejects. You stand before it, and every part of you that can rejects it, though it calls to you. There are others who could seat themselves upon it, but they... must... not!

When the time comes, child of Forquelle, you will sit on that throne, and accept with a free will all that it gives you. This you will promise in the presence of the Lord Brechen, Master of the Seas. This you will swear, for the return of the soul of Isabel Horn, for its journey back. Speak now, for the god to hear.

(Tor, being the eldest son of the Baron of Forquelle, is next in line to the baronial throne. It's a job he really, really, really doesn't want.)

MORNINGSTAR

Already you walk a path not often trod by your sisters. For the soul of your friend, you must promise this before Brechen and before your Goddess Ell:

Your feet shall not stray from the road before you, though the shadows fade and darkness wanes. Some will follow, and others will vilify, and betimes you will be stretched to the breaking point. But even if the future tears you apart, you must stay the course. You will turn your eyes to the light, when it comes, and not turn away, though it burns you. For you are a Child of Darkness, and you are a Child of Light. Swear this, for the journey of Isabel Horn's soul, from the Endless Shore to the land of mortals. What say you?

DRANKO

Mellendiel Brightmirror, hear me well, for the following charge is placed upon you, by Brechen and your God Delioch, as your part for the return of Isabel Horn's soul.

For you there is now an enemy far afield, and another enemy near at hand. One is beyond your reach, but the other must be embraced, for he is the man at a crossroads, and he holds ruin in one hand and salvation in the other. Cultivate him, no matter his resistance, and prepare him for the struggle. Arm him with the truth when you must, and gird him with kindness, though it galls you both. For your lord Delioch does not happily abide his children divided. This is your charge, and you must take it up, in Brechen's name and in your God's, to see the life of Isabel Horn returned from the Endless Shore. What say you?

KAY

Kay Olafsen, though Pikon is not one of the Travelers, the following charge is laid upon you with His assent, as your part for the return of Isabel Horn's soul.

Your life, almost from the moment of your birth, has been spent defying the truth. You have a gift, and a heritage, and you have turned your face from both of these. Should you choose to stay hidden and safe, you will fade, and a great opportunity will be lost. You are here charged not to fade, to embrace that which sets you apart, to accept your gifts and with them free a long-forgotten race. This you must do, even if in doing so the name "Windstorm" shall come to be on a thousand tongues, of allies and enemies alike. This you must promise, before Pikon and before me, as your part in the return of Isabel Horn to life. What say you?

ERNIE

Ernest, though your Goddess is not one of the Travelers, still this charge is given with Her assent, and you must swear to it before Brechen and before Her should you wish Isabel Horn's soul to be returned.

Your charge is the least onerous of all given this day, but important nonetheless. 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. What say you?

FLICKER

Flicker Proudfoot, there is a great weight now upon you, and only you may lift it free. It will never be for you to know, if by the action you almost took, you might have prevented the death of your comrade. But by action you might bring her back. Your cowardice is a cancer, and by the exercise of your skill and bravery you will burn it away. From this day forward, you will forswear the sword, and use the talents your God gave you to help protect the lives of your comrades. In promising this, you will do your part in bringing back the life of Isabel Horn. What say you?

coyote6: Most impressive, the promises. Did the players come up with them, did you work together on them, or were they all yours?

Sagiro: Well, I came up with the promises myself, but they all incorporated bits of character background that my players had provided before the game started. Kay's player wanted her character to have some "mysterious wind-related powers," but left me to make up the details. (You'll find out more about this soon.)

Morningstar's player had the ideas both for the Dreamscape-related stuff, and for the whole white-haired pale-skinned oddly-named-for-a-Priestess-of-Night angle, but again left me to flesh out how this would affect the story. There's a lot more to this, too, which you'll discover before too long.

Dranko's player (Piratecat) made up the characters and relationships with Califax and Praska as part of his character background, but I've taken them in some (I think) unexpected directions.

Tor's player wanted to be the runaway son of a nobleman, which has had both expected and unexpected consequences. And while Ernie's player didn't provide as extensive a background, she did give me a great middle name (Wilburforce), and there's a lot going on there that, even now after 108 sessions, is still a mystery.

Anyway, the moral of the story is, my players all gave me great material to work with, and I've tried to weave as much of it as I could into the story. Mrs. Horn's death gave me a great excuse to expand on some of it! Plus, while I allow the dead to be raised in my world, I want it to have sharply felt consequences in addition to the level loss.

Piratecat: A comment or two on Dranko's temple: At the time Sagiro was starting his game, I had a player in my game who did an amazing job of fleshing out his PC's religion. He posited several branches, or sects, not all of which got along with each other. I thought, "Cool!" So when Sagiro asked me to create Dranko's temple, I got to have fun. Basically, it is a God of Healing, but (unlike the other gods) his healing spells leave scars. Although no one knows for sure why this is, church doctrine dictates that it is a sign that one's body and spirit have been purified, and that it is tangible, visible proof of the divinity.

There are three main branches of the church. The Soulbinders are the only ones whose healing spells act normally; they are the educated, spiritual leaders (or, as Dranko might put it, the "weenie prisses"). Dranko is a Woundtender (the main branch) whose task it is to seek out the sick and infirm. The Scarbearers are the less-respected branch; these clerics believe that since the scars are a sign of purification, they should hurt and heal themselves to bring them closer to God. The really sick ones hurt innocent people, "saving their souls" by then immediately healing them. As you can imagine, they don't have a good reputation. Unfortunately, temple discipline was administered by the Scarbearers, and Dranko was a... willful... child and acolyte. He started the game with over a hundred scars across his body, most of them inflicted by Califax as discipline.

Dranko started the game with some emotional problems, as you'd probably imagine. One of his scars is down the side of his face. He wears an eyepatch, and until the trip to Ernie's halfling village of Dingman's Ferry, everyone in the party thought he wore it to cover a blinded eye. As it turns out, he just thinks it looks cool.

Mokad, the leader of the Scarbearers in Tal Hae (and Califax's superior) plays a big part in what's to come. So does Califax, too, but in a way I never imagined. I was really irked when I had to make the promise to Brechen; help Califax? I'd rather summer in the Mouth of Nahalm. But Mrs. Horn was more important, and Dranko managed to swallow his resentment enough to at least give it a try. It wasn't easy.

And another comment about Mrs. Horn's death, and the events surrounding it: Hoo boy. We went through this barrier that only a wizard can pass (or allow someone else to pass). "Ha ha," we say, "hope our wizard doesn't die in here! We'd be trapped forever!"

Ha ha, indeed. Killed by a fire trap. It was the first PC death, and it was truly traumatic.

Dranko never saw it, though; his memory had been wiped by that symbol, and as far as he was concerned, his "tough guy" persona of "Dranko 'Coaltongue' Blackhipe, scary scarred eye-patch-wearing half-orc" was wiped and he was ten years old again: Mellendiel Brightmirror, a scared and rebellious kid no one likes. He told Dranko's real name to the party. He still hasn't gotten over that.

We thought how Sagiro handled the resurrection was wonderful. It meant something; it wasn't just "okay, we dropped her off at the temple, they said pick up her live body about half-sixish," it was something solemn and monumental. We got the feeling that great things were happening, and that we were caught in them, and that we had damn well better start trying to swim before we drowned.

And that bastard Mokad, the head of the Scarbearers who financed the excavation of the blood gargoyle, defected from the church after Dranko ratted him out. That'll come back to haunt him...



CHAPTER 2

The Turtle Moves

One day a red-haired, slow-witted fellow named **Radburn** shows up, claiming to be Levec Oldbarrow's brother. His story is that he hasn't seen his brother in many years, and his attempt to follow the trail led him eventually to the Greenhouse. The party tell Radburn that Levec was a hired spy, and had been killed on the job. Radburn seems somewhat upset, but mostly seems dumb. He claims to be a farmer, for instance, but confesses that he doesn't know much about farming. The party decide to keep an eye on him while he's in Tal Hae.

Also during this period Keertine Smith visits the Greenhouse, thanks the party for their help with the bugmonkeys, and tells them to consider their debt to the Undermen paid. He mentions that the floor of Gohgan's basement has been permanently boarded up.



Radburn Oldbarrow, Secret Agent

Run #26 – Saturday, December 7, 1996

Thursday, October 8 [Day of Tides (Brechen)] – Wednesday, October 14

On the eighth day of October, on Brechen's Holy Day of Tides, Isabel Horn is brought back to life. The party tell Mrs. Horn all about what happened to her, and explain the nature of their various promises and sacrifices. She is shocked, humbled, and extremely grateful.

As the party finish training, they begin to hear rumors of fighting going on near the capital city of the kingdom (Hae Charagan). There are many different variations of the rumor, most involving an army of indeterminate humanoids, and in which both Hae Charagan and the nearby city of Feslin are involved in battle.

Abernathy visits the Greenhouse again, and is delighted to see Mrs. Horn alive and well. He himself seems more spry and happy than usual. When asked what he was asked to do as his part of the resurrection, he is his usual vague self, but says: "I have always considered myself a chess player. But now I have been shown that I am merely a very important piece." Presumably it is a sacrifice for him to realize that, but whatever the case, he seems happier than the party can ever remember him being.

He has two possible "missions" for the party now, neither more urgent than the other: one is to go to Verdshane, and see if anything interesting has happened to the ruins there, and in particular to the skeleton in the stasis field. The other is to go to Oasis, and find out what is going on there with the erstwhile "Oasis Mages' Guild."



Thursday, October 15 [Cinnamon Day (Yondalla)]

At ten o'clock at night, while Dranko (invisibly) and Flicker are watching the inn at which Radburn is staying, Radburn leaves and goes for a walk – into the seedy and generally unsafe dockside area of Tal Hae. Dranko follows. He observes Radburn entering an old, rundown row-house, and follows (invisibly) to investigate.

From the floor below, Dranko spies on a brief interaction between Radburn and an old, dirty fellow in a second-storey apartment. After Radburn departs (with Flicker trailing), Dranko goes up and (still invisibly) proceeds to pretty much scare the hell out of the second man. By tossing gold pieces onto the floor, Dranko eventually convinces the man to confess that Radburn had hired him to find out information about Abernathy's tower (the man had had little to report, save a bit about the appearing and disappearing window high up on the tower wall). Satisfied for the evening, Dranko returns to the Greenhouse. Flicker reports that Radburn has gone back to his inn for the night.

Friday, October 16

Next morning, Tor and Morningstar confront Radburn in his room at the inn. While Tor "recommends" (insert physical intimidation here) that Radburn should keep his nose out of the Archmage's business, Morningstar hits him with a *mind read*. Although Radburn stubbornly sticks to his story, Morningstar learns that Radburn is not what he claims. He was sent to find out what happened to Levec, and to do a bit of snooping around Abernathy's Tower, by a man named **Gluefoot** in the town of Woodfork. He is not nearly as stupid as he seems, and his mind is racing, wondering how he's going to get out of the situation.

Then Morningstar drops a comment about his plan, that causes him to figure out that his mind is being read. After that it's impossible to get anything more out of him. He threatens to call for help if the two don't leave him. They leave him. The Company try to report back to Abernathy, but only his apprentice Thewana is available to talk over the crystal ball. She seems even more peeved than usual, and expresses a concern that her master doesn't seem as focused as he usually is – a dangerous state of mind for an Archmage.

Soon after the interrogation, Radburn skips town, taking off in the direction of Calnis. Since the party have decided to investigate Verdshane, and since both Calnis and Woodfork (where they guess Radburn is fleeing) are en route, the party immediately set out after him.

Saturday, October 17

After almost two days of fast travel, the party arrive in Woodfork in the mid-evening. They get rooms at an inn (the Oak Palace), and discover Radburn's horse in the stable. The location of Gluefoot and his "Fine Carpentry" shop are no secret, so Invisi-Dranko and company saunter on over in that direction. Gluefoot lives in his shop, essentially one giant room doubling as living quarters, woodshop, and warehouse. He and Radburn are sitting and talking in the shop, Radburn catching him up on what he discovered in Tal Hae, and the news seems to be making Gluefoot distraught.

After Radburn leaves, Morningstar does a *mind read* on Gluefoot through the window. His thoughts are along the lines of: *That does it! Easy money is one thing, but this is getting decidedly dangerous. I'll tell Frohwirth what he can do with his gold pieces. After all, I'm not that bad a carpenter. No more!* Then his thoughts turn to carpentry and sleep.



Verdshane Revisited

Run #27 – Sunday, January 5, 1997

Sunday, October 18

Dranko continues his invisible vigil on the shop. In the morning, Gluefoot writes out a note, thinks better of it and burns it, then writes another note. He takes a metal box out from under his bed, and puts the note in it. A couple of minutes later, he opens the box again, looks in, closes it, and slides it back under the bed. Eventually, when Gluefoot leaves for lunch that afternoon, Dranko breaks in and steals the box. There is no piece of paper inside it. On a whim, Dranko relieves himself in the box. A minute later, there is no sign of... er... relief remaining in the container. He flees back to the Oak Palace, and the Company leave town, headed down the Greatwood road for Verdshane via Walnord. (Walnord is directly on the way, and the party also want to track down the family of the young man whose diary they found beneath Gohgan's shop.)

That night, Abernathy contacts Morningstar via dream, and relays a message (not quite so urgent as the last) about an upcoming auction in the city of Minok. Alykeen's apprentice Parkitt has reported that one of the items up for auction is a statuette of a Cyclops, the eye of which is evidently a source of wild magic, and which fits the physical description of an Eye of Moirel. Since the party are in the area, Abernathy asks them to attend the auction (Parkitt will have tickets), buy the item if possible, come by it by other means if a minimum of violence can be assured, and otherwise note who the buyer ends up being. As he did in their last meeting, Abernathy seems somehow less intense, and more mischievous.

RangerWickett: As resident wild mage junkie, when you say the Eye is a source of wild magic, do you mean à la the 2E Wild Mage class (and my 3E prestige class version of the same), or just standard, "This sure is some wild magic you got here, Earl"?

The teleporting pee-pee. That's naughty. And wait a sec. If Dranko's invisible (why is he invisible again?), then wouldn't his pee be invisible too?

Sagiro: The "wild magic" is similar to the wild magic from 2E, in that it's a branch of magic that's somewhat more powerful than normal magic, but often unpredictable and unreliable. If you want a Really Powerful Custom Magic Effect, for instance, wild magic can be the way to go... but don't be surprised if things don't turn out exactly like you want.

Abernathy personally considers it anathema, and wants nothing to do with it. There are very few Wild Mages in the world currently; it's more a curiosity about which little is known.

Oh, and Dranko's pee would presumably become visible as soon as it became... er... detached from his body. And he's invisible because Mrs. Horn made him invisible, so that he could spy more easily. Remember that we were still in 2E back then, and *invisibility* lasted all day.



Monday, October 19

The Company arrive in Walnord. The party find that they have become local celebrities, as stories about their fight with the "werewolves" have spread and changed, shedding truth right and left.

After speaking with a local priest of Pikon, they are led to a nearby farm. There they meet a man named **Fenbolt**; it was his sister's husband who was killed by the beast mentioned in the diary found beneath Gohgan's. Fenbolt tells the party that his sister had been slain as well, never having made it to Walnord, and that he didn't know what happened to his nephew. The Company tell Fenbolt about the sad fate of the nephew, and give him the diary. Fenbolt tells them to keep the rest of what was found on the bodies, and tells them how to get to his sister's farm, should they ever want to go there and hunt down the monsters that have taken it over. That afternoon, the Company depart for Verdshane.

Tuesday, October 20 [Watching Day (Uthol Inga)]

In the evening, the Company arrive at Verdshane, and stay the night at the Shadow Chaser.

Wednesday, October 21

The Company head out to visit the “bad” ruins north of the village. The elven bone chamber, tower with floam base, and the strange building into which the goblins had broken all seem to be undisturbed. In the blue stasis field, however, the skeleton within has dropped completely to the ground, and the pack on its back is gone.

As they continue to explore, the party hear a low background roar coming from the north. They head in that direction, and the roar grows louder... and louder... and eventually it resolves into the shouts of about 25 goblins. They are chasing a sword-wielding woman, who is fleeing towards the ruins. Dranko is the first to reach her, and she explains (while fleeing) that she isn’t really that worried about the goblins, and has already dispatched about a third of them. She invites Dranko and the party to join in the fighting. They do. The goblins are all slain or driven back into the forest.

The woman calls herself **Meledien**. She is tall, hard-featured, and strong as hell – the party can tell that she wasn’t exaggerating about having dispatched a dozen goblins on her own. Her story is that she was shipwrecked on the northern edge of the forest and captured by the goblins while still dazed. Later she escaped, and was pursued by the goblins all the way to the ruins. She is unwilling to say where she was going, or where she came from, claiming that “she isn’t supposed to discuss those details.” Well, doesn’t *that* figure.

As she talks to the party, she wanders around the ruins, asking questions about them. During the interchange, Morningstar attempts to *mind read* her, and gets the thought: *What are these people doing here?* – before Meledien becomes aware of the spell and somehow renders it ineffective. Needless to say, this doesn’t exactly endear the party to this woman, who already is clearly not the nicest person they’ve met. In the end, she announces her intent to head towards Verdshane for some rest, before returning to the mountains for the rest of her gear. The Company leave her, depart Verdshane and head for Minok.

Piratecat: Okay, pay attention, everybody: We hate Meledien.

Hate her, hate her, hate her. When the Archmage said, “Something big got through,” we’re pretty sure she’s who he meant.

The problem with Sagiro’s villains is that most of them are sort of difficult to hate. Meledien, on every occasion that we’ve bumped into her, has been tough but honorable. Sagiro (the NPC) was an incredibly nice guy most of the time, despite the fact we hated everything he stood for and who he worked for. Lapis (hiss-spit!), who you’ll meet later, is a class-one bitch who firmly believes that she’s working for the right people. They’re all so damn earnest and self-righteous. None of them cackle, none of them do things just to be eeeevil... they all have agendas that they firmly believe in, which just happen to be really, really horrible.

But I still hate Meledien. She managed to humiliate Dranko several times, including taking him hostage... and that’s just bad for a half-orc’s ego.

Even that rat-bastard Mokad, the Scarbearer who set loose the blood gargoyle, is smug in his sincerity.

Never fear, though; Sagiro (the DM) has given us plenty of bad guys who really are despicable, like most of the Sharshun. If the recurring ones (i.e. the ones we haven’t managed to kill) are three-dimensional and realistic, well, I suppose I shouldn’t complain.

Thursday, October 22 – Friday, October 23

They travel to Minok, arriving as the sun is setting.



Best Little Auction House in Minok

Run #28 – Sunday, January 19, 1997

The auction house is closed for the evening, and at the Mages’ Guild, Parkitt is not available. Mrs. Horn picks up the seven tickets left for the Company. The party send a note via street urchin to **Golda Pincloth**, the woman whose property is up for auction, asking for a private meeting to discuss the nature of the Eye. The boy returns; he delivered the note, and was then turned away by the guards.

Saturday, October 24

With one more day until the auction, the party wake bright and early to visit Gatha’s Auction House. There is tight security, and those of the party who enter are divested of all weapons and magic items before they are allowed inside. There are six items up for auction: a silver pet bowl; a white maple double-flute; an ugly piece of abstract sculpture; a gaudy ruby necklace; a painting by the well-known artist **Finley**; and the Cyclops statuette, standing two feet tall and with what looks like an Eye of Moirel as its single eyeball. As the party are leaving, Sagiro shows up! He says that he is there to bid on the painting, being a collector of Finley’s works. Um, yeah.

Ernie learns that Golda Pinclot has been a widow for about twenty years. It is generally assumed that she is coming to the end of her ex-husband **Lord Savoy**’s wealth, and is auctioning off some valuables to continue her lavish lifestyle. Dranko breaks into Golda’s house (invisibly, of course) and drops a note practically in front of her nose. She spots it, reads it – and screeches for a servant (in a horrid voice), demanding to know why a third note about the auction has been allowed to reach her. Seeing that Golda is probably not of a sort to be reasoned with, Dranko hastily departs.



Sunday, October 25

Auction day arrives. The party have put down over 3,000 gold pieces to cover bids, and Kay is the designated bidder. Flicker and Ernie are also in attendance. Before the auction, **Gatha** admits that the eye of the Cyclops might be magical, but because attempts to verify its magical nature have failed, it cannot be advertised as such. Still, word that the thing is a significant source of wild magic has clearly spread.

The auction begins with the item with the smallest starting bid, and works its way up to the Cyclops. Along the way, Sagiro wins the painting, for just over 600 gold pieces. When the Cyclops comes up, the bidding soon eclipses the 3,000gp mark; there are several people who are clearly there just for this particular item. They are: a short, swarthy fellow in gold and red robes; a tall, noble-looking fellow with a well-trimmed blond beard; a short woman with short black hair and a silent dwarf companion; a very tall (6'8"), painfully thin man with frazzled hair; a thin, unassuming young man with spectacles; and a handsome light-skinned elven gentleman.

The bidding among these people rises and rises, soon eclipsing the 10,000gp mark. Sagiro, sitting next to the halflings, lets out a sigh when the bidding goes over 12,000gp (about the same time the blond-bearded fellow stops bidding), commenting that he can't believe how high the bidding has gone. Eventually the young bespectacled fellow wins the Cyclops, for over 14,000gp.

After the auction, Kay makes a desperation overbid on the pet bowl which is ignored by the auctioneer, but the woman who ended up buying it (who was more or less goaded into it by her kid) sells it to Kay. (The party have two cats back at the Greenhouse, named **Smeggy** and **Argol**, who keep Eddings company while they're gone.)

Outside, some of the losing bidders attempt to talk to or make deals with the winning bidder, but he's not willing to talk. He tells them that "they'll have to discuss any details with Sarai." The short woman (who turns out to be from the Tal Hae Guild) and the tall man (from the Guild in the capital, Hae Charagan) are both upset that the Cyclops has just been bought by an independent mage, rather than someone from a Guild. Kay goes back to the Mages' Guild to pick up her bowl, and learns that the bespectacled man who won the Cyclops was only a front bidder. The actual winner is a wizardess named **Sarai** who is staying at the Guild, but who is not particularly welcome there and will likely be leaving soon. Kay and Morningstar follow the elven bidder to his inn, and Kay asks him questions while Morningstar *mind reads* him, but he turns out to be an honest bidder from the city of Lan Hae, a man interested in studying wild magic. That night, Dranko and Flicker scope out the Guild house, waiting for Sarai to emerge.

Monday, October 26

Early in the morning, a huge warrior type shows up in front of the Guild House, leading two ponies, one laden with baggage. A few minutes later, an elderly woman exits the Guild, accompanied by an enormous red tiger, and carrying a metal box large enough to hold, say, a two-foot-high Cyclops statuette. The woman mounts one of the ponies, and she, the large man, and the tiger head off in an eastward direction, traveling slowly. Dranko tails them while Flicker runs back to the inn to alert the party; they're on the move again.

Dranko follows Sarai at a safe distance as she leaves the city via the Greatwood road. After only a few minutes she is met by one of the other bidders, the short one with the red and gold robes. They have a brief argument, in which the man insists that she make the Eye available for study, but the woman continues to balk, claiming that she'll "consider making it available, in the future, for a price." Angered, the robed man departs back towards Minok.

A short while later, perhaps three-quarters of a mile from the city, Dranko hears the sounds of battle from up ahead, and rushes forward; a couple of minutes behind, the rest of the party hear the sounds as well.

(Thankfully this was 2nd Ed., when a combat round lasted a whole minute!)

When Dranko gets close enough to tell what's going on, he sees that the trio is being attacked by a number of bald dark elves (the Sharshun), and the blond-bearded bidder is there as well, fighting alongside the elves. One has apparently struck down Sarai, while another has engaged her fighter companion. The tiger has just leapt on the woman's attacker, bearing him to the ground.

The Lady or the Tiger

Run #29 – Sunday, February 9, 1997

While the rest of the Company rush towards the battle, Dranko goes invisibly to examine the old woman's body, and finds that it's not her body at all, but a double made not of flesh, but of dirt, twigs, leaves and rocks. Also, he discovers that the Cyclops is missing from its box, the lock broken and the lid smashed open – from the inside!

The battle that follows is pretty much a rout for the good guys. *Hold person* spells from Dranko and Morningstar take out the more powerful Sharshun and the blond-bearded bidder, and the rest of the Company, with the help of the tiger, the old woman's

bodyguard, and the woman herself (who blasts one of the Sharshun with a *lightning bolt* from the forest), manage to slay almost all of the ambushers. Kay, Tor, and Ernie (on horseback) chase the two fleeing Sharshun, but one gets away and vanishes into the forest. Kay tracks that one, but the tracks literally disappear when they leave the path.

Back at the site of the battle, the Company loot the bodies and tie up the blond guy (they learn his name is **Masteen**). As Kay approaches him, a wind kicks up in her vicinity, and she suddenly gains comprehension of one line of the elvish song her mother taught her: *War blew across the world, and we were the terror of our foes*. Among the loot are two holy symbols from the two Sharshun priests – black circles set with diamonds.

After divesting Masteen of his mind shielding pin (standard issue among Sharshun – too bad it didn't help against *hold person!*), Morningstar *mind reads* him while the rest interrogate him. By standing behind and out of sight of the bound prisoner, Morningstar is able to respond to and guide the questioning. And she finds out a great deal. Masteen has been in the hire of Sagiro and the Sharshun for a few months, and has been given lots of information about the party. He knows that the Sharshun are looking for the Eyes of Moirel, and that the Eyes are devices that are used for some sort of travel. He has a guess that the Sharshun are trying to free their imprisoned Emperor, though that is only a guess. By inference, it is clear that Masteen is not being affected noticeably by the Masking. And he divulges (by thought) how much he has been paid and where he's keeping the money.

Eventually, he figures out that his mind has been read this entire time, and he despairs. The Company decide to let him go, but not before Kay makes him drink a fake potion, which she claims will kill him if he commits any act of violence against women. He departs with some unkind words for her.

Meanwhile Sarai, while grateful for the help against the Sharshun, is upset that the Cyclops is missing. Kay sorts out some tracks that seem to match, and follows them into the forest, where they end at a tall tree. The Cyclops is sitting up in the tree. And then, as the Company and Sarai look up at it, it begins to talk in a gravelly voice. 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. (It actually seems to consider itself as the tiger's property.)

In the discussion with the Cyclops that follows (and over the next few days' travel), the Company learn some interesting things, though the creature is often hopelessly enigmatic. It is clearly self-aware, and refers to the other Eyes as its "brothers." It dislikes the Sharshun, because they want to use the Eyes to "travel nowhere," and it doesn't want to do that. It claims that Moirel went mad for that reason; that she "traveled nowhere" and, not being ready for whatever that entailed, lost her mind. It seems to regard all notions of (and questions about) time as meaningless. It feels closely associated with its physical form – it thinks of itself as the Cyclops, not just the Eye. It's also of the opinion that its brother should not be held captive in the Greenhouse.

As the discussion is drawing to a close, the Eye warns that a Sharshun had been watching them from nearby, with a loaded crossbow aimed at them. It announces that it has taken care of the problem, and suggests that the humans below might want to move about twenty feet or so back. They do. After about a minute, a Sharshun comes plummeting (and screaming) out of the sky, crashes through the trees, and is killed by a collision with the ground. Then the Cyclops jumps down out of the tree, and agrees to travel with the tiger and her woman.

That night, in a shelter, the Eye claims that more of the Sharshun had been approaching, but that he had "sent them away." The Eye offers no more details, and the Company ask for none.

Rincewind: You must be an *incredibly* lawful party. You're going to just let Sarai walk away with the Eye?

Piratecat: Err... yeah. If we thought she was nasty we would have tried, but she seemed well-intentioned (and awfully competent). We also are firmly convinced that we're supposed to be the good guys. Stealing it from her, when she had just bought it (and when the Eye wanted to be with her tiger) just seemed to be wrong.

As for alignments... Ernie is LG. Dranko started as N, but changed to NG. Kiblhathur Bimson (a dwarf wizard who joined us later) is LG. Kay is CG. Tor is NG. Flicker is CG, and Morningstar is true neutral. It's more our goodness, than our lawfulness, that stopped us from taking it from Sarai.

In retrospect, I suppose I wish we *had* taken it from her. Because her city was overrun by humanoids, and there's this absurd rumor about a giant, one-eyed gnoll warlord...

Tuesday, October 27

The party travel towards Calnis, spending the night in Verdshane.



No Exit

Run #30 – Sunday, March 2, 1997

Wednesday, October 28

At night, in a roadside shelter between Verdshane and Walnord, Sarai begins cursing vehemently. The Cyclops has crumbled

into a pile of black stone with the Eye on top. Sarai claims that she was casting a spell on the Eye (with its permission) to discern the strength and nature of its wild-magic-ness, and it just crumbled to pieces. She collects the remains in the original box.

Thursday, October 29 – Saturday, November 1

They travel to Calnis.

Sunday, November 2

The group arrive in Calnis. The city is up in arms again; there are reports that another gnoll/kobold raid might be imminent. Sarai invites the Company to her home, where she gives all of them some food, and as a gift for their assistance, she gives Mrs. Horn a spellbook entitled *Terfilian's Compendium of Alterations*.

That afternoon the Company depart for Tal Hae, to report all of their recent activities and discoveries to Abernathy.

Monday, November 3

Travel to Tal Hae.

Tuesday, November 4

The Company arrive in Tal Hae. They try to communicate with Abernathy, but he is extremely busy and tells them he'll get back to them in a few days.

Wednesday, November 5 – Wednesday, November 26

Dranko, Tor and Flicker train. Also during this time (not necessarily in chronological order):

- A letter has arrived from the church of Brechen. It asks that all of the Company (and presumably Abernathy) return to the church on March 25th and again on September 25th – the six-month and one-year anniversaries of Mrs. Horn's raising.

For this next part, a bit of backstory: one of the things Dranko did as a youth was to invent a fictional Crime Lord called "The Oracle." Dranko would spread rumors all around the city about the power and mystery surrounding this dangerous man of the underworld. And he'd occasionally imply – though never actually state – that he had a close relationship with this "Oracle," with the merest hint of a suggestion that Dranko and the Oracle might be one and the same. In this way he hoped to increase his reputation among the seedier elements of Tal Hae. As it turned out, his rumor-mongering was more effective than he could have dreamed...

- Dranko, during his training, is brought before the Undermen of Tal Hae, and questioned about the Oracle. It appears that someone is committing heinous crimes in the Oracle's name, and all of the Undermen investigations have led, eventually, back to Dranko. The Undermen have spent some serious effort tracking down this "rival criminal organization," and aren't too pleased to find that it was essentially a practical joke. Men have been killed for less. In return for his life, Dranko agrees to become, officially and for real, "the Oracle," as an arm of the Undermen. The Oracle (and his associates) can be called upon by the Undermen to perform services, though Dranko is assured that these tasks will not involve murder, assaults, or violent robbery. Probably.
 - Massive donations are made to the churches of Ell, Yondalla and Delioch.
 - Lieutenant Marbury Tillerson stops by, with the news that the Greenhouse is required by law to pay 50gp in taxes every year. Not surprisingly, the Greenhouse's delinquency was brought to his attention by Turlus Whitecake.
 - At a mention of the *Matun Essendi*, an agitated breeze picks up in Kay's vicinity.
 - Abernathy shows up at the Greenhouse – at the door, in person! He has been shopping down at the market, and has brought a basket of dates and honey as a gift for the party. Having just drained the evil black book of its magical energy, he feels as though he's deserved a break, and has decided that he needs to get out more. The party fill him in on all the goings-on with Radburn, the state of the ruins at Verdshane, the woman Meledien who was also there, the auction, the fight afterward, and their experience with the Cyclops and Sarai. Abernathy expresses great concern about the backpack being gone from the skeleton in the blue field at Verdshane. He takes Gluefoot's portable latr... uh, magic box, with the hope of finding where the other end is. He doesn't know what to make of the Eye's cryptic opinions, and seems to think that it's in about as good care as it can be with Sarai. He does suggest that the Company not heed the request of the Cyclops to free its brother from the Greenhouse.
- Abernathy tells the Company that a colleague of his has detected a powerful (and probably malign) source of magical energy somewhere in or near the small town of Seablade Point on Lanei. He'd like the Company to retrieve it for him, and though it is not immediately urgent, he tells them not to take too long in starting an investigation.
- During this time, Kay begins to feel some added urgency in her desire to visit her home and family in Cyric.



Thursday, November 27

Tor and Ernie compete in the Church of Werthis' Fall Tourney. Ernie is knocked out in the first round, and Tor manages to make it to the second round before he's defeated. Well, there's always next time! The Company prepare for the trip to Cyric.

Shmoo: When you run those tournaments in the spring and fall, how do you run the combats? Is it all subdual damage? Do you let the characters keep all their equipment? Cast spells?

Sagiro: Fictionally, the tourney participants wear no armor and can use no magic. They each get a wooden "practice" weapon and/or shield coated with colored resin so you can confirm when someone is hit. Two combatants square off in a marked off "mini-arena"; first to score three hits is the winner.

There are many divisions, the most popular being sword and shield. There are also quarterstaff bouts, mace duels, and some accuracy contests in archery and slinging, among others. It's usually a well attended event, with hundreds of participants from Tal Hae and the surrounding lands.

Game-mechanically, it's been ultra-simple. I roll three d20s. The PC rolls three d20s. I secretly add or subtract from my own rolls, depending on how much better or worse their opponent is. The average of the three rolls determines the winner. Of course, I colorfully describe the matches with a gripping play-by-play narrative.

Since the party have been travelling for so long, they haven't participated in a Werthis Tourney since we were using 2nd Ed. With 3E, I'll probably improve the process, using BABs as a base. But I still want to keep it simple, and not use full-fledged tactical combat... unless, of course, my players want the format changed.

Friday, November 28

Travel by ship to Kynder Hold.

Saturday, November 29 – Tuesday, December 2 [Day of the Seablade (Brechen)]

Travel to Cyric. As each day goes by, the air in Kay's vicinity becomes more and more agitated.

Wednesday, December 3

The Company arrive in Cyric. Kay's old neighbors are shocked to see her, given that she had vanished without a trace over half a year earlier, and given that she's traveling with some pretty strange company. Kay's family is delighted to see her alive, since they never received the letter Kay had sent to the local miller, assuring them that she was safe. (All of Kay's family, including Kay, are illiterate, which is why her letter (written for her by Ernie) was mailed to Mr. Miller.)

All of her family are there except for **Karn**, the middle brother (of her three human brothers), who is (and has been for months) off searching for her. Ever the practical-minded family, they're happy to see that she's brought back the salt-shaker, which she was holding when Abernathy teleported her to his tower. Some of the Company go and terrorize poor Mr. Miller, who assures them he never received Kay's letter.

Once in the house, Kay is drawn to her childhood bedroom, and once there, goes faint. She revives moments later, with a full translation in her head of the song her mother learned from her elvish father, and which she then taught to Kay:

In the days of our youth, we ran with the butterflies,
Free like our spirits were free, with our song on the wind.
The Elves danced with us, Men wondered at us, the Kesh despised us;
But even then our dancing cast a shadow upon the noble Dwarves.

In the days of our strength, we fought with the eagles,
Strong like our spirits were strong, and the Kesh fled before us.
War blew across the world, and we were the terror of our foes;
But at last the Tarathi fell or were taken, and we were ringed in a dark circle.

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.

In the days of our sorrow, we die with our memories,
Doomed like our spirits are doomed, and shame in our hearts.
Our fell master has fled, but the weight of God's Thorn endures, and we are chained to the earth;
Forgotten by the Spire, we pray to ride the winds, or else to die.

And then, for the first time, Kay realizes that she's sharing a body with an Air Spirit.

The Air Spirit is young, like a child, though she can impart some basic information to Kay. Her name is **Oa-Lyanna**, and she is a creature called a *yrimpa*, one of a race of air-elemental-like beings that once were numerous in Charagan. It is somehow "bonded" to Kay, living in and around her physical form, able to leave Kay's body invisibly and return freely. Together the two of them can cast the equivalent of a *gust of wind* spell every so often, though that leaves Oa-Lyanna exhausted. At last the mysterious wind that blew at Kay's birth (and her subsequent nickname of "Windstorm") have been at least partly explained.

Kay speaks with her mother (**Miri**) about her real elven father, but Miri doesn't know much. She cannot recall anything unusual about Kay's conception, or particularly odd about the father, **Reinhorn**. Reinhorn left Cyric soon after Kay was conceived, going north into the forest.

Thursday, December 4

The Company head in that direction, hoping to find some clue as to his whereabouts. They don't have to search for long. In the nearest town to the north, a human-and-elvish village called Tandle, the Innkeeper of the Silverbark knows the story of Reinhorn well. It seems that many years back, an elf calling himself Reinhorn came into town, and took a room at the Inn of the Gleaming Bough. That night, the inn was rocked by a mighty blast of wind from inside Reinhorn's room, and when people went to investigate, they found all of the windows blown outward and Reinhorn dead on his bed, with no marks or other indication of what had killed him. Soon after, the Inn had gone out of business and has since been razed.

The Company go to visit the simple grave, which reads: *Reinhorn – stranger yet kin*. The date of death is about eight-and-a-half months before Kay's birth.

Pyramid Schemes

Run #31 – Sunday, March 9, 1997

That evening, the party travel to and camp by the river, hoping to find Kay's brother Karn...

Friday, December 5

...and early in the morning, Karn finds them. He arrived in Tandle soon after the party left, and had been following them. Following the last of the Olafsen family reunions, the party start the long sea journey to Seablade Point.



Saturday, December 6

Travel to Wrack.

Sunday, December 7 – Thursday, December 11

The Company take a ship across the bay to Kynder Hold that afternoon, and then find a captain who will take them to Seablade Point... no easy task, since Seablade Point isn't on any normal shipping routes.

Friday, December 12

The party arrive in Seablade Point at mid-afternoon. They discover that the place is a tiny backwater, with only a few notable features. One of these is the Olde Keg, the town's inn, at which one can buy truly excellent beer for only a copper for a large mug. The entire economy of the place is depressed, and everything is dirt cheap. Mages and halflings are both curiosities for the townsfolk, who have never seen either. The use of several *detect magic* spells doesn't turn up any powerful magic items, but reveals that every one of the townsfolk radiates minor necromantic magic.

That night, Dranko keeps watch on the rooftop of the inn, alert for anything suspicious. At around 11:30, ten or so people (including **Sakkow**, the innkeeper of the Olde Keg) wander out of their homes, and stand silently in the street. Dranko quickly wakes the rest of the party, and they follow as the ten people walk without speaking to the edge of town, and then north towards a small wood. The zombie-like townsfolk enter a small clearing in the wood where they stand motionless, until one by one they collapse onto the dirt. After a few more minutes, they begin to stand again, and by 1:00 they're all back on their feet. Still silent, they march back to town and their homes.

The Company examine the clearing, and in the darkness Kay spots something odd overhead. Further searching reveals that a huge arch, made from rusting but solid gartine, stands in the wood, its horizontal top hidden in the branches. An owl, spoken to with *speak with animals*, confirms that humans come there every night, engaging in the same odd ritual. The arch is magical, and the spot where the townsfolk were standing is directly beneath its center.

Saturday, December 13

The next morning, Sakkow remembers nothing about his sleepwalking. The Company go to visit the Temple of Brechen (the only church in the town), perched on a cliff at the very tip of the peninsula. The priest there, an old man named **Hodge**, seems pleasant enough, and chats idly with them for a while.

That evening, the party watch again as ten completely different people leave their homes and wander north towards the arch. When Ernie tries to stop one of them, the peasant just ignores him and walks around. When Ernie actually trips one of them, he speaks to Ernie in a bizarre and multi-toned voice, with a single deep menacing voice beneath. "Do not interfere," it says... and then the peasant blasts Ernie with some kind of fiery blast. Ernie and Tor both think the voice is familiar, but can't quite place it.

During that night's ritual, the magic of the arch fluxes mildly. Morningstar *mind reads* the peasants, and discovers that they aren't thinking at all during their vigil beneath the arch. Dranko trips the same guy as the group leave the clearing, with the same results as before... but this time, he realizes that the strange voice sounds like that of Hodge, the kindly old priest of Brechen.

Sunday, December 14

Next morning, the Company attend services at the local temple of Brechen. Hodge checks out (with *know alignment*) as lawful good, and slightly more magical (with *detect magic*) than the rest of the townsfolk. When Morningstar casts *mind read* on him, she discovers a huge black void there which she can't examine too closely for fear of having her own mind get sucked into it. The Company confront Hodge with the facts, but it's clear that he thinks the party are a bunch of loons, and he refuses to speak more with them.

That night, the Company break into the temple at 11:30, hoping to find out what Hodge is up to during the nightly goings-on. Flicker picks the locks, and the party enter the building, to discover a very un-Brechen-like ritual taking place. Hodge is standing at the altar, wearing strange red robes (Brechen's colors are a sea-foam blue and white), and holding a red metal pyramid. On the altar stands a statue of a man on fire, its arms raised. Outraged at the defilement, the party move to attack Hodge.

A sling stone from Flicker shows that Hodge is protected by a red magical force shield, which is only visible when struck. When the Company start to batter at the shield, Hodge summons a pair of large, semi-substantial fiery lions. In the ensuing battle, most of the Company are reduced to unconsciousness (or nearly so) by the lions and by fire bolts cast intermittently by Hodge, but they manage to batter down Hodge's shield in the end. One strike by Kay to the old man makes the lions vanish, and the pyramid clatters to the floor. Hodge himself falls wounded and unconscious. The party stop him from bleeding to death, and they heal themselves up as well.

In Hodge's office the party find a large metal trunk with some loot, and on his desk there is a page of prophecy, written in Hodge's own hand, concerning a strange fire god:

...shall depart whereto his home, and also we shall be driven out. It is not writ brightly in the stars that a day will see our return, but signs there are that it may be so, and the stars' whims can be swayed by the faithful.

In the books of the Burning God is so writ, of the land across the uncrossable sea: that a venic giant will again walk the earth, and three sons of Werthis will lay it low; then, on the fingertip of the Empire, our gate will be opened in the land of gates, forced gear with souls, and the Children of the Burning God will return to conquer.

Tor, Kay and Dranko head off to the arch, where the people beneath it are coming to. They are very confused, and their initial reaction is to think the party have something to do with their odd situation. Back at the temple, Hodge is even worse; he's convinced that the party have just done something horrible to him and his temple, and sees all evidence as supporting that conclusion (he has no memories of his fire-god-worshipping ritual). After a frustrating and failed attempt to convince him otherwise, the Company depart Seablade Point with the pyramid, two statues of the Burning God, and some other treasure from Hodge's office.



Halfling Hors d'oevres

Run #32 – Sunday, March 30, 1997

Monday, December 15

The party limp up the peninsula, planning on visiting the cities of Hydra and Ghant.

Tuesday, December 16 [Hearth Day (Pikon)]

The Company reach a spot where the map indicates a town, called Espro. What they find are very old ruins. *Thought captures* from Morningstar show both a person cringing in fear, and a person slaying others with disdain.

That evening, Morningstar is visited by a powerful Ellish entity, and is called to the path of the Dreamwalker. (Dreamwalkers are Priestesses of Ell who can enter the *Ava Dormo*.) The glowing Avatar tells her: "When you return to this place, one of the lives of your comrades will be for you to lose or to save. Your mind must be ready." Then it says, "Face the light, and defend yourself," and attacks! Morningstar spends the night in sudden and brutal training combat with an angel.

Wednesday, December 17 – Saturday, December 20

The party travel north, following a long and wide valley west of the mountains. There are some herds of cattle roaming around, but they seem docile and harmless. Also during this time, Morningstar befriends a raven with *animal friendship*, that Dranko wants to name "Murdrach, Harbinger of Death," and Ernie wants to name "Beaky." Morningstar delays the decision.

Piratecat: That's Ernie – and Dranko – in a nutshell. Ernie has a pony named "Sausage," 'cause he likes them. Dranko had a horse named "Pugzut" (Orcish for "cannon-fodder"), 'cause he hopes someone will kill it before they kill him.

By the way, Seablade Point is doomed. It was inevitable, really; they had the best beer we'd ever tasted, at 1 cp per mug. Figures.

Sunday, December 21

During the day's travel, the ground begins to shake... and a herd of cattle comes thundering down on them from the north. They are being driven by some sort of large flying horses. Stampede! The Company attempt to get out of the way, but the stampede is coming at them too fast, so Morningstar stands fast and uses *Dismay*, while Kay casts *gust of wind*. Faced with a burning person and a 50-mph headwind, the herd divides and goes around them on either side.

However, the flying horses, which have the heads of eagles and talons in place of front hooves, now descend on the party to attack. They don't manage to do much damage, but one of them grabs Flicker in its claws and flies off with him, high up into the nearby mountains. Dranko immediately begins scaling the mountains, but before he can get far the rest of the group notice that there is a mostly crumbled building facade built into the mountainside near by.

When the party approach it, they note that a number of boulders resting nearby suddenly sink into the ground. They approach the one remaining boulder, and Morningstar casts *mind read*. It does have a mind, albeit an unfathomable one. When Ernie addresses it, it talks back! It turns out to be a creature called a Galeb Duhr, essentially a big boulder with eyes, a mouth, and squat legs. It seems friendly. When they ask it if they could go inside the ruined mountain dwelling, it tells them to go right ahead... and to be careful of both the crumbling ceilings, and the "big snake."

Beyond the facade entrance, the Company discover a large hall, partially ruined, with a seven foot wide tunnel leading up into the ceiling. Dranko starts climbing up the tunnel to secure a rope, as it looks like a promising way to get to Flicker. But, after a few moments, Dranko comes hurrying down out of the hole, announcing that the "big snake" is on its way.

He's right. A huge snake, 40 feet long, six feet wide, and with a dozen small legs along the sides of its body, comes pouring out of the hole. During the ensuing combat with the snake, it coils itself around Dranko, and begins to rake him with six of its clawed feet. Mrs. Horn tries a *color spray*, but it has little effect on the huge beast. And then it swallows Kay. Whole.

Fortunately, she keeps hold of her weapon, and does some hacking from inside the horrid stench- and acid-filled stomach. As the rest of the party continue to damage the snake, it follows its Kay Dinner with Ernie Dessert. But in the end, the party manage to slay the beast, with Ernie and Kay chopping their way out from its innards. The smell is not pleasant.

Afterwards, as the party are just beginning to head up the hole again, Flicker comes crashing through the rotting wood of the ceiling, scratched and bruised and with a broken leg. He had escaped the nest of the horse-eagles by using his *ring of jumping* to leap to another ledge, and had found a crevice which led into a series of tunnels. He had made his way down to the weak ceiling of the main hall.

A search of the area reveals a lower level to the edifice, mostly collapsed. In it, the party find some treasure which some of the doomed occupants had been trying to drag to safety. It includes a magical wooden staff, a magic carpet, a magical morningstar, a chest with some other magic goodies, a statue and holy symbol of the Burning God, and a pile of jade chits very similar to the ones carried by the Sharshun.

Pulling the carpet (which has a pattern of bright red, yellow and orange flames) out from a pile of rubble causes more of the building to settle – the Company hurry back to the surface, where they engage in conversation with the Galeb Duhr. When they ask, it tells them that the building was built a long time ago, by a people who worshipped a fire god and who were often running military drills. One day, a priest of the fire god came outside, looked at the sun, and then ran back inside. Soon after, humans began to run out of the building, and soon after that, a massive earthquake struck the building and destroyed it. The Galeb Duhr, who can usually predict quakes, had not detected this one. The surviving humans fled en masse to the south; many years later, another group of soft-skins (possibly goblins) arrived to inhabit the mountains, but they were driven away by the big snake.

Lastly, the Galeb Duhr, when shown a piece of "floam" taken from Verdshane, claims that it was once rock, but isn't any more. The thought distresses him.



Family Business

Run #33 – Saturday, April 5, 1997

Monday, December 22 – Friday, December 26

The Company depart the ruined hold of the fire-worshippers and continue to travel northward towards the city of Hydra.

Saturday, December 27

The Company reach the walls of Hydra, but are told they cannot enter with magic items. (And gosh, are the guards at the gatehouse blown away by the quantity of magic items the party are carrying!) The reason for this is that investigators have discovered that the blood gargoyle, the same one that had attacked Ghant, had been smuggled into Hydra a few days before the attack and stored there. Until the authorities can figure out how it was smuggled in, and by whom, they're being especially paranoid about more powerful magics being brought into the city.

The party send a couple of people into the city for supplies, but camp outside the walls.

Sunday, December 22 – Tuesday, December 30 [Warding Day (Corilayna)]

Travel to Ghant.

Wednesday, January 1, 1829

In the evening, the party arrive at the city of Ghant.

Thursday, January 2

The Company spend the day in Ghant. The city has been largely repaired and rebuilt since the attack by the blood gargoyle, though many of the humans and elves are dressed in mourning black. Asking about Reinhorn, the party are directed to an elven sage named **Tineva**. In addition to being extraordinarily beautiful (Dranko manages to mostly control himself), Tineva has useful information. She knows of Reinhorn; he was an elf born about 200 years before, but who has not been seen in the past fifty. She knows the story of the winds, which gusted mightily at his birth. He was the son of two glassblowers: the father, **Conine**, was killed in the gargoyle attack. The mother, **Amethyst**, still lives and works in Ghant.

Kay goes to Amethyst's shop, an elevated store selling intricate glass sculptures and ornaments. Needless to say, the elderly elf (dressed in black) is quite surprised to discover that she has a granddaughter. Amethyst only knew that her son Reinhorn, restless for a reason he could never explain, left the city fifty years before to wander, and hadn't returned. She tells Kay that he was the first to exhibit the strange birth-wind; neither she nor Conine had had the experience. After the private reunion, Kay introduces her grandmother to the rest of the Company. They all receive a standing invitation to visit in the future.

Friday, January 3 [Day of Icebreaking (Brechen)]

The party leave Ghant and head back to Tal Hae.

Saturday, January 4 – Wednesday, January 8

They go by ship back to Tal Hae. The journey is made more quickly than expected, as the party find a ship captain (**Mad Captain Lyle**) willing to brave the Royal Straight in winter. Some halfling seasickness occurs.



Thursday, January 9

The Company arrive in Tal Hae to find a pair of city guards standing outside the Greenhouse. Eddings tells them that there has been some excitement while they were gone – about a week before, the Greenhouse had been attacked! Someone had tried to break in by both physical and magical means, but was thwarted by Abernathy's wards. One of the attackers was actually killed by the magical protections, and the body was hauled away by the guard.

Marbury Tillerson is sent for, and he takes the party to a public cemetery where the body of the assailant is being stored. It's a dark elf, and it has the poison sac of a Sharshun.

Friday, January 10 – Sunday, February 3

The party train. Also during this time, Abernathy introduces the party to **Ozilinsh**, his newest apprentice. Ozilinsh is short and scholarly, and has great knowledge and interest in exotic beasts. He knows that the horse-eagles are called hippogriffs, that the giant snake was called a behir, and that the rubbery creature beneath Gohgan's (which they have been calling an "ogre") was actually a troll. He wants to hear all about flatworms and Galeb Duhr, and clearly would like to discuss exotic beasts all day, but Abernathy cuts the conversation short.

The Company deliver the red pyramid to Abernathy, and in light of their conversation with the Galeb Duhr, ask him again what "floam" really is. (He had refused to tell them once before.) The answer is hard to believe: in a war fought long, long ago, a mighty spell was cast that turned most of the stone buildings in central Harkran (covering hundreds of miles) to mud for a short period of time, after which it re-hardened into "floam." Because of magical "aftershocks," building with stone was made illegal in Tal Hae.

Ernie, during his training, is granted a vision from his Goddess upon gaining his next level:

You dream. You are standing on a wide and rocky plain. Above you, clouds race across the sky, unnaturally fast, driven by a wind you cannot feel. The sun sets swiftly, and in the dim twilight you become aware of several dark giants surrounding you in a rough circle. They are watching you, still and silent, but menacing. After some time the giants slowly fade away, but a dark circle of shadow remains in their place.

The circle begins to shrink, contracting as if to close upon you. But a warm breeze carrying the familiar scent of freshly baked bread blows across the plain, and the black circle ripples, and turns to gold. A comforting voice rides the wind. "Ernest, when you come to stand in this place, be sure to be girded with Cranchus' gift. Trust the one who has preserved it – his message is true." The golden ring continues to shrink, until it hovers close about your waist like a belt.

"Ernest, you are a great credit to the church of Yondalla, and set an example all of her children should follow. Continue to stay true to your heart, and take these gifts. Few are as deserving... and few will be more needful of them."

You wake from the dream feeling refreshed, and the smell of bread is strong in your nostrils. You now have the ability to cast the *shield* spell once per day. You also have been given minor-sphere access to Traveler and Time spells.

(Remember, this was back in 2nd Ed.) Cranchus, as the party learned from Richter at the Hae Kalkas Sages' Consortium, is the name of the dwarven Archmage who lives in the mountains near Hae Kalkas (see session 19).

For Whom the Dwarf Trolls

Run #34 – Sunday, April 27, 1997

Rumors are circulating through the city that the gnollish armies near Calnis have withdrawn, and that no imminent attack is expected.

Later in the training period, Abernathy visits again, and with him is a dwarven mage. The dwarf is named **Kibilhathur Bimson** (Kibi for short), and he hails from one of the mountain villages near Hae Kalkas on Nahalm. Abernathy makes a brief introduction – and names the dwarf as one of the Company! He seems rushed, but tells the party two more things. The first is that Ozilinsh has remembered that trolls regenerate and that their severed limbs can attack by themselves (this is relevant because the party have talked about hunting the trolls that killed that family – see session 27). The second is that the party should make it a point to visit Verdshane again sometime soon; something odd is going on there again. And then he tells Mrs. Horn that he needs to speak with her on an urgent matter, and the two of them vanish.

While the party introduce themselves to their newest member, Abernathy tells Mrs. Horn that she must leave the Company, and come to his Tower to be an apprentice along with Ozilinsh. He doesn't foresee a time when she'll be able to leave. He is very sorry, but offers her no choice in the matter. He then returns her to the Greenhouse, where she tells the Company and then falls into a somber mood.

Kibi is a dour but friendly dwarf, quite confident in his magic abilities, even though dwarven mages are very rare. He knows a lot about masonry and stonemasonry, and (more importantly) is an expert brewer. (One of the first things he does is set up a still in an unused storeroom of the Greenhouse.) He is somewhat vain about his magnificent beard. Like the rest of them, Kibi doesn't know why he was chosen by Abernathy to be part of the group.



Monday, February 4

The Company leave Tal Hae to go troll-hunting in the farmlands south of the Greatwood.

Tuesday, February 5

The party arrive in the general area of countryside where the first troll was seen. They spend the day going from farm to farm, and find that none are still inhabited. Each has either been abandoned, or ransacked by trolls.

Wednesday, February 6 [Day of St. Fozno (Pikon)]

The Company find that three trolls have holed themselves up in one of the farmhouses. They have barricaded the windows and doors, but when they hear the party approach, one unblocks the door and tries to trick the party into approaching. When an invisible Dranko reveals the ruse, Kay starts off the combat by firing her magic *lightning bolt* arrow dead center in the troll's chest. It goes flying back into the house, the rest of the party pursue, and the melee begins. At first the battle appears to be going poorly, with several party members badly injured, and at least one of the trolls at near full strength...

Verdshane's Revenge

Run #35 – Sunday, May 4, 1997

...but their luck takes an abrupt turn for the better, and the party manage to win the fight. Kibi prevents one troll from regenerating with a liberal application of *burning hands*, and the other two are torched as the farmhouse is burned to the ground. Some human remains are rescued, along with some treasure that includes a magical wood-cutting sword.

As the house finishes burning, the Company suddenly notice that a Sharshun has been watching the encounter; he's standing a short distance away, waving a piece of white cloth. His name is **Hasek**, and unlike most of the previously encountered Sharshun, he wants only to talk. (During the talk, Hasek often stares intently at party members, causing speculation that he's reading their minds.)

He says a number of interesting things, including claims that the Sharshun are the rightful owners of the Eyes of Moirel. He then offers to buy the Company's Eye for (ye gods!) *three hundred thousand* gold pieces. Despite some misgivings from Dranko and Flicker, the party decline the offer. Hasek ends the discussion with a parting remark about how the party's minds were uninteresting, and vanishes. (A quick sword-strike through the place where Hasek was standing confirms that he probably didn't just go invisible...)

Thursday, February 7

The party rest and recuperate in one of the other nearby farmhouses.

Friday, February 8

The Company go down the well from whence came the troll. They find a continuation of the wide and even underground road, an end of which came out beneath Gohgan's basement. They follow troll tracks to the south.

Saturday, February 9

The party discover a more rough-hewn tunnel, branching off the road, and ascending to an abandoned troll cave. They make a note of its location, with an eye towards using it as an emergency hideout, and then turn around to follow the road back to the north.

Sunday, February 10

After going a few miles to the north of the farm, the party discover that the underground highway has been caved in.

Monday, February 11

More digging reveals that the cave-in is extremely extensive. Morningstar goes into a trance and begins her own journey through the tunnel in Dream, and learns that it bends to the east and heads towards Calnis. (The dream world, *Ava Dormo*, is an exact parallel of the real world, sans people and most man-made objects. But it does have buildings and large man-made structures, including the immense underground roadway.)

Tuesday, February 12

The party travel back to the farm, and then onward to the Greatwood Road, with the eventual destination of Verdshane.

Wednesday, February 13

Travel, and an evening arrival in Woodfork.

Thursday, February 14

The Company spend the morning tormenting an increasingly destitute Gluefoot, and then head on down the road.



Friday, February 15 – Sunday, February 17

Travel to and arrival in Verdshane.

Monday, February 18

Locals at the Shadow Chaser Inn in Verdshane report that some unsavory mercenary types have been seen heading to and coming from the ruins to the north. The Company go to investigate, with the always invisible Dranko at point. He notes that a game track leading to the ruins is guarded by two armed mercenaries, so he slips past them invisibly while the rest of the party wait back down the path. He discovers a large number of armed guards (about 24) around the place, all in the vicinity of the odd triangular building where they had fought goblins on a previous visit.

Dranko slips inside that building to see what's going on. Silent and invisible, no one notices him... until Meledien comes out of one of the small rooms, spots him immediately (she's wearing spectacles), and easily subdues him. He notes that she is wearing distinctive red plate mail. Dranko is tied up and guarded by two of the thugs, while Meledien continues her secretive business in one of the side rooms of the triangular building.

Meanwhile, the party wait and wait and wait for Dranko's return, and eventually decide to just blast on through to the clearing. Two guards along the path are easily dealt with (another *hold person* spell), but when the party arrive at the clearing, over twenty crossbow-wielding guards move in from the woods to cover them. Meledien comes out of the building, and announces that she has Dranko inside, captive.

Morningstar recognizes that her armor is the same as that worn by the man who attacked (and injured) her in *Ava Dormo*. During a brief discussion, Meledien claims that she's not interested in any of the other buildings in the ruins, and that the party shouldn't have meddled in her affairs. Kay tries to send Oa-Lyanna into the building to free Dranko from his bonds, but Meledien seems to notice her passing by, and slashes at the air with her sword. Kay feels a sharp and intense pain (though she takes no damage), and the wind comes slowly back to her. Meledien makes a snide comment: "Oh, I see you have one of those creatures with you."

Angered, Kay demands Dranko's return, and boldly claims that they have been sent by the Archmage Abernathy. If Meledien doesn't release Dranko, she'll have to deal with an Archmage's wrath. After a lengthy impasse, during which Meledien seems to strongly consider just killing Dranko and loosing her army of thugs on the party, she eventually decides to free Dranko, in return for a promise from the party that they won't return to the ruins. The party agree, Dranko is released, and the Company return to Verdshane.

Big Frozen Doorstop

Run #36 – Sunday, May 18, 1997

That night, Morningstar has a strange two-part dream:

In your dreams, the angel comes. The two of you are in *Ava Dormo*, in the practice field of the Kynder Hold Temple. She draws her mace and salutes you, but does not attack. Instead, she bows her head, and the two of you are suddenly in a cold stone hallway, near a door that is slightly ajar. She gestures at the door. "Watch. Listen. Learn."

Looking through the doorway, you see two people talking in a dark room, lit only by a lantern. One is Meledien, and the other is the man who injured you in the palace beneath Gohgan's shop. Both are wearing red armor.

"I hate this place," Meledien says. "How can you stand it here?"

"For some of us," the man replies, "the Dreamscape is like home. It is certainly more familiar than the wretched country that reflects it." His voice carries the harsh sneer you remember from your previous encounter.

"No matter," Meledien continues. "I have some significant news. That Ellish woman and her cohorts paid me a visit today at Kinnet Vulthani. We had a standoff, and one of them claimed that they were working for Abernathy, the archmagus of Pyke Vale. Troubling, don't you think?"

"Do you believe them?"

"I don't know. I think so. But it would have been foolish to have just assumed they were lying. I decided to spare their lives, in exchange for a promise that they wouldn't return. They likely won't feel bound by it, but it was the safer course of action. I'll have to hire more guards, in case they return with a larger force. And they'll need it; their attempt to break into my camp was pathetic. I could kill them all myself, with or without guards, if I had to. But I don't want to anger an archmage if I can help it."

"We shouldn't worry about the archmage. Besides, if he takes a personal hand in any of this, it's really only saving us the trouble."

"One other thing. One of them had an air spirit with her, probably as a familiar. I didn't think they had them here. It was a weak specimen, but still curious, don't you think?"

"An air spirit? Who cares? You should concentrate on your work. Are things on schedule?"

Meledien frowns. "There's a problem. The spells around the keyrooms have eroded more than I was led to expect. The boxes are going to have to be opened in sequence, and controlling them is going to get more and more difficult. I figure we'll just kill the first few specimens, to avoid raising suspicion. Once I get to the tougher ones, I'll just do the best I can to send them on their way. But it will take some time before I get to the... major distractions. I hope the sage isn't on a tight schedule."

"No rush," the man says. "Time is on our side. The sage is eager, of course, but he knows the folly of rushing things."

"And you?"

"Nothing to worry about," the man says with a grin. "As I said, the Dreamscape here is practically empty. The Dark Sisters might be a nuisance, but they have such an obvious weakness. That girl I encountered in the palace is the only one who could even look at me. And none of them are trained properly."

"What of Restimar?"

"No word, but that's not surprising. I don't envy him his job, having to play Lord with the Kesh. A power trip, but the smell must be awful. But we'll know that he's doing his job. Word will spread."

"Octesian, I'm tired. It's difficult for me to stay here. And I have plenty of work to do here at Kinnet Vulthani. I have nothing more to report. If anything else comes up, I'll let you know."

Hall, door, and room fade away, and you are back at Kynder Hold. The face of the angel seems strained, as if she has just been exerting herself heavily. "Take heed," she says. "You are the Child of Light."

The angel suddenly glows with a fierce, blinding (and painful) light, and then vanishes. You are alone for a moment. And then another voice intrudes, accompanied by a familiar embodiment.

"Morningstar? It's Abernathy. I don't have much time or energy to spare, but I have a brief but important message. I have discovered where the other end of Gluefoot's box is... it's somewhere in or near the city of Brinth, down the coast from Minok. It seemed worth telling you while you were in the area. Be careful if you go there; the box was constructed by someone extremely powerful. It worries me. Anything you can find out would be useful. I must go now..."

LovlyNipper: Quick question, when Morningstar was spying in *Ava Dormo*, did you write out what she saw or roleplay it for her by switching voices? Also, did you present this information to the whole group or just to Morningstar's player?

Sagiro: Honestly, I don't remember; that run took place in the spring of 1997! But in cases like this, you have to take some things into account:

- Is it possible that Morningstar (the character) might not want to divulge everything from the dream to the rest of the party? If so, the DM shouldn't "perform" the dream out loud in front of the players.
- I try to minimize the amount of time when I take one player out of the room for a one-on-one session; it's boring for the other players. (Plus, the less frequently I do it, the more impact it has when I do take a player out of the room.)
- It's also a bit boring to give a player a long handout, and have the rest of the players sitting around while he or she reads it. (Of course, there's also some suspense, which is good.) Generally, if I'm certain that a character is just going to turn around and tell the rest of the party all the details, I default to roleplaying scenes in front of everyone.

If the material is of a very personal nature to the character, I'll use a handout or take the character aside. (For example, I used a handout for Dranko's dream before his memory was restored.)

LovlyNipper: Great story, by the way. I read it every night for inspiration. I had to steal the idea of the Greenhouse; I hope you don't mind. You should have seen my players' faces when they found out their PCs were given a house with a butler. I don't think any of my players have ever had a character with a home or if they did have a home they never actually went there.

Sagiro: Thank you! You (and everyone else) are free to steal anything you want. And even if you weren't, how would I stop you?

The Greenhouse has worked out very well. The party have personalized it, working out where everyone sleeps and such. Tor brings back monster bits whenever he can, and puts them on the mantelpiece as trophies. And the party have also acquired two housecats, who are spoiled rotten by Eddings while the party are away. Back before the spell vanished with 3rd Ed., Morningstar would cast *frisky chest* on one of Dranko or Flicker's cigars, and let the cats chase it around the house.

Speaking of Eddings: something very... strange... is going to happen to him about ten sessions from now...



Tuesday, February 19

The party set out down the Greatwood Road for Minok, planning on taking a ship from there to Brinth.

Wednesday, February 20

As a steady snow falls, the Company continue on towards Minok. They are interrupted by the sound of something crashing towards them from the direction of Verdshane, and soon a giant... something... comes rolling into view, knocking over saplings as it approaches. The thing is a huge dark greenish blob, roughly spherical and about six feet in diameter. It has numerous long tentacles which are wrapped around its body as it rolls.

It is on a course a few dozen yards north of the road, but it slows as it draws even with the party, and then rolls towards them to attack! Kibi buys the party a few moments by surrounding it with a *wall of thorns*, but eventually it breaks through and a melee is begun. The blob fights by slapping with its tentacles, and occasionally grabbing a party member and bringing them in to a beak protruding from its top. "Beak, beak!" these party members yell, since the mouth isn't visible to those standing on the ground. Eventually the monster is killed, with the party suffering no casualties. With more time to inspect the body, the party note a number of crossbow bolts protruding from its bulk. After some discussion, they decide to track the creature's route back towards Verdshane.

Thursday, February 21

In the morning, the party arrive at the outskirts of Kinnet Gorge (the same place where the eyewing crates fell from the sky). It is clear that the tentacled creature came from the gorge, so (invisible) Dranko goes to investigate. He finds a number of Meledien's thugs about, and an odd pattern of stakes and ropes running throughout the floor of the gorge. Off to one side are two more thugs, reviewing what appears to be a large map of the stake and rope pattern. Also nearby is a large pile of smashed wooden planks, similar to those that had been holding the eyewings. Dranko reports back to the rest of the group, and they head off back to the west, towards Minok.



Friday, February 22 – Sunday, February 24

Travel to and arrival in Minok.

Monday, February 25

The party arrange passage to Brinth on a ship leaving the next day.

Tuesday, February 26

Early in the morning, the Company make the short voyage from Minok to Brinth. They spend some time asking around after Frohwirth, and eventually learn from the owner of a general store that Frohwirth is a noble.

Dressed as a lower class girl, Kay learns the location of Frohwirth's house, and goes there, applying for a job as a servant. She is told by the butler that there aren't any jobs specifically open, but that he'll talk to Frohwirth about it. She learns from the butler that Frohwirth is currently in session at the courthouse, so the Company head that way. Their plan is to get him to think about his involvement in his shady dealings, while having his mind read. Dranko (invisible) climbs the roof of the courthouse, and when Frohwirth leaves the building, Morningstar *mind reads* him while Dranko shouts (and here I paraphrase) "Frohwirth! There's trouble at the Tower! What should we do?" His thoughts are of confusion, followed by some concern, but it is clear to Morningstar that Frohwirth doesn't really know anything; he is yet another lesser link in the chain followed from Levec to Radburn to Gluefoot.

Chain of Command

Run #37 – Sunday, May 25, 1997

Later that day, Kay goes to visit Frohwirth's house again, and is quite surprised when **Frohwirth** (a complete gentleman) hires her as a cook's assistant. She spends the rest of the afternoon helping the chef prepare dinner, has a pleasant dinner with the master of the house, suspects that he might be flirting with her, and then leaves for the night.

Wednesday, February 27

In the morning, the Company go back to Frohwirth's house. Dranko (again invisibly) slips into the mansion, hoping to find a metal box similar to Gluefoot's, but has no luck. But on a hunch he leaves a note on Frohwirth's desk that reads (again I paraphrase), "We no longer have need of your services. Leave your box in the snowdrift at the southeast corner of the house." Frohwirth follows the instructions, dropping a small metal box into the snow. The party grab it.

Soon after, the whole party (led by Kay) go to visit Frohwirth, and pretty much tell him the truth – that he's been working for some bad, bad people, that he's not going to get any more information from Gluefoot, and that he probably wants to take a long vacation in the near future. He agrees. He tells the Company that when information showed up in his box, he'd send it to a woman named Mary, owner of Mary's Fine Silke Flowers, every Thursday.

Thursday, February 28

Hey, it's Thursday, so the Company go early to visit Mary's Fine Silke Flowers. **Mary**, a kindly old woman, claims ignorance, but a *mind read* reveals that she takes missives from Frohwirth on a regular basis and gives them to a man named **Manzanill**. Soon after, an armed thug comes into the shop, and asks Mary if she has anything for him. When the answer is no, he leaves, and heads down the street with another thug and an older man.

The Company tail them to a small house – the three of them go in, and lock the door behind them. Before going in after them, Morningstar casts another *mind read*, and discovers that the two thugs are poised on either side of the door, weapons at the ready. So while Flicker makes a lot of noise at the door as if he's picking the lock, Kay goes around to the side of the building, ready to slice through the wall with the Woodcutter sword, while Kibi puts up a huge *wall of thorns* (using a magical staff) around the building to cut off escape, Tor uses the Infinity Book to cast *spell turning* on himself, and finally Morningstar casts *hold person* on the two thugs inside.

Kay cuts her way through the wall, and once inside, the party discover that: (a) both of the thugs have been *held*; and (b) there are no other people or exits in the small one-room dwelling. And that's when Manzanill starts bombarding the Company with spells.

The spells – first a modified sort of *fireball*, and then *magic missiles* – seem to come from the back of the room, but there's no one there. Thinking Manzanill is invisible, the party cover the exits, while an *unseen servant* from Mrs. H sweeps the room with yarn, and Ernie starts throwing handfuls of flour around. The tossed flour eventually makes it evident that the whole back wall of the dwelling is illusionary, and the hidden "corridor" ends in a flight of stairs. The Company head down the stairs in pursuit. Flicker, in picking the lock of a door in their way, sets off a *fire trap* that knocks him unconscious.

Tor leads a charge into a small living room, and finds himself face to face with a huge purple snake with a human head. The snake immediately casts a spell – which is reflected by the *spell turning*. A huge stony arm erupts from the floor and grabs the

snake just below the head. Behind them in the room, Manzanill casts a spell which causes a wall of roaring flames to leap up, blocking himself off from Tor. Tor, fearless for his own safety, leaps through the flames, nearly killing himself in the process. But he lives, and takes a swing at the surprised Manzanill.

Realizing that he's been backed into a corner, Manzanill casts a *teleport* spell and vanishes, but without taking any of his valuable belongings with him. Meanwhile, the snake has been held in place by the stony arm, while heat from the *wall of flames* has roasted it alive. Victory!

Among Manzanill's possessions are some spell books, a bunch of magic items, a revealing diary (aren't they all!) and a letter from his superior, a person who has signed the letter with only the initial "P".

6/28/27	<i>Tharnius to Street of Wisdom, Calnis. Mors Tar. Connection with Alykeen in Minok?</i>	
9/30/27	<i>Need to find a leader for the Sand's Edge dig. Several leads. Also, money. (care needed more than speed)</i>	<i>probably 20-30,000 g.p.</i>
2/16/28	<i>Dig funds coming through church of Delioch in Tal Hae... awaiting confirmation & name of contact.</i>	
4/1/28	<i>Ugly man (half-orc?) vanishes (!) near Abernathy's tower.</i>	
4/2/28	<i>Small man with mustache visits Tharnius in Calnis - seen lurking about after. local thief?</i>	
4/5/28	<i>Half-orc and odd company in Calnis visit Tharnius - short visit. working with mustache? Make sure Frohwirth stays on this!</i>	
5/1/28	<i>Khorl (local) in charge of Sand's Edge. also Varliss, Mandrake (mage)</i>	
5/29/28	<i>Khorl - dig on schedule. Suspects Mandrake, not sure.</i>	
6/2/28	<i>Tharnius killed! Casualty of gnoll raid, probable accident.</i>	<i>salvage?</i>
7/1/28	<i>Remainder of funds coming from church in T.H. contact - Mokad.</i>	
7/17/28	<i>Khorl reports dig ahead of schedule... statue should be out by end of August at latest.</i>	
7/28/28	<i>Half-orc (Danko?) shows up at dig site! Who is he?? Likely connection with church in T.H. leak? Claimed involved with Mokad but this is unconfirmed... only surveyed site, no trouble, though he saw statue. Link to Abernathy? No news from T.H. must make sure F is doing his job. K increasing security, searching.</i>	<i>Must find "Aggik Truk til v' Iv Kesh Toz" (Prophecies of the Orcish Crusades) most copies probably still hidden... try Sand's Edge (Werthis), Vault in H.C.</i>
8/9/28	<i>Gargoyle out. Sent back to Sand's Edge. Should be in Hydra by 8/25, Ufor 8/29, Ghant 9/1</i>	
9/1/28	<i>Gargoyle killed, but job a success. Khorl suspects Mandrake of spying, should have him killed.</i>	
2/4/29	<i>No word from F since October... probably welching. should keep him alive for later when things pick up again.</i>	

Manzanill,

Here is your promised bonus for a job well done. The gargoyle has done exactly what I hoped, and now my plans are that much closer to fruition. It is now more important that you find me the Prophecies of the Orcish Crusades. Let me know as soon as it is in your possession.

Since you handled the Sand's Edge excavation so well, I've decided to put you in charge of a similar operation in the capital, but we won't be ready for that for many months. In the meantime, see if you can learn anything about that half-orc you mentioned. Since you report that no attempt to stop the dig was made after his visit, I would guess he really was working with Mokad; if the Church of Delioch wasn't supposed to be involved in anything but the funding, it's not surprising that you couldn't confirm the relation. But anyone seen vanishing near Abernathy's tower is worth checking up on.

P.



Friday, February 29 – Saturday, February 30 [Pot-Scraping Day (Yondalla)]

The party leave Brinth and take a ship back to Tal Hae.

Sunday, March 1 [Crunard's Birthday] – Tuesday, April 1 [Day of Casting (Brechen)]

The party train. During this time (on March 25th), all of the Company (as well as Abernathy) are summoned to the Temple of Brechen, for a ceremony marking the six-month anniversary of Mrs. Horn's return to life. Each member of the Company is given a brief message from a priestess there...

TOR: "Your time has not yet come, but it will be upon you soon. Only the true blood of the royal house can step where you step."

MORNINGSTAR: "Sister of Darkness, remember the difficulty of the transition, when it becomes time for others to follow."

FLICKER: "Your courage is a sapling – strong, but constantly needing nourishment. Feed it well."

KAY: "Tend well your charge. Let her serve you – by doing so, you serve your kingdom."

ERNIE: "Stay the course, and know the Circle when it comes to embrace you."

DRANKO: "Persevere. Your progress cannot be made in minutes or miles, but only in the soul of your brother."

ABERNATHY: "Remember that your freedom comes with added responsibility. Hold true to your oath."

KIBI: "The soul's burden is yours to share. Without you, the circle of light will shatter, and the circle of darkness will consume."

...and then Abernathy tells Mrs. Horn that it's time for her to go. With little ceremony, she says her goodbyes, and is gone, taken to be an apprentice to the Archmage of Tal Hae.

First Anniversary Recap Episode

Run #38 – Sunday, June 1, 1997

Also during training, Dranko receives this letter from Praska:

Dear Dranko,

I think it's finally safe to write you. Guess where I am, I'm at the capital, and they accepted me into the church here! Can you believe that Tomnic remembered me from Tal Hae? They've made me a priestess, and I'm doing research to help restore the Church library. A few months ago, the librarian here vanished without a trace, and he took a bunch of books and destroyed a lot of the rest. We think he was one of those people who was in with Mokad... Tomnic told me about that. I had a really weird dream a while ago with you in it...

Harmon was warning us about Mokad. Like I need warning! I was saying, that I get to do research, which is really fun. They send me to the vault about three times a week, which is this huge library that's mostly underground. I bet you could find out anything in the world in there. It's bigger than the whole Church of Delioch, and the Church here is much bigger than ours in Tal Hae. The best part is, we don't have to pay as much to use it as most people, and that's a good thing, since it's real expensive.

You should come and visit me here when you get a chance. This city is amazing, and it's huge! I think you could fit Tal Hae in it three or four times. The Church of Delioch has a garden which is blooming all the time, even now when it's winter. And there's a mage's building that's constantly changing shape. And the vault is amazing. There's lots more, too. Good luck with the stuff you're doing! And say hi to Harmon for me.

- Praska

The Company also spend much of this time discussing the details and events of the past year, making connections and piecing together pieces of history. It's plot-tastic!



Wednesday, April 2

The Company travel by ship to Hae Charagan, and arrive at the port of the kingdom's largest city in the early evening. They go immediately to see Praska, and find that she has been missing for a couple of weeks. She has left another letter for Dranko, but when he reads it, he discovers it was not written by her:

Blackhope:

How touching of you to come all this way to visit your friend. Let me assure you that she is in the best of health, and being treated as an honored guest. She will stay that way, as long as Mother Church is not made aware of the nature of her absence. Tell them, and I will know, and your friend will suffer.

Now that you are in town, we would be delighted if you would join us for a pleasant evening meal. You can find us at the address of 118 on the Avenue of Clouds, not far from the Patchwork Square, any evening around dinnertime. Bring your friends if you wish, but be aware: if you give us any reason to suspect hostility, or that you have alerted any city authorities, we will slay your young friend. In fact, you may consider her life as insurance against any sort of idiocy you may wish to plan.

One last point. By now our agents have noted your arrival in this fair city. Failure to pay your respects within the week will be considered an act of idiocy. But by all means, take a few days to enjoy the sights of the capital of Charagan. We'll wait.



The letter is signed with a black circle, but no name.

Eat at Mokad's!

Run #39 – Tuesday, July 1, 1997

The party stay the night at the King's Feast. In the common room of the inn, Flicker overhears a conversation in which two men are discussing the reward for the missing Darien Firemount, son of the wealthy Baron Olorayne of Forquelle. Flicker tells Tor, who asks that Flicker keep this information to himself.

Thursday, April 3

The Company spend the day scouting out the building in which Praska is purportedly being held; it appears to be a shut down inn. Dranko befriends a beggar near the building, while Tor visits the Mercenaries' Guild, to investigate rumors that a number of merces have gone missing recently. That night, Morningstar scouts out the building in *Ava Dormo*, and discovers that it is shielded in a way that prevents close scrutiny. She sets a local Dreamwalker from the Hae Charagan temple to keep watch on the building in *Ava Dormo* as often as possible.

Friday, April 4

The party visit the Diviners' Guild, hoping to verify the location of Praska. A large diviner named **Ragmir** proudly casts a spell of his own creation, which he claims will find their young friend without fail – but something goes wrong, and after a moment or two he claims that someone on the other end of the divination observed and attacked him while he was casting! He is so shocked and horrified by the experience that he rejects payment for his efforts, and refuses to have anything further to do with the party.

Saturday, April 5

In the evening, around dinnertime, the party go to the boarded-up inn indicated by the letter. They are admitted by a black-robed figure into a large empty room filled with the aroma of incense. They are not deprived of weapons and equipment. Around the room are several vacant-eyed guards, and some other men and women in black robes. The party are led upstairs, where **Mokad**, one time Scarbearer of Delioch and now member of the Black Circle, sits at a table with a number of other black-robés.

What follows is a strange conversation: he discusses the progress of Califax's "conversion" to the Black Circle, and thanks Dranko for his "help" in this; he asks Dranko why he stayed in a church which treated him so poorly; he asks about what the Company are doing, and about their odd living arrangements in the Greenhouse; and he offers the party a vague promise of knowledge if they abandon Abernathy and join the Black Circle religion. The party, unsurprisingly, refuse the offer.

Near the end of the meal, Praska is brought out from a back room, evidently unharmed, though unhappy at her captivity. Mokad then reveals that the incense they've been inhaling all evening is a poison, but then he tells them that they will be led to the antidote – he has no desire to kill them. And then he lets them go free. They are directed by a pair of notes back to the church of Delioch, where they find vials of the antidote in a flower bed in the Eternal Garden. By the time they have taken the antidote, they guess that Mokad and company are probably long gone.



Sunday, April 6

Kay goes to the Mercenaries' Guild, and spots a couple of Mokad's guards, just hanging out and talking. She approaches one after he leaves the building, but he is extremely unwilling to talk about his recent job, even faced with evidence that Kay knows some pretty specific details. Morningstar is *mind reading* during the exchange, and learns that the man was just paid for a job the day before, one not run through the Guild, which is a big no-no. The way he remembers it, he was paid to stand guard in an old inn in case something happened requiring his services. The way he remembers it, nothing ever did.

The Company then go to the Vault, the tremendous library of Hae Charagan and the biggest single repository of knowledge in the kingdom. It is an unassuming building from the outside, but underground are dozens of individual vaults, each containing dozens of books and scrolls on various topics. In addition to paying a significant fee to be allowed in at all, most patrons also hire one or more "walking curators" who know their way around the maze of vaults. And on top of that, most vaults have their own "resident expert" who, for another fee, can save you hours of searching for a particular piece of information.

The party have several topics they want to research; everyone goes in but Tor, since a condition of admittance is the removal of all magic items, and he doesn't want to remove his anti-scrying pendant. In the Vault, the party come out lighter in the purse, but with good information on the topics of the Burning God, the Mors and Elhen Tarathi, the Black Circle, venic giants, God's Thorn, and gartine. The Vault doesn't have a copy of *Prophecies of the Orcish Crusades*, but one of the curators mentions that someone else had been in recently also asking about that work.

On gartine:

Also called 'skysteel.' An extremely rare blue metal, extraordinarily light, made via a magical process practiced upon fine steel. In addition to providing fine weaponry and armor, and being of generally enchantable quality, skysteel is thought to retard the aging process. There are tales of ancient kings building sleeping chambers out of skysteel, to increase their own spans of years. The spells required to produce gartine are generally thought to have vanished over a thousand years ago, and no attempt to recreate the formulae has been successful.

On the Tarathi:

These were two races of elves, each as elegant and cultured as any that survive today. The Mors Tarathi were of darker skin, and among them were mages mighty and puissant. The Elhen Tarathi looked more as do modern-day elves, and were well-practiced in the might of arms. Both lived in the Greatwood, with the Elhen building and inhabiting the great and wondrous city of Verdshane; but the Mors eschewed cities, and dwelt in the woods, practicing mysterious arts.

Little is left today to tell us of these fair folk. The Elhen Tarathi were slain in a succession of wars older than record, the most recent of which took place about a thousand years ago, and which resulted in the destruction of Verdshane.

On God's Thorn:

(from *The Heroic Adventures and Exploits of Grimford the Great*, written by his personal bard and awed admirer, Sefic the Sonorous)

...and Grimford, the blood of the Forest Demons still dripping from his shield, broke out of the woods of Gahan and beheld an amazing sight. He looked down upon a barren valley, where no trees grew among the scrub, and rising from its center was a lone but tremendous peak. 'At last,' he declared, 'I have discovered God's Thorn, and the treasures within will be mine.' He descended into the valley, down to the base of the mountain, and there beheld the massive iron gates of God's Thorn, bright red, and crackling with legendary fire. First, he spake the Words of Opening taught him by the sage Cabarius, but the mighty gates did not even tremble, and when Grimford reached for the burning iron his hand was scorched. Undaunted, and having cleverly anticipated the need, he quaffed the Magic Brew given him by Tarvez the Wise, which made the heat and fire as cool as spring water to him. Again he tried the gates, but though he could grip them without pain, and heave against their weight with his awesome strength, they would not budge. For three days and three nights the hero Grimford camped at the foot of God's Thorn, but against all of his incantations and all of his strength, the gates held fast. At last, perceiving a massing of the Forest Demons at the edge of the wood, he forsook the place, and returned to Lanei, but vowed to return, armed with further strength and wisdom.

Near the small village that still bears the name, one can visit the strange ruins which remain, including a burial room named by modern scholars the Elven Bone Chamber. Here lie undisturbed the remains of the slain Elhen Tarathi, bones of thousands stacked with meticulous care, woven about with spells to ward against desecration. The Mors Tarathi vanished from record even longer before, and nothing remains to tell us what became of them.

It is startling how little record of these elven races remains. Because of the strange dearth of historical reference, few scholars have taken up their study, and research is further hindered by a reluctance of the Ghantian elves to discuss their lost cousins.

The Legend of God's Thorn:

It is said of those days so swayed by the purge of Karth, that Hawlie did a wrong to the Empire or Primpa were dangerous to exist unchained.

So did the Emperor send the Matun Essendi to his dark servants, and the Primpa were imprisoned in the vaults beneath a great spike of rock called God's Thorn. Then did the Emperor make of them a gift to the Burv'.

Vaults were locked, so that only one whose soul burned with faith might open them. But the Lord of the Primpa, before his death, did thwart his captor with a last spell, so that while the gate is locked to all but the Faithful of Fire, the prisons themselves could only be opened by a Bonded One. Thus did he assure that the Primpa would not be again enslaved.

o' Tuvith. As th' Stormknytes wyl hayte th' creature, three o' their number wyl smyte th' beast, an' rytely so; for if the turtle is allow'd t' live, it wyl call t' its kin, an' wayke an army o' turtles to conquer the kingdom. Gods help us then! **The Turtle Army!** Verily It Wyl Sweep 'Cross Th' Land, ARMOR-PLAYTED AN' STONY-EYED, AN' WHO IN HYS RYSTE MYND WOOLD NO' FLEE FROM SUCH MYTE! **RYWYRS WOOLD FLO' WITH TURTLES, YE GODS HELP US, AND VERILY WOOLD THEY DANCE ON MYE HEAD!!!!**

Heartys, I Need My Elyxys, my poor head

On the Black Circle:

The Black Circle is a long-dead religion, that was once widely practiced on the islands of Charagan. The name of the God (or Goddess) of the Black Circle is not known. The Black God appears to have been a deity of knowledge and the mind, necromancy, and dark magic. Examination of some excavations indicates that there was a purging of the religion, almost a systematic expunging of all groups that worshipped the Circle, that took place over the course of many years. There has been no known instance of open worship of the Circle in the last three to four hundred years, though continued underground practice cannot be ruled out.

On the Burning God:

It is rumored that many hundreds of years ago, a cult-religion sprang into existence on the island of Lanei, near the tip of the Balani Peninsula. This cult, which worshipped a deity known as 'The Burning God,' purportedly practiced human sacrifice in which worshippers, usually volunteers, were burned alive. The cult died out before it had a chance to spread, as one might expect of a group that killed its own members.

The Children of the Burning God were a warlike race of humans who long ago appeared off the southern coast of Lanei. As their name implies, they prayed to a god whose depictions show him to be on fire (several statues, paintings, and drawings have survived, and are highly valued by collectors). At their height, the Burning Ones occupied the entire Balani Peninsula, and by some accounts they are responsible for the uninhabited state of that area today. When and why they vanished is not known, and more detailed information about them is extremely rare.



After a long day in the library, the Company return to the King's Feast, to find that Tor hasn't yet returned. Ah well... he's probably just out late, enjoying the splendors of Hae Charagan. But midnight comes and goes, and still there's no sign of him. When the party go out to find him they hear a great deal of buzz about an incident that happened earlier in one of the plazas. It seems that a huge cloud of magical smoke was released by a halfling, right after a guard went to offer help with the drunk companion the halfling and his friends (a priestess of Corilayna and a nondescript man) were carrying. The companion meets the description of Tor.

Flicker finally admits that there's a reward out for Tor's return to Forquelle. That night, Morningstar succeeds in accessing Tor's dreams (a different dream-related ability than going to *Ava Dormo*). Tor is having a nightmare about being chained to a desk in the Palace of Forquelle, with an endless stack of bureaucratic forms to process. Morningstar manages to affect his dreams

On venic giants

(from the *Gleanings of Romus the Mad*, written in an increasingly unsteady hand):

Th' Venic Giant wyl begyn t' wayke when th' sun oe'r hed dost wynk at th' city o' Ganit Tuvith, o' th' edge o' a grayte bowl o' dust. Seven moons wyl ryse, an' seven moons wyl set, an' th' morn ayftr, those that look wyl see th' grayte **Venic Tortoise** plod th' streets

by leaving simple symbols on the paper in front of him, but Tor doesn't understand their meaning until after he wakes the next morning.

Kay goes to the palace, and asks the guards on duty there if anyone had turned in the son of the Baron of Forquelle, and they're pretty sure no one has.

Rincewind: How long have you been working on this world for? It sounds incredibly detailed. Do you have an entire setting planned out, or do you improvise?

Sagiro: Well, before I started the campaign, I spent a few months working out some history and backstory for the world, along with a grand but very generalized plot arc. Also, I had my players give me their characters and backgrounds well in advance, so that I could work *those* into the story arc as well. So far, after 5+ years of the game, I'm about halfway through the plot arc I imagined at the start.

Honestly, though, I don't have as much planned out in great detail as it might seem. My trick is basically to: (a) have a big, very generalized story arc structure in place, to help keep all future crazy ideas focused and relevant; and (b) drop plot hooks all over the place, whenever possible, for later use.

Typically, I'll introduce some plot element in a general way first, without worrying about any details. As the PCs get closer to it, then I start worrying about details. For example, when I first had the idea for the Black Circle during my pre-campaign planning, it was nothing more than an old cadre of mages/clerics serving an Evil Emperor™. Only later, when I decided I wanted a mysterious evil cult, did I say, "Hey, I've got this Black Circle thing lying around... I'll use that." Then, when Piratecat gave me the details of Califax and his church, I thought, "Hey, this would be a good place to get the Black Circle involved." And bit by bit, over years of gaming, the Black Circle has grown into a huge plot element, responsible for all sorts of evil plots (some of which the party still don't know about), and tied into the story in various places.

It might seem like I knew all about the Black Circle's place in the grand plot from the start, but really I've been making it up as I go, layering on areas of their involvement. (Don't tell Piratecat! He holds the mistaken belief that I'm some sort of plotting genius!) Likewise, I added some huge plot elements long after the game had started; having that big story arc "skeleton" in place from the start makes it easier to add new stuff.

That said, I seldom make up Important Plot Stuff™ on the spur of the moment, in the middle of a run. I probably overplan (and end up wasting effort) more than I underplan (and end up wildly improvising). But the important thing I have to suggest is: leave yourself undetailed plot hooks whenever you can. Then you'll always have one ready to "fill in" when you need it.



Monday, April 7

Dranko and Flicker use their roguish talents to get information from the Hae Charagan underground, and learn that an even greater reward is being offered if young Firemount is returned directly to Forquelle. The Company check the docks, to see if any ships have left recently for Forquelle. Several have, and they realize that they have to assume he's still in the city; there's not much they can do if he's already gone. The party visit **Harfang**, Harbormaster of Hae Charagan, and for a liberal bribe, plus a vague promise of future "remuneration" (wink, wink) from Kay, he agrees to have his men find ships bound for Forquelle which are trying to smuggle a cargo past customs. He discovers one leaving the following morning, which is only trying to slip one crate through official channels. The Company tag that ship as the likely candidate to be smuggling Tor out of the city.

That night, Morningstar accesses Tor's dreams again, and finds that on a piece of paper he is furiously writing the word "tomorrow" over and over again. (Evidently Tor figured out that Morningstar was observing his dreams, and was leaving a message as best he could.)



The Great Escape

Run #41 – Tuesday, July 22, 1997

Tuesday, April 8

Early in the morning, the Company pay another ship to wait on standby, and then set up to wait by the ship on which they expect Tor to be smuggled out. Sure enough, a wagon pulls up to the dock by the ship, accompanied by a priestess of Corilayna.

Corilayna, by the way, is called the Goddess of Gamblers, Mistress of Thieves, Lady Luck, the Puppeteer, the Hand of Fate, and the Shepherd of Fortune.

Some dock workers begin to unload crates of onions. (The crates are big enough that they could hold a person, though not too comfily.) As they do in many such situations, the party instigate chaos. First, a *hold person* spell freezes the dock workers in their tracks, and another freezes the priestess of Corilayna. Some of the party, aided by *beans of strength*, begin to unload crates from the wagon. Realizing that his plan is going awry, one of the kidnappers tries to drive the wagon away, but a *bean*-enhanced Ernie grabs the reins of the horses and drags the wagon to a halt, and then the kidnapper is knocked from the wagon.

Guards begin to converge on the wagon, and Kay distracts them by pretending to be ill. And then someone (probably the halfling, who hadn't shown himself) pops an *eversmoking bottle*, and things really get chaotic. The priestess of Corilayna is pushed in the harbor, and doesn't resurface. In the thick clouds of smoke, Morningstar is able to contact Tor via *telepathy*, and the Company free him from his crate. Under cover of the smoke, the party flee with Tor down to the waiting ship, and tell the captain they need to leave immediately... but Flicker hasn't made the rendezvous. Just as they start to think they should go back after him, he arrives, dragging one of the onion crates from the wagon. They load it on the ship, and off they go. In the crate, along with some onions, are all of Tor's stolen belongings. Flicker is suddenly very popular.

Late that night, the ship puts in at Tal Hae, and the party report in to Abernathy. He tells them that an Eye of Moirel has “come to light,” somewhere in the Norlin Hills on Nahalm, between Hafast and Hae Norl. (It seems that Abernathy and his associates have some long range way of detecting flare ups of wild magic. It’s probably not Abernathy himself, though, who detests (and even fears) wild magic, considering it anathema to proper wizardry.)

Wednesday, April 9

The Company hire a ship to take them to the coast of Nahalm near the Norlin Hills.

Thursday, April 10

The ship drops the party off in the morning, and they spend the day marching inland towards the hills. After an evening rest, they continue on overnight, eager to make good time.

Friday, April 11

The Company spend the day climbing up into the steep Norlin Hills. In the afternoon they see a small keep high atop a hill, some distance off; since it’s the only sign of habitation they’ve seen, they decide to make for it. Along the way, they encounter a large mountain cat, which watches them briefly from a ledge above the trail before climbing up and out of sight.

As the sun begins to set, the party finish the climb up to the keep; they find a trail, which is separated from the keep’s closed drawbridge by a deep ravine. With no better way to get in, the party ferry themselves over the high walls and into a courtyard, using the flying carpet. As the first group is dropped off, and the carpet returns to pick up the second, a number of animated skeletons, crusted over in places with a greenish crystal, shamble out of the dusk shadows and attack!

The magic carpet rescued from the hold of the Burning God worshippers (session 32) turned out to be a flying carpet called *Burning Sky*. It’s Ernie’s favorite possession. It’s a true shame that he loses it later due to... oh, but that’s another story.

Keep on the Borderlands

Run #42 – Thursday, July 31, 1997

Kay draws her sword and goes to swing... but instead she feels her magical boots of levitation (found in Manzanill’s lair) suddenly become very tight, and then she begins an extremely graceful pirouette. Unable to stop herself, she begins to dance around the melee, unable to attack or defend, while fighting rages around her. The party manage to kill the skeletons, but Kay is knocked unconscious while dancing. They revive her, but she’s very weak.

In the failing light, the party quickly search the keep. It appears that the place has been looted several times over, and only useless junk remains. They do find strange holes in both the floor and the ceiling of the keep’s main hall. Upon further scrutiny, they find that something seems to have blasted its way out of a hidden compartment in an upper storey, down through the ceiling of the hall beneath, and through the hall’s floor to someplace underground. There is a staircase leading into a basement level in one of the keep’s side buildings, so they descend.

The keep’s basement appears to be a crypt; there are several chambers with long-dead bodies in them. And in one of the further in chambers, a particularly large skeleton lifts itself off a slab. Like the ones above, it is rimed over with greenish crystal, but this one then extends large crystal blades past the ends of its bony hands. As an encore, it animates several of the nearby skeletons, and all of them attack the Company!

A few rounds into the battle, it becomes clear that the lead skeleton is healing itself somehow. Guessing that the Eye of Moirel is in the skull, the party start aiming more for the head, and finally they succeed in knocking the head mostly off its bony shoulders. 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.”

Then it tilts to face Kibi: “Bimson, my regards to your grandfather.”

Then it dies. They are not surprised to find an Eye of Moirel embedded in the back of the skull.

The Company find a box of treasure in a secret compartment beneath the slab on which the Eye skeleton had lain. In addition to some coins and gems, it contains a *heal* scroll and a magical block of wood.

Wounded but victorious, the Company head back up to the surface of the keep – and as they emerge, wounded and spent from the battle below, Sagiro and three Sharshun come around a corner about thirty yards away.

Immediately, Ernie, Kay, Kibi and Morningstar hop aboard *Burning Sky*, while Sagiro and his company look on with dismay as the carpet ferries half the party, along with the Eye, over the high wall of the keep and out of sight. When Ernie comes back

Rincewind: Beans of strength?

KidCthulhu (a.k.a. Ernie Roundhill): *Beans of strength* were one-time magic items which gave a Strength of 20 (and this was back in 2nd Ed!). Ernie was so damned chuffed with being so buff. You have to imagine him as he is, a little, cheery fireplug of a guy in plate mail, just reaching out and stopping the horse with his hand.

And Tor still won’t eat onions. Understandably.

for the rest of the party, one of the Sharshun casts *hold person* to disable Tor, Ernie and Flicker. Dranko attempts to leap down on the attackers from a rooftop, but stumbles, and then surrenders when the other party members are threatened.

Helsinki Syndrome

Run #43 – Sunday, August 17, 1997

The Sharshun secure the *held* party members, while the remaining three land outside the keep and begin to make their way down the mountain. Kay, already weakened, stumbles, falls and tumbles many yards down the mountainside. By the time the other two reach her, she is unconscious and near death, but they revive her. Then they hear someone else coming up the mountain towards them.

They fear more Sharshun, but it turns out to be **Elnimon**, the elf who was one of the bidders on the Cyclops in Minok. Morningstar activates *Dismay* (becoming enshrouded in shadow and flame), and moves atop a boulder, to challenge Elnimon as “the Guardian of the Eye.” They learn that Elnimon is indeed there seeking the Eye, but is not working with the Sharshun. They drop *Dismay*, and he agrees to assist the party.

With Kay in her weak state, the four of them go into hiding in a cave-like rock formation, to wait until morning. Back up at the keep, the Sharshun have been arguing with Sagiro in their own tongue, probably about how to get the Eye back, and what to do with the prisoners. It’s clear that Sagiro is getting the better of the dispute.

Saturday, April 12 [Day of St. Kemmi (Pikon)]

As the sun rises, and there is still no sign of the remaining party members arriving to rescue their friends, Sagiro and one of the Sharshun lower the drawbridge, and the two of them head down the mountainside in pursuit. Meanwhile, Tor and Dranko talk it up with the two Sharshun left to guard them (or at least with the more social one). They learn that Sagiro is in charge of this particular operation, but that the Sharshun aren’t happy with the arrangement.

As Sagiro and the Sharshun near the place where the party members are hiding, they call out for him to come no closer. Sagiro informs them that while has no particular wish to harm any of the Company, he will do so if that’s what it takes to get the Eye. When the party tell him they won’t give it up, he tells them he’ll have to go back to the keep, and come back with proof that he’ll take extreme measures to extort the party.

But he didn’t reckon with Elnimon. A blast of *lightning* from the elf, *magic missiles* from Kibi, and a *gust of wind* from Kay combine to kill the Sharshun, and knock Sagiro down the side of the mountain and into the swift mountain river. His body is not recovered.

The outside-the-keep contingent then plan and execute a successful assault on the remaining two Sharshun, highlighted by a *call lightning* spell from Morningstar, combined with a generated storm from one of Kay’s magical arrows.

The arrow was a one-shot magic item that created a localized thunderstorm when shot into the air. This was a great piece of combined tactics, using it with the *call lightning* spell.

One of the remaining two Sharshun is killed, and the other is allowed to take a dagger (though he is divested of his other valuables) and flee. The party leave Longtooth Keep (which a certain party member wants to rename “Castle Blackhope”) and head to the nearby town of Hafast to get some real rest.

Sunday, April 13

The Company pay a barge to take them to Hae Kalkas, with plans to head from there to Kibi’s nearby home village of Eggemoggin. They decide to pay a visit to Richter at the Sages’ Consortium, but find that that many months ago he went insane and has since been committed to a private asylum. The asylum is an awful place; while the party are not allowed in, they can hear the terrible shrieks from inside. Richter is brought before the party, whom he recognizes as those who caused his mind to break (see session 19), and he starts screaming.

In a fit of altruism and guilt, the party decide to use the *heal* scroll obtained at Longtooth to restore Richter to health. He doesn’t have any memory of what he had been studying, so after a discussion with some other sages at the Consortium, they set him up back there as a botany specialist, with orders that his old notes not be shown to him for at least two years. They leave some money for him as well, to help him get a good clean start.



All Roads Lead to Eggemoggin

Run #44 – Sunday, August 24, 1997

Monday, April 14 – Wednesday, April 16

Travel to the dwarven village of Eggemoggin. En route, the party meet a caravan of ore wagons as they move along the mountain road. Dranko’s presence nearly causes an inter-racial incident, but Kibi steps in.

Thursday, April 17

The Company arrive in Eggemoggin. There is more trouble with Dranko, due to the history of orcish raids in the village, but thankfully there's no violence. Dranko decides to try the inn, The Orcs' Grave by Flagon Thundermug – and survives! Actually, reports are that the orcs seem to have withdrawn unusually far into the mountains, and there have been no incursions for weeks.

Remarkably, the party notice that a large gold band sits on a mantelpiece in the Bimson home, a ring that looks the twin of the ring found on the Wilburforce statue in Dingman's Ferry! It doesn't detect as magical. Kibi's mother claims the ring was found with her in the ruins of her village.

Kibi's mom, Gela Dun-Bim, was found by her now husband, Kibi's father Bim. She was the only survivor from an orcish raid on her village.

Friday, April 18

Memory read spells cast on Kibi's mom (with her consent, of course) have mixed results; they seem to confirm her discovery by her husband, but an attempt to share her memory about the first time she saw the ring fails. Clearly something odd is going on. In the early afternoon, the party depart Eggemoggin, bound for Hae Kalkas, with plans to head home to Tal Hae via Kynder Hold.

Saturday, April 19 – Monday, April 21 [Day of Fortune (Corilayna)]

Travel to Hae Kalkas. After a quick stop in Hae Kalkas, they continue on to Kynder Hold.

Tuesday, April 22 – Thursday, April 24

Travel to Kynder Hold.

Friday, April 25

After a week of land and sea travel, they arrive safely in Tal Hae.



Saturday, April 26 – Thursday, May 29

The party train.

Ancalagon: Tell me... do the PCs go up in level every time they train? Because if so, I'm pretty sure they trained more than three times (I thought that when you said they trained it meant that they gained a level).

Sagiro: Yes, they train to gain levels. The discrepancy you notice is due to people leveling at different times, due to the 2nd Edition XP table disparity, and the fact that not every character gets the same XP for every run.

In most (if not all) of the training periods so far, only a subset of the party have actually leveled.

During this time, everyone in the Company (even Kibi!) competes in the Spring Tourney of Werthis. Tor advances several rounds this time, but loses to the eventual winner, a powerful Stormknight named **Sorent Redhilt**. Apparently, this Tourney is also to determine which Stormknight will get to compete in a bigger tourney in Sand's Edge, the winners of which will be allowed to fulfill a particular Werthian prophecy. According to the prophecy, three Stormknights will kill a creature called a Ventifact Colossus. On the 15th of May, there is a grand procession of the Stormknights, as they march with Sorent down to the docks.

They are halted briefly by a trio of Utholites (see session 11) who step out into the road, but there is no violent conflict. The Utholites calmly warn the Werthians not to take their current course of action, the Werthians tell them to get out of the road, and the Utholites leave. Dranko follows one of them to her house, but doesn't learn anything of importance from her.



Hasek's Heads

Run #45 – Wednesday, September 17, 1997

Also during the training period, the Undermen come to Dranko with a mission for the "Oracle Gang" [see session 30]. It seems that the Mages' Guild in Calnis has come into the possession of an exotic creature, but doesn't have the facilities to examine it, since much of their Guild Hall is still being rebuilt after the gnoll and kobold raid. They are willing to sell the creature to the Tal Hae Guild, but both parties want to avoid paying the inevitable taxes, which are especially high due to the tense situation in Calnis. The Tal Hae Mages' Guild has hired the Undermen to assist them, and the Undermen in turn are asking the Oracle Gang to retrieve the creature without paying customs.



Friday, May 30 [Artichoke Day (Yondalla)]

The Company start out for Calnis, where they will pick up the "exotic creature." The first day's journey is uneventful and rainy, and that night they stay in a small roadside shelter.

As the party are preparing for sleep, a severed head falls into the shelter through the smoke hole. Two more heads soon follow it. They look cadaverous, but are also animate, and from their ragged neck stumps they fire out thin but tough strings with barbed bone hooks on the end. Ewww! Using the hooks, they pull themselves up towards a victim's head, where they expel clouds of noxious gas. Double ewwwww!

The party begin fighting them. They hack two of them to bits, and trap the third beneath a *weighty chested* cookpot. Flicker goes outside to scout, to find out where the heads came from, but as soon as he exits the shelter, he lets out a shout which ends rather abruptly. When others go outside to check on Flicker, they are immediately attacked by the Sharshun Hasek (the one who offered a huge amount of money for their Eye of Moirel back in session 35).

He fights well and with little energy expended on talk or explanation; certainly no offers of 300,000 gold pieces! Unfortunately for him, it seems that the heads didn't weaken the party as much as he had hoped, and the battle starts going against him. Rather than surrender or fight to the death, he vanishes, apparently having *teleported*.

The party quickly search the surrounding area, using **Ala** (Morningstar's befriended raven). Ala discovers a horse fleeing up the road, but when some of the party catch up to the horse with *Burning Sky*, they discover that it's only a horse, with no rider. Rather than chase Hasek into the wilderness, they return to the shelter. There are signs that someone had come upon the scene, checked out the cookpot, and fled quickly. The party catch up to him on the road back to Tal Hae, but he's just a traveler, scared silly by the thumping coming from under the pot.



Smuggling with Alacrity

Run #46 – Wednesday, September 24, 1997

Saturday, June 1

Travel to Calnis.

Sunday, June 2

The Company arrive in Calnis in the early evening. Due to the increasing threat of humanoid invasion, security is tight. Weapons must be peace-bonded, curfew is at 9:00, and each person must purchase city papers for a gold piece. There is also a mage there who casts *detect magic* on the party, but, perhaps knowing something of the party's errand, he doesn't tell the guards that the party are anything out of the ordinary. There is a slight unpleasant odor that seems to be permeating the air of the city.

The party go immediately to the Calnis Mages' Guild (which is in the midst of significant reconstruction and repair), and is soon introduced to a short human mage named **Theodore**. They give him the password supplied by the Undermen of Tal Hae ("We understand you're having pet problems") and are admitted into the guild house. The bad smell gets a bit worse.

Theodore leads the party through the Guild House to a room in the basement, and stops at a door. He gives each person in the party some blue liquid to smear on their upper lips, to help lessen the effects of the smell. He opens the door, and the stink is powerful, blue liquid or no. In a shallow depression in the corner of the room sits a large metal box, with a hinged lid that is latched closed. Theo uses a stick to open the latches and lift the lid... and then the smell gets *really* bad.

A stalk pops up from inside the box, a stalk with two eyes on it. It is followed by two nasty tentacles, which whip around harmlessly. After a few seconds, Theodore beats the protruding bits with the stick until they withdraw inside the box, and then he closes the box. He informs the party that the creature (name unknown) has been growing since they received it, and while it eats anything, it seems to prefer garbage and refuse. It is one of three such beasts that has been seen in the city in recent days.

The Company leave the creature (to which they assign various names like "stench beast," "witherstench," and "wiggling stinker") for a time and go back to the inn to plan. En route, they are called over by a beggar claiming a need for help. When they get close, however, the beggar turns out to be a member of the Calnis Thieves' Guild, and he tells the party that a number of other thieves have them covered with bows. A nearby city guard is clearly more afraid of the Thieves' Guild than he is interested in justice, and with alacrity he wanders away at the thief's request.

The thieves claim to know that the Tal Hae Undermen are operating on their turf, and want a piece of the action. Rather than fight against the thieves, the party pay them off, a sum of several hundred gold pieces. Later, the party go back to get the witherstench, and under cover of darkness, a few party members fly it out over the walls of Calnis on *Burning Sky*.

Monday, June 3

The next morning, the second half of the party meets them, and the first half flies (invisibly) back into the city, and then exits normally. During its morning feeding, the witherstench somewhat resists going fully back into its box, but by attacking it with real weapons the party convince it to behave. The Company head back to Tal Hae, towing the beast on the flying carpet.

Tuesday, June 4

Travel to Tal Hae.



Wednesday, June 5

The Company arrive at Tal Hae, and take the wiggling stinker immediately to the Mages' Guild, happy to finally be rid of it. Then they return to the Greenhouse, where they make a truly shocking discovery...

Kael: First of all, congrats on the excellent story. I usually try to steal strengths from different DMs but you have woven together so many excellent pieces of the game that it is truly impressive.

Sagiro: Thanks! You're too kind.

Kael: Now my questions.

(1) *How do you integrate a new player into a game as complex and with as much backstory as yours has? This includes both making the new player feel as emotionally involved as the other players and making their character feel a coherent part of the team.*

Sagiro: This is a perfect example of why, when plotting out a huge and complex story, you shouldn't fill in the details until you absolutely have to. In the three cases where I've introduced new PCs to the game (Kibi, and two characters you'll meet later named Grey Wolf and Aravis), I've been able to find good places to slot them into the backstory, because there were plenty of places where I hadn't "played my hand," so to speak. (Grey Wolf especially: he ended up taking an important role that I was going to give to an NPC.)

As for making them feel like part of the team, I leave that mostly up to the other players. But it helps that all of the new characters have been hired into the Company by Abernathy or his organization.

(2) *In the earlier games you seemed to do more foreshadowing than you are doing in the games you are writing up now. The rats' squeaks and the lizards sunning themselves were particularly good ideas. Did your game change from location-specific to character-specific and cause this or are you just not including them in the recent writeups?*

Funny you should bring this up, since I just posted the Story Hour with the building stench leading up to the discovery of the otyugh. I don't think I dropped off the foreshadowing, though certainly there are situations that lend themselves better to it. (In the most recent "dungeon" the PCs were in, the whole thing was in some sense an exercise in such foreshadowing, or at least in recurring themes.)

I've actually found myself spending more time working on more macroscopic foreshadowing – things that happen in one run that become clear one or more runs down the line. But details like the squeaking rats really do make a difference in terms of setting the scene and mood.

(3) *Is Morningstar's mind reading difficult to control in such an information-sensitive game as yours? If you had to do it over would you allow her the mind reading?*

Back in the early days of the campaign, that really was a concern of mine. But I decided to give it some time, to see if it was really going to be a problem, and in the end I decided to leave it be. Yeah, the party get a lot of good info out of *mind read* (now *detect thoughts*), but not (it turns out) enough to unsettle the campaign.

I did have some of my enemies adapt to this tactic, though. The Sharshun, for instance, now wear minor magic items that shield the mind from such spells for a limited duration. And NPCs who have really vital information can (and do) take similar precautions in safeguarding their own minds.

Lastly, I adjudicate the spell fairly strictly, observing the rules for what sorts of walls and such block the spell, and really only giving Morningstar surface thoughts. That said, it does keep me on my toes! Morningstar's player is quite adept at finding good times and places to scout out the mental landscape, as it were.

(4) *Was the animated gem-eyed cyclops statue a planned event or a spur of the moment thing? It just doesn't seem to match the rest but I don't know why. Maybe I haven't got the whole story down, being only this far in, but what was the purpose of animating it?*

That was a planned event, and an example of foreshadowing, as you'll soon find out. I wanted to establish that the Eyes of Moirel often inhabited the eye sockets (or at least the heads) of other things, and could animate (and partly control) those things. Thus the Cyclops. And the Eye that worked its way into the eye socket of the lizard (which it also grew to enormous size), and the Eye that blasted its way out of a locked box in order to lodge itself into the head of that skeleton in Longtooth Keep.

(5) *What would you change if you could go back? You already mentioned the "set piece" of the court case and the dangers of creating situations the PCs can't dramatically affect. Please keep these kinds of comments coming, they are insightful and very useful in our own games.*

That's a tough one, but I think I have at least one answer. Morningstar has a whole personal plot involving Ava Dormo, and her identity as an Ellish "Child of Light." It largely involves her "training" in *Ava Dormo*, learning what she can do there, learning to endure bright lights while fighting there, and so on. You'll find out more about that whole plot in later posts (currently she has a number of "disciples" who she is teaching to follow in her footsteps), but in reality, it's proved very difficult to get the rest of the party involved in her "part of the plot."

I should have realized that from the start: she has all this stuff to do, in a place the other members of the party can't even reach. Much of what I've done with that plot took place over e-mail to Morningstar's player, so as not to take up large amounts of game time with Morningstar-only stuff. If I had to do it over again, I would have found some way for the other characters to be more involved in the whole Morningstar-dreaming thing. (As it happens, I've just recently given her the ability to take the others with her when she travels to *Ava Dormo*; this should help correct this problem to a degree.)

Eddings is there to greet the party as usual. What is less usual is that his eyes are missing from their sockets, and in their places are the two Eyes of Moirel!

The edges of the sockets are rimed over with colored crystal, one purple, the other green. They speak through Eddings using his voice, each one glowing (either purple or green) while it is the one "talking":

WELCOME HOME, ERNEST. KIBI.

YOU HAVE KEPT ME PRISONER, BUT I HAVE ALSO BEEN YOUR GUEST. YOUR GUEST I WILL REMAIN. BUT I LIKED THE LIZARD MORE.

LISTEN WELL TO ME. THE VENTIFACT COLOSSUS IS WAKING FROM ITS SLEEP. THE WORLD IS AT A CROSSROADS.

LISTEN WELL TO ME. THE GREAT SAND TURTLE WILL ARISE FROM SLUMBER, AND DESTINIES WILL SCATTER LIKE GRAINS OF SAND TUMBLING FROM ITS SHELL.

HEED WELL MY WARNING. IF THE COLOSSUS IS NOT SLAIN BY THE STORMKNIGHTS, THOUSANDS WILL PERISH. IT WILL LEAD ITS BRETHREN IN A CRUSADE OF MINDLESS DESTRUCTION.

HEED WELL MY WARNING. IF THE COLOSSUS IS KILLED BY THE WAR GOD'S CHILDREN, THOUSANDS WILL PERISH. ITS DEATH WILL HERALD THE COMING OF THE FIRE.

YOU MUST NOT ALLOW THE WATCHERS TO SUCCEED. THEY WILL SACRIFICE THE PRESENT, AND ONLY TO SAVE AN EMPTY FUTURE.

YOU MUST NOT ALLOW THE WATCHERS TO FAIL. THE STORMKNIGHTS WILL THROW THE FUTURE INTO CHAOS, AND ONLY TO SAVE THE EPHEMERAL PRESENT.

MY BROTHER IS CORRECT. THE DEATH OF THE COLOSSUS WILL CREATE A PERILOUS FUTURE.

MY BROTHER IS CORRECT. THE SURVIVAL OF THE COLOSSUS WILL RESULT IN DESTRUCTION BEYOND MEASURE. BUT BEST THAT NONE BE ALIVE TO SEE THE FUTURE BURN. FOR THE FUTURE IS CARVED IN DIAMOND, THAT NONE MAY ERASE OR CHANGE.

NO. THE FUTURE IS WRITTEN ON WATER, AND WE ARE ALL ITS AUTHORS.

Then both Eyes speak, glowing at the same time as Eddings speaks in a strangely double-toned voice:

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. AND THERE IS ONE MORE THING.

OUR CREATOR DID NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND US. THOUGH YOU DO NOT HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE OR THE MIGHT TO BEND US TO YOUR WILL, WE ARE NOT ALL REQUIRED. TO TRAVEL NOWHERE, YOU WILL NEED US WHO ARE WILLING. TO TRAVEL NOWHERE, WE WILL NEED OUR BROTHER.

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.

And then the Eyes fall out of Eddings's head and drop to the floor, inert. The poor butler gives out a cry of pain and keels over. (Remarkably, Eddings retains his sight afterwards, even though he has no eyeballs (his sockets are now smooth depressions). What's more, he can *detect magic* at will, and no longer needs to sleep.)



Gohgan, R.I.P.

Run #47 – Sunday, October 19, 1997

Thursday, June 6

The Company decide that they want to go to Sand's Edge, to check things out for themselves. They book a ship, but it won't leave until the 11th, so they decide to relax in Tal Hae for a bit.

Kibi pays a mage at the Guild to *identify* some of the party's magic items, and Dranko goes to visit some sages about the prophecies concerning the Ventifact Colossus. (He is rooked by a disreputable sage named **Zezel**, who takes payment in advance and gives no information that is not generally known. Dranko plots revenge.) Ernie is asked by the Temple of Yondalla to be the head cook at this year's Summerfest.

Friday, June 7 – Saturday, June 8

They wait for the ship to sail.

Sunday, June 9

At noon on this day, the sun begins to go dim. There is an eclipse for a few minutes, during which there is moderate (but not too widespread) panic in the streets of Tal Hae. A mob forms, thinking that the "evil Church of Ell" is performing some ritual to blot out the sun, and heads there to inflict some mindless group violence. Dranko goes to try to stop them, and also picks many of their pockets. The sun comes back out soon enough, and there are no obvious lasting effects.

Monday, June 10

Around midday, several guards are seen running down the street past the Greenhouse. Then a couple more run past. When someone pokes their head out the door to ask what's going on, the guards report that they are going to help fight a group of bugmonkeys that have come up from beneath Gohgan's shop! The party run to assist. When they arrive on the scene, they find that a group of city guardsmen has the situation under control; a number of bugmonkeys have been killed, and it doesn't look like any are left alive.

That's when a large, black armored knight comes out of Gohgan's shop. It's over seven feet tall, and the face beneath its black helm is rotten, cadaverous. It shrugs off initial attacks by the guards, and then bellows for Alander to come down from his tower. The party don't know who Alander is, but they assume the knight is talking about Abernathy's tower. The party instruct one of the nearby guardsmen to run to the Greenhouse, and tell the butler there to get in touch with Abernathy. The guard looks skeptical for a moment, but then his eyes open wide, and he says, "You're Tillerson's group, aren't you. OK, I'm off!"

The black knight uses a huge sword in battle, casts a large *fireball* (which roasts a number of guards) and many *walls of ice*. When the party move to engage him, the knight utters a powerful magic word which leaves Tor stunned. But the party, combined with some stalwart guardsmen who stay to fight, manage to wound the knight badly.

It begins then to stride down the street, when Abernathy suddenly appears about a hundred feet away. "Please keep it occupied for a moment," he requests, and then he takes out a scroll and starts reading. The party manage to slow it down enough, giving Abernathy enough time to summon a great many-headed dragon-like beast. The beast has little trouble defeating the wounded knight, and ends up ripping it in half. Then Abernathy dismisses the beast, and disappears himself, presumably back to his tower.

Dranko goes into Gohgan's and makes the grim discovery that the rug merchant has been slain by the knight. The party go below to examine the sub-basement areas. They find that the black knight must have been what was kept in the walled-up room with the round glass seals; all of the seals have been broken and are lying in a pile of rubble. The black knight then reached the ceiling of the chapel by making ramps out of *walls of ice*, and from there it was an easy matter for him to reach the surface. Poor Gohgan never had a chance.

Kael: I was hoping Turlus the Evil Baker would show up and give the death knight a lesson in zoning.

Turlus: "This is the rug district! Wanton destruction and demonic boogery will be contained to Evil Temple Lane (right behind Goodly Leaders With Secret Agendas Avenue). And you killed a recurring character! Do you have any idea how many forms have to be filled out for something like this?!"

Hehe. Turlus is my favorite NPC and I'm rooting for him. I'm hoping he gets the whole group of PCs caught and jailed for ungentlemanly actions. I mean, they made the hobbit a master chef and he hangs around with a half-orc that doesn't wash his hands and has a habit of peeing on his enemies. That's just not right.



Partly Cloudy, With a Chance of Turtles

Run #48 – Sunday, November 16, 1997

Tuesday, June 11 [Festival of Arrival; Day of Bounty (Pikon); Calipa's Eve (Ell)]

The Company leave Tal Hae by ship, en route to Sand's Edge. By this time they have formed a fairly solid but terrifying hypothesis. Here are their clues:

- The Werthians are going to fight a "Ventifact Colossus" – some sort of giant – in a city on the edge of a great desert.
- In the church of Brechen at Seablade Point – defiled by the Burning God worshippers – there was a bit of prophecy that "...a venic giant will again walk the earth, and three sons of Werthis will lay it low."
- According to an old scroll (penned by a Romus the Mad) found in the Hae Charagan Vault, "The Venic Giant will begin to wake when the sun o'erhead dost wink at the city of Ganit Tuvith, on the edge of a great bowl of dust" (some spelling corrected). Romus goes on to write in terror of a Turtle Army that will destroy the kingdom. Perhaps not so coincidentally, there has just been an eclipse.
- The Eyes of Moirel, speaking through Eddings, had referred to the Ventifact Colossus as the "Great Sand Turtle," and that it would be fighting the Stormknights.
- When they were out in the desert itself (the Mouth of Nahalm), camped upon one of the great islands (floating in the sand), the whole island moved beneath them.

From this, they have decided that the Ventifact Colossus, a.k.a. the Venic Giant, is a giant tortoise that lives in the desert. Of course, if that's so, the creature would be unimaginably huge – those rocks in the desert are between 50 and 100 yards in diameter. It could be a tortoise the size of an American football field!

Piratecat: I don't believe that Sagiro has really expressed our horror properly.

I mean, there are *hundreds* of those stone islands out there. And if every one of them is sitting on top of a gigantic tortoise, and they all wake up like the purple Eye of Moirel prophesied... well, let's just say that we didn't like that one bit. Of course, as usual, the actuality was far worse than our assumptions.

Also despicable is that neither of the two prophecies were good. In one, the turtle dies but the children of fire show up, and thousands die. In the other, the turtle wakes up its brethren and thousands of people die, presumably by the embarrassing fate of tortoise trampling. Oh, goody. That's a nice choice, don't you think? So, do we help the Stormknights of Werthis, or hinder them?

We ended up choosing to try for the prophecy of the green Eye of Moirel, who said that the future was written in water. We didn't like the idea of the turtle (if there was a turtle, of course, ha ha) dying and thousands still dying, but we thought this way we'd be able to make a difference.

Wednesday, June 12

At noon, the Company arrive at Sand's Edge. There is a long line of people at the gate; apparently word has spread that the Stormknights of Werthis are going to fight some sort of giant, and there's sure to be spectacle galore! Oh boy!

Once inside the city proper, the party make arrangements at a local inn (the Falling Sands). Then they go to visit the church of Werthis, but the gates to the church are sealed, and no one is being admitted. Still determined to warn someone, they go to the church of Delioch, where Dranko tries to tell them about the true nature of the Ventifact Colossus. The priest to whom Dranko tells the tale, **Brother Nolman**, clearly doesn't believe Dranko's story. At the temple of Ell, the priestesses there are less skeptical, but still won't take any immediate action.

Thinking that someone might be watching the church of Werthis, the party do some rooftop scouting, and Dranko spots a man crouching on a different rooftop, keeping an eye on the temple.

DRANKO: "I look around for a rooftop that will give me the best discreet view of the front of the temple of Werthis."

DM: "OK, you spot a likely-looking building across the street."

DRANKO: "Great! I pick a rooftop that has a great discreet view of *that* rooftop, and look down."

Invisibly, Dranko performs his usual sort of interrogation, and learns that the man is a member of a local Thieves' Guild, curious about the large number of people who seem to be carrying similar quarterstaves, and who appear to be themselves checking out the church of Werthis. This man has also overheard the name of "Clockman" used, but doesn't know its significance.

Armed with this knowledge, the party start looking for someone carrying one of these staves, and soon find one – it's a man who is a member of the church of Uthol Inga. They break into his room at an inn called the Mule, and take his staff and gray Utholite vest.

Morningstar visits the temple of Ell again, and this time convinces the High Priestess there to apply her personal seal to a warning letter to the Werthians. Then the party go back to the church of Werthis, and with clever use of the *telepathy* spell, convince a Werthian inside to come out and receive the letter.

Thursday, June 13

The Company decide to just go ahead and kidnap the Utholite who they robbed the night before. Dranko hauls him up to a rooftop for an interrogation. The man doesn't reveal much, but the party do confirm that he's an Utholite, that he is not privy to the master plan of the Watchers, and that his contact is Clockman.

The party go to visit **Clockman** (a clockmaker – surprise!), sending Ernie in to look at clocks, while Flicker hangs out invisibly. Morningstar's *mind read* reveals that there are several more people in a closed office in the back of the shop, so the party don't try anything overt. Instead, Flicker watches invisibly as a "customer" walks into the shop a few minutes later, a customer who flashes a hand-sign to Clockman. Clockman politely asks Ernie to leave, but Flicker stays. Clockman then gives his customer an address, and an order to "stand and wait." The customer departs.

The party talk it over, and decide to go to the address mentioned by Clockman. They find there a carpenter's shop, and a carpenter who is apparently giving out the Utholite staves. Kay goes in, and tries to get a staff; when the carpenter looks puzzled, she flashes the sign that Flicker saw at Clockman's. While the carpenter seems skeptical about her presentation of the sign, and even asks her what "branch" she comes from, he eventually goes into a back room and gives Kay a staff. He gives her a warning that her branch should be more disciplined (she had said "Tal Hae"), and Kay leaves.

The party talk it over some more, and decide they still need more information. They plan on having Kay approach another staff carrier, wounded, and plead for help and information. (Dranko punches her in the face to simulate the wounded part.) Kay then finds a woman carrying an Utholite staff, and implements the plan, begging for aid. The woman looks Kay over, looks around (the rest of the party are hiding out of sight nearby), and tells Kay to follow her.

She leads Kay down into an alley, and then, without warning or provocation, launches a vicious attack on Kay with her quarterstaff. She is very skilled, and things look grim for Kay, but then the rest of the party show up and the Utholite woman is quickly subdued. The party take her back to the temple of Ell, to be kept prisoner and perhaps interrogated.

That evening, the party go back to Clockman's, hoping to find more information. They discover that the shop has been closed indefinitely, but while the rest of the party wait down the street a ways, Dranko and Flicker head to the roof to break in. They aren't up there long, however, when a group of city guardsmen rounds the street corner and heads right for them.

Dranko and Flicker manage to escape off the back of the building (without having gotten inside), as some of the guards approach the shop, and others speak to the rest of the party. While the party beg ignorance of the affair (claiming they saw no

one near the shop), the searching guards find signs that two people had been on the roof recently, and had escaped. One of them, they say, was a child. The party figure that someone had to have alerted the guards almost immediately after they showed up at Clockman's, for the guards to have gotten there so fast. The Utholites are clearly on to them.



Turtle-zilla!

Run #49 – Sunday, December 7, 1997

Friday, June 14

The party are summoned early to the temple of Ell. The priestesses there have interrogated the Utholite prisoner (none too gently either, it seems) and are going to let her go, but they wanted to let the party talk to her before her release. From the Ellish priestesses, and from the woman herself (named **Hawke**) the party learn several things:

- The Utholites are gathering an army in Sand's Edge, to fight the Werthians if and when the Stormknights attempt to kill the Ventifact Colossus.
- There is probably another (backup) plan, to which Hawke is not privy.
- The staff which Kay was carrying had a mark carved near its base – the mark of a spy. That is why Hawke attacked Kay. The carpenter must have realized right away that Kay was an imposter, and given her a “booby-trapped” staff that would be recognised by others.
- Hawke is a more powerful than average Utholite.
- The Utholites have their own versions of the two prophecies spoken by the Eyes of Moirel, and they clearly are following the “turtle must live” version.
- While the Utholites have heard of the Burning God, they cannot find much about him because of the Masking. (They don't know about the Masking specifically, but they know something odd is going on.)

After divulging this much information, Hawke is let free.

I don't think I've yet explained the Masking (mentioned in Tharnius' letter in session 12). What the party know at this point is that some powerful magic effect has caused information on certain topics to vanish. Worse, it somehow prevents people from even *wanting* to find out about certain things, or remembering things they've learned. For instance, the party have discovered that very few people can remember the word “Sharshun,” even after they are told to remember and recite it. And an hour after the Sharshun attacked Sarai (the woman who won the Eye of Moirel at auction), she remembered the event as an attack by common bandits. The party are also pretty sure that the Masking is what made the sage Richter go insane.

The party spend the rest of the day “turtle trolling.” They fly out over the desert on the flying carpet, and Morningstar casts some *mind read* and *telepathy* spells on some of the giant rocks. None have a discernible mind. They land the carpet on the rock which hosted the gargoyle dig, but the place is abandoned save for some broken digging equipment and debris.



Saturday, June 15

Having done all they can, the Company wait for the inevitable...

Sunday, June 16

In the late morning, people start to gather in the town square, where some ceremonial rigmarole is planned before the Giant is due to show up. By this time, most people in Sand's Edge seem convinced that the Ventifact Colossus is a storm giant, and they eagerly await its demise at the hands of the three Stormknights.

The town square fills, and then four Stormknights step out onto the balcony, followed by the Lord Governor of Sand's Edge. One of the Stormknights (the High Stormknight **Dalesandro**) begins a speech, and introduces the Prophesied Three: Sorent Redhilt, **Faskel Giantbane**, and **Velown Thunderstick**. Then he goes on about how the Giant is coming, and how these three will kill it...

...and his speech is interrupted by a hail of darts which come flying out of the crowd towards the balcony.

However, the darts all bounce off a glowing blue shield around the people there, which had been invisible before. (Perhaps the party's warning convinced them to take this kind of precaution... who knows?) Although no one is pierced by the darts, one of the people in the crowd dies soon after she picks one up off the ground, as they are coated with an extremely virulent contact poison. The guards on the walls scan the crowd, but no one seems to have seen who threw the darts.

Rincewind: Why do you actually believe the prophecies the Eyes gave you?

Kidcthulhu: How could you *not*? They're prophecies, spoken by an eyeless butler! Anything that rocks want to say so badly that they suck the eyes right out of your butler has to be important.

Besides, they sounded very authoritative.

The speech continues, with the Lord Governor assuring the people that many soldiers stand ready to fight the Giant, should something go wrong with the Werthian prophecy. And then, as the city official continues to drone on, the first tremor is felt.

At first, the Governor only pauses, and then continues. But as more tremors follow, and shouts start sounding faintly through the city, everyone turns to face the desert. Some of the Company immediately get on the carpet and fly out towards the Mouth of Nahalm, and their fears are confirmed. One of the huge rocks has moved to the edge of the “Grayte Bowl o’ Dust,” and is heaving its great bulk up out of it, and onto the land.

The Ventifact Colossus, which does, in fact, resemble a huge turtle, lumbers towards the city. The creature is truly massive – the body is almost 300 feet in diameter, and the head alone is 80 feet long and 60 feet high. The “rock island” is a mound of hardened sand that has mixed with secretions from the turtle’s shell over the years, to form a massive covering. Gallons of sand stream off the turtle’s back as it walks, and its huge feet leave enormous craters in the ground as it slowly walks towards Sand’s Edge.

The crowd disperses from the square, some (the foolish) eager to get a closer look, but most intent on fleeing the approaching Colossus. And the party members on the carpet now see that, from many abandoned buildings and little-used streets near the edge of town, hundreds of Utholites armed with staves are pouring out, and taking up a march in front of the turtle. As the Colossus reaches the edge of town, an army of Stormknights issues out of the temple and rushes forward to meet the Utholites; a fierce battle is joined.

Above the battle, Ernie manages to spot Sorent Redhilt and the other two prophesied Werthians, having a conference behind the rearmost lines of the Stormknight ranks. (One can only assume that they’re wondering just how in Werthis’s name they’re going to defeat a creature that enormous.) Tor uses the magic mirror to get their attention, and using Morningstar as a *telepathy* link for two-way communication, then asks if he can render assistance. The Stormknights have another hurried conference, and then ask if the party can get the three of them to the head of the Colossus. Ernie lands the carpet, unloads Tor and Morningstar, loads the three Stormknights on, and flies over the battle towards the turtle.

Meanwhile, on the ground, the battle line continues to move forward just ahead of the Colossus. Everyone in the party save Ernie (who’s on the carpet) fights alongside the Stormknights, and the fight is fairly even. Fortunately, the Utholites are using staves, while the Werthians are using largely bows, maces and bladed weapons. But as the battle moves back, the turtle moves forward, and with each step, huge pieces of the city – homes, shops, warehouses, parks – are smashed to flinders.

Ernie, who has had plenty of practice piloting *Burning Sky* by now, performs some harrowing feats of aerobatics around and beneath the body of the Colossus. Up close, the Colossus is even more unimaginably huge, and it seems impossible that any effort will be able to stop its plodding march. But Ernie manages to maneuver the carpet (with Sorent, Faskel and Velown clinging on for dear life) over the great head of the beast.

The three Stormknights attempt to disembark. Sorent loses his balance, bounces off and then slides down the side of the head, and falls nearly 100 feet into the depression left by a foreleg. The other two manage to land safely atop the turtle’s head.

Ernie goes down to try to rescue Sorent, but the Stormknight’s body is too large and heavy for Ernie to lift onto the carpet, and Ernie barely escapes as a massive hind leg stomps into the depression, doubtless crushing Sorent to paste.

Meanwhile, Velown has climbed onto the underside of a huge rock-like formation of crusted sand over one of the turtle’s eyes. She tries to hang on and stab at its eyeball, but the Colossus opens its eye wide, and then blinks down, crushing her in its huge eyelid. Her lifeless body plummets to the ground.

The final Stormknight, Faskel, realizes what he has to do. He takes some deep breaths, and then plunges into one of the beast’s huge nostrils. Still the turtle marches on.

In the fight below, both sides have suffered massive attrition. Of the hundreds of soldiers on each side, only handfuls still battle. But after more minutes go by, and the Colossus nears the center of the city, it stops, briefly, and twitches. Then it takes a few more steps... and stops again. Parts of it seem paralyzed. It starts to slow down. It staggers. Its eyes glaze over.

And then it falls. The massive body collapses, and the ground shakes as it hits. The head falls a few seconds later, smashing down into, and entirely filling, the town square.

Ernie tries to crawl up the nostril to rescue Faskel Giantbane, but the smell is so strong that he is forced to turn back. Dranko tries, and with his strong constitution has better luck. He follows a hacked-out tunnel through the vile nasal passages, and eventually finds that Faskel had hacked his way to the creature’s brain, and sliced most of it into chunks. He also finds Faskel, who has died of suffocation. Dranko hauls the body out into the open air.

Sparrowhawk: WOW. That is so incredibly cool. Tortoise the size of the Superdome. These questions may sound silly, but... How many hp's would you estimate it had? What would its AC be?

Sagiro: Gosh... perhaps I should be embarrassed, but I never figured out the vital stats for the Ventifact Colossus. (Also, remember we were 2nd Ed. back then.) If I were going to model it in 3E... hmm... I see that the Colossal creatures in the Monster Manual are in the 700-800 HP range, and that "Colossal" means about 40 ft x 80 ft. The Ventifact Colossus was about 300 ft x 200 ft, but was not really a magically tough creature like a Great Wyrm or the Tarrasque. I'd say something in the 3000-4000 HP range.

Its AC? Well, its natural AC would be enormous, but its size would give an enormous penalty. Perhaps to best model the advantages and disadvantages of its size, I'd say to give it an AC in the 30s or 40s, and some huge damage resistance (around 50) that cannot be overcome with normal magic weapons. (Even stabbing a +5 longsword up to the hilt in its leg would be like poking a person with a small thumbtack.) You might want to reduce its AC and DR for the eyeballs, and increase it for the shell.

Basically, the creature is a bit unwieldy for actual tactical combat.

Sparrowhawk: Hmm... A couple of prophecies fulfilled, a couple of secrets revealed. And a couple of new mysteries to drive us mad. A few questions:

(1) *What would the party have done about the Ventifact Colossus if the magic carpet had been destroyed before then?*

Sagiro: You got me. Hey, it's not my job to actually *solve* the party's problems...

(2) *Tharnius was a Sharshun, right? What's up with that?*

Well, Tharnius was different from the Sharshun in at least one important respect – he didn't have a poison sac implanted in the roof of his mouth. And Abernathy clearly trusted him.

I think the party may have learned by this point that not all Mors Tarathi (the dark elves) are Sharshun; the Sharshun are a small, evil, powerful subset of the Mors Tarathi. Also, the Mors Tarathi are mostly extinct.

(3) *What will be done with the Ventifact Colossus now it's dead? Just how do you dispose of a dead animal that big?*

Good question! For a while after the death of the beast, the Turtle Sickness killed hundreds of Sand's Edge citizens. It's not healthy having thousands of tons of rotting meat in the center of your city.

Since then, many volunteers have been put to work carving up the body and dumping the pieces into both the desert and the ocean. The process has been accelerated by a few high-level mages casting occasional *disintegrate* spells, but there aren't that many such wizards and sorcerers in the kingdom.



Hall of the Mountain King

Run #50 – Sunday, January 4, 1998

For the rest of the day, some of the party help the city guard keep rioting to a minimum, while the rest assist the many people wounded during the turtle onslaught. Actually, the people wounded are mostly Werthians from the battle; most of the damage done by the turtle was structural, since people generally had time to get out of the way. Dranko goes to find Brother Nolman, and gives him a good dose of "I told you so," but Nolman remains unimpressed. While he admits Dranko was right about the Giant, he maintains that if he had to do it over again, he still wouldn't believe such an unlikely story from Dranko.

Later in the day, a Stormknight approaches the Company and invites them to a ceremony being held that evening at the church of Werthis. Upon arrival, each of the Company is outfitted with a simple Werthian outfit, and then led into the main hall of the church. The place is already mostly full of Stormknights, many of whom are wounded. The High Stormknight Dalesandro leads the service, which starts with a procession of the coffins of the prophesied three. Then he goes into a speech about the glory of Werthis and the fulfillment of the prophecy. And then he calls the Company up to the front of the hall, and praises them for their help in bringing about the death of the Ventifact Colossus.

He makes Ernie an honorary Stormknight, and gives all the Company gifts for their aid: each party member gets a jeweled necklace with the symbol of Werthis upon it. Flicker, Morningstar, Dranko and Kibi get magical pins which grant resistance to poison. Kay gets magical bracers which increase skill at archery. Tor gets a magical *sheath of the crusader* (effects unspecified; he later discovers it helps prevent fumbles). And Ernie is given a shortsword named *Beryn Sur*, the Dancing Blade.

After the ceremony, Dalesandro speaks in private to the party, asking how they knew about the Ventifact Colossus. The party tell him about the bit of prophecy found in Seablade Point, and that they know of both versions of the prophecy, but not too much else. Dalesandro seems content.



Back at the Falling Sands, the innkeep is most upset; it seems a metal box in their rooms had started smoking, and the inn was evacuated until someone broke into their rooms and discovered the source of the smoke. It is the box Abernathy uses to send messages, and there is a note inside it, which reads:

Some powerful magic is manifesting at the place of Brechen's defilement... much more potent than last time. It bears immediate investigation, and of course retrieval if possible. Use caution!

O.

That night, Morningstar leaves a dream message with Abernathy, to see if the smoke was the Archmage's doing, or something else. (It turns out that it was; Ozilish did it to catch the party's attention, to make sure they checked the magical box and read the note.)

Monday, June 17

Figuring that they need to make all haste to Seablade Point, the Company look to find a ship. Fortunately, many captains are willing to leave Sand's Edge right about now, and it's not difficult finding almost immediate (albeit expensive) passage as far as Feslin.

On the way to the docks that morning, the party note that they are being followed by a street urchin. Morningstar casts a *mind read* just to be safe, and discovers that the child has no mind! Other than that, the kid seems fairly normal, but not having time to deal with him, the party drop him in a nearby rain barrel and continue on to their waiting ship. They reach the dock and board the ship, but just before it leaves, the child runs up to the ship and talks briefly with one of the sailors untying the ship. Then the ship gets underway. Kay questions the sailor, and learns that the kid just wanted to know where their ship was going.

The ship arrives in Feslin that night, and the party immediately go looking for a navigator to help them use their magical boat-in-a-box, since it's doubtful that they'll soon find a ship willing to make the long voyage to Seablade Point.

The magic wooden block found in Longtooth Keep (session 42) turned out to be a *folding boat*.

They go visit the Feslin harbormaster, who recommends an acquaintance (later learned to be his cousin) named **Makel**: "a fine navigator, if you can keep him away from the liquor." The party find Makel in a dockside tavern, completely drunk. A *mind read* from Morningstar gives her the impression that he's probably good at what he does, when he's sober. They negotiate with him for his services (not easy given his state), and agree to hire him only if he agrees to come with them immediately to their ship.

Tor and Ernie fly on the carpet to a piece of shoreline a ways outside of the town, so that Makel won't see them unfolding the boat. The rest of the party lead Makel the long way around, through the center of town and towards the main gate. As they walk, they notice that they are being followed by the sailor from the ship who had talked with the strangely mindless kid back at Sand's Edge. When the party turn to confront him, the sailor bolts and runs down the street. Morningstar hits him with a *hold person* just as he gets to the doorway of a crowded tavern, and as the party approach, hands from inside the place pull him in. When the party reach the tavern, they find a small crowd around the now paralytic man; Dranko convinces them that the man is very sick, and needs to be taken to the temple of Delioch right away. The party take him, turn him invisible, and carry him discreetly out of town.

Eventually he becomes un-held and un-invisible, and the party question him thoroughly. He has no memory of following them; in fact, the last thing he remembers is talking to some kid just before leaving Sand's Edge. He doesn't recall any of the voyage to Feslin. The party give him some money for his trouble, and continue on with Makel to the boat (now unfolded).

Makel is drunk enough that he falls overboard, and Dranko grabs a rope and jumps in after him. Unfortunately, the rope wasn't attached to anything. Even more unfortunately, Dranko can't swim, but Tor (grabbing a secured rope) jumps in and rescues him. They all spend the night on the ship.

Tuesday, June 18

The party set out for Seablade Point. Makel is a likable fellow when sober; he's amazed by the crew of *unseen servants*, but takes it fairly well in stride. He proves a competent navigator, though he wants to start drinking almost from the moment he wakes up. (Kibi casts a cantrip which makes water taste like good ale, and that mollifies Makel for a while.)

When Makel notes that there's no name on the ship, the party get into an argument over whether it should be the *Sea Floam*, or *Burning Sail*. They let Makel decide, and he chooses *Burning Sail*.

Sparrowhawk: ...how big are *Burning Sky* and *Burning Sail*?

Piratecat: *Burning Sky*, the flying carpet, can hold about three men and a halfling, as long as they don't mind dangling their feet over the edge. *Burning Sail*, the *folding boat*, has two shapes: a longboat and a goodly-sized sailing ship. Both sizes are crewed by *unseen servants* to row oars and move sails.

Wednesday, June 19

Burning Sail reaches Seablade Point in the late afternoon. They land near some cliffs some way outside of town, and ferry everyone to shore with the flying carpet. Then Ernie flies back, folds up the boat, picks it up, and returns. Makel is once again amazed.

The party head into town, and discover that it has been abandoned, though not more than a few days; in one house, there is moldy but recognisable food on the table. Even the Olde Keg is empty.

The party then head north of town, into the woods where the gartine arch stands. Even in the failing light, the arch is easy to see, as it's glowing a slowly pulsing red-orange. Directly beneath the arch, the air glows a faint orange. No one seems to be around.

As the party watch, the translucent orange light beneath the arch becomes a brighter opaque orange for a split second, and then returns to translucency. This happens a few times while they stand around. Someone throws a rock through the arch, but nothing unusual happens.

The party then head up to the church of Brechen on the cliff. They tell Makel that it's probably dangerous to come with them, but (creeped out by the abandoned town) he opts to remain with the group. The church seems to be empty as well – there's no sign of Hodge, and his office is cleared out. But the altar has been moved aside with two large wooden poles, and a staircase leads down beneath the building. The party descend...

The stairway spirals down almost a hundred feet, and empties out into a medium-sized natural cavern. It has two exits leading to hallways, and its only feature is a wide, red stone basin filled with a slightly greasy liquid. As the party look around the cavern, two haggard figures come staggering down one of the connecting hallways; the party recognize one of them as an inhabitant of the town. They have swords in their hands, but aren't threatening; rather, their expressions are tired and vacant, and they don't talk. They do look at Tor a bit strangely, and one shakes his head slowly at him. Down that hallway, they discover a row of dorms, or barracks, in which many other Seablade Pointers are sleeping, or standing around zombie-like.

The party take the second hallway, and that one leads into a wide man-made chamber, at the far end of which is a huge red rock throne, at the top of a short flight of steps. There are two large statues of the Burning God flanking the throne.

As soon as the party enter the room, all of them are either drawn irresistibly towards the throne, or dazed by its presence. Only Tor doesn't feel the compulsion – he feels instead a terrible dread of sitting in it. Eventually, enough party members snap out of it to drag the rest back out of the room, away from the compelling throne.

Tor wrestles with his conscience about sitting on the throne. He is utterly repulsed by the idea, but it now occurs to him that *this* is the throne he promised to sit on for the resurrection of Mrs. Horn, and not the baronial throne of Forquelle as he expected. He prays to Brechen for guidance, but gets none. In the end, he overcomes his fear, goes into the shrine and sits on the throne. As he sits there, he first is given the knowledge that Brechen now accounts his debt for Mrs. Horn's life paid; he has done as the gods required.

And then he finds himself suddenly transported to a wide and featureless plain, still sitting on the throne. He is wearing a simple outfit of black and orange. In front of him is a tall man, similarly dressed, who looks something like his father. The man thanks Tor for arriving, and asks Tor for the use of his body. He claims that an invasion is about to begin, and that according to an important prophecy, he should "be in his own blood" to lead his army of Burning God worshippers. If he is, they are prophesied to conquer the Kingdom of Charagan quickly – within a year. Otherwise, the war will be long and difficult (though according to him, the forces of the Burning God will be victorious either way). And young Tor, a.k.a. Darien Firemount, should be quite willing to give up his physical body to his ancestor, **King Davarian Firemount**, for the good of their people.

Of course, Tor refuses to yield up his body for Davarian, who becomes outraged. He claims that there's no time to argue; he'll just have to take Tor's body by force. And then the man concentrates for a moment, and is suddenly armed with a sword and shield, and fully armored. He advances on the unarmed and unarmored Tor.

Meanwhile, back at the entrance to the throne room, Morningstar feels an odd sensation in her mind, as if there is a disturbance in *Ava Dormo* (unusual, given that she's wide awake...). And as Tor seems to be in some kind of trance himself, Morningstar instantly drops to sleep (a handy skill), enters *Ava Dormo*, and finds that the strange flat plain in which Tor has found himself actually exists in the Dreamscape. She cannot reach it directly, but hovers above it, able to observe but not interact physically. It's as if she's a three-dimensional being able only to observe the goings-on of a two-dimensional universe.

Tor cannot hear her, but she can hear Tor, as he yells, "I could use some help here!" Morningstar tries to give herself her armor and weapons, as she has become used to doing during her training with the Avatar, but it doesn't seem to work in this strange aspect of the Dreamscape. But she is able to cause a sword and shield to appear for Tor, and this lets him stand up to his ancestor in battle. As the fight goes on, she continues to assist Tor, sometimes making his weapon more "solid," sometimes removing his opponent's weapon, and even managing to successfully cast healing spells.

Meanwhile, a horde of the townspeople have marched down the narrow hall between the cavern and the throne room, and have the party trapped. One of them lobs a vial at them from the back of the throng, and it erupts into flames when it hits. Some in the party are burned, but the townsfolk seem to be immune.

kidcthuhu: We knew Seablade Point was too good to last. Cheap beer, friendly people... they were doomed. Nothing that good can last in Sagiro's world.

Now the Mouth of Nahalm (the big desert) and Tal Lor (a.k.a. Tal Boring, the world's dullest city), they'll last forever.

Kay gulps down a *potion of fire resistance*, eats a *bean of strength*, and wades into the mass of townsfolk. The party also manage to bar the progress of the throng with a magically *enlarged* gartine plank. (They keep a plank or two in the *bag of holding*.)

One of the townsfolk manages to get past the plank and the party members, and runs into the throne room towards Tor, who is still sitting motionless on the throne. Makel runs after him, and tackles the man before he can reach Tor. They roll around, there's a crunch, and flames erupt around them both. Makel rolls away, trying to put himself out.

Meanwhile, one of the fiery cats the party fought last time appears from behind the crowd of townsfolk and moves forward to attack, but the party, led by Kay, manage to kill it. When its vaporous body disperses, the dead body of Hodge is discovered, wearing a bright red cloak.

In *Ava Dormo*, Tor and his ancestor continue to trade blows, but Morningstar's intervention makes the difference, and Tor is victorious. Upon killing Davarian Firemount, he finds himself back in the throne room, his body covered with the wounds he received in the battle. The surviving townsfolk have fallen unconscious with Tor's victory.

While the rest of the party rest, Dranko goes back up to the surface, and flies the carpet out to the gartine arch in the nearby woods. From a distance through the trees, he can see a large group of people moving about in the failing daylight. And about when he sees them, they see him, and whoever "they" are loose a volley of crossbow bolts at him. He escapes back to the church on the carpet, and rejoins the party below in the Burning God shrine.



Possession is Nine-Tenths of the Law

Run #51 – Sunday, January 18, 1998

Thursday, June 20

In the morning, Flicker goes out invisibly to scout out the arch, but comes back reporting that he started glowing blue when he got too close, and some crossbow bolts were fired his way. The party discover a metal treasure box beneath the throne; Flicker opens it, and is hit by a poisoned needle, which paralyzes him (and might have killed him, if not for the *protection from poison* pin given to him by the Stormknights).

Then the party decide to haul the throne out and take it with them back to Tal Hae, but it's too heavy and cumbersome to move by normal means. Using the carpet to help support much of its weight, the party manage to wrestle the throne up the stairs, and load it onto the *folding boat*. They sail some way out to sea and spend the night there. Before bed, Ala (Morningstar's befriended raven) is sent to scout around the arch, and comes back reporting that there is no "big metal thing," but there was a "big wooden box" there. The Company deduce that the Burning God people are building some kind of edifice around the arch.

That night, Tor has a dream in which Davarian Firemount speaks to him. In the dream, Davarian seems remorseful for what happened, and urges Tor to go join the Burning God people coming through the gate, and give them assistance and advice. His people need him!

Friday, June 21

The next morning, a carpet flight inland to wreck the docks and sink the fishing boats of Seablade Point is aborted, as there are many people walking around that area. The party decide to leave with the throne and sail back to Tal Hae by way of Lan Hae.

Saturday, June 22 – Sunday, June 23

Ship travel to Lan Hae.

Monday, June 24

The Company arrive in Lan Hae, and go immediately to the church of Werthis there. They talk to a Stormknight named **Henric**, who actually takes them seriously as they talk about the Ventifact Colossus (the Stormknights from Lan Hae haven't yet returned from Sand's Edge) and the army coming through the gartine arch at Seablade Point. Henric promises that a scout ship will be sent to the peninsula to check out the story. Satisfied, the party continue on to Tal Hae.



Tuesday, June 25 – Thursday, June 27

Ship travel to Tal Hae.

Friday, June 28 [Day of Windsong (Brechen)]

The Company arrive in Tal Hae. At the Greenhouse, the Company discover Eddings fast asleep, and are unable to wake him; the cats have knocked some food pots and water jugs off shelves in the kitchen, and so have not starved. The party then contact the Tower via the crystal ball, and Thewana appears in the crystal ball, looking very haggard. When they tell her about the

throne, she goes off to tell Abernathy, who appears in the Greenhouse “secret room” a little while later. He looks extremely tired, and his eyes are glowing a very bright green. He casts some sort of spell, and he and the throne both vanish.

Makel, having been horrified by the sight of the eyeless and sleeping Eddings, becomes more and more bewildered. The party pay him 100 gold pieces for all he’s done, and promise to continue paying him to keep him on retainer.

Saturday, June 29 – Friday, August 3

Training happens. Also during this time:

- Makel uses his new wealth to rent a nice house in the better part of town.
- Tor picks up his new plate mail (commissioned last time they were in town), resplendent with flatworm tooth adornments.
- Dranko discovers that Califax has gone off on a journey, but no one knows where.

The party members who are training hear many rumors of war. The gnoll and kobold raids near Calnis are getting worse, and there are rumors that Eceren, a small coastal town north of Calnis, has been sacked. From far off, there are rumors of humanoids attacking Feslin, and orcs and goblins attacking Sentinel on the far western shores of the Kingdom. And there are worse rumors that something has completely wiped out the forest villages of Verdshane and Lorverd – possibly goblins, possibly a small army of imps, possibly some huge monster. No one knows for sure.

Also, while Flicker, Ernie and Morningstar train, Tor, Kay and Kibi take a two week vacation, sailing to Kynder Hold and then taking the flying carpet to Eggemoggin by way of Hae Kalkas. There they convince Kibi’s mom to give them her precious Gold Ring™ family heirloom. They also learn that there are now no orcs within 100 miles of the place.

On their way back to Tal Hae, they stop at Hae Kalkas and pay the Hae Kalkas Sages’ Consortium to research several topics: Davarian Firemount, Santo, Het Branoi, Annon Dun, the Inner Flame, and the Orcish Crusades. Then they discover that Kibi’s mom’s Ring is gone! None of them can remember where they might have lost it, so they trace their flight back to Eggemoggin, where they find the Ring has appeared again on Kibi’s mom’s mantelpiece. Clearly it has some strong magical tie to Kibi’s mom, and they decide to travel back to Tal Hae without it.

They return on July 14th, and though over two weeks have gone by since the Company’s return to Tal Hae from Seablade Point, Eddings is still sleeping. Strangely, his hair isn’t getting longer, and he doesn’t appear to be suffering from malnutrition.

That night, their friend Marbury Tillerson shows up... except that it isn’t really Marbury Tillerson. It turns out to be the creature that had possessed the little kid in Sand’s Edge and the sailor in Feslin. It introduces itself to the Company as **Farazil**, King of the Carch Din, but it admits when asked that it is sometimes referred to as a Soul Eater!

(See reference on the Ellish text in session 14.)

It announces that it had been sent to kill the party, but won’t say by whom. It says that it’s supposed to kill the party sooner rather than later, but that that would be no fun. It also says that for some reason, it would not or could not possess any of the party. It invites Morningstar to read Tillerson’s mind; it seems that *mind reading* no longer indicates the presence of Farazil. However, Tillerson does radiate magic while being possessed.

Then, still wearing Tillerson’s body, Farazil departs. The Company are understandably upset.

Piratecat: Sagiro failed to mention the creepiest thing about Farazil. Tillerson is our buddy and favorite guardsman, and while possessing his body Farazil blissfully pulled his own arm out of his socket. He did it just to show us that we couldn’t hurt him without hurting our friend. There was a sickening crack. Then, if I remember correctly, he left Tillerson for a few seconds so that Tillerson could scream – and then Farazil took him once again. Sagiro is one sick bastard.



I Hate Nature

Run #52 – Sunday, February 1, 1998

Later in the training period, the Company receive a visit from **Kira**, a Stormknight with news from Sand’s Edge. She tells them that a building had been found burned completely to the ground, the morning after the Ventifact Colossus attack. Ironically, the building would have been smashed anyway had the Colossus taken one more step before its death.

The ashes of the building were arrayed in a specific pattern, as if the burning of the building had been part of some complex ritual. Among the ashes were found a number of small metal pyramids, similar to the highly magical one taken from the Burning God shrine in Seablade Point. These smaller ones aren’t magical, but the High Stormknight Dalesandro in Sand’s Edge thought the Company might be interested in seeing them.

Finally, the party are visited by Abernathy and Ozilinsh. Abernathy thanks the Company for the “snack” of the throne; there was something strange about it (probably the fact that it contained some part of Tor’s ancestor) but it was extremely useful. Abernathy then goes on to ask the party if they’re managing to enjoy themselves while performing their duties. He promises them that they will soon get the answers to many of their questions.

Ozilinsh, who you may recall is an expert on magical and exotic beasts, has some vague recollections about Soul Eaters. He knows they could possess people, but thinks that they detected strongly magical, couldn’t control human eyes very well, and could be driven out of their hosts by bright light. He seems to remember that there were Lords of the Carch Din, but thinks that they were all killed or banished.

He suggests to the party that they seek out the home of his old mentor, **Gadrunas**, who had one of the most extensive libraries of exotic creatures extant. While Gadrunas has probably died of old age, Ozilinsh guesses that his daughter Hickory probably still lives in the family farm near the village of Tinderbox.

Sparrowhawk: You mean people actually stayed in Sand’s Edge after the Ventifact Colossus incident? I thought that a disaster like that was the kind of thing that would cause a mass exodus. Ah well.

Sagiro: Actually, there was quite an exodus from Sand’s Edge, but not anything like the whole city population. Many people had nowhere to go, and chose to stay and rebuild.

Sparrowhawk: A bunch of questions:

(1) *The party seem to stay in one place just long enough to find out something is going on (or else to get some loot), and then leave. Why didn’t the party stay in Seablade Point and attempt to fully uncover what was happening there? It just seems too important to me to just walk away from.*

Sagiro: My guess is that they wanted to get the throne back to Abernathy ASAP, so that he could use it for... whatever he’s draining magic items to do. Or they may have felt that they had enough information already (army of Fire God worshippers coming through a magical gateway!), and that the most important thing was to tell someone who could mobilise an army of their own. At least, that was my impression at the time.

(2) *Re-reading the whole story, I see some things I didn’t before. The song Kay remembered, for instance, mentioned a Hammer (capital H), "the Warlord's Maul." The Matun Essendi, right?*

Give that man a cigar!

(3) *How did a party of ~3rd level characters fight a behir and survive? That’s a CR8 monster! Was it less buff in 2E?*

Even when I use “official” monsters, I usually alter them somewhat. The behir they fought was somewhat weaker than a book version. Bet I had Piratecat scared, though!

(4) *Why did the party feel it was necessary to hide the fact that they were using a magical folding boat from Makel when they didn’t keep anything else from him?*

Dunno. I don’t pretend to always understand the party’s motives.

(5) *Are the Sharshun’s poison sacs natural or are they implanted by some other means? I was under the impression that they were a racial feature of the Sharshun, but that seems unlikely to me.*

They’re not natural. They’re slightly magical, and are probably implanted during young adulthood.

(6) *The eater of souls is so evil! What is this thing, a demon or incorporeal being of some kind? I like your prophecies and ancient writings, by the way. ("And too the lesser horrors: the Soul Eater, one as many, and the Sek-ki, many as one – these fadeth (from thought) as all things behind the Curtain. Who now remembreth such (things)?")*

The party will soon be heading to Gadrunas’s old library to find out just what “Soul Eaters” are. You haven’t seen the last of King Farazil, I can assure you.

(7) *Speaking of the Seki, they sound very cool. Another unique monster, right? What can you tell us about them (without giving away big sections of plot, of course)?*

Yup, the Seki was an invention of my own, though I’m sure I borrowed the basic idea from something I read at some point. From the passage in Tharnius’s letter “...another damned Seki got through,” one might surmise that they come from, or are being sent from, another country, continent, or plane. They’re certainly not native to Charagan.

(8) *Finally, a pathetic plea for a spoiler. Does anyone in the party get an Eye of Moirel imbedded in themselves? Dranko might have a reason to wear that eyepatch, then.*

Sagiro: Gosh, what a nifty idea. Mind if I steal it?

Kidcthulhu: Dear Sparrowhawk: Shutup, shutup, shutup, shutup. You’ve violated Rule 1 of Gaming: NEVER GIVE THE DM ANY IDEAS! Even if it’s not your DM. An Eye lodged in Dranko’s head? Eeek. Please, leave the plotting to Sagiro. He’s plenty evil on his own.

As for the *folding boat*, as I remember we wanted to keep it secret from the rest of the vultures in the harbor, rather than specifically from Makel. We didn’t want to just unfold it there in front of all those people!



CHAPTER 3

A Conspiracy Unmasked

kidcthulhu: I thought I'd provide a brief rundown on the members of Abernathy's Company. I don't remember what levels we were at the time that this Story Hour has reached, and they were 2nd Ed. levels anyway, so I'll just give classes:

Tor Bladbearder: Big strong fighter type. Tor is six-foot-something, blonde, handsome, honest and likeable. He's not the brightest candle in the chandelier, but he's noble and good and very easily amused by stacks of treasure. Tor's role is to suck up damage and take out two or three enemies for every one that the rest of the party eliminates. He's frightfully good at his job.

Mrs. Isabel Horn: Early thirties, pretty in an unremarkable way, soft-spoken but firm, mage. Mrs. Horn (we never call her Isabel) has joined the party as an offshoot of her quest to find her husband lost at sea. She is capable of producing just about anything from her capacious (but normal) handbag! Her role is to keep us on the straight and narrow, and provide a civilizing influence.

Kiblhathur Bimson: Young dwarven mage. Kibi was a dwarven mage back when there were none, and he's quietly proud of his unique status. Kibi is dour, but funny, and has the best character voice ever (although you can't hear it here). His role is to blow things up, and to make comments about how dwarves do everything better. Oh, and to brew really good beer.

Kay Olafsen: Pretty, half-elven ranger. Kay is our bad cop in all our games of good cop/bad cop. She's the party member (after Ernie) most frequently underestimated by the enemy. She is of "good" nature, but not prone to forgiveness for insults or previous wrongs. Her role is to get mean when we need someone to, and to play nice when we need someone to.

Morningstar of Ell: Shock-white hair, six feet tall and skinny, priestess of the goddess of night. Ell is a much-maligned goddess; people think of her as evil (although she's not) and Morningstar has the challenging role of being a misunderstood prophet in an already misunderstood church. She is very centered morally, and provides a needed neutrality in an otherwise painfully good party. Ernie thinks she should eat more. She's somewhat shy, but constant association with the Company is wearing down her resistance to embarrassment. She definitely has the coolest cleric pressies of all of us. Her role is healing, mind reading and cool dream stuff.

Dranko Blackhole: Ugly but stylish half-orc cleric/rogue. Dranko is the product of a bad childhood and a lifetime spent pushing people away with bad behavior and rudeness, in the hope of avoiding eventual rejection. The Company's acceptance of him has been a bit of a world shaker for Dranko. He's still rude and gruff, more as a knee-jerk reaction than anything else, but he's become a hero in spite of himself. Ernie likes to say that "Dranko is just an old softy. He's got a heart of gold underneath." Dranko wishes Ernie wouldn't say that quite so loud; it could ruin his street cred. Dranko's role is stealth, healing, outrageous plans and getting the party in trouble when there's nothing else going wrong. He's very good at two of the four and exceptionally good at the others.

Flicker Proudfoot (NPC): Halfling fighter/rogue. Flicker is a type 2 halfling; inquisitive, acquisitive and full of mischief. He has to be watched carefully around shiny objects and other people's purses, although he generally means no harm. Ernie despairs of him. Since the death of Mrs. Horn, Flicker has quietly battled his own demons of guilt and fear, demons which will continue to haunt him for the next few years. His role in the party is locks, traps, bouncing, *blinking* and frenetic energy.

Ernie Roundhill: Short, round, freckle-faced halfling cleric/fighter. Ernie is a type 1 halfling, straight out of Tolkien. He's loyal, law-abiding, caring, stubborn in defense of the little guy (usually him or Flicker), and just about as sweet as a guy can get without bringing on insulin shock. Ernie frequently gets himself in trouble by trying to be a front-line fighter without the hit points for it. He is a splendid cook, and the Company eats better on the road than most people do in good taverns. He's part Italian grandmother, part lapdog, part kid brother. His role in the party is food, comfort, motherly advice, emotional affirmation, healing, and occasionally opening a tiny can of halfling whup-ass.



Saturday, August 4

The Company decide to go first to Verdshane, and investigate the rumors of the attacks there, and then to go see if they can find Hickory and learn more about Soul Eaters. With training finished, they set out.

Sunday, August 5

Travel north towards Verdshane by way of Calnis.

Monday, August 6 [Eve of Departure (Ell)]

En route to Verdshane the Company meet a family fleeing south from Calnis to Tal Hae, driven by the threat of humanoid attacks, and by the awful smell of the stink-wiggles. Apparently the whole city now reeks of the creatures. Dranko gives them the address of **Berthel**, his old landlady, in case they need a place to stay.

The Company bypass Calnis, but pass near enough to smell the faint odor of the stink-wiggles.



Tuesday, August 7 – Saturday, August 11

Travel to Verdshane via Woodfork.

Sunday, August 12

The Company reach Verdshane in the evening. In the woods around the town, there is an odd lack of noises and wildlife. As the party head towards the Shadow Chaser, a hail of small wooden javelins comes from the trees, though there's no sign of the throwers, and no follow-up attack.

In the Shadow Chaser, the party find **Minya** holed up, and there are torches burning all around the outside of the Inn. Minya welcomes the party, and tells them that she is hiding from "stickmen," small wooden creatures that look like twigs with arms and legs but no heads. She also mentions that Meledien's mercenaries are still camped near the northern ruins.

While the party are talking with Minya, a group of stickmen gather near the edge of the trees. When the party go out to confront them, many of them start stacking themselves on top of one another, and in a very short time there is a huge stickman, standing about fifteen feet tall, and swinging arms like huge wooden clubs.

It continues the attack, along with a number of its smaller brethren who throw small javelins that are actually their own arms! (As soon as they are thrown, the javelin-arms grow back.) The Company defeat the creatures using a combination of weapon attacks, carpet-mounted fire attacks (some of which start a stand of trees burning), and a *wall of thorns* (cast by a magical staff) from Kibi, which shelters the inn and restricts the battlefield.



Attack of the 50-Foot Stick Woman

Run #53 – Sunday, February 15, 1998

Later that night, two of Meledien's thugs visit the inn, come to see what caused the smoke and fire. They clearly don't have much respect for Minya, but depart without causing too much hassle when confronted by some of the party members.

Monday, August 13

Next morning around sunrise, the people on watch hear faint screams coming from the north – the direction of the old ruins. An expedition goes out that way on the flying carpet. As they fly above the trees, they note some mercenaries fleeing wildly through the forest, to the southeast.

At the ruins, there is another (but even larger) conglomerate stickman standing in the clearing. On the ground are many mercenary corpses, some speared to death and some beaten. The gigantic stickman itself has been wounded in several places. There is no sign of Meledien. The carpet expedition flies back to the inn, with the large stickman following, and there is another pitched battle outside the Shadow Chaser. The Company are again victorious.

The party decide to follow the tracks of one of the fleeing mercenaries, and they are led down the Greatwood Road back towards Calnis. They eventually come to one of the roadside shelters, and find one of the mercenaries there; his name is **Erik**, and he's one of the ones who had come to investigate the day before at the Shadow Chaser.

He has some things to say about Meledien – that she's a pretty harsh boss, that she's killed at least one mercenary who challenged her authority, and that she's been letting monsters go in the vicinity of Kinnet Gorge. Apparently, most of the monsters appeared on the floor of the gorge, and the mercenaries would kill them or drive them off by shooting them with crossbows from the top of the gorge. (It seemed that there was usually a period of time during which the released creatures were stunned.) But Meledien evidently underestimated the stickmen, which fled into the forest as soon as they were free, and then eventually merged into a huge stickman and attacked their camp. Frankly, Erik seems happy to be done with the job.

The party go back and investigate Kinnet Gorge. They can now see, suspended in mid-air out over the gorge, brief glimpses of the sides of wooden crates. It's as if there's an invisible mist which is mostly keeping them concealed. Through the use of some clever dredging techniques, the party discover that there are eleven crates, hanging invisibly over the gorge, suspended from invisible cables which are tied to invisible crossbeams. Some of them are extremely large.

The party spend the night back at the ruins and make plans.



Whistling in the Dark

Run #54 – Sunday, March 1, 1998

Tuesday, August 14

Before departing Verdshane, the party inspect the building in which Meledien had been spending most of her time. As they know from their last visit, the oddly-shaped building has a roughly triangular footprint, and is divided into three symmetrically arranged chambers. (There is a smaller fourth area in the very center, and the entrance is at one of the vertices). In each of the three chambers is a blue crystal globe, entirely encased in a clear crystal mooring that is built into the rock of the building. Also in each chamber is a smooth hemispherical depression in the floor. The globes and the depressions detect as extremely magical.

Meledien has freed two of the three large crystal globes from their moorings, and rolled them into two of the hemispherical depressions in the floor. The globes are covered with strange runes, and are magically locked into place. Even after a *dispel magic* is cast, they won't budge. Dranko pokes one with his pinky, and it freezes to the globe. Some skin comes away, and the tip of the finger goes numb.

The Company leave a *glyph of warding* for Meledien at the entrance to the building, and head out for Minok. Along the way they come across a large group of soldiers from Minok, heading to Calnis to assist in the ongoing battles against the gnolls and

kobolds. They are greatly entertained by the party's stories about slain monsters, including ones about the recently defeated stickmen.

The travel plan, by the way, is to go west on the Greatwood Road to Minok, and from there take a ship to Kynder Hold on Nahalm. From there they'll go overland to Kallor (City of Twilight, most holy to the Ellish religion) by way of Medir (the town nearest to Lizardo, whence came one of the party's Eyes of Moirel). Kallor is directly on the other side of the mountains from the rich farmlands around Tinderbox, where lived (and hopefully still lives) Gadrunas' daughter Hickory.



Wednesday, August 15 [Chef's Day (Yondalla)]

Travel to Minok.

Thursday, August 16

In Minok, the party hear rumors of a war going on near the tip of the Balani Peninsula – where Seablade Point is located. Foreign invaders have landed on the shores, it is said. They also hear rumors that there are two adventurers named **Jerzembeck** and **Junaya** (either sister/brother or husband/wife), who have been trying to systematically eliminate the stink-wiggles in Calnis.

Friday, August 17

Travel by ship to Kynder Hold.

Saturday, August 18 [Festival of Blessed Shade (Pikon)]

Arrival in Kynder Hold. Morningstar meets with her mother, who is still acting distant and somewhat strange.

Sunday, August 19 – Monday, August 20

Travel to Medir. The Company reach Medir in the early evening but don't stop, instead continuing onward and camping out farther down the road.

Tuesday, August 21 – Thursday, August 23

Travel to Kallor.

Friday, August 24

The party arrive at Kallor in the afternoon. The day is bright, and from outside the city walls, it appears that the sun must be shining down into the city. However, after passing through a large gatehouse that straddles the wall, the party emerge into a city in twilight (the sun shines overhead, but its light is severely muted). Morningstar goes to the High Temple of Ell, as Kallor is the center of the Ellish religion. She is clearly known there, but not necessarily approved of by all of her Sisters. The Sister to whom she reports, named **Corinne**, is clearly disapproving, and quite hostile towards Morningstar.

The Company spend the night at the Night's Candle.

Here's another detail regarding Morningstar that I realize was skipped over in these posts. Another Priestess of Ell in Tal Hae, named **Amber**, has started her own semi-heretical branch of the Church, called the Illuminated Sisters of Ell. They strongly believe that the Ellish religion has made itself weak by treating the Day with such fear and distrust, and more, that it has proved too discouraging in recruiting new members of the flock. They focus more on the Ellish precepts of succor and protection, and teaching people not to fear the Darkness and Mother Night. But their doors are open during the daytime, unlike those of other Ellish temples.

Morningstar, by dint of her unique position (she has a special dispensation from the High Priestess of Tal Hae to journey by day and sleep at night), has become something of an unwilling figurehead of this new Ellish sect. Amber considers her a powerful ally.

Saturday, August 25 [Founding Day (Tal Hae)]

In Kallor, the party learn that crossing the mountains to Tinderbox will not be as easy as it usually is. Orcs and goblins, on their way to the besieged city of Sentinel on the coast, have occupied the two passes that connect Kallor to the farmlands around Tinderbox. With most of the Kallorian soldiery off fighting in Sentinel, and the King's forces engaged in many other conflicts around the Kingdom, the city doesn't have the strength to take back the passes or drive the humanoids out of the Tinderbox region. One of the passes (Twilight Pass) was retaken for a time, but a large force of goblins took it back. The Company decide to try the other pass, called Five-Stone Pass.

They head out from Kallor on horseback, towards the mountains. There is a group of Kallorian soldiers stationed a half day's march from the start of the mountain passes, where the two roads diverge. They give the party some information about the uniforms used by the humanoids, and send the party on their way.



The Battle of Five-Stone Pass

Run #55 – Thursday, March 19, 1998

The party ride up into mountains, following Five-Stone Pass. The first part of the trip is uneventful, but in the late afternoon, Dranko (on point as usual) discovers that orcs have knocked a landslide barrier across the pass, too high for the horses to cross. There are two small wooden watch towers built on the other side of the barrier, each with an orc lookout.

The party discuss options. They ride quietly back a couple of hundred yards, leave the horses, and approach on foot the last bend in the pass before the watch towers. Then Kay is made invisible, and, armed with Flicker's *ring of jumping*, goes forward to scout. She gets right up to the barrier easily, and even jumps over it with no problems. On the other side of the landslide Kay discovers a small cave, in which are lounging two more orcs, two extremely large and powerful orcs, and one large but "froofy" orc. The froofy one is dressed in purple silks, and has shoes with a slight curl in the toes. As Kay spies on them, the froofy orc motions for the other orcs to be silent, and then begins to sniff. Sensing that she might have been detected by smell, Kay backs away from the cave mouth, and goes to jump back over the barricade.

That's when all her luck decides to leave her. She slips. She falls onto the landslide with a loud crash, sending small stones scattering. The two orcs on the towers snap to alertness, and start looking around and talking loudly, as the other orcs come out of the cave. Realizing her peril, Kay uses the last charge of Flicker's ring to try a final jump over the barricade – and slips again. This time she falls on the top of the barricade, on her back, feet pointing the wrong way. The orcs are now slashing out at the air with their swords, getting closer and closer with their hacks. With no charges left in the ring, Kay strikes out at an orc who's gotten too close, and this causes her to become visible...

The rest of the party, hearing the loud sounds of orcs shouting, come running to help, and the battle is joined. The normal-sized orcs aren't much of a problem, but the large orcs flee through a concealed tunnel, and the froofy orc vanishes. Minutes later, the froofy orc reappears, high up on a ledge looking out over the pass, and it lets loose with a blast of magical frost that hits half the party.

The following round the froofy orc is paralyzed by a *hold person*, and as Dranko climbs up the mountainside towards it, two large orcs appear up on the ledge. They poke curiously at their froofy friend, and seconds later, those two are also *held*.

Tor, meanwhile, has found a partially concealed tunnel entrance on the far side of the landslide, which seems to lead up to the shelf, and Kibi discovers another tunnel mouth on the other side of the pass. At about that time, a large company of orcs (about two dozen) approaches from behind, from the direction of the horses. Kibi halts their approach (and kills a few of them) with a *wall of thorns* from his staff. Then Flicker, who was watching the other tunnel mouth, hears more approaching orcs.

Although these orcs are able to shove Tor out of the tunnel mouth through sheer force of numbers, he and the rest of the party butcher them as they come pouring out of the tunnel, enough so that the final two turn and run in fear. Those two are met by two more large orcs coming the other way; the smaller orcs squeeze past and flee, while the larger two fight and are soon killed. Unfortunately, the smaller ones have escaped into the tunnels, and at about this time the *wall of thorns* drops, and twenty more orcs charge down towards the party.

This time, though, the landslide works to the party's advantage, and the charging orcs are cut down like wheat as they reach the barrier. Tor, Ernie, Morningstar and Dranko man the landslide, while Kay and Kibi attack from range up on the shelf. It's quick and brutal. Tor sends orc heads flying left and right, and in his rage hacks down the final orc, who had thrown away his weapon and was begging for mercy.

The Battle of Five-Stone Pass, Part II

Run #56 – Friday, April 10, 1998

The Company go back to check on their horses, only to find that they are gone. Hoof prints head away back down the pass towards Kallor. The party decide not to go after them, and continue along the pass, especially wary because some orcs escaped the previous encounter. But there is no sign of trouble, or returning orcs, for the rest of the day.

Saturday, August 26

The party travel into the morning, finally going to sleep at about 3:00 a.m. in a place where the pass opens up a bit. They wake up later in the morning, and for a few minutes there's still no sign of trouble, but then the sound of drums starts to echo faintly through the pass. In preparation for trouble, the party make Tor invisible, and use *dust of illusion* on Morningstar to make her look like a large ogre.

The party progress cautiously, trying to maintain the appearance of an ogre and a half-orc (Dranko) escorting prisoners. The sound of the drums gets louder and louder, and then a large force rounds a bend in the pass and comes into view. In front are five ogres, and behind them are about fifty orcs. They stop when they see the party, and Dranko walks forward to parley.

Unfortunately, the ogres aren't buying it. They don't seem to trust a "half-breed," and they want to know what happened to the "Uktul Kan" (this means "pale giant" in Orcish, and apparently refers to Tor). It turns out that spies have been reporting back on the party's progress along the pass. Morningstar has been *mind reading* the ogre, and realizes that combat is inevitable. She's right. The ogres and orcs attack.

Kibi opens with a *wall of thorns*, but it's placed largely behind the large orcish force, and mostly just prevents escape. In response to this, some of the ogres pull out potions and take quick swigs.

More effective is Kibi's next salvo – a *fireball* launched from a scroll. This wipes out a good number of orcs and one of the ogres, though most of the ogres seem unfazed. The battle rages fiercely; one of the ogres seems to be magically berserk, the others fight with – well, with ogre strength, and the surviving orcs manage to flank the party near the end. But despite some harrowing moments, the party win without any casualties.

The party question a captive orc following the battle. The orc confirms that the valley on the other side of the mountains is under orcish control, and providing supplies to the orcish armies as they move through the mountains en route to Sentinel. The orc is also confident that a figure called the "**Chun Aggrat**" (Orcish for the Red General) will easily dispose of the party, despite the failure of the recently defeated group.



Passing the Torch

Run #57 – Sunday, April 19, 1998

The party continue onward through the pass, and reach the other side as night falls. They easily dispose of a token guard at the base of the pass, and travel eastward along the mountains until they find an abandoned farmhouse conspicuously close in (Ozilinsh had said that Gadrunas' farmhouse was the closest to the mountains). This place has apparently already been ransacked by orcs, but there are no bodies within. The party spend the night in the burned-out house.



Monday, August 27

In the morning, the Company wake, and discover a trail leading from the farmhouse towards the nearby mountains. There are signs that orcs have been that way. The trail leads up into a well hidden pass, which appears to dead-end at a small grave site marked for Gadrunas. However, the party discover a secret door into the mountains which the orcs seem to have missed.

The party go into a short tunnel leading into the mountains, a tunnel which empties into a small cave. The cave (and an exiting tunnel on the far side) is guarded by a large floating sphere with one big central eye and several smaller eyestalks; the creature warns the party to leave, or be destroyed.

The party do not leave. The creature fires a beam from an eyestalk and vaporizes a rock near their feet. But something about the creature doesn't seem quite real to some of the party members, and the creature is revealed to be an illusion. Past the illusionary guardian, the party meet **Hickory**, now an elderly woman, who tries briefly to hold them off with several crossbows mounted on crates. She decides to trust the group when they use Ozilinsh's name.

Hickory has taken shelter from the orcs in Gadrunas' old library, having abandoned the farmhouse to the rapacious humanoids. She allows the party to examine all the books and scrolls, and they spend the whole day in the library. They read all about all sorts of weird and hideous monsters, and also find some useful information about Soul Eaters. In one book they read:

In a time now past were the Carch Din, called also the Shadow Imps and the Devourers of Souls. Great was the mischief that they worked before they fled, at the death of their fell Kings.

Three Kings there were: Azarin, Farazil and Naboz; and through them much harm was done to the world. Unlike the Shadow Imps were they, and seemingly without weakness. Undetectable, leaving no sign, casting no spoor, staining no memory, and clean of enchantment or dweomercraft, they might have blighted the Kingdom for many long years. For where the Carch Din were a nuisance, their Kings were a terror, and an oft-used tool of the Emperor. But it seems that they were killed at last; Boros of the Spire traveled himself to the Shadows to learn their secrets.

For creatures of the Shadow Plane are the Carch Din, and so too their Kings. The hosts of the Kings each were found and slain in places of utter light or utter darkness, and with no shadows close at hand in which to flee to their home plane, they were forced to take a material and mortal aspect. In such a form were Azarin, Farazil and Naboz dissipated and removed from the world.

In another scroll, they discover this passage:

I fear that we are helpless to defeat this self-styled King Naboz; he takes what bodies he wishes, and can so hide from all but the most potent scrying. We have learned somewhat of his movements and methods, but the news is not good. While inhabiting a body, Naboz cannot be detected by any readily available means; the mind stays calm and ordinary, and no enchantment can be detected about the host. As such he strikes with perfect surprise. He can ride about in a body for weeks or months, and afterward the victim has only neutral and pleasant memories of the time, no matter the atrocities committed. Even the extreme measure of killing the victim only buys us time; in a month or two after, reports of his return spread again. His only weakness is a strong preference for contact for the switching of bodies, though at least once he has crossed several feet of space to effect an escape into a new body. Also, thankfully, he has evidenced a reluctance to kill anyone whom he is currently inhabiting. Still, the conclusion thus far is that King Naboz is unkillable, and capable of nearly infinite malice.

- Kmak

The party spend the night in the library.



Tuesday, August 28 – Wednesday, August 29

Crossing the fields, the party consider spending some time rescuing farmers and killing orcs, but end up chased by a huge orcish force towards the coast.

In a prodigious display of stamina, and aided both by spells and *Burning Sky*, the party reach the shore, unfold the ship, and spend the night on the ship.

Piratecat: These two short paragraphs can't even begin to express how heroic and epic that run seemed. We were being cut off by what seemed like an inexhaustible army of orcs, with no place to go to ground and no chance of fighting them. Having gotten the information we had come for, we decided to race for the shore fifty or sixty-odd miles away, certain that they'd get bored with chasing us before very long.

They didn't get bored.

Maybe it was Tor's reputation as "Uktul Kan," maybe they were being spurred on by their mysterious leader, but we had to run for our lives. To me it felt a little like the reverse of the epic run made by Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas in *The Two Towers*; this time, the orcs were chasing us, and we couldn't stop no matter what. The halflings had the worst time of it, of course, but they were able to ride on the flying carpet for part of the way (the carpet leaves a trail of smoke behind it, unfortunately, so it isn't so good for stealth missions). Dranko luckily had some *cure fatigue* (2E Spells & Magic) spells prepared, but we were gasping with the orcs only a few miles back when we finally reached the ocean. We had been running for more than a day with no sleep, and we were devastated both mentally and physically. But we were safe.

It was one of those times that made me wish we had a bard in the party. We did something pretty cool – staying alive – and no-one is ever going to know about it. Unless Dranko tells 'em, of course. And no one believes him.

LostSoul: How did Sagiro run this in-game to make it fresh and exciting? I can never think of a way to make a long chase scene more than a bunch of dice rolls. Sure, you can throw in a pack of really fast orcs that the party has to defeat right now or they'll be slowed down until the main army reaches them; but other than stuff like that, how can you make a long-distance chase thrilling?

kidcthulhu: I had to think a long time about this before I could come up with an answer. It's hard to convey the heart-pounding tension this session had; I had sore muscles the next day just from holding them tense for so long.

How does Sagiro do it? Well, I don't know what he'd say, but I've finally put my finger on part of it. He doesn't want us to succeed. I mean, I'm sure as a DM and friend he doesn't want us wiped out by several hundred orcs. But you'd never know it from the look on his face.

For these sessions (and we have had other terrible run-for-your-life sessions since), he becomes incredibly stern and unyielding. In a sense, he becomes the elements we are facing, the very realities of physical endurance and physics that we are battling. We tell him what we want to do, and he has us roll the dice, yes. But it's all in the attitude. Someone fails a CON check, and Sagiro says, sternly, as if it's all over, "Ernie, you're getting a terrible cramp. Your leg is frozen up and..." and Kay immediately interjects, "I pick up Ernie and keep running!"

Sagiro frowns and says, "You do know Ernie weighs over 70 pounds?" Again, the harsh world trying to force us to face reality and give up. And we roll the dice. And the dice give us victory again over fate. Or they spit on us again, and someone else picks up Ernie and helps the now herniated Kay, and we keep rolling the dice.

I think it's a combination of Sagiro's total commitment to not letting this be an easy task, and the party's indomitable will to win.

Does that help?

Thursday, August 30 – Saturday, September 2

Ship travel to Sand's Edge.

Sunday, September 3 – Monday, September 4

Layover in Sand's Edge.

Tuesday, September 5 – Monday, September 11

Ship travel to Tal Hae.

Tuesday, September 12

The Company complete the long ship voyage to Tal Hae by way of Sand's Edge. In the three months since the Ventifact Colossus rose from the desert, some real progress has been made on hauling away chunks of flesh from the great turtle. Hundreds of volunteers and city workers are involved in the project, and the party learn that the City Council intends to leave

the shell as a great roof for a new open market, once the rest of the turtle has been cleared.

Still, all is not well there. Hundreds of people have fled the city since the attack, and hundreds more have sickened or died from the “turtle sickness” that has swept the city. Carrion birds and rats infest the town square, where the majority of the vast bulk still festers. And it will likely be a couple of years still until the last of the Ventifact Colossus’s body is cleared away.



Wednesday, September 13 – Tuesday, October 17

Back in Tal Hae, training happens. During this time, word arrives that the forces at Sentinel have driven out the orcs there, and that the Kallorians have won the pass through the mountains, routing the orcs in the process. Kay complains that she wasn’t there to help mop up the orcs.

Also during this time is the one-year anniversary of Mrs. Horn’s resurrection (September 25). As they promised, the party go to the Church of Brechen to renew their pledges, and it’s confirmed that Tor has done his part. Then a priest of Brechen leads them back into a small room, with a window looking out on the sea. The soothing sounds of surf pounding the shore come in through the window. Abernathy is there, lying in a bed, looking frail and at peace. “Ah, I’m glad you could make it,” he says softly. He turns to the priest and asks to be alone with the party for a while.

“Do you know what today is?” he continues. “It’s my birthday. Quite clever to have arranged things that way, really. This morning I saw the end of the 997th year of my life. And much to my relief, it’s the last one I’m going to see. Today I finish paying my debt to Brechen, and fulfill my promise. Today I finally kick back and stop saving the world.

“You can’t... possibly know what a relief it is. For so many years, the weight on my shoulders has been... well, it’s difficult to describe. I had come to believe that if I failed, the kingdom and all the people in it would be doomed. I had come to believe that no one could replace me. It is a... side effect... of our work that we archmagi live such a long time. But for years now I’ve really just been hanging on through force of will. I couldn’t... die... or who knows what would happen?

“But then I was shown the truth of things. I’m not really so important, you know. We have hope now, and we’ll continue to have hope after I’m gone. I’m leaving things in very capable hands. Ozilinsh, if you want to know the truth, is much smarter than I am. He’s quite the prodigy, and he’s already doing everything I’ve been doing, as well as I ever did it. He’s proven ready to adopt the mantle of an archmage. He was apprentice to one of the others for decades. Highly recommended, you could say. Isabel Horn will be his apprentice. She too is a fast learner, though I don’t think the tower life will ever really agree with her. That’s good. If we’re lucky, all of this will be over before she grows too old.

“We decided that my tower wasn’t a good place for Thewana after my departure... she’s gone to replace Ozilinsh at his old job... old Grawly’s been barely able to hold it together with only his junior apprentice, and Flynus has been working his old elven bones off to pick up the slack.”

He coughs, and his eyes twinkle. “Ah, but I’m getting ahead of myself. Yes, yes, I know I promised that you’d find out everything. Well, I never said that I’d tell you. That would take far too long, and I’m really... quite tired. No, no, I’m not going to tell you anything. I’ll leave that for Ozilinsh. When you get back to the Greenhouse, he’ll answer all of your questions. He knows as much as any of us know.

“But I’m still going to urge you to caution. It wasn’t on a whim that I withheld so much from you, and you should continue to act with discretion whenever possible. But things are moving quickly now, and you’ll find that at times action is more important than secrecy. If you can find reliable allies, who themselves can be counted on to be discreet, don’t be afraid to accept their help. You’ll need it before the end.”

Abernathy pauses, and closes his eyes. His breathing slows. Then he opens his eyes and again, and says softly: “You know, I meant what I said a month ago. I’ve lived many lonely centuries, since my master Alander passed away. I had one apprentice before Thewana, but he lasted less than twenty years before he couldn’t take the strain. For most of the time, it’s been just me; Thewana was only my apprentice for 63 years. Hundreds of years alone in my tower, pursuing my work and little else. No friends. No time for them. Not a pleasant way to live. And you... you’ve been like a... family to me. I know it... probably doesn’t seem like much... to you, but after the... years of solitude... I know it probably doesn’t seem fair, what I’ve asked of you, but I for... my part have long stopped thinking of... you as... agents. You’ve been friends. I’m glad to... have experienced that... before the end. Thank... you.”

Suddenly his eyes grow very bright, and a smile of pure wonder suffuses his face. “Oh... my. What a delightful feeling... sand... between my toes. So... beautiful. I think I’ll just... lie down here... and... rest for a while.”

And just like that, Abernathy is gone.

Sparrowhawk: We hardly knew him, and now he's gone. A moment of silence for Abernathy...

Now, some questions and comments.

1. Where did all the otyughs come from?
2. They say that the two ancient races of elves, the Mors Tarathi and the Elhen Tarathi, are extinct. We already know that reports of the Mors Tarathi's demise were greatly exaggerated. What about the Elhen Tarathi?
3. Just who are our enemies, anyway? A round-up of the forces of evil (as far as I can make out) follows. Please correct me or fill in the gaps if you can.

The mysterious "P". This person or persons (working through Manzanill the wizard) spied on Abernathy et al through a network of pretty ordinary folks (Levec Oldbarrow, Gluefoot, Frohwirth, etc.). P also organized the excavation of the blood gargoyle, and its attack on Ghant. This was apparently meant to keep the Archmage Fylnius busy while he (she? they? it?) brought something into this world (from beyond the Masking?). There is no indication as to what this was, but as Fylnius said, "Something got through. Something big." P has a distinctive style to his/her/their/its villainy: always getting lackeys to do the work, never revealing anything.

The Black Circle. This evil religion, thought to be long dead, has resurfaced in the form of the corrupted Scarbearer sect of the Church of Delioch. Scarbearers left the church by the hundreds to join fallen cleric Mokad in forming the new Black Circle. There is more known about the Black Circle than about P, but only because there isn't any info at all about that monogrammatic menace. In the distant past, the Black Circle was involved in the leadership of the underground city (beneath Gohgan's basement) just before its fall. In the present, they funded P's dig in the Mouth of Nahalm (for the blood gargoyle) but don't seem to be doing much else. Yet. (Connection with P? The way Mokad funded the dig without asking anything about it begs the question.)

The Sharshun. Evil Mors Tarathi with sacs of poison implanted in their mouths so they can commit suicide when captured. Cruel and devious, they will stop at nothing to get the Eyes of Moirel. Why they want them isn't clear, but Masteen (a man hired by them to bid on the Cyclops) thought they wanted to use them to free their Emperor. The Eyes have said they want to "travel nowhere" and that this would be a bad thing. One of them may have already done this, as that hooded figure who disappeared at the Mirrors of Semek was almost certainly a Sharshun. It is not known whether the object he was holding was an Eye, but it seems likely. Also unknown was the exact relationship between Sagiro and the Sharshun. (He certainly worked with them, and towards the same ends.) (A couple of Sharshun in the cyclops battle wore Black Circle holy symbols. Connection?)

The Burning God. Another long-dead evil religion resurfaces. A mysterious force dominates the residents of Seablade Point, they go into a trance-like state and perform dark rituals without knowing what they are doing. This has something to do with the big metal arch in the woods outside town. There also appears to be someone influencing these events from the outside. (Who shot at Dranko and Flicker? Who built the "big wooden box" around the arch?) In the past, worshippers of the Burning God inhabited a mountain fortress on Lanei; they abandoned it before an apparently magical earthquake. They were also involved with the *Matun Essendi*, and the imprisonment of the Yrimpa underneath God's Thorn. They were apparently led by an ancestor of Tor, who attempted to reincarnate in Tor's own body.

Red-Armored Warriors. Meledien and Octesian are the important ones. No idea what they're about. They know secrets we can only guess at. They can enter *Ava Dormo* like Dreamwalkers of Ell can. Among the things they're doing are: trying to activate some sort of magical device in Verdshane ruins, and trying to catch those sky-crates hanging above Kinnet Gorge with a giant net. There are indications that they're involved in plots as yet unseen.

There are also a few wild cards that don't seem to fit anywhere. Larkin, Embree, Beltray. Who are they working for? What is uniting the savage humanoid races, organizing them to attack civilization? And who sent Farazil after Abernathy's Company? (Is Farazil the "something big" that got through?)

But I won't have to wonder much longer, 'cause the newly minted Archmage Ozilish is going to tell us everything next chapter, right?



Back at the Greenhouse, the party find that Abernathy has left them gifts:

- For Tor, an ornate display case on the living room wall, with a huge black gauntlet (from the death knight) already displayed;
- For Ernie, a large package of honey-and-date pastries;
- For Kay, a set of wind-chimes, each bell shaped like Abernathy's tower;
- For Flicker and Dranko, a huge crate of Blacktallow cigars, and two trinkets – a goblet and an ashtray – which they had filched on their first night in the Tower (Abernathy caught them and made them return the items at the time);
- For Kibi, a metal cask of fine dwarvish wine (Rockbreath vintage from 1801);
- And for Morningstar, a necklace with the triangular symbol of Ell, jet on one side, and ivory on the other.

Also for each party member is a potion (different for each), of Abernathy's own concocting. Lastly there is a note, bidding them a final farewell, and with instructions that they should collect Abernathy's ashes from the priests of Brechen, and place them in the Greenhouse's magic icebox. That will send them somewhere safe, and out of the clutches of those who would use ashes of Archmage as spell components.

Abernathy had promised that the party would be told everything about his work, though not, it turns out, from his own lips. That job falls to Ozilish, who spends an evening dumping huge amounts of information on the party in his typical scatterbrained style. (Ozilish is clearly brilliant, but often has trouble expressing himself, and frequently loses his train of thought or goes off on wild tangents.) The highlights are thus:

A long time ago (a bit less than 3000 years), the Kingdom of Charagan was ruled by an evil tyrant named **Naloric Skewn**. Freedom under his rule was virtually unknown; thousands were enslaved in his great cities, both above and below ground. He slew the Elhen Tarathi of the Greatwood, and the Mors Tarathi surrendered to him and were made his servants. The Elves of Ghant withdrew deep into their forest, and the perimeter of that wood was under constant guard.

Naloric also conquered and enslaved the Yrimpa, used them in turn to conquer the dwarves of Karth, and then had them (the Yrimpa) imprisoned in a mountain prison called God's Thorn. The Fire God worshippers from beyond the gartine arch on the peninsula were allied with Naloric.

For about a thousand years, Naloric (who, like the Archmagi, had the knack for longevity, and who was apparently something not quite human) ruled the kingdom with the proverbial iron fist. But during that time he grew somewhat complacent, and a group of elves and powerful mages – the Spire – began to plot Naloric's downfall.

When they were ready, the Spire struck, and the war that followed lasted a hundred years. Eventually, Naloric and his forces were banished through an inter-planar *gate* to an alternate Prime, though the Spire afterwards discovered that he had *allowed* himself to be so banished. Also, in the decade before he withdrew, Naloric hid many fell objects and creatures, hoping to use them when he returned.

About a thousand years after that, he did return, forcing his way back through the planar *gate* (at Verdshane, which was once Naloric's capital of Kinnet Vulthani). There was a huge war, and the population of Elhen Tarathi (which had grown numerous again in the thousand or so years since the first slaughter) was again wiped out. Several Archmagi were slain as well, including Typier, Parthol, Rauth, and Abernathy's own master, Alander.

But this time Naloric was killed as well, and the surviving Archmagi vowed to withdraw from the general affairs of the kingdom, and devote all their energies to keeping the planar *gate* at Verdshane sealed again for good. They divided themselves into two branches: those who would seek for the permanent solution to keeping the *gate* sealed, and those who would keep it closed in the meantime. For Naloric's son, **Naradawk Skewn**, was still on the other side, in the other Prime, and he had sworn he would one day come to claim his father's kingdom.

And that's what Abernathy had been up to all those years: keeping the *gate* closed, while Naradawk hammered at it (metaphorically, of course) from the other side. The glowing blue field at Verdshane is a powerful *temporal stasis* zone, set up around the planar *gate*, so that anything Naradawk might sneak through there would be immediately rendered helpless.

Ozilinsh also tells the party about the Masking. It seems that when Naloric came back through the *gate*, he set in motion the spells that would cause all of the nasty stuff he left behind to "wake up," as it were. A number of the surviving Mors Tarathi, along with the Archmagi, created a massive spell that took years to cast: the Masking.

The Masking was designed to do two things: to slow down (if not stop completely) the emergence of Naloric's material legacy; and to erase from all memory, books, and scrolls, all knowledge of Naloric's empire, so that no one would ever seek out things best left buried and hidden. The Masking was generally a success, though now it is clearly breaking down, and has become somewhat random in whom it affects and to what degree. The word "Sharshun," along with information about them, seems still to be especially well "Masked."

The Spire doesn't know anything more about the Eyes of Moirel or their significance, and they don't know who "P" is. But the blood gargoyle had clearly been used as a specific distraction for Fylnius, and it had been timed with Abernathy having been drawn into a short-lived but effective magical trap (remember, he had been AWOL at the time). Fylnius and Abernathy were the two Archmagi most responsible for keeping the planar *gate* well sealed. With both of them distracted or removed, "something big" was squeezed through the fragile planar boundary between this Prime and Naradawk's Prime. What that "something" is is unknown.

Whoever or whatever is whipping the humanoids into a frenzy is also (speculates Ozilinsh) doing so in an attempt to distract the Archmagi. If the Archmagi are spending their time helping defend the kingdom from orcs, bugbears, gnolls, kobolds,

Sialia: I'm the player who moved to California and left Mrs. Horn in the Tower. I don't know how much time has passed in game time for Mrs. H. It's been four years, real time...

Fortunately, I'm living somewhere wonderful with my husband and baby and job and hobbies and I'm having a good life. (Actually, I went to Sagiro's nephew's first birthday party this past weekend. What a cutie!) But whenever I think about Mrs. H locked up in the tower with her life permanently on hold until this thing has run its course, it seems very awful.

The irony was that she lived alone before the adventure, and it was the warmth of the Company that drew her out of that isolation and made her want to love people again, and so her isolation in the tower is more terrible now than it would have been if she had never met them, because she cares and she misses them, but without them, she would never have been worthy to be there in the first place.

The irony was that she was built as a PC with an easy out because I knew I might have to leave and I wanted to give Sagiro an easy way to get rid of her (hence the missing husband), but I didn't know that in Sagiro's world there weren't going to be any easy ways out.

She was given another easy out, too, when she died and I almost didn't agree to let her be brought back, because I knew it was almost time for me to leave. But Sagiro convinced me to let her be raised, although I had no idea of the cost at the time I agreed to the deal.

One thing I learned from her death. Sometimes death comes very unexpectedly, when you are still in the middle of getting things done and have made no preparations whatsoever to tie up your loose ends. You can't always count on a long death speech, or a chance to say goodbye properly.

And yet... The afterworld in Sagiro's world is a terribly peaceful place. Abernathy was right about the sand and the surf. I can't tell you how many times she has wished she had stayed there. Reading Abernathy's death speech reminded me both of how she missed him, and of her terror at finding out how long he'd been alive, at how long she might have to go on with his work. Sometimes, the sound of the waves fills her with more longing than the memory of her husband's face.

Sagiro builds a mean world, no surprise to any of you faithful readers. It's a long time trying to get it out of my system. Far more than any adventure we had, I remember the characters, both PCs and NPCs, and miss them.

Mrs. H sends her love to the party, and fond wishes that they will do whatever it is they need to do successfully, soon.

goblins, and who knows what else, then they're not giving their full attention to the ever weakening planar *gate*. Meledien's efforts to free monsters from Kinnet Gorge are probably serving a similar purpose.

So it's not a stretch to think that "P" is somehow allied with Naradawk, though how they communicate is a mystery, as is any connection with Meledien and Octesian.



Grey Wolf, Black Circle

Run #58 – Sunday, April 26, 1998

Also during this time, **Grey Wolf** (a fighter/wizard from the forest of Ghant) is introduced to the Company. Ozilinsh brings him by the Greenhouse, and announces that he (Grey Wolf) is now an official part of the group. (The Spire feels that the group need more magical oomph now that Mrs. Horn has gone to Ozilinsh's tower.)

Having made the introductions, Ozilinsh tells the party about their next job. There is an item – the skull of something called a horned spycrow – which the Spire badly need for their spells to close the *gate* to Naradawk's Prime. Another adventuring group, known as Corley's Crew, had been dispatched to an old Black Circle bestiary to retrieve the skull. Now they are weeks overdue, and the Spire feels that something ill has befallen the Crew. They want Ozilinsh's group to follow, discover what happened to Corley and co., and if possible, come back with the skull.

The Black Circle had several such bestiaries hidden throughout the kingdom in the old days. Naradawk used them to create, experiment upon, and house horrific beasts. Knowledge of these bestiaries (including their locations) has largely been protected by the Masking, but recently, as the Masking has started to wear off, details about them have come to light. Horned spycrows were magical birds used by Naradawk for surveillance.



Wednesday, October 18 – Saturday, October 21

The party sail to Feslin, the nearest city to the bestiary.

Sunday, October 22

The Company arrive in Feslin. The party go to the Dragon's Den, a "theme inn" where Corley's Crew often stayed. The common room looks like a dragon's abode, with scales adorning the wall, and piles of fake treasure lying about. Each room, while comfy, looks like a small dungeon room, and even has a secret compartment with ten copper pieces painted to look like gold.

In the Dragon's Den, Corley's Crew was well known, and the party learn that they went into the mountains about six weeks earlier, towards the abandoned mining village of Irondale. The party are warned that there are still occasional groups of bugbears in the area.

Monday, October 23 – Wednesday, October 25

Travel to Irondale; along the way, the party find signs of a bugbear slaughter (the bugbears were slaughtered, that is).

Thursday, October 26

The party arrive in Irondale in the afternoon. As expected, it's abandoned, but there are some signs of a battle. The biggest of these signs is a huge dead monster (a bulette, as the party remember from Gadrunas' library) lying in a road.

The party also find a dead man in a tavern, laid out with care behind the bar. The party surmise that this is one of Corley's Crew; wounds on the body are consistent with the claws and teeth of the bulette. Grey Wolf takes a magical crossbow which was left with the body, presuming that the Crew won't mind if he uses it in their rescue.

The party explore a mine entrance at the edge of town, and Kay sees signs that someone had been that way. They make their way through mining passages, and discover a more recent tunnel which breaks out into the air, overlooking a large, sheltered valley. At the far end of the valley is a metal structure set up against the mountainside, but the party decide to camp for the night and explore the next day.



Black Menagerie

Run #59 – Sunday, May 10, 1998

Friday, October 27

The party approach the metal structure, which is semicircular, with a flat top, and the flat side facing outward. There are a number of stone gargoyle statues perched on top, and these launch themselves and attack when the party cross an outer perimeter of gray stones. The party back out of the perimeter, and the gargoyles return to the roof. Seeing as there's no way into the building without crossing the line, the party decide to just march in and fight the monsters. After the creatures are defeated, the party go into the building via the main front door.

They find themselves in a large foyer-ish area, with another door facing directly across. Between them and the door, however, is a huge black circle drawn on the floor, which will have to be crossed to reach the door. It detects as a magical trap, and Morningstar *dispels* it. Ell: 1, Black Circle: 0.

Through the door, the party discover three main rooms on the ground floor. The leftmost is a library, but most of the books are being eaten by a number of small crabs, with eyes looking out the tops of their shells. The crabs scuttle away from people, and seem generally harmless, unless you're a book.

The rightmost room contains a magical kettle used for brewing potions, and an empty steel cage hanging from the ceiling. The cage, whose door hangs open, has a green glass seal set into the bars, which is cracked and dim. There is no sign of the occupant, though the cage has an odd odor.

The center room is guarded by two flesh golems, which attack when the room is entered. Oops! Still, the party are able to dispatch them fairly easily. In the room is a bed (recently slept in), and next to it a long green glass slab (about the same size as the bed), also cracked and dim. There is a dark (and dried) bloodstain on the slab, and a trail of blood which leads into a nearby closet. A human body is discovered there, dead, with its throat cut. A bloody dagger rests on the ground next to him.

In the hallway that connects the three rooms, there is a stairway leading down at one end. The party descend, and find a room seemingly used for cattle butchery. There are blood-soaked butcher blocks, and drains in the floor. There is also a skeleton standing there, hacking pieces of meat off a cattle carcass, and throwing them into a wheelbarrow. The party blast the skeleton out of habit. There is an adjacent hallway, off which are several rooms which seem to be cells. Before the party can do much exploring, however, a hideous creature comes barreling out of one of these cells, and attacks!

It has a four-legged body like an oversized lion, but instead of a head or tail, it has four thick tentacles rising from the body, each ending in a sharp-toothed maw. It proves a tough adversary, and Dranko's bold (if curious) strategy of jumping on its back almost gets him eaten, but the party eventually slay it. By this time, after the gargoyles, golems and this beast, the party are in pretty bad shape, so they back out of the building altogether to rest and heal outside.



Saturday, October 28

The party go back in, and start to explore the rest of the cells. Most of these have a round, dull green glass seal by the door, and a strip of dull green glass on the floor of the doorways. (The green glass looks very much like the green glass seals that had been keeping the death knight locked up below Gohgan's basement.) All of the cell doors are open, and all of the cells themselves are uninhabited, save one. On that cell, the round green seal is uncracked and bright, though occasionally flickering. Inside the room there is a large monster which looks like a huge floating ball with several eyestalks. The monster is suspended in a flickering green light. The party decide to leave it that way.

The nearest of the uninhabited cells is made of stone, and is empty save for a water-filled depression in one corner, and some patches of a clear, sticky residue on the floor. There is an ornate wooden door with a marble frame on the back wall; Morningstar approaches the door, and puts her hand up to it as she casts *thought capture*. As her hand sticks to the door, and the door attacks (being a mimic, and not an actual door at all), she gets the thought: *Yum*. Ell: 1, Black Circle: 1.

Recursive Summoning

Run #60 – Saturday, June 6, 1998

The party fight and kill the mimic, as well as some sort of pudding which drops from the ceiling during the battle. It's a tough fight, but the party's sheer numbers make the difference.

A trail of smeared dried blood leads from an open area at the end of the hallway, back into the cell of the weird lion-tentacle creature. The party discover the chewed up remains of most of Corley's Crew, which have been dragged back to the monster's nest. (The nest also includes other remains, which may be what's left of the monsters from some of the other cells.) In the open area are signs of a battle, which include dozens of smaller bloodstains, and (oddly) a number of daisies growing directly out of a stone wall. Always practical, the party loot the bodies of Corley's Crew. In another cell is the dead and rotting body of a huge alien-looking creature with black skin, sharp teeth and numerous clawed appendages. It has bite marks consistent with the teeth of the lion creature. All of the cells have water-filled depressions in one corner.

A stairway down near the butcher block leads to an enormous (perhaps a mile long) underground cavern, in which roam hundreds of blind cattle. There is an underground lake from which they drink, and a spongy edible fungus grows abundantly. A skeleton here is hacking up one of the cows. The party figure that the skeletons are essentially an automated feeding mechanism for the creatures in the cells; they slaughter the cows and bring the meat up to the main floor of the bestiary.

Exploration beyond the hallway of cells reveals more hallways, and a large room from which a strange chanting is coming. The party go into the room, and discover a summoning circle in the middle of the floor, with torch stands around its perimeter. In the circle, a large bipedal frog creature is being summoned.

Up on a platform looking out over the room, a small, imp-like creature (wearing a too-large crown and a makeshift cloak torn from a larger piece of human clothing) is holding a large tome. Upon seeing the party enter, the imp has a hurried conversation with the frog creature in the summoning circle, and the creature attacks the party.

The fight seems to be going well, but before the thing dies, it lets out a mighty croak, which seems to bounce around the room, and eventually opens a *gate*, through which enters another frog creature. This one also attacks. Fortunately, the second one is unsuccessful at gating in a third, and infinite recursion is avoided.

After the frog creatures are dispatched (with the help of some of Kibi's *summoned* bullywugs, who are again paid for their service), the party subdue the imp creature.

When Kibi casts *summon monster* spells, he often ends up with the same two bullywugs. Last time, after they helped defeat some foe, the party actually paid them some gold before they vanished back to wherever they had come from. This second time, they were better armed and armored than the first time, having seemingly spent their gold well.

The party drag the imp outside for questioning; it insists that it's "the king," and is in charge of the bestiary. It's clear from the evidence that the imp was originally in the cage on the upper floor, and had killed the man whose body was found in the closet, the man who probably was *actually* in charge of the bestiary. Since the green glass seems to be an indicator of a kind of stasis field, it's likely that the imp came out of stasis first, and killed the man while he was still on his green stasis slab.

The party eventually tire of the monster's lies, and kill it. Again, they rest, heal, and wait another day outside.



As the Horned Spycrow Flies

Run #61 – Saturday, June 20, 1998

Sunday, October 29

The party still haven't found any horned spycrows or their skulls; the only lead is that one of the empty cells had some blood-matted feathers in a corner, and several bars up near the ceiling that might have been perches. But there are more places yet unexplored, so the party continue to search. One hallway leads to a pair of iron doors which form a sort of airlock to whatever space lies beyond. Thinking that the spycrows might be in there, the party crank open the doors, and discover that the place is the lair for a very young white dragon!

A very tough fight ensues, in which several party members are nearly frozen to death by the dragon's breath. After the fight, the party once more leave the bestiary, and heal up outside. Still no spycrow.



Monday, October 30

The party take an extra day of R&R.

Tuesday, November 1

One last time into the bestiary? The party hope so. One of the only places left unexplored is a stairway leading down beyond the cells, a stairway from which a familiar and disgusting smell is emanating. Part way down the wide stairway, just off a landing as the stairs bend around, the party discover a large stone pit, filled with the rotting skeletal remains of dozens of misshapen monsters. The most awful is a skeleton of a three-headed chimera, where the middle skull is human, with a grey circle burned into the bone.

The revolting smell from below turns out to be coming from a gigantic otyugh (a.k.a. "stink-wiggle"). It seems that the skeletons cart all of the refuse of the various creatures down here, and feed it to a giant, living trash disposal. A brief melee ensues, in which Grey Wolf, forgetting for a moment the clouds of methane gas from the offal, casts a *flaming sphere* spell. It turns the entire cavern into a flaming sphere, blistering characters and monster alike.

The otyugh turns out to be mildly psionic, and communicates mentally with the party, asking them what they want, and to stop attacking. The party agree to spare the creature, if it will let them search its refuse-pile home. The otyugh actually helps them, pulling up bones and such from under the pile, and one of these turns out to be a skeleton of a bird that matches the description of a horned spycrow. Success! (Less happily, it also pulls up the last remnants of Corley's Crew, who must have been dumped down here by the skeletons.)



Wednesday, November 2

So now the party can leave behind this abominable place... or can they? They recall the flickering glass ward on the room with the eye creature (someone thinks they remember it's a "beholder," from Gadrunas' library), and worry that it will soon be free like the other creatures were once the stasis fails. They debate for a while: now that they have the skull, should they risk further delay or disaster by fighting a potentially deadly enemy? But on the other hand, what if the monster escapes, and finds its way to inhabited regions where it then could kill many innocent people?

In the end, the Company do the good thing, and stay to fight it. They go into its cell and surround it, while Tor smashes the flickering glass seal. Its stasis field drops, and a melee ensues.

It turns out that the creature isn't a magic-using beholder, and that the "eyes" at the end of its "eyestalks" are actually blood-sucking mouths. It's a tough fight, and Grey Wolf (still getting the hang of this whole spellcasting-in-combat thing) almost kills himself with a ricochetting (2nd Edition) *lightning bolt*. But the party win out without any losses, and then leave the bestiary with a clean collective conscience. They travel via carpet back to Irondale, and spend the night camped there before starting the journey back to Tal Hae.

Thursday, November 3 – Monday, November 7

Travel to Feslin, then ship travel to Tal Hae.



Tuesday, November 8

The party arrive in Tal Hae, and find the city awash with refugees. There are families huddled under awnings and in alleyways, and the temples and churches of the city are packed. It seems that while the party were away, Calnis was finally sacked by a huge force of gnolls and kobolds come from the mountains, and that many of its inhabitants fled south to Tal Hae.

The party deliver the spycrow skull to Ozilinsh, and also tell him about the grim fate of Corley's Crew. While sad to hear about the other adventuring party, Ozilinsh is very excited about using the spycrow skull in their rituals. It's entirely possible that it could prove the key to keeping the planar *gate* closed forever.

Wednesday, November 9 – Wednesday, December 21

Training happens. On the party's first day back, Eddings shows them a strange list he received while the party were away, a long list of numbers, seemingly without pattern.

Morningstar receives a dream warning from the Avatar who has been training her:

"Morningstar, listen carefully. A change has come over the *Ava Dormo*. It is no longer safe, and it is no longer an open realm. A world's shadow has fallen across it. You may, and should, continue to abide there in your places of strength, but do not venture into the vastness beyond."

I will be unable to visit you again for some time, but that is no matter. I am done administering my training. It is your turn now."

When Morningstar tries to go into *Ava Dormo* afterwards, she discovers that, unless she chooses a place firmly under the control of Ellish Dreamwalkers, the Dreamscape is filled with a mysterious (and disturbing) oily black fog. When she tries to penetrate it, her body back in the real world starts to fade, and the party wake her up.

In the crowded streets, a madman named **Samuel** is yelling at a crowd, that a thousand years ago there was a terrible war, and armies of the dead are now returning to exact revenge.

Most of the party enter the Fall Tourney of Werthis. Kay advances in the two swords division, and after a couple of rounds is paired up against a huge fighter named **Longmire**. During the fight, Kay is knocked over, and Longmire reaches out his hand to help her up. However, when Kay reaches to take his hand, he reaches past her, grabs her by the throat, and squeezes.

He's insanely strong, and he grins at Kay as he reveals that he is, in fact, King Farazil, inhabiting the body of this massive fighter. Kay pummels him, but his grip doesn't relent. She hears a cracking in her neck, and her legs go numb. But Farazil didn't reckon with Oa-Lyanna – she attacks Longmire, buffeting him until he is forced to release Kay. Werthians rush forward to grab Longmire, and in the chaos, Farazil leaves Longmire's body and vanishes into the crowd. Kay's neck is broken, but a healing spell saves her life.

The party receive a strange letter from Dranko's old tormentor Califax, who is suspected of joining Mokad and the Black Circle. The letter is filled with weirdly phrased threats, and seems like it was written by a madman. But the party apply the list of numbers received earlier as a deciphering key, and find another letter contained within it:

Dranko -

I apologize for not coming to see you in person. Perhaps I'm being rude, but Tal Hae is so plain. It is worrisome that you have grown dangerous, and even I have reason to think that in these interesting times, things could get out of hand if I visited with friends, let alone by myself. If I could find words to express my sorrow, I would write them. But it is no matter. The Black Circle has a way with thoughts, and we will have yours, one way or another. You can resist, but I can have them, even if you can block them, for a time.

Your letter, and your words in person, are meaningless. I have weighed many factors, and I'm afraid guilt does not lie heavily on me. The Black Circle has taught me, and made me realize some things about my relationship with Delioch. I decided to make the conversion, to take a risk, and I have learned much. Some of Mokad's friends might mind that I'm stooping to taunt you, but by now, even they would stop pretending that you'd have any real use. You are foolish, and you have my sympathy. As for my Master: If anything, he learns from each mistake you make. My friend, and I am true to him. Your thoughts, I will have. You will be lost.

He is so powerful, using leftover minds as he wishes. Thoughts are his funds from the wastes of Sand's Edge to the Isle of Karth, he can dig out your dreams, too. You will pay for your interference. With something similar to your pleasant dinner in Hae Charagan, you will be dealt with. It is all covert, a private venture and no one will ever find you. There is no hope that you will dine in a tavern again, once I have called the powers to my command. I am the Rock which will smash you. This is a certainty; that I can read you like a book, from front to back. Be extremely careful. They're all in a league beyond your ken, and you will sink like a ship, including sails, mast, Ballast and hull. And they know how to make you suffer, to look for opportunity. There is no way out for you. Do not waste time with hope. I trust you recall that they could have killed Praska! They will not play around with you.

I know you have reason to think me mad, but I'm not, too bad for you. Trust me. But I swear on our God the Circle, that the Healer will not save you. I have rediscovered the truth, and abandoned my old faith. And I will apologize in person, should we see each other again, that I did not bring you with me when I had the chance.

- C

I apologize for not coming to see you in person. Perhaps I'm being rude, but Tal Hae is so plain. It is worrisome that you have grown dangerous, and even I have reason to think that in these interesting times, things could get out of hand if I visited with friends, let alone by myself. If I could find words to express my sorrow, I would write them. But it is no matter. The Black Circle has a way with thoughts, and we will have yours, one way or another. You can resist, but I can have them, even if you can block them, for a time.

I weighed many factors, and I'm caught me, and made me realize make the conversion, to take a ht mind that I'm stooping to you'd have any real use. You are nything, he learns from each thoughts, I will have. You will be

ts are his funds. from the r dreams, too. You will pay for dinner in Hae Charagan, you e will ever find you. There is no ne powers to my command. I am n read you like a book, from yond your ken, and you will d they know how to make you do not waste time with hope. I not play around with you. l for you. trust me. But I swear rediscovered the truth, and ld we see each other again, that I

After making his promise to Brechen for Mrs. Horn's life, Dranko tried to speak directly to Califax in an attempt to make up with the old Scarbearer, but was rebuffed. Then he wrote a letter of reconciliation, but the letter went unanswered.



Also during the training period, yet another letter arrives, this one from the Sages' Consortium of Hae Kalkas. It contains some information that the party had requested weeks before:

To the occupants of the Greenhouse, on the Street of Bakers, Tal Hae. We have conducted research commensurate with funds received on the 7th of July. You requested information on the following terms: Davarian Firemount; Santo; Het Branoi; Annon Dun; Inner Flame; Orcish Crusades.

"Firemount," as is well known, is the name of the ruling house of Forquelle. What is less well known is that this name originated with a people who once occupied and ruled the Balani Peninsula, and for a short while the Islands of Forquelle. These people worshipped a deity referred to as Nifi, or the Burning God, who is neither one of the Travelers, nor one of the Gods native to Charagan before the Arrival. The Inner Flame was probably a ruling body or council of these people, though details are extremely sketchy, and this is no better than an enlightened guess.

There are rumors that an army recently landed on the shores of the Balani Peninsula is actually a force of these Burning God worshippers, come to retake lands once owned. Their homeland has never been discovered.

There are no records of a person named Davarian in specific, though this name is phonetically consistent with recent generations of Forquellian nobles. Most notable, the oldest son of Baron Olorayne is named Darien; perhaps “Davarian” is simply a misspelling or variant on this name.

“Santo” was a first name common among halfling peoples some hundreds of years past, but which has fallen out of general use. As halflings are not as a rule historians, there is no information on any specific person named Santo of any importance. Curiously, we found in our researches a volume whose spine reads “Lineage and genealogy of the Holbytla,” but all of whose pages are blank. (*Holbytla* is an old Elvish word for halfling.)

The Orcish Crusades appears to refer to an Orcish holy war, in which (according to them) the orcs will take over the Kingdom of Charagan, led by a legendary figure called the Chun Aggrat, which roughly translates to “Red Warchief.” We know from a marginal note that more information can be found in an Orcish tome called *Prophecies of the Orcish Crusades*, but this book is not currently in the possession of the Consortium.

We were unable to find any information on Het Branoi or Annon Dun.

If you desire further resources to be expended on investigation of these subjects, or research to be conducted on any other subjects, an additional deposit will be required. A duplicate of this message has been sent, to assure proper delivery.

Sparrowhawk: Did Eddings ever wake up?

Sagiro: Yes, he did eventually wake up, a fact that went under the radar of this Story Hour, so to speak. Additionally, I didn’t mention that Abernathy, before his death, gifted Eddings with two permanent illusory eyes, which are *almost* indistinguishable from normal human eyes. People often find something odd about his face, but can’t quite figure out what.

Sparrowhawk: Also, the PCs asked the sages at Hae Kalkas to research two terms I don’t recognize: “Het Branoi,” and “Annon Dun.” When were these things mentioned before?

Sagiro: “Annon Dun” is a name Dranko picked up in Sand’s Edge, a name of another kingdom (or possibly country) far across the ocean to the west. “Het Branoi” was mentioned at the end of the prophecy spoken through Eddings by two Eyes of Moirel. According to them, a third Eye of Moirel is “in the house of Het Branoi, beyond the Gate of Fire” (see session 46).

Doc_souark: When can we expect to see the party converted into 3E, and how many problems did it cause?

Sagiro: We switched over to 3rd Edition sometime around session 76; I don’t recall or have good records of the actual date of the switch. The transition was 99% painless and well accepted, as a majority of my players preferred 3E to 2E. Converting Morningstar was the most difficult, since her *modus operandi* involved several *Tome of Magic* Thought-sphere spells that didn’t make the transition. (Also, Morningstar’s player was the least happy with 3rd Edition rules generally, and the character conversion difficulties didn’t help...)

Still, the players of multiclass characters took the drop in power with good grace, understanding that it was really just bringing them into line with everyone else.

Doc_souark: Did the party ever realize that the large statue in the halfling village and Ernie look alike (and the Wilberforce(?) reference)?

Sagiro: Yeah, the party realized right away that the Dingman’s Ferry statue looks like a double of Ernie. And the fact that the sand creature hissed “Wilberforce” did not go unnoticed. The party still haven’t discovered the meaning of it all, though.

Doc_souark: Is the asinine Bakers’ Guild guy still hounding the party?

Sagiro: Turlus Whitecake is still the occasional pest, though recently Dranko has been more of a pest for him.

Doc_souark: And finally, don’t you just want to bop your players on their pointed heads sometimes?

Sagiro: I love my players! If they weren’t so good, my campaign (and this Story Hour) wouldn’t be anything like it has grown to be. I never want to bop them on the head, though they often outsmart me. I do secretly suspect that Piratecat (who plays Dranko) loves to ask me the names of NPCs that he *knows* I don’t have names for, so he can watch me sweat while I try to make something up on the spot. (Only occasionally do I remember to have my “list of generic names” handy.)



The Rock

Run #64 – Sunday, August 16, 1998

Thursday, December 22 – Friday, December 23

The party head out by ship to Hae Charagan, to investigate the Black Circle project mentioned in Califax’s letter.

Saturday, December 24

The Company arrive in the capital, and spend much of the day picking up some rumors. Word is that only a skeletal force of arms remains to guard the city. Many of the king’s elite (known as the Royals) are stationed in the nearby town of Riss (which

stands between the capital and the humanoid-infested mountains). Others are scattered among the forces fighting (or defending from) humanoids in Feslin, Minok and Tal Hae. Some have been dispatched to fight the invaders on the Balani Peninsula.

There is a muddled rumor that an army of dwarves had arrived by ship from Karth, but no one has seen them.

It is said that the king himself has pleaded with the Archmage of Hae Charagan for aid (given the way the kingdom's armies are stretched), but has been turned down. Soon, people say, there will be forced conscription.

Lastly, there is a rumor of several disappearances in the Poor Quarter, but not much is being done about it.

The party investigate the Rock, which is a mostly dwarvish tavern – it serves a strong drink called “Elf Killer.” While doing his usual rooftop reconnaissance, Dranko notices marks in the snow that indicate someone else is also scoping out the place. With some keen observation, he watches footprints being left in the snow by an invisible person, and dives off a rooftop onto the place where he thinks the person is. They grapple, and eventually the invisible man capitulates.

The man (named **Hamner**) agrees to talk with the party in a tavern, but only if he remains invisible. During that talk, Hamner reveals that he is part of a group that is opposed to the Black Circle, and thinks something evil is going on in the Rock. He makes no promises about cooperating with the party, but says he'll talk with his colleagues and meet them back at the tavern in the morning.

Morningstar casts *mind read* outside the Rock, but all the thoughts of the dwarves inside seem innocent.

Sunday, December 25

In the morning, the party go to meet Hamner, but he's not there. He has left a note, in which he says his colleagues were not convinced that they could trust the party. However, they will not (they claim) interfere with any attempts by the party to infiltrate the Rock and learn what's going on. The note is signed with a picture of a shell.

Through judicious use of spells and magic items, the entire party is made invisible, and that very night sneaks into the Rock. There are some hairy moments, as dwarvish patrons often nearly walk into invisible party members as they pick, dodge and weave their way across the commons. But eventually the group reach their target; a closed door that leads into a back room. (To cover opening the door, Oa-Lyanna blows the main exterior doors open, creating an effective diversion.)

There are some brief scuffles with dwarves in some back rooms, in which the opposition is *held* and otherwise rendered helpless. Further investigation reveals a trapdoor, which leads to a recently excavated tunnel below the tavern. The party descend, travel through a freshly dug tunnel, and eventually find a hole that has been knocked in the floor. This leads to a large chamber, and thence to the cavernous remains of a large and mostly buried underground city.

Sneaking along, the party make their way through caverns filled with buried ruins, and eventually into a very large cavern in which some ritual is taking place. At the far end of the cavern, the party can see that a large gartine arch is being excavated. Standing near to the arch is a man well known to the party – it's Manzanill, the evil wizard who escaped from them in Brinth. There are some dwarves about, continuing to chisel out the gartine arch from the surrounding stone.

A melee soon ensues, in which Manzanill launches a *lightning bolt* into the passage from which the party are emerging, and the dwarves put up a decent fight defending the wizard. Also, part way through the combat, a large green humanoid creature, with wickedly sharp claws and demonic features, emerges from a side building to join the fight. Its claws go through armor as if it were cheesecloth. During the battle, it retreats back into its building and emerges with what seem to be five allies, but in fact this turns out to be a *mirror image* spell.

In the end, the battle is won, the strange creature slain, and Manzanill, largely rendered powerless by a *silence* spell, is also killed. No last-minute escape this time!

The party interrogate the surviving dwarves. It seems that they are miners from Karth, who were sent to work with Manzanill by their master, a dwarf named **Silvernose**. Manzanill has been placing kidnapped prisoners (homeless beggars from the poorer parts of town who won't be missed) underneath the arch, and draining their life energy to bring the green monsters (called Chriks) through into Charagan.

The dwarves have been told that the prisoners are criminals, who would have otherwise been executed or rotting away in prison. They actually find the Chriks to be good company. They think that about fifteen Chriks have been released, and a nearby pit of drained bodies corroborates this guess. The dwarves have no knowledge of Manzanill's long term plans. One dwarf in particular, named **Bludgeon**, seems exceptionally remorseful that he was killing innocent people. He asks the party lots of questions, and seems eager to be allowed to redeem himself.

In an adjacent room to the arch cavern, the party find some interesting correspondence from the mysterious “P,” as well as a shorter letter from someone named **Emory**. Neither letter is dated.

Manzanill,

I hope you have enjoyed your vacation, but the time has come to get back to work. I've already told you most of what you'll need to know, and how important it is that it all be done in secret. Here are the details: our best guess is that the Arch of Poal Cathan is more or less directly underneath the Street of Vials, a short avenue populated by alchemists, apothecaries and leeches. My advisors and I have decided that the best place to start will be under a dwarven tavern, called The Rock, which is a few streets over. Some of our dwarves from Karth will be sent over to do the heavy work. I leave it in your capable hands to secure the tavern, and decide who can be trusted, bribed, etc.

You'll need to tunnel about 80-100 yards south-southwest (we think). At that point, start punching holes until you break into the caverns of the old city. From there, you'll just have to go on the instincts of the dwarves, until you find the Arch.

You should only need to dig out the area under the keystone (or where the keystone would be, if it were stones and not gartine) to start summoning the Chriks. One person's energy should be sufficient to force open the gate and recall one of our green friends. Kidnap whom you must, but be discreet. If you can excavate the full Arch, it will speed up the process considerably, but start as soon as you are able. Timing is critical, and even a force of 50 Chriks is something not easily dealt with. Assemble as many of them as you can; when the fire-worshippers are ready to push up the peninsula in earnest, all other forces should be set and in place.

Speaking of our fiery friends, it is my plan to send you on a long but crucial journey after you're done in the capital. I need you to go to Kivia, to find and retrieve for me a thing which is of the utmost import, a thing without which we cannot succeed. Once in Kivia, make your way to a city called Djaw, and seek out a shrine to the goddess Dralla. Someone there will have information about a relic known as the Crosser's Maze. Find it. Bring it back to me, whatever the cost.

I'm sorry I don't have more information for you. Lord Stablein tells me that this Dralla is a Goddess of Abominations, and that you should use caution. I should have more for you before you set out, which is unlikely to be for several months yet. In the meantime, you should start making preparations. Lord Stablein will expedite your passage through the Arch when you arrive at the point.

We can see victory, Manzanill. A year, or two, or three, but no more. Always think of the rewards that will be yours, when Crunard is ousted at last.

P.

Manzanill,

Our master has bid me tell you, that we do not currently have the time or resources to adequately investigate this half-orc person and his cohorts – many irons in the fire, and all that. We know that they are an adventuring party that resides in Tal Hae, and that there is possibly some connection between them and the Archmage Abernathy. We know from rumor that they were more recently involved in the slaying of the Ventifact Colossus in Sand's Edge. And we know that you will take the necessary precautions in handling them, should they bother you again.

– Emory

Chrik-mas at Ground Zero

Run #65 – Sunday, August 30, 1998

The party return to the Rock, and find that **Ballast** and a few other dwarves have “left on some emergency.” Most of the remaining dwarves are drunk, but one of them shapechanges (back) into a Chrik and attacks. When it does so, Bludgeon also reveals himself to be a Chrik, and joins in the fray against the party.

The party defeat the monsters, and go to bed.

Monday, December 26

In a park, beneath a makeshift tent, some priests of Delioch are tending to some sick refugees. One of them, **Sister Noreen**, tells Dranko that Praska would love to see him and his friends. So the Company have a paranoid visit to Praska, who seems in fine

spirits, passes a *mind read* test with flying colors, and generally seems to be her old happy self, in spite of Califax's warnings. The party do not mention Califax's letters to her. The party also inform the city guard of what they discovered beneath the Rock.

Tuesday, December 27 – Wednesday, December 28

The party sail home to Tal Hae through a terrible storm. Makel and Tor (who's learning to pilot the ship in case anything ever happens to Makel) manage to get *Burning Sail* and her passengers home safely.



Thursday, December 29

The party arrive back in Tal Hae, and give Ozilinsh a full brain dump of their adventure in Hae Charagan. Ozilinsh has heard of Kivia (a place mentioned in the letter to Manzanill), but only knows that it is a land hundreds of leagues to the east, beyond the Uncrossable Sea. It seems clear now that Kivia is the land on the other side of the gartine arch on the Balani Peninsula, and it is from there that the army of the Burning God is coming.

Ozilinsh tells the Company that in a few days' time, they will be summoned to a meeting of the Spire, the ancient order that has long opposed Naloric and his son Naradawk.

Friday, December 30

Against the better judgment of the rest of the party, Dranko plasters the city with notices that he wants to hire a torchbearer.

Saturday, January 1, 1830

A child named **Thomas** shows up at the Greenhouse, and wants the torchbearer job. Kay dissuades him, but gives him a dagger, and the important mission of protecting his mother if humanoids should come to Tal Hae.

Sunday, January 2

A brusque, competent woman named **Syria** arrives to audition for the torchbearer job. She actually seems like she might be cut out for the position, but the rest of the party still can't really believe that Dranko is serious about the whole thing. They ask Syria to come back the next day.

Monday, January 3 – Friday, January 7

The party basically hang out, waiting to be summoned to the Spire Council. During this time, Syria comes by to see if she got the torchbearer job. The party tell her no thanks (over Dranko's protests), and give her a bag of gold for her troubles.



Convene the Council

Run #66 – Sunday, September 27, 1998

Saturday, January 8

The Company are summoned to the Spire Council. Ozilinsh gives them magical bracelets, which are used to *teleport* the party to somewhere in the forest near Ghant. Right before the teleportation, Grey Wolf feels a strange churning in his guts, as if all his internal organs were sliding sideways. Nevertheless, he and the rest of the party arrive safely.

Once in the forest, the party are blindfolded and led through a winding forest path for several hours. They eventually emerge in a clearing, in the center of which is a huge, majestic tree. Inside this tree is the meeting place of the Spire. Tor uses a pinch of his *dust of illusion*, and goes in disguise so that any high-ranking nobles who might be there won't recognize him.

After spending some time in a waiting room (talking with a large and vaguely unpleasant man named **Matthias**), the Council is called to order. In addition to the Company, the following people are in attendance:

- Ozilinsh;
- Parkitt, the apprentice to the Archmage Alykeen;
- Matthias, High Priest of Pikon;
- **Warfield**, a high-ranking Stormknight of Werthis;
- **Cencerra**, an old but hale elven fighter/mage;
- **Carbuncle**, a short, almost dwarf-like human;
- **Nigel**, Duke of Harkran;
- **Yale**, an advisor to King Crunard IV of Charagan.

However, the man who runs the meeting is the only Archmage present: his name is **Gravly**, and he is the Archmagus of Hydra. His familiar, a parrot named **Paciorek**, sits on his shoulder.

Yale opens the meeting by introducing the party to the others, and thanking them for their recent help with Manzanill. She says that a Chrik was discovered impersonating a palace guard, and there were indications that it had been there for some time, gathering information on the kingdom's disposition of troops in the field.

The second order of business is the coordination of the kingdom's military forces. Carbuncle turns out to be an expert at impersonating humanoids, and speaks most of their languages. He has been spying at Feslin, and his knowledge gathered from the bugbears was key in their recent defeat. He also has knowledge that the bugbears were led by (or at least terrified of) a tremendously large bugbear in red armor called "The Crusher of Skulls."

Warfield has already recognized the party; he talked with the Galeb Duhr near the Nifi front. He reports that the war on the Peninsula is going well, though the Nifi have holed up in an old stronghold of theirs, and adopted a strong defensive position. Matthias opines that the various attacks are being coordinated to draw the Archmagi away from their tasks concerning the *gate* in Verdshane. Lastly, Duke Nigel expresses his grave doubts that the kingdom can long sustain a war on five or six fronts.

The next items discussed are the Sharshun and the Eyes of Moirel. Cencerra knows that the Sharshun are in possession of at least one of the Eyes, and that their stronghold is somewhere in the Greatwood. The party talk at length about all they have discovered concerning these matters. No one present knows what "traveling nowhere" means, or why one would want to do it.

Next, the party are asked to speak about everything they learned about Manzanill. After they finish, Cencerra talks about similar work she has been doing. She has recently led a group of adventurers into the mountains near Hae Kalkas, to foil the excavation of a second blood gargoyle. An enemy mage named Lapis had hired a strong mercenary force, but Cencerra and her group prevailed, and the blood gargoyle was removed and destroyed. Lapis escaped the battle.

Grawly then talks briefly about the gartine arches. He knows that they were built long before the Travelers (as the gods who are not Pikon are called) arrived in Charagan, and no one had gleaned their function until the party had been to Seablade Point. There are records that an arch was in the city of Poal Cathan (formerly where Hae Charagan is now).

The party are asked to speak at length on the Black Circle. As a related topic, the Order of the Silver Shell is mentioned, in light of Hamner's note to the party with the shell symbol on it. Long ago, when the Black Circle was more active, the Silver Shell opposed them, and sought to wipe them out. While a force for good, the Shell often acted with a fanaticism that made the Spire uneasy. It is not surprising, given the apparent emergence of the Black Circle, that the Silver Shell is also becoming active again.

Finally, the talk turns to the Crosser's Maze, the item mentioned in the letter to Manzanill that seems so crucial to the plans of "P." Cencerra and Grawly have heard rumors of it; it has something to do with planar travel, and they seem to think that it can be used to prevent or sabotage such attempts, or to destroy extra-planar creatures. Given that Naradawk is trying to cross a planar boundary, it's curious as to why his allies would want it. Most of the Council believe that some third party has discovered its location, and that Naradawk and "P" want to keep it out of enemy hands.

Some of the Council know that Kivia (also mentioned in Manzanill's letter) is another continent, referred to in some ancient scrolls. It cannot be reached by ship; legend has it that Brechen and some other God of the Sea are at constant war, making the sea between too violent for ships.

And that's the end. The party are told to expect orders shortly, and then are returned to Tal Hae via the same magical means as brought them to the Tree.

Sunday, January 9

Ozilinsh informs the party that they are to be sent to Kivia, to find and bring back the Crosser's Maze. Whatever reason "P" has for wanting it, a legendary magical item that can prevent planar crossings could be the answer to the Spire's greatest need. Since the only known way to get there is through a gartine arch out of which a hostile army is currently pouring, the Spire will want some time to plan, and prepare certain devices to make it possible. It will likely be a few months before things are ready.



Journey to the Thorn

Run #67 – Sunday, November 22, 1998

Monday, January 10 – Wednesday, March 1

Training happens. During this time, Morningstar is approached by a fellow priestess named **Obsidia**, who recently was called to be a Dreamwalker. She had a powerful dream, of which she can remember little save a vision of Morningstar's black-and-white holy symbol given her by Abernathy. She believes in the work the Illuminated Sisters are engaged in, and wants Morningstar to train her in being more resilient in the Dreamscape. She is timid, but resolute.

Also during training, some city guards show up at the Greenhouse. They have been instructed to inform the party that a Nifi priestess has been kidnapped from the front (at some cost in human lives), and will be kept in custody until or unless the Company want her. (The party had requested that a Nifi priest be kidnapped, since they had information indicating that only such a one could enter God's Thorn, where the Yrimpa are held prisoner. The party plan to go to the Gahantropalas Islands and look for God's Thorn, after they finish training.)

See session 40 for the information the party learned about God's Thorn from the Vault in Hae Charagan.

Each of the three clerics (Morningstar, Dranko and Ernie) receives a spiritual message and blessing, all on the same day. Dranko receives his in a dream; Morningstar during one of her nightly meditations; and Ernie while taking over some cooking duties at the Tal Hae church of Yondalla.

Dranko Blackhole

You dream, and in that dream you are in a bumping carriage, riding along what is barely a road. You are young, and next to you sits an old man, grim-faced, who gives you no love nor wants any in return.

The scene shifts, and the carriage pulls up outside an imposing wooden building, adorned with the holy symbol of your family's religion. There is a summer storm raging above, and the ceiling of clouds is sickly and gray. A tall man waits outside the carriage, his face a latticework of scars. He sees you as you exit the carriage, and his face quirks briefly with ill-hidden revulsion. You hate him, before you have even learned his name.

The scene shifts again, and now you are in a small, dark room within that imposing building. Three of your elders sit in chairs behind an immense table, two men and one woman. One of the men is the hateful one, the scarred one. You already have several scars, earned in your first month in this place, given to you by this man. He speaks, demands the name you have chosen.

You spit it out, bitterly. "Dranko." None of them know its meaning. You have already discovered it, in the library, having started to learn an ugly and guttural tongue that few have studied. Dranko. Unwanted. Unloved. Unwelcome.

Then the second man, who strangely has shown you kindness, speaks, and now you are no longer sure if this is dream, or memory, or just your old schoolmaster speaking as he often does. "Hmph. Unwelcome indeed. But then, when had you ever learned what 'welcome' meant? You didn't know it when you saw it, did you? But you were always welcome in the house of the Healer. I think you realize that now. And I imagine that you find that the name no longer fits you so well as you once thought it did. If you would keep it, think now that you are unwelcome to your foes, and the enemies of Delioch. And maintain hope, even in the blackest hours.

"One other thing, Brightmirror. On the next day of St. Jenniver, go to the farm of Saum Derrie, and bid him lend to you his family heirloom. Light a candle that night to the Lost Saint, who died long ago in the service of the Lord Healer, far from home. Light a candle and pray for the soul of Califax, whose very essence will hang in the balance. Let go the last of your hatred, and in your prayers, he will welcome you."

You wake with a start, and you realize that there is a new, small, light pink scar on the back of your left hand. It is shaped, somewhat abstractly but hard to mistake, as the holy symbol of Delioch. You now have the power, once per day per four levels, to cast any healing spell at the range of your line of sight, and with its casting time cut in half. A healing spell so cast does one point less per die, with a minimum of one point per die.

Morningstar of Ell

During your nightly meditations, as you blanket your thoughts in darkness, you suddenly open your eyes, and find yourself back in Kynder Hold. You are on a hill overlooking the city and with you is Clariel, your old teacher. It is night. She gestures out over the sparkling lights of the city.

"Beautiful, isn't it? A wonderful place to grow up, and to serve Mother Night. Who would believe the depth of evil that it hides? Well, no matter. That evil is well beyond you today, and you have other things to worry about. But don't forget that it's there. Some day you'll have to deal with it, you and your friends. But not today.

"Anyway, I wanted to warn you. If you end up crossing Posada's boundaries, remember this. The nighttime there has its own mistress, and Her creatures stalk the shadows. Do not befriend them, for they will betray you. But do not be afraid; Ell will be with you, wherever you decide to go. And in case things get hairy, you'll have an extra trick up your sleeve. Good luck!"

kidcthulhu: By the way, now he's joined us, let me do a character summary on Grey Wolf:

Grey Wolf: Half-elven fighter/mage, about 70 years old. Grey Wolf got off to a bad start with the Company, in that his first few spells had some aim problems, and he did more damage to the party than to the enemy. He's gotten much better since then. For a mage, he kicks some serious butt, having gone in toe-to-toe in numerous melees. After Mrs. Horn (who, bless her heart, was of low CON and few hit points), Grey Wolf was a radical shock to the party! He's exceptionally pessimistic. His favorite statement is, "We're doomed." Despite his fatalistic worldview, or perhaps because of it, he's brave and tough, and never turns his back on a fight.

It has been prophesied that the group will have to betray Grey Wolf. And there is a whole bucket more of mysterious character background stuff (such as the mystic teleporting tummy alert), which I won't go into here, because it would ruin the surprise.

You snap back into your meditation, still in the Temple of Ell at Tal Hae. You know innately that you now have the ability to create a *cloak of night*, once per night. A *cloak of night*, when cast outdoors in light no greater than twilight, will make up to twelve people invisible to anyone outside the cloak, as long as they stay within 15 feet of you. While you have the *cloak* up, you can move at half your normal movement speed. Only people who are within range at the time of the casting are affected, and once someone leaves the area, they cannot come back into it. No one inside the *cloak of night* can attack while the cloak is up, or for one full round after it is dropped, unless it is in clear self defense. It lasts for up to two minutes per caster level.

Ernest Roundhill

In a room at the Temple of Yondalla, you are enjoying a part of your training that involves reading old recipe books scribed by past priests and priestesses, which mix cooking instructions with spiritual practice and prayer. As you read, you find this passage:

“Roasted Onion Salad – prepare a hot fire of glowing coals, and let the heat warm the room and the hearts within. Take meat juices, and brush them onto freshly cut slices of onions, carefully, letting none spill, and preserving what is not used. These you should grill upon the coals, only until tender, or the Goddess moves you to cease. Then let them stand covered for ten minutes. This is a good time to reflect on the aroma of onions, unique in all the world, and how even the vapors of your creations are divine in their fashion. And you know, humans love them. Ah, humans. So noble, and yet at the same time so flawed, and prone to an unpleasant complexity of thought and deed. They need to be protected, and reminded of what is good in all the Gods’ creations. You, Ernest, are going on a journey, and those who go with you will need your courage, and your determination, and your perspective. They will also need your strength, which cannot be measured by stature. Though as for that, you will find that, once per day (and only for a short while), you can let the Goddess imbue you with her strength. You were never one to abide a bully, and now would be no time to start! You are still admonished not to endanger yourself in anger, nor to put your life at risk unless another’s is at greater risk. This will be the shorter journey, as such things are measured, and without you, the longer one will be much harder for the rest. But Ernest, make sure this journey goes well, and keep those big ‘uns out of trouble if you can. And if you ever find yourselves in dire need of hearth and home, think of the Goddess, for she has many homes. Now, where were we? Ah, yes, the onions. When they have stood for their proper time, take the mixture of the Five Essential Vinegars, add in the garlic, and...”

You turn the page, and the recipe continues. But when you turn the page back again, all that is there are detailed instructions on how to prepare the Five Essential Vinegars, and how best to crush cloves of garlic for the dish. Nowhere is your name mentioned.



Thursday, March 2

Before departing, the party collect the Nifi priestess, named **Sovrenna**. She is middle-aged, with white hair, thin but strong. She promises to cooperate with the party as long as she is well treated. She has been promised that, if she serves well, she will be returned to her people unharmed. The party head out overland, intending to go to Oasis and then take *Burning Sail* straight to the Gahantropalas.

Friday, March 3 – Thursday, March 16

The party travel across Harkran to Oasis. They stop in Dingman’s Ferry en route, and visit Ernie’s parents, who seem well.

Friday, March 17 – Monday, March 20

Makel and Tor bring *Burning Sail* to the city of Gahan. They stay the night in a Corilaynan inn called The Coin’s Edge, in which patrons can make a double-or-nothing wager for the cost of lodging.

Tuesday, March 21 – Friday, March 24

The Company march inland through the snow, to the town of Yen Hae. They learn that no one ventures deep into the forest because of the “forest demons,” but no one knows anything about them.

Saturday, March 25

The party send a scouting mission out on the flying carpet, to locate God’s Thorn. They spot the Thorn in the distance, but before they can approach, they are turned back by a small greenish-brown dragon-like creature, that rises silently up out of the forest. Fortunately, the dragon does not pursue them back to the town.

Sunday, March 26

The party decide to march into the interior on foot, through deep snow. It’s slow going. As they near the Thorn, the party are attacked by small, preternaturally quick, red-skinned humanoids, which dart almost instantly from tree to tree, and hurl javelins at them.

The fight reminds the party of the “stickmen” at Verdshane. The party use *continual darkness* spells as a defensive measure, and it seems to work – beyond the darkness, the creatures stop attacking. There is a moment of eerie quiet. And then the dragon, in perfect silence, pokes its head through the ring of darkness, and breathes a jet of searing steam.

At the same time, a blue ring of light draws itself under the snow around Kibi, and in a flash, Kibi vanishes. (Grey Wolf recognizes the circle as similar to those used in some *summoning* spells.)

Grundy: Did Kibi come back? Still vanished?

kidcthulhu: Unfortunately, Kibi's player suffered from the Piratecat Curse of the Mages (all mages must move away), and left us for grad school. She visits frequently, so you will see Kibi again. And Kibi's player is coming back to the area (oh frabjous joy!), so the post will someday be full of dwarfy goodness.

Sagiro: To elaborate on kidcthulhu's answer: Kibi's player moved out of state to attend graduate school. Kibi ended up getting *summoned* by a powerful wizard on another plane, but the summoning was imperfectly executed. As a result, Kibi bounces back and forth between the two planes. (Kibi's player does occasionally make it back for games, and when she does, that's when he bounces back to the party's home plane. Convenient, huh?)

Even more convenient is the fact that Kibi always seems to appear in the immediate vicinity of Grey Wolf when he comes back, no matter how far the party have traveled. This probably has something to do with Grey Wolf's strange reaction to nearby planar travel. But that's a story for another time.

Trapped

Run #68 – Sunday, December 6, 1998

A fight ensues, which ends not with defeat of the dragon, but with a truce called, followed by a generous food bribe provided by Ernie (a *create food* spell produces deer carcasses). With the dragon satiated, the party press on to God's Thorn. It is a huge spike of rock jutting up from a deep valley with a rocky, treeless floor. They camp above the valley.



Monday, March 27

The party descend into the valley by carpet, and go around until they find the magical fiery gate which is the only way into or out of the Thorn. Now it's time for Sovrenna to do her thing. While the party watch, she grips the burning iron gates, and while she grimaces in obvious pain, the iron vanishes, leaving only a latticework of flames. The party jump through the flames, into the first dark hall of God's Thorn. Sovrenna lets go of the gates, and staggers back.

She is still outside the Thorn. After falling in the mud, she gets up and begins to laugh.

And she reveals that she is, in fact, King Farazil of the Carch Din, Soul-Eater-at-large. She notices as Morningstar begins to cast an abjuration, and flees out of range. With a parting laugh at the party's (seemingly) hopeless predicament, Sovrenna/Farazil departs, leaving them trapped in an ancient mountain prison from which no one has yet escaped...

Tor Bladebearer: Man, the story notes cannot convey just how completely floored, stunned, and dismayed we were after Farazil/Sovrenna trapped us in the Thorn. I mean, in the back of my mind I kind of figured we were going to have to make our way through some awful things to save the Yrimpa but when that particular rug was pulled out from underneath us, it was pretty powerful.

kidcthulhu: We hate Farazil. Really, really, really hate Farazil. We want to see Farazil and Meledien in a steel cage match against each other, and then have the chance to take out the winner.

God's Thorn isn't high up on our list of return vacation spots, either.

The party find themselves in a large chamber, littered with debris and bones. There is a faint skittering sound all around them, and the source of this is soon apparent. Two giant ants emerge from the debris and attack the party, but are soon dealt with. Dranko goes alone into a side chamber to explore, and is attacked by even more giant ants; the rest of the party come to his rescue.

At the far end of the chamber is a wide arched opening, with a passage continuing on the other side. A black circle is drawn on the floor, blocking the entrance, and a skull with a silver crown rests inside the circle. Dranko uses *find traps* to discover that the black circle is (surprise!) a trap, and Morningstar *dispels* it.

When things have calmed down, the party descend into the bowels of the Thorn. It is soon apparent that the place was once a dwarven mine before it was converted into a prison, and there are several desecrated statues of dwarves in the place. As they continue, the party hear a distant inhuman groaning coming from somewhere deep down in the Thorn. Nothing seems to come of it, but it's disturbing nonetheless. Also, something in the place is terrifying Oa-Lyanna, and it's not just the usual discomfiture of being below ground. The ground starts to become littered with white, desiccated giant ant corpses, though there is no sign of what killed them.

In one chamber there are some old dwarvish tombs, and as the party near them, hideous dwarven mummies emerge from their crypts and attack. The battle is gruesome, since the mummies are oozing out of their bandages and smell pretty awful, but the party are victorious, and find some valuable metal chits in the crypts.

They then find a chamber in which to camp, far from the scene. After the party have been asleep for only a few minutes, a cry from Flicker startles everyone to alertness; some horrible vaporous creature has lifted him off the ground and is draining his blood through misty tendrils. Oa-Lyanna, in absolute horror, whispers to Kay: "Death is here!"

Mist of Death

Run #69 – Friday, December 11, 1998

The party fight the misty monster, though it's tough; as it drinks blood from victims, its white vaporous body starts to swirl with red streaks, and when struck, blood spatters out of its body. Eventually, when the fight seems to be going against it, the creature flees by flying through a small crack in the ceiling. After some healing, the party rest for what they guess is the night.

Tuesday, March 28

The party search the nearby tunnels; there are lots and lots of desiccated ant bodies, and they eventually find a small cavern which seems to be the vapor creature's lair. There is a huge pile of ant bodies, along with many humanoid bones, and a pile of treasure. After looting the lair, the party discuss how to deal with the creature if and when it comes back. They formulate a plan, which involves finding a stretch of hallway with almost no "escape cracks." Dranko prays for the *stone shape* spell, and the party wait...

Wednesday, March 29

...and wait...

Thursday, March 30

...and finally, the creature attacks again. The party, pretending to sleep, are ready to spring the trap. *Stone shape* spells trap the monster in a restricted stretch of corridor, and in a heated battle, the party finally slay the beast. It bursts open, and a huge splash of blood splatters on the stone floor. The party move away, and wait out the remainder of the day, healing and resting.

kidcthuilhu: Once again, a terse run summary cannot do justice to the horror of that battle. The creature grabbed Morningstar, pulled her into the air and was sucking the life out of her as we watched. Ernie and Dranko were desperately pumping healing into her each round (Emie jumping up and down frantically trying to reach Morningstar), to replace the massive damage the mist vampire thing was doing. The rest of the party were pounding on the thing like crazy. It was immune to normal weapons, so some of the group (Makel) were useless, and frustrated. It eventually dropped Morningstar and tried to flee, and then we had to scan shadows and corners of the room with *continual lights* and torches, desperately hoping it hadn't gotten out through a hole we'd missed.

One of our best battles, I think, although Morningstar, soft drink of Ell, has long begged to differ.



Friday, April 1

I note, by the way, that this day (in game) marks the two-year anniversary of Abernathy's original summons.

The party continue down through the old dwarven mining tunnels. There is still no sign of prisoners or prison cells, and no Yrimpa. There do appear to be many small, low-value gems exposed in the walls, and Flicker often pauses to pry them out with a dagger. The party continue to hear the groaning sound, but by now, it has become more of a running joke than anything else. After a few minutes, Tor (in front) turns his head to peer down a side passage, and sees the end of a very long, thick tentacle hovering in the air a few feet from his head. After a few seconds, the tentacle quickly retracts, whipping down the passage, around a corner, through a hole, and out of sight.

With nothing else to do, the party continue on. Eventually, the passage widens, and the party can see that, in the distance, the corridor opens up into a large cavernous space. Then, from that direction, two long tentacles come snaking out of the darkness. They stop for a few seconds, twenty feet or so from the party, and then they shoot forward. Tor and Kay are both grabbed by the tentacles. Tor manages to quickly land a critical blow to his, which severs the end. The second tentacle, after taking massive amounts of damage the following round, tries to pull Kay back towards the open cavern where (presumably) the body of the creature is. But it (the tentacle) is injured enough that it has to pull slowly, and the party damage it enough before it can "escape" with Kay that it flings her away and retracts quickly back into the darkness.

The party advance into the cavern, and discover a chasm dividing it. (The tentacles had come up out of that chasm.) There is a thin stone bridge crossing the chasm, but there is also a small but passable tunnel opening on the near side of the gap. The party opt for that option, rather than for the bridge. After they have been in the new tunnel for a few minutes, they hear the sound of a cave-in, and discover that the tentacles have battered the entrance, and trapped the party inside.

The new tunnel continues in random-seeming directions, and the walls and ceiling are filled with the strange gemless divots. The tunnel branches in a few places, with the branches going at odd directions, even straight down at once place. Eventually, a strange sound of grinding stone is heard. The party head towards that, and discover, in a small natural cave, a most unusual creature. It has three stumpy legs, three clawed arms, and a mouth at the top of its head. It is slowly tearing rough gemstones

out of the wall with its claws, and eating them. It seems slow and peaceful. Morningstar communicates with it via *telepathy*, and learns the location of some man-made tunnels nearby, that the creature has discovered but wants no part of. The party head in that direction.

The creature's tunnels break into a wide and well carved corridor. The party travel down it for a ways, until Kay feels a sudden chill. Looking ahead, the players see that the walls of a section of corridor a short way down are covered with a brownish mold.

Tor goes ahead to investigate (he feels no chill since he's wearing a *ring of warmth*) and takes a torch to burn off the mold. When the torch comes near the mold, it (the mold) begins to grow at an alarming rate, spreading along the walls towards the source of heat. Tor quickly snuffs the torch. Figuring that a mold that likes the heat might hate the cold, Grey Wolf decides to use his *wand of ice* to cast *ice storm* on that patch of corridor. It seems to hurt the mold, which turns a darker color, and no longer radiates a chill.

Beyond the moldy area is a stretch of corridor with slight protrusions in the walls. Thorough investigation reveals this to be a trap, in which two iron slabs cut off a stretch of hallway, and then that stretch floods, presumably drowning anyone trapped within. The party get past the trap by purposefully setting it off, and using the *decanter of endless water* set on "maximum suck" to prevent the water from completely filling the trap area. After a few minutes, the trap resets and drains, which allows the party to make it across. On the other side, the party rest.



Jailhouse Rock

Run #70 – Sunday, January 10, 1999

Saturday, April 2

Beyond the water trap, the party find a set of prison cells, but it is guarded by two tall stone statues, which attack when the party approach. After the guardians are dispatched (not an easy fight!), the party discover a number of empty cells, but also find a specially protected cell door, with a now familiar green glass seal. A faint sound of crackling flames can be heard on the other side. Expecting trouble, the party rest another day, to get back spells used in fighting the statues.



Saturday, April 3

Thinking that the Yrimpa might be beyond, the party break the seal, but inside they find a strange sight: a man is there, suspended in a field of crackling flames. He himself is not actively on fire, but his expression is one of obvious torment. Furthermore, the man is a Sharshun.

The party decide to free him, which they do by breaking another glass seal they discover on the inside of the cell. The flames go out, the man falls with a scream, and then he falls unconscious. While he's out, Morningstar casts *memory read*, and learns that the Sharshun had been imprisoned for assassinating a high-ranking Nifi priest.

Eventually he comes to, and the party question him thoroughly. His name is **Inivane**, and he is (understandably) shocked to find that over 2000 years have passed while he has been imprisoned. Last he remembers, the Emperor ruled the kingdom, and the Black Circle was the prominent religion of the realm. The party don't trust him, but don't kill him either.

Vault of the Yrimpa

Run #71 – Sunday, January 17, 1999

Directly below Inivane's prison is another, similar prison, with another eternally burning inmate. This one is a woman, who is garbed in a robe with the symbol of the Silver Shell. Sensing the potential problems, the party make Inivane promise that he won't start any trouble with her; he agrees, on the condition that the Shell woman won't start any trouble either.

Monday, April 4

The party free her, and perform a similar *memory reading* exercise after she drops unconscious; her name is **Rosetta**, and she was captured after a Silver Shell raid on some Black Circle edifice, also over a thousand years ago. Since she does not revive as quickly as Inivane, the party leave her safely locked in one of the nearby empty cells along with a friendly note, some water,

kidcthuuh: I've been meaning for a while to do a quotes posting for Sagiro's game, so here goes. These are only some of them, but I've had to edit out some things that are either going to give away plot which has not been reported here, or lines which were really geography jokes (you had to be there).

Dranko: Our enemies put their armor on the same way we do.
Tor: Yeah, one powerful, arcane, undead ritual at a time.

Kay: Don't mock my pain!
Dranko: But your pain is funny.

Ernie: If you show up at my table undead, I'm going to turn you.

Flicker: How come all our plans involve humiliating the halfling?

Dranko: Just lucky, I guess.

Kay: First we do it the nice way, then we do it the other way.

Ernie: Feed the halfling NOW, and no-one gets hurt.

Player: Gentle repose, for those 'not so fresh' days.

Sagiro: He [the enemy] hits AC 38.

Kay's player: Ow, my family probably dies.

Dranko: Ernie just walks up and gives me strange little lectures. I don't ask for them.

Kay's player: Have we EVER seen anything with tentacles that we liked?

Grey Wolf: (pointing to Dranko, who has just taken a rude conversation to new lows) HE started it!

Morningstar: Duh.

Ernie: I opened up a can of halfling whup-ass, it took one look at my portion size and laughed at me!

a blanket, and a *Murlynd's spoon* so that she can make herself food. Then the party, taking Inivane along, exit the prison cell area, and continue down into the depths of the Thorn.

Grundy: They left her in a prison cell with a friendly note?! Is the party under some time rush that we are not aware of? I can just imagine that note... "Hi, you were imprisoned for more than 2000 years but didn't recover fast enough for us so we locked you back in a cell and went on without you. Don't worry, we are only going to explore the dangerous deeper levels; we'll be back soon..."

Tuesday, April 5

At last the party reach the end of their search. They find an iron door which opens into a stretch of hallway lined with niches; there are iron slabs set to slide out of the niches, blocking the passage (though unlike the similar set-up earlier, there are no traps detected here). Spikes are applied to prevent the doors from closing behind them. At the end of the hallway is another closed iron door, and beyond that is an amazing sight.

The last door opens into an immense chamber, shaped like a tall cylinder. Its surfaces are smooth like glass, but dark and swirling in strange patterns. Shapes move through the space on the other side of the glass, and one of these bumps against the glass; a huge eye looks up at them through the floor. The party realize that the whole glass cylinder is underwater!

There are a dozen large torch stands around the circular perimeter, and four more in the center of the room. And in the upper half of the huge cylinder (which is over a hundred feet tall) there are hundreds of floating crystal spheres, of sizes varying generally from three to eight feet in diameter. Some of these are darkened, but others are lit with a ruddy glow, and shapes seem to be moving slowly inside them. Lastly, there is a large humanoid creature standing in the chamber, with reddish skin and a bellowing voice. It introduces itself as **Habibulin**, Guardian of the Air Spirits. It has been waiting for someone to come and free the creatures imprisoned above, and serving as a guardian in the meantime. It asks the party, "Which of you is the Bonded One?"

Kay doesn't trust the creature, but volunteers herself. Habibulin asks her to stand in the center of the room, inside the central four torches, so that he can perform the ritual that will set the Air Spirits free. Once she's standing there, however, Habibulin's true nature and purpose become clear; he casts *pyrotechnics* to blind some of the party members and attacks Kay. He's a tough opponent; he flies, does devastating fire damage with his fists, and has several other magical powers. When it seems clear that Kay is not going to survive Habibulin's attacks, Morningstar hides her in a magical *darkness*, and Tor uses *dust of illusion* to make himself look like Kay. Habibulin is fooled, and when Tor emerges from the *darkness*, Habibulin starts focusing his attacks on the wrong target.

When things seem to be going poorly for him, Habibulin appears to summon a small red dragon, which then appears to roast Tor. But the dragon turns out to be just a convincing illusion, and Tor is not truly dead. Knowing that the dragon isn't real allows the rest of the party to concentrate on Habibulin, who is eventually slain.

Kay, with a *fly* spell cast upon her, flies up to one of the still luminescent globes, but cannot open it (in fact, touching one of the globes causes heat damage). But Habibulin had a magical key on his body, and this, when touched to the glass globes, frees the Yrimpa trapped inside. Kay flies around the high glass cylinder, and frees about two hundred Air Spirits, which resemble translucent blue humanoids wrapped in swirling mist.

In the midst of their celebration, the party hear a terrible, wrenching sound. Cracks start to appear in the glass of the cylinder. The party quickly flee through the door, with the Yrimpa streaming out among them. They note that iron doors have indeed tried to slide out to block the passage, but the spikes are preventing them from closing. As they flee, the party kick the spikes out, and the doors seal behind them – and a good thing, too, since after a few of the doors are closed, a tremendous crashing sound can be heard, as the glass chamber collapses, and the ocean comes rushing in. Fortunately, the iron doors hold, and the danger seems averted...

A Titanic Escape

Run #72 – Sunday, February 7, 1999

Grey Wolf feels another churning in his gut, and Kibi reappears abruptly. Apparently, he has been (or is in the midst of being) summoned by some wizardess in another world.

(Interestingly, he was summoned because he is "the Opener," and his summoner needs him to undertake a great quest to save her realm. To see why this is interesting, see the prophecy from the Eyes of Moirel in session 46.)

Kibi is somewhat dismayed to hear of the group's predicament of imprisonment. The party hurry back to the cell in which Rosetta was placed. After releasing her, the party tell her many details of what has happened to the world since her imprisonment. She doesn't seem too dismayed, despite the years of torture... she says she expected that something like this might happen. While generally non-hostile, she is clearly quite fervent in her hatred of the Black Circle.

Then the party tell her about Inivane (who has been keeping out of sight during the interview). Although Rosetta clearly has reservations, she agrees not to attack him, or bait him into attacking her. As she and Inivane first make eye contact (and you can almost hear the ambient hostility), the sound of one of the iron doors buckling comes echoing from the direction of the glass prison. The group make haste back the way they originally came to this area, while the Yrimpa stream around and among the party like small blue comets.

The party and Yrimpa get through the water trap just as they did before – using the *decanter of endless water*, and waiting for the trap to reset (this must be done four times, to accommodate all the Yrimpa). On the other side, Grey Wolf again renders the remaining mold harmless with an *ice storm* from the wand. As the party and Yrimpa leave the trap behind, they hear a distant clang as another door buckles beneath the weight of the ocean. One of the Yrimpa points in the direction of fresh air it senses, and Kibi, after being told the direction that the fiery gate faces, guesses that the Yrimpa is in fact pointing to the gate. Off they go!

They all hurry through the tunnels, pausing to rest for a few hours when more people than can fit on the carpet start becoming exhausted. Oa-Lyanna, when asked if the Yrimpa want food, responds that they eat clouds. Ernie casts *create food*, and produces a large cloud which the Yrimpa quickly devour.

Wednesday, April 6

When the party reach the cave-in caused by the tentacles, the Yrimpa are able to move the rocks. The tentacles show themselves briefly, peeking up out of the chasm, but don't attack (perhaps it's the two-hundred-odd Air Spirits which make up the creature's mind). After the next rest break, water begins to seep in through cracks in the floor. The group hurry onward.

Later, in a long, wide passage, the water begins to fill up faster, so Tor activates the smaller version of the *folding boat* (*Burning Sail*), and for a few minutes some of the group are rowed along by *unseen servants*.

Thursday, April 7

Eventually, with the water rising behind them all the while, the whole group reaches the fiery main gate of God's Thorn. Tor, donning a holy symbol of Nifi found below, tries gripping the bars and forcing the gates. He only succeeds in giving himself severe burns.

Then one of the Yrimpa tells Kay to have the party stand well back. Once they have done so, the Yrimpa form a collective tornado, and in a fury of rushing winds unlike anything the party have ever seen, they blast open the rock around the gate, leaving a wide hole to the outside. The burning iron gate (still burning) is lying on the ground a few dozen yards from the entrance. Then the Yrimpa go spiraling out into the open air, upward, and vanishing into the sky. As they do, Kay hears in her mind the sound of waves and the sea, and knows that her debt for Mrs. Horn's life has been repaid in full.

A moment later, one of the Yrimpa comes flying back down to the base of God's Thorn, and talks to Kay. He is **Yaro Karenne**, the leader of the surviving Yrimpa, and he answers some of Kay's questions regarding Bonded Ones. It seems that when the Yrimpa were imprisoned, one of them (attached to a Bonded One but separated physically) escaped. Kay is likely a descendant of that Bonded One, and Oa-Lyanna is, in parallel, a descendant of that one surviving Yrimpa. Yaro goes on to say that the freed Yrimpa are returning to their city in the sky, to rest (the little strength they had was entirely spent in wrecking the gates of the Thorn). Yaro then flies away to join his fellow Air Spirits.

Afterwards, Kay discovers that with Oa-Lyanna's aid, she can *fly* once per day. The party camp at the foot of God's Thorn, grateful for the fresh air and open sky.



Friday, April 8

The next day, the party fly Inivane to the nearest town on the carpet, and there he leaves them with words of gratitude for his rescue. On the way back from dropping off Inivane, the body of Sovrenna is discovered in a clearing, pierced through by forest demon javelins. There is no sign of King Farazil. Rosetta makes clear her displeasure that the party were just willing to let the Sharshun free, without interrogating him properly.

Tor Bladebearer: I left the campaign before finding out whatever happened to the two prisoners we rescued... Sagiro, has that loose plot thread actually been followed up on yet?

kicdthulhu: Has it ever! We've just met Rosetta the Silver Shell chick again recently, and she's a flaming bitch. She must be our ally, as she was really, really mean to us.

Inside joke, everyone. We often joke that in Sagiro's world, our enemies are usually very pleasant to us (Sagiro, the NPC, for one) and our allies are rude, condescending and unpleasant. Given this scale, Rosetta is our new best friend.

As the party prepare to head for the western coast of the island, Grey Wolf feels the odd tugging on his innards, and this time there is a specific direction from which he feels it. The party head in that direction, and discover a large gartine arch in the forest. Kay examines the ground in the area, and it appears that some forest demons vanished under it, presumably having traveled to some other place. Rather than wait for forest demons to potentially come pouring out of it again, the Company head to the coast.

Saturday, April 9 – Sunday, April 10

The party travel through the forest to the western coast of the island. When they reach it, they unfold *Burning Sail* and sail off towards Lan Hae.

Monday, April 11 – Tuesday, April 12

The Company drop off Rosetta in Lan Hae; from there she wants to head to Ghant, where in her time the Silver Shell was based. She too thanks the party again for her rescue, and is clearly planning on continuing to hunt down worshippers of the Black Circle, wherever they might be.

Wednesday, April 13 – Thursday, April 14

Sailing to Tal Hae.

Friday, April 15

Late at night, the Company finally return to Tal Hae. During the first night back home, Kibi vanishes again. The party call Ozilinsh on the crystal ball, and fill him in on all the details of the trip to God's Thorn. Along with the usual praise for a job well done, Ozilinsh says he'll need to find a replacement for Kibi who's a bit more... um... reliable.



King's Bounty

Run #73 – Sunday, February 28, 1999

Saturday, April 16 – Wednesday, June 15

Training happens. During this time, Ozilinsh appears at the Greenhouse with **Aravis Telmir**, a transmuter who has been studying for years in the town of Feslin. Aravis is introduced to the party, amid the usual chaos, as the new party mage. He passes both the *continual light* test (bright lights from which they expect Farazil would flinch) and the Masking test ("A minute from now, we want you to say the word 'Sharshun' back to us").

Ozilinsh also has big news: when the party have finished training, they are to begin their journey to Kivia, the land beyond the Uncrossable Sea. They will have to go through the Gate of Fire, the gartine arch near Seablade Point that is currently clogged with a hostile army coming the other way. To make the trip possible, the Spire is providing some magical items. Each party member gets a special *ring of invisibility*, that has the advantage that anyone wearing one can see anyone else wearing one. Of course, they have the disadvantage of only lasting for two to six hours (exact time unknown) from when they are first used.

The party are also given a set of earcuffs, each of which can be used once, that allow the wearer to understand and speak any single language. (Once activated, they are "bound" to that language, and they can only be used by the person who activated them.) Most importantly, the party are given a magical rope, which can be used to transport the party back to Charagan. Ozilinsh also provides some tactical information. Lastly, the party are given Nifi uniforms, supposing that they might be useful. The Nifi are guarding the coast of the southern Balani Peninsula, but there is a gap in the defense, where a single ship could approach unnoticed, assuming the crew could disembark by scaling a cliff.

As the Company train, they hear rumors that many more kobolds and gnolls have been driven out of Calnis and back to the mountains, but not by the forces of the king. Rather, they are fleeing from some huge one-eyed gnoll, who has apparently built a tremendous crystal palace in the center of the city. That gnoll, it is said, has ousted the former leader of the gnolls, a warchief who wore red armor. Hmm.

There are reports that the Nifi, whose advance had halted for a time at their old stronghold on the peninsula, have begun to advance slowly but steadily northward again. Another rumor says that orcs are once again attacking Hae Kalkas. Lastly, the party learn the king has given the orders that with so many enemies besetting the kingdom, there will be (for the first time in hundreds of years) forced military service. All households have been ordered to send all but one of their able-bodied men to serve in the war.

Morningstar is visited one day by a group of Ellish priestesses, each of whom has heard of her and her unusual place in the Ellish church. They all share a desire to learn from Morningstar about being more competent (especially in battle) in daylight. One is Obsidia, who has already asked to be trained. Also from Tal Hae are **Previa**, a Chronicler who has done research for Morningstar, and thus became interested; **Maltha**, another Chronicler, shy, who found a picture of a symbol in an Ellish book that looks just like Morningstar's black-and-white pendant from Abernathy; and **Eleanor**, who had a vision but won't discuss

it. **Opaline** is a feisty, rebellious sort from Sentinel. Lastly, there is **June**, an aggressive Shield of Ell from Hae Charagan who has had many dreams of war. All of them ask to be trained by Morningstar.

The Spring Tourney of Werthis takes place, but the turnout is very, very low, since most who would participate are off fighting. Many of the participants are too young, too old, or in some way disabled or injured. The party do well, but it's not very satisfying.

Finally, a letter is delivered to the Greenhouse, summoning them to an audience with the King of Charagan himself, His Most August Majesty, **King Crunard IV**. Luxurious carriages arrive at the Greenhouse to collect the party (dressed in their finest clothes), and transport them to the ducal palace, where the king awaits them...

Before entering the palace, the party are divested of all weapons and magic items. Inside, the Company are first met by Yale (the king's advisor), who gives them a pre-audience briefing. Apparently the king is not naturally immune to the Masking, but various spells are functioning which allow him to remember and discuss Masked things without going mad. Also, the party are warned to be respectful in the king's presence, and that even the most minor crime committed on palace grounds (including the swiping of trinkets, she says with a glance at Flicker) is punishable by death.

The party are brought before King Crunard, and he speaks to them. First, he thanks the party for their work in defeating Manzanill's scheme in the capital, which in turn led to the ferreting out of a Chrik spy from the king's palace. Then he thanks them for agreeing to go on the mission to Kivia; he'd like to have the party participating in the war, but understands that their mission to retrieve the Crosser's Maze is more important. He asks for information about the Black Circle, and the party tell him what they know. It is clear that hearing about usually Masked things is difficult for the king; he stammers, pauses, and has to visibly force himself to keep his mind on the subject at hand. But he manages.

In the most surprising event of the audience, the king calls Kay to stand before him, and on the spot he makes her a general! It seems that Yaro Karenne, Lord of the Yrimpa, has visited the palace and offered the services of the Yrimpa to the king. They will fight the enemies of the kingdom as the king directs, but only upon orders from a Bonded One. Since Kay is the only one alive who fits that description, and since by law only generals (or the king himself) can give such orders, Crunard grants Kay the honorary position. (Later, at the Greenhouse, she receives the pins and paperwork making it official.)

Lastly, the king speaks privately with both Aravis and Tor. Afterwards, Tor says his meeting concerned the king's knowledge of his true identity; apparently, the king seems to know who he is, but has agreed not to divulge that information to anyone. Aravis says his meeting concerned the death of his family at the hands of bugbears near Feslin.



Thursday, June 16 – Tuesday, June 21

The Company sail to the Balani Peninsula.

Wednesday, June 22 – Thursday, June 23

The party disembark at the spot recommended by Ozilinsh, use the flying carpet to ferry people up the cliff face, and the last one up folds and brings *Burning Sail*. They begin to make their way inland and southward, paralleling the coast. When they start getting close to Nifi watches and patrols, they decide to spend the remaining daylight in a low dell. Unfortunately, some patrol has picked up their footprints, and two trackers are heard approaching. It looks as though the party are caught with nowhere to hide...

The Dirty Dozen

Run #74 – Sunday, March 24, 1999

...but they use the current spell from the Infinity Book – *mirage arcana* – to make the dell look unoccupied, with the party members as boulders or stunted trees. The trackers are baffled, and eventually depart.

That night, the party continue, sneaking past patrols, and the huge watch fires lit by the Nifi on many hilltops. When they get close enough, they activate their special *rings of invisibility*. They creep through the enemy lines, expecting to be discovered at any time, and hoping the rings last more like six hours than two hours.

Eventually, they approach a simple but huge wooden edifice, inside of which is the gartine arch through which the army of Fire God worshippers is invading. Kay (using her new ability with Oa-Lyanna) *flies* invisibly past the perimeter guards, and up to the flat roof of the building – which sets off a massive magical alarm. While Nifi scurry around below, Kay shuttles the rest of the party up to the roof, and then flies back and forth over the building (setting off the alarm afresh with each pass), attempting to make it look like the alarm wards are randomly misfiring. Huddled on the very center of the roof, the party are invisible from the ground, even from someone using *true seeing*. With the Woodcutter sword, they carve an easily openable hatch on the roof (not quite cutting all the way through), along with a spy hole or two.

Looking down into the torch-lit building that houses the arch, they see (and overhear) a man who looks very much like Tor arrive, a man who is referred to as **the Warlord**. The Warlord has a tense discussion with a man who seems to be a mage. The Warlord wants the arch to be activated so that an overdue supply transport can come through, but the mage (nervously) resists the orders, wanting a few more hours to catch any intruders before the *gate* is opened. The Warlord relents, gives the mage an hour, and stalks out. After the Warlord departs, the party use a pinch of their *dust of illusion* on Dranko to make him look like the Warlord, and send him down off the roof. He takes off his *ring of invisibility* and bluffs his way into the wooden building (no one seems comfortable pointing out to him the change in his voice, which they notice even though Dranko does a pretty good job imitating the Warlord).

Once inside, Dranko reissues the Warlord's orders to open the *gate* immediately, and brooks no protest. Some mages inside begin to cast what are presumably opening spells, while the rest of the party watch through spy holes cut into the roof. Things seem to be going smoothly, until the mages ask Dranko to provide the final word of the spell – it seems that the Warlord has always insisted on the privilege. They look expectantly at Dranko, who of course has no idea what the final word of the *gate* opening ritual is. It looks like the plan is going to fall apart, when Morningstar saves the day. Thinking quickly, she casts *mind read* on the mage who is looking expectantly at Dranko, and of course he is thinking about the command word himself, waiting for Dranko to speak it. Then she uses the *mirror of whispers* to whisper the word directly in Dranko's ear. Dranko gives the word, and the *gate* is opened.

The *mirror of whispers* is one of the first magic items the party acquired. One can use it to communicate verbally across any distance, as long as one can see the person one wants to talk to in the mirror.

Dranko strides through, and the rest of the Company, who have secured ropes up on the roof of the building, shimmy down ropes and into the *gate*. Everyone makes it to the other side while alarms and shouts are heard all around, since while the party are still invisible, the ropes are not. There is mass confusion, as a line of wagons immediately begins to move through the *gate* in the other direction.

On the other side of the *gate* is a tremendous army camp on an open plain, and soon the alarm is being sounded there as well. When it becomes clear that people are looking for someone impersonating the Warlord, the party *dispel* the Warlord illusion (Dranko is wearing a Nifi uniform) and casually move away from the *gate*. And right about now, the *rings of invisibility* stop working, but everyone in the party is wearing a stolen Nifi uniform. Still taking advantage of the confusion, the party start to head away from the *gate*, through the huge camp – and then things get really chaotic. Grey Wolf feels a wrenching in his gut, as if all his internal organs have shifted eight inches to the left, and about a hundred kobold-like humanoids appear in the camp, all looking and acting bewildered. The encampment erupts in ad-hoc battle.

In the confusion the party escape to the outskirts of the encampment, and while escaping they spot a bound and gagged prisoner in one of the tents. His guards have run out to help fight the kobolds. The party free him, and after a hasty introduction (his name is **Carawell**) they continue to flee the camp. Carawell guides the party in what he says is the best direction to get back to his home country of Tev – they are currently in the Nifi's kingdom, called Delfir. A Nifi officer notices them leaving (with a prisoner, no less!) and tries to stop them, and the party kill him quickly.

An hour or so outside of the camp, heading generally southeast, the party hear horsemen approaching. Hoping to hide from the pursuers, the party enter a small copse of trees, and use a scroll of *mass morph*, which makes the party members look like trees. The horsemen arrive: it is a group of about sixteen Nifi, one of whom is clearly a priest. The priest casts *true seeing*, and spots the party hiding in the trees; a fight ensues. One of the Nifi is a wizard who drops a *fireball* on the party, but soon a *hold person* shuts down the enemy mage. The priest remains a problem, casting a *flame strike*, and fighting fiercely hand to hand. The battle is vicious and bloody, but the party are victorious. There is one survivor from the Nifi side, who chooses to surrender rather than be killed. Morningstar plants a memory in his head, that he was the only survivor of the fight, and that the party members popped out of existence (as if they had been *summoned*) as they were killed.

The party travel for the rest of the day. They note that it seems several hours later than it should be, and also that there is snow on the ground (and some more is falling), despite the fact that it's June.



Farewell to Tor

Run #75 – Friday, July 25, 1999

Friday, June 24 – Saturday, June 25

The Company ask many questions of Carawell as they travel along. He has been spying on the Delfirians (posing as one of them) for almost a year, since there had been rumors of military activity in Delfir. He has discovered that the Delfirians believe they are being punished with cold weather by their god Nifi for failing to sow adequate destruction. The fact that it has been winter

in Delfir for over two years lends credence to this belief. Carawell is a chairmaker by trade, but with his language skills (he can perfectly imitate a Delfirian), he volunteered for the job as a spy. He was discovered while rifling a command tent, and has been kept captive ever since (there is evidently an old treaty that prevented the Nifi from killing him outright).

Now Carawell is leading the Company back to his home country of Tev, which is separated from Delfir by a range of mountains. There is only one pass, and it is guarded by towers manned with Tevian soldiers. He lives in the town of Lav-Set, many days' journey on the far side of the pass. He mentions in passing that he wants to visit a Black Circle shrine en route, which naturally makes the party curious. It seems that in Kivia, there are many small Black Circle shrines, which will answer questions or make vague pronouncements, in return for a small donation of what Carawell calls "life energy." They are generally thought of as useful and benevolent, or at worst harmless.

Saturday, June 26

As the daylight fails, the party find themselves moving through the ruins of an ancient town. Amid the ruins the party see ghosts of Nifi soldiers, sitting in circles around ghostly fires. A *thought capture* from Morningstar finds a thought of a soldier preparing for battle. In addition to the ghosts, small (and real) flames zip along the ground in random patterns among the ruins. The party camp up on building fragments, to avoid the fires. Tor grows strangely silent, and watches the ghosts intently, deep in thought.



Monday, June 27

After the party have woken and had breakfast, Tor announces that he has to leave the party. There is much incredulous consternation. Tor's reasoning is thus: having seen the size of the Delfirian army massing on the Kivian side of the *gate*, he is convinced that the forces of Charagan cannot win a war against them. Given his bloodlines (and his knowledge of his ancestor Davarian), he thinks he can convince the Nifi that he is defecting and joining their side. He will attempt to use his position to gather knowledge and get it through to Charagan, and do anything else he can to sabotage the Nifi war machine from within. Morningstar casts a battery of detection spells and *mind reads*, to make sure Tor isn't being magically compelled into this decision. He isn't. After some sad goodbyes, and after handing over some (but not all) of his magic items, Tor walks off, back towards Delfir.

As soon as he's gone, the pronouncements of doom begin, mostly from Grey Wolf. Makel, depressed at Tor's departure, immediately hits the bottle again. Morale is low, as the party and Carawell head out for another day of travel.

In the late afternoon, Grey Wolf feels that churning feeling in his gut, as all of his organs shift several inches to the left. Immediately after, a swarm of bats appear, swirling around the party. The bats are covered with small hooks and barbs, and though the party drive them off (flapping away in all directions) with relative ease (and good use of *gust of wind* and *efficacious monster ward*), Kay is nicked by one of the barbs.

As the evening wears on, it becomes clear that Kay is suffering from some sort of unpleasant and increasingly severe disease. Her skin glistens with sweat, dark bags appear under her eyes, and she begins to stare intensely at other party members. They figure out that something's wrong, and try a *cure disease* spell, but the disease is so virulent it resists. Dranko force-feeds her *elixir of health*, and this cures her, but not before he catches the disease himself, from touching her sweat. He goes through the same thing, and he strongly resists being force-fed more *elixir*; but in the end, they make him choke it down, and he's cured. With the disease licked, the party press on.

Kosh: Excellent game, Sagiro... Your masterful DMing is an inspiration... Thank you for posting your logs so we may see and learn from a master... I never played D&D before Third Edition, so a few of the spells and items are quite alien... Can you explain what a Woodcutter sword does exactly?

I was also wondering about the spells *telepathy* and *thought capture*... They don't appear in the PHB (at least to my knowledge) and are used frequently by the party... If you could write a brief description or give a link to a site that has them converted to Third Edition, I would appreciate it...

Sagiro: Thanks for your kind words! (Though whenever anyone refers to me as a "master," I feel compelled to point out that I learned most of my craft from Piratecat, and get lots of great ideas from Dr. Rictus.) The Woodcutter sword was my own invention, though the idea came from one of Joel Rosenberg's *Guardians of the Flame* series. It's just a +1 longsword, but for about five minutes a day it can cut through wood as if it were butter. It also does double damage against animated wooden creatures.

Telepathy and *thought capture* were two spells in the 2nd Edition *Tome of Magic*. *Telepathy* is a 3rd-level cleric spell that essentially is *Rary's telepathic bond* between the caster and one other person. *Thought capture* allows Morningstar to pick up thoughts left behind by sentient creatures. You can think of it as a *detect thoughts* that only picks up a single thought, but that you can use long after the person has left the spot where they had the thought in the first place. Stronger, more emotional thoughts tend to be more "detectable" with this spell, and areas can easily become polluted with many thoughts from many different people, making it less likely that you'll get one that's useful. (Morningstar has often cast the spell only to get a thought like, "Oops! I shouldn't be standing here! I might mess up Morningstar's *thought capture*!")

Sometimes the thought captured is a coherent phrase or sentence. Sometimes it's just an emotional feeling. And sometimes it's a vision. I roll a die behind the screen to determine how useful a thought is picked up, modified by location and circumstance.

About 30 sessions from now, Morningstar uses *thought capture* in an amazingly useful way that had never occurred to me; all the party members were quite proud of her.



*A Passage Through Kivia***Bats in the Belfry**

Run #76 – Sunday, August 15, 1999

Tuesday, June 28

The next day, the Company reach the beginning of the long mountain pass between Tev and Delfir. A few minutes later, the party hear a distant crashing sound, almost like thunder, coming from the pass ahead. Undaunted, they press on. Shortly thereafter, Carawell notes that they should have been challenged by guards, but have not been.

And then the party come across the remnants of the westernmost outpost, a large cave which usually shelters a couple of dozen Tevian guards. The injuries to the bodies indicate that the guardsmen likely killed each other, and some of them have gruesome human bite marks. One set of tracks leads away from that cave, down the pass. Some hook-bats are sleeping peacefully upside down in the guard cave; these are quickly (and safely) dispatched. The party then split up, with one group flying ahead on the carpet and the other continuing on the ground.

The flying group (Ernie, Flicker, Carawell, and Dranko) go ahead in an attempt to get ahead of the disease. They spot several dead archers, nestled in good vantage points above the pass. Dranko leaves a note to the others, next to a body that has fallen to the ground below, that they shouldn't lick the body.

The flying group also discovers a huge landslide of debris blocking the pass. According to Carawell, this looks like the Tevians have triggered the landslide as a defense, probably thinking the disease is some precursor to a Delfirian attack. They fly on, and find an archer still alive (but near death) on a lookout spot; they save him with a *cure disease* spell, and in doing so discover the spell is effective at least some of the time. Ernie then flies back and picks up the ground-pounders, who at this point have reached the blockade, and have decided that the don't-lick message was probably from Dranko and not from enemies.

Once all together, the party continue on to the end of the mountain pass. There they find two giant towers connected by a hundred-foot-long stone bridge that arcs over the pass. They enter one of them and begin to look for someone in charge, but instead discover dozens of dead or dying Tevian soldiers. The ones that are still alive are deranged; a few are eating the bodies of their dead comrades, and all around ring screams of agony or madness. Eventually they hear above the general din someone shouting coherently for help. They find a man named **Louvhad** barricaded in his room, which is filled with various herbs, including lots of garlic. He explains that he was chased into his room, but that the diseased soldiers would not follow him in.

Piratecat: Can I just tell you how damn creepy that plague was? What Sagiro hasn't described is that it made the victims so hungry that if they couldn't find anything else to eat (like the bodies of their comrades), they'd start eating themselves.

We were questioning one sick guard, while restraining him, and he kept muttering about being "so hungry." While we watched, he began chewing on his own arm. And the creepiest part was that he was really enjoying it.

The guard, that is. Sagiro was also really enjoying it, but for different reasons. Like he's a sick, twisted individual.

Kay and Dranko take some garlic and other herbs from the room, and go out to figure out which of them is keeping the diseased soldiers away. After discovering that it is, in fact, the garlic, they proceed to the signal tower at the top of the fortress. Of course when they get there, they realize they have no idea how to use the huge swiveling mirror to send a real message, so they flash some nonsense signals and then start looking for someone who knows how to send real messages.

Aravis suggests that they try to force-feed garlic to one of the diseased but still living soldiers. There is a brief battle with some of the diseased men, during which Grey Wolf fires garlic-coated crossbow bolts at one of the enemies' legs. It seems to help almost at once, and the party manage to get him to ingest more garlic by just eating it.

Ernie casts *create food and water*, praying for garlic to supplement their supplies. It works. After munching some garlic, the party run around the tower, trying to find anyone they can cure (in the end, they save about a dozen men out of the three hundred or so stationed at this outpost). Meanwhile, Ernie and the first saved soldier (who knows how to use the signal tower) send a message inland to Tev, warning about the plague and the bats.



Wednesday, June 29

The next day the party hunt down some more hook-bats, and then continue on with Carawell to Lav-Set. They stop at a couple of farms to warn them about the hook-bat situation.

Thursday, June 30

Travel to Lav-Set.

While traveling, the party run into a small group of Tevian soldiers and clerics who (after the signaled warning) are loaded down with garlic. They thank the party on behalf of their country (though they also seem to feel the plague is the party's fault), and then press on towards the infected towers.

Later in the day the party discover a small Black Circle shrine on the side of the road. There is a young girl in the yard outside the building, tending to chickens. Inside the Shrine, the party find a Black Circle priest and numismatist named **Sirvhad**. He has devoted his life to the study of coins, both minting and history, and his own body is covered with tattoos on the subject. As Carawell has mentioned, the Black Circle priests who tend these shrines can serve as foci and conduits for powerful divinations, at the cost of the some of the questioner's "life energy." This energy is regenerated after about a day. Carawell himself has used this "service," and found it safe and worthwhile, though there are no guarantees about the nature, completeness, or even veracity of the answer.

Some of the Company decide to ask questions. Kay asks about the nature of the plague-carrying bats, while Sirvhad sits in a plain chair in the middle of a black circle drawn on the stone floor. In a deeper voice than his own, Sirvhad answers: "*They are a natural consequence of current events.*"

Grey Wolf then asks about the uncomfortable feelings in his innards. There is a pause, and Sirvhad starts to tremble. But after a tense moment he speaks: "*That feeling in your guts... that is... you are the center. You are the axle. You are the place in common. The day will come when your friends will betray you, and your enemies will fight to save you.*"

Banoc the Worm: You are an amazing DM with some amazing players; I totally admire the work you have done and the effort put in.

Sagiro: Well, I at least agree about the players.

Banoc the Worm: I have a few questions that would help me with my campaigns; please answer them at your convenience.

Sagiro: I'll do my best!

Banoc the Worm: (1) *I see that you send players emails to further plots; how exactly do you use this? (Do you send emails when the players are training, or is it used on a random basis?)*

Sagiro: I don't actually do that much over e-mail. I'll use it for administrative details, sending out treasure lists so that players can look at it before they divvy up loot, and answering "Can my character do this?" sorts of questions players have between runs. I've done more with Morningstar's player over e-mail because Morningstar does experimenting with *Ava Dormo* at night before she sleeps, and (at least until recently) there hasn't been a good way to get the other characters involved. (I see that as a bad thing, by the way, as I mentioned in a previous post.) If you can, I suggest reserving e-mail for things that either would otherwise be time consuming one-on-one sessions with a player, or are just administrivia.

(2) *There is an incredible amount of detail in your campaign – do you work out most of the details prior to the campaign or is it as you go along?*

Lacking Piratecat's amazing improvisatory skills, I try to have as many details noted as I can before a game starts. I still have to make lots of stuff up as I go, because the party often want to go places and do things I wasn't prepared for. But for the "main plot," I probably over-prepare. What I don't do is prepare detailed material until I'm almost certain it will get used.

(3) *How do you handle the training/down time? I have noticed a lot of stuff happening during this time frame.*

I love training! It gives me a chance to press the "world fast-forward" button from time to time (letting the world outside the PCs' sphere evolve), and it gives the PCs a chance to meet with local NPCs, make magic items, take short trips to see family members, and report in person to Abernathy/Ozilinsh. Plus, there are always plenty of NPCs who want to see *them*, and who have to wait until they're back in town training. Often, letters have been delivered to the Greenhouse while they've been gone. And occasionally they get to participate in one of the Tournaments of Werthis.

(No, they don't actually train and make magic items exactly concurrently. But down time like this offers a good opportunity to at least do them sequentially.)

(4) *What do you use to create all the maps etc. that you must have for all the different places? Do you have them for every location such as the cities?*

I don't, really. I have old hand-drawn maps of Charagan, and I have a big (and more recent) hand-drawn map of Kivia, the large continent on which they've just arrived in the Story Hour. But I don't make maps of individual cities or dungeons or towers until I actually need them. I wouldn't have time! Sometimes I improvise quick-n-dirty maps if they're called for, but usually I have a good idea of what maps I'll need when. As for cities, I'll just describe a few unique features, but mostly leave the details to be filled in on the fly.

(5) *I love the letters as plot devices. Do you pre-plan where to plant them – actually write them out – or is it something that you email the players?*

I typically pre-plan those, and either print them out or write them out by hand to give to the players at the table.

(6) *I notice how the party split up a lot; how do you run this without the other players being bored?*

When the party split up, I try to bounce the focus around so that no one goes too long without being the center of attention. And if someone wants to do something long and involved on their own, we often agree to work out the details via e-mail later on.

(7) *You wouldn't happen to have a floor plan for the Greenhouse, would ya?*

I don't, but I think my players might. I seem to recall drawing up very simple maps, and letting them decide where they'd sleep and such. But if I posted it, you'd all know the location of the secret room! :-)

(8) *Ever thought about writing a book?*

All the time! In fact, I wrote most of a really bad fantasy-in-a-modern-day-setting novel in college, that served as my thesis. But now that I'm in the real world with a job and such, there just aren't enough hours in the day. I'd have to give up my campaign, and I'm not prepared to do that. I dunno... maybe when my campaign ends, I'll work on a novelization of it, though I understand that such endeavors usually work out poorly.



Saturday, July 2

Travel to Lav-Set.

Sunday, July 3

The Company approach Carawell's home town of Lav-Set. In the hills above the town they can see the castle of Lord Baravhad, whom Carawell says rules northern Tev. At the outskirts of the town are some fields in which several hundred troops are training. Once in town, Carawell recommends that the party stay in an inn called the Victory, and then takes his leave of the party and goes off to see his much-missed wife.

Lav-Set is a medium-sized town, not nearly as big as Tal Hae. Most of its shops are for crafts – there are carpenters, toolmakers, glassblowers, clockmakers, cartwrights, stonewrights, chandlers, and lots and lots of smithies. Bows and arrows are made in great quantities. In the center of town is a large stone statue of Chav the Great, a famous war hero from a past conflict with Delfir. The party get some of their money changed into the local currency: the mirac. (A mirac is worth half a gold piece. A min-mirac is worth half a silver, and a chit is worth half a copper.)

Since they are approaching St. Jenniver's Day (when Dranko must borrow an heirloom from the farmer Saum Derrie to save Califax somehow [see session 67]), the party investigate, and discover a town farmers' market which is currently convened. At one of the stalls, they discover a woman named **Mirvah Derrie** and her daughter **Luna**. They learn that the family farm (and Mirvah's husband Saum) is only a few miles to the east.

The Victory is a large, well kept and comfortable-seeming inn. There is a collection box for the Church of Palamir (God of Soldiers, Loyalty, Duty and Honor), and there are many swords mounted on the walls. There are about a dozen patrons seated at tables in the common room. The party are handed menus when they sit down – an odd custom!

The Company are sitting down and eating, looking forward to a night in real beds for the first time in a long time, when something strange happens. One of the long chains hanging from the ceiling, with a lantern at the end, starts swinging the lantern at the party. Other similar chains lash out to the walls, twine around the swords mounted there, and start flailing away as well. The table lurches and turns itself over (sending food and dishware flying) and tries to trap party members underneath it. Within seconds, much of the decor of the Victory is attacking the party! The other patrons scramble in horror for the exits. After a small amount of fighting, Morningstar puts an end to the foolishness with a *dispel magic*, but only a couple of rounds later the decor starts to become animated and hostile again.

The party head for the exit. Grey Wolf is out first... and is immediately run over by an animated cart! As the rest of the party file out, the cart turns for another pass, but this time Kay destroys it with the Woodcutter sword as it goes by. And then the party become aware of pounding footsteps, and around the corner comes tromping the stone statue of Chav the Great, stone sword raised! They fight briefly, but their attacks do little damage against the statue, so they do the sensible thing – flee! They head out of town, with the statue running after them, but Chav is slow, and eventually it slows down and stops, seemingly bereft of its animation.

Not long after, town guardsmen show up and detain the party. The party are told that they should remain outside the town. Grumbling about missing out on real beds again, the party camp outdoors. Ernie is especially upset.

Monday, July 4

The party are met outside by **Lord Baravhad** himself, come down from his castle. Baravhad explains that the party have clearly been targeted by a feared organization of assassins known as "the Animators." While he is generally sympathetic, he also requests that the party fork over some money to help pay for the damage done to the Victory. Worse, he demands that after tomorrow, they not set foot in another Tevian city or town until they have proof that the Animators are no longer after them.

The party spend the rest of the day shopping, picking up local-style clothes, a primer for reading and writing the local language, and various other items. They also meet again with Mirvah Derrie, and arrange to visit their family farm on St. Jenniver's Day (July 12th).

Ernie's crisis of faith, which has been building for some time, really starts to have an effect on him. He is depressed about being so far from any home, and thus out of Yondalla's element. He is feeling helpless and isolated, and quite miserable. The rest of the party try to cheer him up.

Tuesday, July 5 – Thursday, July 7

Camped outside the town, the party *identify* some magic items acquired recently in the battle with the Delfirians.

The Company travel to the farm of Saum Derrie, but wait camped out on the main road a few hundred yards from the farm until St. Jenniver's Day arrives.



Califax In(n) Between

Run #78 – Tuesday, September 7, 1999

Tuesday, July 12 [St. Jenniver's Day (Delioch)]

Today is St. Jenniver's Day. The party walk in the rain to the farmhouse of **Saum Derrie**, and Dranko tells him about his dream of the artifact of Delioch. Saum (a gruff but good-natured middle-aged farmer) listens intently, and then goes into his house. He comes out with a worn iron candlestick, on the base of which is scratched a "J." The candlestick is a family heirloom, and Saum has always felt that there was something special about it. He willingly hands it over to Dranko, and invites the party to stay dry in his barn. When they warn Saum that they are currently targets of the infamous Animators, he replies: "Well, if you need me, I'll be hiding under the bed, then."

The party spend some time moving all potentially-dangerous-if-animated farming equipment out of the barn. Then, with the rain still falling outside, they spend a relatively boring day in the barn, with Oa-Lyanna cleaning up the hay to make the place more fire-safe. Around sunset, Flicker climbs into the hayloft, and Dranko lights the candle inside the candlestick of Saint Jenniver. It glows with a soft golden light.

After a few minutes of intense prayer by Dranko, and with the last failing sunlight slowly dissipating, a dome of ghostly light forms in the barn, and a dim stone room takes form. It seems that both the room and the barn are occupying the same space at the same time. In the center of this room sits Califax, alone, in a chair, wearing robes of the Black Circle. Dranko continues to pray, and Califax, who at first had a somewhat vacant expression, becomes a bit more alert and turns his head in Dranko's direction, though he still doesn't see him. In Dranko's mind, he hears the sound of waves crashing upon an unseen shore, and he knows in his soul that his debt to Brechen for Mrs. Horn's life has been paid.

Then a door opens into the room, and three black-robed figures enter. One of them, a tall, thin-faced man covered with scars, who seems to be the leader, speaks to Califax: "Ah, Califax. We're all busy, as you know, so I'll get right to the point. Although you have seemed to serve the Circle well in these past months, Mokad has been wondering if seeming is the same as being. Your mind is strong, and as capable of deceiving us as deceiving our enemies. So he has devised a small test of your faith. A test easily passed, if you are true to the Circle. I personally believe this test unnecessary; your work, to the best of my knowledge, has been exemplary. But Mokad insists."

A second door opens, out of which comes a fourth priest, dragging a child who stares ahead blankly. "This brat was caught spying on one of our more delicate operations. We cannot risk letting him go. He must be killed. As you can see, we have made the appropriate arrangements for an Integration. Califax, Mokad would like you to do the honors."

He hands Califax a long knife, and one of the other figures bends back the neck of the child. Dranko walks over to Califax to put his hand on his shoulder (the Black Circle figures don't seem to see the party or the barn), but finds that his hand passes right through. He keeps his hand there anyway, and prays hard for Califax to do the right thing. Califax looks at the boy, and smiles. Then he tells the Black Circle figures that, yes, this is a test of his faith, and that he has passed. And he drops the knife.

Two of the figures immediately step forward and force Califax down into his chair. Dranko, with a last effort of will, prays hard enough that the room suddenly becomes solid, and the figures, including Califax, can see them. A melee immediately ensues. Spells fly everywhere, including *hold persons* from both Dranko and one of the Black Circle figures, a *magic missile* from Grey Wolf, *fist of stone* from Aravis, and *lightning bolt* from the tall, thin-faced man.

After a few rounds of vicious combat, the Black Circle priests are down, as is the child (who was an unfortunate victim of the *lightning bolt*). With half the party magically *held*, Grey Wolf and Aravis end up dropping their enemies in physical melee, but the Black Circle leader *teleported* away before he could be killed.

kidcthuuhu: This is the appropriate time to introduce the Amazing Battling Mages of Ozilinsh's Company. In that battle, all the combat team (Kay, Ernie, Makel) were *held* or down, and Dranko, Flicker and Morningstar were either *held*, deeply wounded, or busy trying to get to the people who were down. Aravis and Grey Wolf, each in single-digit hit points (Grey Wolf had 1, as I remember), went hand-to-hand with the enemy. Aravis launched a battle tactic which has become something of a specialty for him, *fist of stone* and bare-fisted punching. Our mages have shiny brass ones!

Dranko hastily writes a note of introduction and gives it to Califax, and tells him to seek sanctuary in the Greenhouse back in Tal Hae. Then the candle goes out, and Califax, the bodies, and the room all vanish, leaving only the barn. The party see that a corner of the barn has been blown open by the *lightning bolt*, and that the place has been left in disarray by the fighting.

Wednesday, July 13

Under the direction of Saum Derrie, the Company spend the entire next day repairing the barn. Dranko also gives him 500 miracs for his help, which is a fortune for the humble farmer. The party spend one more night in the barn, and then continue on their journey.



Thursday, July 14

The party travel southeast, through an unusually cold, wet rain.

Friday, July 15

The weather gets progressively worse... the rain is a driving downpour. The road is turning to mud.

Saturday, July 16

Towards the end of the day, which has been unseasonably cool, there is a brief period of hail, followed by an especially drenching thunderstorm. The party reach an entirely washed-out section of road, and are forced to stumble along the muddy grass.

As the sun sets somewhere behind the clouds, Ernie spots lights in a copse of trees some fifty yards off the road. Ernie walks in that direction, and the party follow him, even though only Ernie can see the lights. As they get closer, Flicker too sees the lights, and then both the halflings can see what looks like a building nestled among the trees. Only when they are almost upon it can the others see the building. There are warm yellow lights shining out through rain-streaked windows, and a weathered wooden sign hanging on the building reads "The Inn Between" in Charagan Common! Some of the party (especially Aravis and Grey Wolf) are suspicious, but the party go in.

The place is an extremely comfortable inn, filled with the scent of freshly baked bread. The ceiling is low, with lamps hanging from thick wooden beams. A plump halfling woman (**Dolly**) is bustling about, and a middle-aged halfling man (**Barnabas**) is sitting in the back with his feet up on a table, and smoking a long pipe. Two large, fluffy cats roam about the place.

From the kitchen, Dolly calls for the party to go dry out in front of the fire – the party note that there are several comfy couches in front of a warm fire at one end. Once they are dry, Dolly serves them a wonderful meal: bread with honey, butter and jam; hot mulled cider; and a good beef stew. Aravis and Grey Wolf remain so suspicious that they refuse to eat any of the food, despite Dolly's assurances.

In the kitchen, Dolly calls Ernie over for a consultation about the apple dumplings she is making. She asks Ernie what is troubling him, and Ernie tells her all about his quavering morale and his homesickness. Dolly cheers him up with words of encouragement. Do you realize, she says, just how much you mean to your friends? You despair of being far from home, but you make everywhere seem like home to them. Home in the truest sense isn't a place, she tells him. Having faith in the Goddess lets you carry "home" around with you, in your heart. About this time, it suddenly occurs to Ernie that he might in fact be speaking with Yondalla herself, in some incarnation. Dolly. Barnabas. His jaw drops.

Flicker has been over with Barnabas, picking up tips for dice games. Barnabas gives good pipes to both Flicker and Dranko, along with a supply of excellent tobacco.

Eventually, the party go up to their rooms. There is a room for everyone, with comfy feather beds, tubs and coppers full of steaming water, soap, fluffy towels, small fireplaces – and cat doors.

Sunday, July 17

The next morning, Ernie wakes first and discovers that the Inn is gone. The party are sleeping in a very well prepared campsite, and the sun is shining down through the trees. Nearby is a small stack of sealed jars of jam, and carefully wrapped traveling cakes.

It's a beautiful day, he thinks to himself. "Rise and shine, everyone!"

RangerWickett: *sniffle* That's beautiful. You're Oprah, aren't you?! No one else could have so many poignant moments in one story. *sniffle* Keep up the wonderful storytelling, Sagiro. Wherever I am, I can log into a computer, read your Story Hour (and others' too), and feel at home. Many thanks.

Sagiro: *looks at self* Nope, I'm not Oprah. Wrong gender, wrong color, wrong height, and wrong weight. But I'm glad you're enjoying the story!

The Inn Between was made even cooler by my housemate and accomplice Dr. Rictus. As I was first describing the interior of the Inn, Dr. R was baking bread in the oven, filling our house with the smell. And as Dolly served her wonderful meal to the party, Dr. R came to the gaming table with a large plate heaped with freshly baked bread, butter, jam and honey.

It was one of my favorite sessions in all the years I've been running the game.



Monkeying Around in Trev-Lyndyn

Run #79 – Friday, September 17, 1999

The rest of the party wake, and they continue to journey southeast to the city of Trev-Lyndyn, which is a free city on the border of Tev and the country of Dir-Tolia. (The party had picked up rumors in Tev that the Animators might be based there.) Flicker announces that Barnabas had given him the name of a possible contact for the Animators: Bryce.

Monday, July 18

Travel to Trev-Lyndyn.

Tuesday, July 19

As night falls, the Company chance upon some travelers with a wagon who have camped for the evening. The master of the wagon is a merchant named **Hylwyn**, who is transporting crates of fruit and some bucklers to Lav-Set. He has two large hired guards named **Srenvhad** and **Twyll**. Ernie challenges one of them to an armwrestling contest, and wins with a little help from Yondalla.

Hylwyn has some interesting news: he recalls that a few weeks earlier, a big man with a black beard and long black hair had asked him if he had seen a group of foreign travelers which included two halflings and a big fighter with spiky armor. Then, only six days ago, a man in Trev-Lyndyn asked him to be on the lookout for a similar group. That man's name is Falva, and he is awaiting the party in an inn called the Golden Bell.

Wednesday, July 20 – Thursday, July 21

Travel to Trev-Lyndyn.

Friday, July 22

The party arrive in Trev-Lyndyn, a bustling city through which the Softwater River runs. There are seven bridges that cross it, and it is by these that most directions are given. The party immediately seek out Falva at the Golden Bell. **Falva** is a Tevian merchant who sells ornate pottery in Trev-Lyndyn, and who was contacted about a week ago by a Delfirian cleric of Nifi. The priest gave him 500 miracs to spend a week asking merchants to look for the party and send them back to him.

Now that the party have arrived, Falva asks them (as instructed by the priest) if they would please return the flying carpet. It seems that the carpet is an important religious artifact to the Delfirians, and is called in their holy tongue the *Vyasa Vya*. When the party refuse, Falva goes on to offer them 2500 miracs for it. When the party still politely decline, Falva shrugs, thanks the party for their time, and tells them they will no longer be bothered. Morningstar's mind reading confirms that Falva has not been deceptive.

That evening, Dranko and Flicker use their roguish abilities to send a message to Bryce, requesting a meeting. Bryce, they hear, is a shady figure purported to be a high-ranking member of the local Thieves' Guild (known as the Lurkers). No obvious connection to the Animators is known.

Saturday, July 23

An unknown person contacts the party (with an anonymous note), telling them that they have arranged a meeting with Bryce that evening. At night they head into one of the more disreputable parts of town, to an old warehouse where the meeting is to take place. They are admitted, and the warehouse is filled with statues, presumably to discourage any bad-faith dealing on the part of the party.

Bryce, a huge man, sits behind a desk at the far end of the warehouse. Bryce tells them that, frankly, he was hoping to get a chance to talk with the party. The Animators have never failed to carry through on a job, but they have never been hired to kill anyone as tough as the party. Bryce makes the party an offer: for 1000 miracs, and a promise never to discuss this deal, the Animators will drop their contract on the party. The party accept these terms in the proverbial heartbeat.



Roasted Orcs with a Fried Ogre Chaser

Run #80 – Tuesday, October 5, 1999

Sunday, July 24 – Sunday, September 6

The party train in Trev-Lyndyn. During this time, Dranko is trained by a one-eyed Lurker named **Chalwyn**. Aravis and Grey Wolf are trained by an irascible mage named **Nanvhad**. Kay trains some on her own, and some with a local guardsman.

Oa-Lyanna grows strong enough to learn a new trick, a powerful *whirlwind* attack.

Morningstar receives a dream visit from Previa. Apparently, she and the others who sought Morningstar out a while back have figured out how to contact her in the Dreamscape. They report that they have joined on with Amber's Illuminated Sisters;

Previa, at least, thinks they will be useful if nudged in the right direction. They express a renewed desire for Morningstar to teach them how to be effective fighters in the Dreamscape, especially in the light. Lastly, Previa also reports that the war situation back home is getting worse. The Delfirians have pushed up the Balani Peninsula, and are threatening to take Hydra in the next few month sunless they are slowed. On the positive side, there are rumors that an army of air elementals helped defeat the orcs at Hae Kalkas.

One night, while the party are asleep in the Flippant Fish Inn, Grey Wolf is woken up by that awful churning feeling in his bowels, and seconds later, a vast jungle appears superimposed over the inn. Strange birds cry overhead, thick vegetation and trees are all around, and animal noises fill the air.

From elsewhere in the inn, people start shouting and screaming. A woman comes bursting out of her room down the hall, screaming about a swarm of insects. And from another room, a small monkey comes ambling out. The party befriend the monkey.

Here the game-master learns that, if he ever has to entertain the party for a few hours without benefit of prepared materials, he need only introduce a monkey into the game, and voilà!

Many amusing monkey antics follow. When the party realize that it would be impractical to take the monkey with them, Dranko sells it to Chalwyn and the Lurkers, for its thieving potential.

kidcthulhu: At one point, after we'd wasted several hours of play time goofing around with the monkey, someone asked Sagiro whether he'd planned all this. He looked forlornly at his papers and said, "There's no monkey in my notes."

Sagiro does one of the best monkey impersonations ever.

One more time before the party leave, they are approached by Falva. His employer has asked him to make one more plea for the *Vyasa Vya*. To his last offer he adds a promise that the flying carpet would not be used in the war against Charagan. The party again say no, though they give Falva a counter-offer: if the Delfirians withdraw their army from Charagan and give up their war, then the party would give them back their holy artifact. Falva says he will pass the offer along.

kidcthulhu: By the way, Ernie may have been asking for trouble when he told the Nifi that they'd take the carpet over his dead body.



Monday, September 7 – Tuesday, September 8

And so to the party's actual quest, based on the letter to Manzanill from the mysterious "P," to go to the city of Djaw and find out information about the Crosser's Maze. Having heard that Djaw is one of the "Jewels of the Plains," a string of free cities to the southeast, the party travel through the small kingdom of Dir-Tolia in that direction.

Wednesday, September 9

While traveling along the road from Trev-Lyndyn to the town of Bynbur, half of the party are suddenly enveloped in a cloud of choking green gas. It's an ambush! There is a force of ogres and orcs doing the ambushing, and they greatly outnumber the party.

Unfortunately for them, the party has mages with *fireballs*, and the monsters are soon mopped up.

"Gosh, This Powder Tastes Great!"

Run #81 – Sunday, October 17, 1999

In the nearby cave that the humanoids used for a base, the party find some good loot, and also a crate containing some pots of a chocolate-smelling powder. Dranko tastes some of it, and when he reports feeling somewhat stronger and more alert afterwards, Kay also takes a taste.



Thursday, September 10

Travel to Bynbur. Kay and Dranko no longer feel so good; in fact, they are feeling rather sick and weak. Still, the thought of tasting more of the powder seems mighty tempting to them.

Friday, September 11

With Dranko and Kay still feeling sick, the party arrive in Bynbur, a sprawling farm town. Sheep roam in the pastures, and sometimes spill into the streets. Goods are cheap, and the mutton and ale are both quite good. A sign [*see overleaf*] is posted on many of the buildings.

The party go to visit the mayor, a man named **Lynstock**. Lynstock thanks them profusely for dealing with Fnag, and hands over the reward. Then, he nervously asks the party for another favor. It seems that he is addicted to a substance he calls "Powder." (Kay and Dranko look nervously at each other.) About a year ago, someone slipped some into his food, and then

three weeks later, after he had grown weak, a man had come to tell him that for a price, he could be supplied with more Powder to allay his symptoms. Without the Powder, the man said, he would grow weaker and weaker and eventually die.

He first thought it might be a bluff, but he did in fact grow terribly weak. The priests and priestesses of Heros (Goddess of Healing) could not cure him, so he has been paying the man his fee. He has even begun to embezzle money from the town to pay for his addiction. He allows Morningstar to cast *memory read* on him, and she experiences Lynstock's memory of first finding out he is addicted. She relives the memory of a nasty red-haired man, informing Lynstock in mocking tones that he is about to be blackmailed and extorted.

Lynstock begs the party to find out who is responsible, and find a cure for him. Since it seems that Kay and Dranko are now in the same boat, they agree. They first cast *locate object* spells to see if there is any more Powder in Bynbur, but there is not.

Saturday, September 12 – Sunday, September 13

The party hang around Bynbur, looking for any signs of the red-haired man who sells Lynstock his Powder, but have no luck. The party discover that the *neutralize poison* spell will postpone the effects of the Powder on Kay and Dranko, but it has to be cast on them every day, which uses up all of Morningstar's 4th-level spells.



Hot on the Powder Trail

Run #82 – Tuesday, November 2, 1999

Monday, September 14 – Thursday, September 17

Travel to Shayle.

Friday, September 18

The Company arrive in Shayle, and after securing lodgings at the Mutton House, cast *locate object* spells to locate any Powder. They find some inside the local general store, and it appears that the wealthy owner of the store is also being blackmailed by the red-haired man. However, he grows extremely belligerent when asked to talk about it (presumably fearing for his life, since he has been told not to discuss Powder with anyone lest his supply be cut off).

Saturday, September 19 – Monday, September 21

The Company travel through Dir-Tolia to the town of Lyme.

Tuesday, September 22

The party arrive in Lyme, and once more cast *locate object* to find Powder. They discover two locations: one is in the town inn (the Waymeet), and the other is at the outskirts of the town. The latter is actually found secretly buried among the debris in a long ago burned-out building, and with it are 3000 miracs! The innkeeper turns out to be another Powder extortion victim, who absolutely refuses to admit anything about it.

Wednesday, September 23

After asking questions around the town, the party decide to take both the Powder and miracs from the hidden cache. They leave a note, which says (and I paraphrase), "My wife and I were looking into buying this lot of property, and discovered a cache of money and some sort of delicious spice. We assume that the money's owner is long gone, but if anyone expects to find it here, you can contact us at the Singing Sickle in Mirj." (The Singing Sickle is an inn that has been recommended to them in Mirj, the next city along their current route.) They hope to flush out the responsible party, by setting themselves up as potential victims.

The plan pays immediate dividends. Only a couple of hours out of Lyme, they are overtaken by a man on a horse. He found the note, and claims that the money and "spice" are his. The party spend a bit of time trying subtlety, but in the end decide to intimidate information out of the man with force.

It works. The man is terrified, and blabs all he knows. His name is **Cymnyk**, and he works for Lord Dafron, a member of the House of Law in Mirj. He is paid to make pick-ups and drop-offs of money and Powder, but doesn't know what the Powder does. He guesses that someone else comes to take the jars and drop off money, but he doesn't know who. He promises the party that he will forget about the whole operation, and be thankful that he isn't going to be turned in to the authorities.



- WANTED -

FNAG THE OGRE

For various crimes of banditry, theft, and murder on the Bynbur-Trev-Lyndyn road.

He and his band of ogres and orcs are extremely dangerous.

Reward for his death is 500 miracs.

PROOF REQUIRED

Bring such to the Mayor's office in the Towne Centre.

The party spend the rest of the day riding south towards Mirj.

Thursday, September 24

Travel to Mirj.

Friday, September 25

The party continue to ride. They pass many people traveling in the other direction, mostly carrying wares from the Jewels of the Plains into Dir-Tolia. A minute after a covered wagon passes them on the road, the horses are all startled by the sudden appearance of a large fire elemental behind them! Many of them throw their riders and bolt, and the rest of the party dismount.

The last wagon to pass them has stopped about a hundred feet down the road, and armed people (who must have been hidden inside) are running towards them. One person climbs up onto the top of the wagon and readies a bow. And a last man, dressed in red and orange robes indicating a Delfirian cleric of Nifi, hangs back by the wagon.

A difficult battle ensues. The fire elemental is tough enough, but the Delfirian priest casts a devastating *flame strike* from range. Also, while some of the armed thugs aren't that tough, one of them is a fighting juggernaut. He wields a magical warhammer and is just as strong as Ernie, who has called upon the Strength of Yondalla. The hammer-wielding fighter also announces, as he charges, that the party will be allowed to live if they will just hand over the magic carpet. Nothing doing, say the party. They respond with spells of their own (a *coldfire* spell blows the archer off the wagon), and Dranko charges across the battlefield to close with the Nifi priest before he can unload another fire spell.

Coldfire is almost identical to *fireball*, but one die of its damage is actually cold damage, and it extinguishes itself immediately. (The point being it never sets anything on fire, which is sometimes what you want, and sometimes not.)

He doesn't quite make it. The cleric retreats, and puts up a *wall of fire* around himself. When Dranko dives through the wall (ouch!), he is greeted with a *searing light* spell to the chest (OUCH!). Meanwhile the fire elemental has rushed back to defend its summoner. In the end, the party manage to finally defeat the hammer-wielding fighter, and an *ice storm* neutralizes the fire elemental (and, for a moment, obscures everyone's view of the enemy cleric). When the *ice storm* ends, there is no sign of the cleric; it seems that he escaped magically sometime after the *ice storm* hit.



Sunday, September 26

Travel to Mirj.

Monday, September 27

The party arrive at the walled city of Mirj, northernmost of the Jewels of the Plains. There is a poor "outquarter" outside the wall, and inside, conditions aren't too much better. The streets are winding, maze-like and teeming with low-lifes and criminals. The city guards are just as corrupt as the street thugs, hardly lifting a finger to help those in need.

The party learn that the House of Law is located in the Upper City, which is walled off from the city proper. They get rooms in the Singing Sickle inn.

Tuesday, September 28

The party spend some time searching the city for Powder, but there doesn't appear to be any. Kibi flies invisibly over the wall into the Upper City and locates the House of Law.

Some of the party approach the gate to the Upper City; Aravis pretends to be "Lord Turlus," who wants to speak with Lord Dafron about the spice trade. The gate guards are rude, but agree to pass along the message. Dafron will send word to the Singing Sickle if he's willing to meet with Lord Turlus. The party also note a guillotine in an open space in front of the gates; the ground around it is bloodstained, and nearby three headless bodies hang by their feet from a scaffold. It is indicative of the tenor of the city.

Later that afternoon, a message is delivered to the party: if they mean the chocolate spice trade, then they should come meet with Lord Dafron the next morning.

That night, the party are attacked in their rooms in the Singing Sickle. About twenty armed men are in the attacking group, and more are stationed outside with crossbows, should the party try to escape out the windows. The fight is over quickly; a *lightning bolt* from Aravis fries many of them in the corridor, and blows a hole right out the end of the inn. The surviving attackers flee back down the stairs in disarray, and are chased away in terror by several other party members, including a flying Kay and a *feather falling* Dranko. The party spend the night in another inn.

The next morning, some (but not all) of the party go to their appointment with Lord Dafron. Before being allowed into the Upper City, they are divested of all weapons, magic items, and even spell components. They are then led into the large stone building that is the House of Law; the place is crawling with well-armed guards. Eventually they are shown into the office of **Lord Dafron** himself, who is an extremely oily and self-confident man with an annoying voice.

Dafron listens with (mock) sympathy to the party's cover story, about how Lord Turlus's wife chanced upon some Powder, consumed some, and is now sick. (Kay, by the way, has foregone a couple of *neutralize poison* treatments, and actually *does* look sick.) The party tell Dafron that they consulted the Black Circle about what to do, and the Circle's cryptic answer was that they should talk to Lord Dafron in Mirj. So here they are. While they tell the story, Morningstar casts a Silent, Still *detect thoughts*, but Dafron seems immune to it. But as Dafron tells the party that he'd love to help, but doesn't know anything about the addictive Powder, Dranko manages to slip some of the Powder into Dafron's cocoa, which (in a show of extremely misplaced hubris) he has offered to drink with the party.

Of all the confounded times to roll a 2 on a Spot check!

Eventually, when it becomes clear that the bandying of words is not getting anywhere, Dafron tells the party that they should leave if they know what's good for them. And then the party tell Dafron that he might want to reconsider, given that he himself is now addicted.

Well, that changes things. Dafron and the party (interrupted often by Dafron muttering to himself about the confounded bad luck of it all) reach an agreement. Dafron tells the party that he doesn't actually know much about the Powder; an alchemist confederate of his named Klenemon makes it in some secret hideout in Dir-Tolia. The place is reputed to be haunted, which is perfect for their needs since it keeps people away. Dafron doesn't know exactly where the hideout is, but presumably Klenemon knows the antidote.

Piratecat: Dranko has almost maximized his Pick Pocket skill ever since first level. It hasn't always been useful, as he's less of the footpad type than he used to be, but this moment made it *all* worthwhile. Slipping the addictive powder into Dafron's cocoa was the best kind of revenge imaginable.

Dafron writes a letter to Klenemon, instructing him to give the antidote to the party. By agreement the party will bring some antidote back to Dafron, and in return Dafron will hold no grudge against the party, and not use his considerable resources to make their lives difficult.



Lair of the Tiger-Man

Run #84 – Friday, December 3, 1999

Thursday, September 30 – Tuesday, October 5

The party have one lead regarding the unknown hideout and laboratory used by Klenemon. When Morningstar *mind read* the merchant Cymnyk, she got a mental image of the place where he picks up Powder for delivery to towns. It is a place a bit off the road, about halfway between Lyme and Shayle. They spend a week traveling back through Dir-Tolia to the spot.

During this period of travel, the routine check of their *box of transport* reveals a piece of paper, which is mostly blank.

The party are now using one of the two magical boxes that Gluefoot and Frohwirth used to send messages. The party have the "receiving" box, and they check it on a nightly basis to see if Ozilinsh (who has the "sending" box) has sent them any important messages from Charagan.

The only words on the paper are: Speak the name of the familiar parrot. Recalling the name of the parrot familiar of the Archmage Grawly, they speak it: "Paciorek." Many more words appear on the page. It is a letter from Ozilinsh, and the news is not good:

Sorry about the security measure, but this message contains sensitive information.

Friends, I have grievous news to report. The Archmagus Grawly, leader of the Spire and my former Master, and his apprentice Thewana who is known to you, are dead, apparently murdered. It seems that both of them were attacked by a knife-wielding and magic-using assassin, just as they were finishing a particularly draining spell, and thus were vulnerable. From the evidence it looks like Thewana was magically *held*, while Grawly was run through repeatedly with a bladed weapon. Then the assassin did the same to Thewana. Finally, both of the bodies were burned beyond recognition after they were already dead. There is no evidence of forced entry into Grawly's tower, either physically or magically, and that has all the other Archmagi on edge as you might imagine.

Although this is a horrible and disturbing occurrence, it could have been much worse. The other Archmagi were able to improvise in the aftermath, to prevent Naradawk from taking advantage of the weakness of the warding spells. Fortunately the attack on Grawly and Thewana was not coordinated with any push from the Other Side; Naradawk did not even try to take advantage of his window of opportunity, and we were able to close the gap

and reestablish all the wards. The whole episode may have shaved a week or two from our estimates of the time until our Enemy breaks through at Verdshane. It leaves us wondering who was behind the attack... perhaps someone with a personal vendetta against either Grawly or Thewana? Or someone seeking to weaken the Spire at its highest level? We are investigating.

Other news: the Nifi army, for an unknown reason, has stopped their northward march about 30 miles south of Hydra and have fallen back some. They have sealed off the peninsula, and our best guess is that they are securing the coasts and their supply lines before making another push. Information from Tor suggests that they are *not* expecting fresh troops at the front; some country on your side, called "Bederen," has the Nifi worried about leaving themselves exposed on two fronts. Sadly, we are in no position to take advantage or push back in any meaningful way. The Werthians have been suffering attrition throughout the campaign and don't have the numbers to mount a counter-offensive. The rest of the King's forces are still spread too thin as it is; humanoid attacks have continued all over the kingdom. And Calnis has been sealed in – literally. All of the gates have been filled and blocked by pulsing crystal, and the walls are manned by hundreds of gnolls. A token military force is stationed nearby, just out of bowshot, in case any gnollish hordes come out, but that's it. The King has ordered that no attempt be made to recapture the city, until there is some sign that it presents an obvious threat.

I wish my news were better, but for now there is nothing cheering I can tell you. Oh, Eddings tells me that some Ellish priestess stopped by, and that she and some friends of hers had contacted Morningstar through the Dreaming. If you can make that into a reliable line of communication, that would be most useful, though the Spire is loath to pass sensitive information through that particular channel. Good luck in your quest... the hopes of the Spire are always with you.

- O.



Wednesday, October 6

The party arrive at the spot pictured by Cymnyk. Investigation does indeed show signs that heavy shipments of something are moved on and off the road, to a hidden location behind some trees and rocks about fifty yards away. However, there is no sign of how the Powder is brought to the location to begin with.

Kay notices signs that a fox lives in the area, and discovers it hiding in its hole. She casts *speak with animals* and talks with it, and it tells her that a man occasionally visits the area, and "goes into that rock." It indicates the relatively flat face of one of the out-jutting boulders. Flicker checks the rock, and discovers a hidden switch, which opens a cleverly concealed secret door. There is a short flight of stairs on the other side, which leads to a long, straight passage with a crude rail system.

Kay thanks the fox, and the party travel carefully down the passage. It continues fairly straight for about a mile before it ends. At the end is a wooden car with wheels fitted to the rails, and a trapdoor in the ceiling. The party emerge into a lightly wooded clearing, which turns out to be the outer yard of a crumbling and seemingly abandoned keep.

They approach the doors (which are still standing) and knock, but no one answers. They go in, and while the ground floor is mostly crumbled away and open to the sky, there is a wide staircase going down to a lower floor. As they descend, they call for Klenemon. They hear a old man's voice from below, calling for them to come down.

Klenemon is an old and good-natured alchemist, who has set up a laboratory in what used to be a meeting room. A large table is covered with books and notes, flasks and beakers of strange liquids, glass tubes and other odd apparatus, and even a self-stirring cauldron. When the party tell Klenemon why they're there, he looks dumbfounded. "I'd love to help you, but Dafron knows full well that there isn't an antidote," he says.

He goes on to tell them that he himself is addicted to the Powder, and that Dafron is keeping him there against his will. Dafron, he says, chanced upon the recipe himself. The party ask him if they can cast *detect thoughts* to verify his story. He tells them they can, but that it won't work: Dafron made him drink some potion early on in their partnership that makes him immune to mind-affecting spells. However, he agrees to eat some of the Powder in front of the party. "After all," he says, "I'm already addicted."

The party are startled by some odd (and large) green spider-like creatures, which scuttle along the ceiling of the laboratory. Klenemon tells the party not to worry about them; they've been here at least as long as he has, and have never done him any harm. In fact, he's happy to have them scuttling about, since they help keep the rat population down.

The party are somewhat mystified, and spend some time trying to figure out why Dafron sent them all the way out here if he knows there's no antidote, given that he himself is addicted. Klenemon invites Aravis to study the manufacturing process;

maybe he can discover a cure? He even offers to help. Flicker and Ernie stay behind with Aravis and Klenemon, while the rest of the party go outside to explore the grounds. The two groups stay in contact via *Rary's telepathic bond* provided by Morningstar.

Klenemon excuses himself from the lab for a moment, and walks down a hallway to his bedroom. Flicker follows. At about this time, several things happen. The door to the lab swings shut and locks. Several of the spider creatures drop from the ceiling of the lab and attack Ernie and Aravis. And outside they can hear Flicker shouting: "Klenemon... he's... he's a MONSTER!"

The rest of the party, alerted via the *Rary's telepathic bond*, rush back to the keep. In the meantime, Aravis and Ernie manage to fend off and dispatch the spider creatures. Flicker keeps Klenemon – whatever he is – busy, by using his *ring of jumping*, but eventually Aravis and Ernie hear his screaming stop. Ernie invokes the Strength of Yondalla and busts down the locked door, just as the rest of the party are arriving.

They find themselves facing a large humanoid creature with the head of a tiger, and long, strange claws that curve backwards away from the palms. It is a fierce and fearsome adversary. For one thing, it can cast spells, including *lightning bolt*. For another, it itself is seemingly immune to all magic. Worse, most weapons don't seem to affect it either. At first only *Gorok-Nil*, wielded by Makel, seems to hurt it. The party eventually figure out that only magic weapons of great enough power are having any effect, so they do some mid-combat weapon swapping to arm as many people as possible with effective weapons.

When the tide of battle turns against the tiger creature, it casts an *obscuring mist*, and seemingly vanishes in the fog. After some quick searching, the party discover that one short branch of corridor, seemingly blocked by a cave-in, is actually open, and that the cave-in is just an illusion.

Makel goes charging through the illusion (and through the mist) – and falls into a spiked pit on the other side of the illusion. The rest of the party proceed carefully, and find a plank spanning the pit on the far right side. Beyond that is a short stretch of corridor, which seemingly dead-ends. Then, without warning, a secret door opens, and Flicker (who has been healed back to health) is grabbed by a clawed hand and jerked inside. The door closes again, and locks.

Aravis goes gaseous, seeps through the cracks around the secret door, and discovers another door. The rest of the party find the catch for the secret door, get through it, and Grey Wolf, since he can't hurt the creature with magic, opens that second door with a *lightning bolt*. It exposes the creature's bedroom, which also seems to be a second laboratory. Flicker is once again unconscious and has been thrown into a corner. The party pour into the room, and again beat down the creature, which seems to have healed since they saw it last. The beast tries to escape again, but Dranko bashes its head in with the magical war hammer taken from the Delfirian priest's fighter companion after their last battle. Victory!



Speaking with the Dead

Run #85 – Tuesday, January 4, 2000

With the blood still dripping from the walls after the fierce battle with the tiger-man, Grey Wolf feels a surging feeling in his guts, and a second later Kibi appears in the room. This time however, he appears on his back, and pinning him to the ground is a large black panther that has two long tentacles coming from its shoulders, and that is strangely difficult to focus on.

Battered and resource-depleted as they are, the party attack and kill the panther through sheer force of numbers, helped by the fact that Kay is still feeling the effects of Abernathy's *potion of haste* which she used at the end of the previous battle. Makel delivers the killing blow despite having only 1 hit point, after having climbed out of the spiked pit.

With all threats taken care of, the party search the room. Flicker appraises the fourteen statuettes he had spotted earlier, and gauges their total value at about 9,000gp. There are a number of books and papers written in a strange language, along with various alchemical supplies (beakers, powders, glass tubes, etc.). The equipment was set up to slowly drip liquid into a pot, though the pot was partly filled with a black powder, and not liquid. The powder smells vaguely like the Addictive Powder™. Also, there is a man's skeleton under the tiger-man's work counter. Kay thinks it had been killed with claws, and then the flesh had been boiled off the bones. The party guess rightly that it's the skeleton of the real Klenemon, killed and impersonated by this tiger creature.

Aravis sets to work trying to analyze Klenemon's work with the Powder, hoping to learn a cure. Meanwhile, most of the others engage in a long discussion over what questions they will ask the next day, when Morningstar will cast *speak with dead* on both the tiger-man and the skeleton. This discussion involves a great deal of speculation about the tiger-man's relationship with Dafron, whether Dafron *was* a tiger-man, what the real Klenemon's motives had been for working with Dafron, and other similar questions.

There is also a digression while the party review the various Enemy Groups™ with whom they are embroiled: the Sharshun, the Emperor, the Black Circle, the red-armored people, the Delfirians, Lapis, and the still enigmatic “P” are all discussed. Eventually, the party settle on some questions.

That night, Morningstar has a strange and vivid dream, in which she and Clariel (her old trainer at Kynder Hold) are plunged into a slick and corrupt darkness briefly, while sparring in Tal Hae. When the darkness passes, all the buildings and people in the world have been wiped out, except for the temple of Ell. The dream Clariel then tells Morningstar that the darkness isn’t even the real problem – it is a side effect – but that she should still not be there when the darkness passes by. Morningstar then starts to tell the party about the rest of the dream, but decides instead to keep the details to herself.

She goes into *Ava Dormo* briefly, to take another look at the wall of darkness that she had seen before out to the west, but it is too dark to see if it has changed.

Thursday, October 7

When she goes back the next morning, however, the dark wall has clearly moved closer, as if an enormous black tidal wave is slowly advancing across the landscape of *Ava Dormo*.

Morningstar casts *speak with dead* first on the tiger-man; the questions and answers are (and I greatly paraphrase, I’m sure):

- “What is the antidote to the poison?” “*I didn’t ask... it didn’t matter to me.*”
- “Who else is at your level or above it in the whole poison organization?” “*It’s not my organization – but only Dafron.*”
- “Who else are creatures like you impersonating in Kivia?” “*I’m the only one of my kind here, that I know of.*”

The three questions asked of the skeleton of Klenemon:

- “What is the cure for the poison?”
(Here, the tongueless skull rattled off a list of ingredients, most of which were unintelligible.)
- “Why were you working with Dafron?” “*Lucre.*”
- “What could we do to hurt Dafron?” “*Wound his pride.*”

Aravis, meanwhile, is able to gain a great understanding of Klenemon’s alchemical work, and figures out the cure for the poison on his own. Kay gulps it down, starts to shiver and convulse, feels a burning sensation course through her body, takes ten points of damage, and all at once sweats out huge beads of greasy black liquid. It’s not yet clear if she is actually cured.

With the aid of Kibi and his uncanny dwarfish senses, the party discover a secret closet behind the tiger-man’s workshelf. It contains five magical potions, a magical blue-glowing longsword with runes on the blade, and sixteen sacks of coins, which altogether hold about 16,000 miracs! Grey Wolf casts *identify*, and learns that: (1) the glowing blue sword is a *+1 longsword*; (2) the person holding it doesn’t need to breathe; and (3) it might do something more if it is used enough. Grey Wolf feels as though the sword itself prevented him from learning anything more about it.



“Our Work Here is Done”

Run #86 – Friday, January 21, 2000

Soon after the interrogations of the dead, Grey Wolf gets that familiar gut-churning sensation, and Kibi vanishes, back to wherever it is that he’s been summoned from. Aravis finishes concocting enough antidote for Dranko, who consumes it, and much like Kay, takes ten points of damage and then sweats out great black beads of greasy liquid. Aravis spends the rest of the day mixing enough antidote for four more people, while Grey Wolf *identifies* some more magic items. Kay goes and hangs out with her friend the fox, and catches it a rabbit. The party decide that Aravis should make a second potion, which will turn Dafron’s skin purple, and that they will give Dafron instructions that the second potion should be consumed a day after the first. Heh.

Friday, October 8

The Company set out back westward, to Shayle, to deliver the antidote to the ornery general store owner.

Saturday, October 9

Travel to Shayle.

Sunday, October 10

Despite causing a scene, they successfully make their delivery, and heal the man after the antidote damages him. When he asks what he can do to repay the party, they reply: “Kick the crap out of the red-haired man when he next comes to sell more Powder.” The man smiles broadly at the prospect.

Monday, October 11 – Friday, October 15

They travel next to Bynbur, and make a similar delivery to Lynstock, the mayor of the town. He is extremely grateful, and tells the party that they can always count on him for favors in the future. The party leave him with 5000 miracs from the spoils, since he had been embezzling from the town to pay for his “habit.”

Saturday, October 16 – Sunday, October 24

Lastly, the party make their delivery to the innkeeper in Lyme, before heading southward to Mirj.

Monday, October 25 – Thursday, October 28

Travel to Mirj.

Friday, October 29

The party arrive in Mirj. Some of them go to deliver the antidote to the guards at the gate to the Upper City. They also use a *whispering wind* spell to help start a rumor that Dafron has been “cursed by the gods for his double-dealing” (remember the potion that will turn his skin purple!). With the delivery done, the party head southeastward to the city of Djaw.



Saturday, October 30 – Monday, November 2

Travel to Djaw. En route to Djaw, the party notice that some barges being poled downstream are making better time than they are. They decide to unfold *Burning Sail*, and sail down the river to Djaw. However, as soon as any of the party set foot on the boat, it begins to rock violently, and it becomes nearly uncontrollable. Dranko, using the no-breathing power of the blue glowing sword, hangs out under the boat while it rocks, and is swept about by powerful riptides in the otherwise placid river. So much for that idea.

At some point the party figured out that: (a) the *folding boat* is probably holy to Brechen, the Charagan god of the Sea, and that since (b) the “Uncrossable Sea” is supposedly uncrossable because Brechen and the Kivian Sea God (Posada) are waging eternal war, it makes some sense that (c) Posada is not going to sit still while some unholy Brechenish device is floating around on His waters, thank you very much.

As they continue on foot, and are riding past a field of very tall grass, they hear screams coming from the grass. Moments later, two men come bursting out, followed by two extremely hideous insect-like creatures. As the party watch, one of the creatures skewers one of the men on a long sharp claw. The party rush forward to kill the creatures and try to save the life of the other man. They succeed at both, although Dranko, Makel, Ernie, and the stranger are all seriously wounded by the creatures (including a third one which rolled into the fight about ten seconds after the initial rush).

The man, grateful at having been saved, introduces himself as **Four Yellow Stalk**. Stalk and his now dead friend were hunting in the grass for grass reavers, the plates of which are very valuable when sold to smiths. They had heard that grass reavers were solitary creatures, and were overpowered when three of them attacked at once. Stalk is from Djaw, and he has some interesting information about the city. He calls Djaw the greatest of the Jewels of the Plains, and has an extremely low opinion of Mirj. As they travel together towards Djaw, Stalk imparts much information about his home city, some bits of which include:

- There is a license that must be bought by those who would wear weapons on the streets.
- The city is ruled by an Emperor called **One Supreme Intellect**, who is considered the leader of the Council of the Plains Cities.
- The Emperor’s justice is carried out by elite guards called the Falcons, who, Stalk claims, can see truth in men’s hearts.
- There is no shrine to the Goddess Dralla that he is aware of.
- There is a disreputable organization of criminals called the Faceless that might be useful in gathering information.
- There is a popular sport called farangi which is played (and bet upon) in a great arena at the center of the city.



Faithless Faceless

Run #87 – Sunday, February 6, 2000

Tuesday, November 3 – Thursday, November 5

Travel to Djaw.

Friday, November 6

The party arrive in Djaw. Djaw is a tremendously large city, probably five times the size of Hae Charagan back home. The party have to pay exorbitant fees for visitors’ papers and weapons rights. The Falcons are immediately evident – silent, imposing figures watching over the city. Four Yellow Stalk goes off to find the wife of his slain companion.

The people of Djaw have bronze-colored skin, and are generally tall. The men wear white robes adorned with various colored strips of cloth denoting their houses; the women wear a variety of gauzy skirts and dresses, with light scarves. The architecture runs the gamut, from the grand and gleaming limestone palace of One Supreme Intellect, to the more common squat clay and brick houses of the commoners.

As they make their way through the city en route to a recommended inn, the party see many interesting sights. One is the Living Garden, a public park in which animated topiary wanders freely. Another is the Court of Cats, a huge plaza inhabited by hundreds of felines, and with bowls built right into the stone-flagged ground. Most disturbing is the presence of slaves, who wear plain gray robes, red iron collars, and who aren't typically allowed to speak. Many of the slaves are dwarves, and there are no non-slave dwarves to be seen. Good thing Kibi's not here!

In the Court of Cats, Aravis seems to be extremely popular with the felines there. They crowd around him, seeking his attention. Kay *speaks* with one of the cats, asking why they all like Aravis so much. "Because he's like a cat," says the cat. She can't get the cat to be any more specific.

The party get rooms at The Lamp of Heaven, and Flicker goes out to see what he can dig up about a shrine of the Goddess Dralla in the city. While he doesn't learn any direct information, he does find someone who claims they can broker a meeting between the party and the city's Thieves' Guild, known as the Faceless. (It is said that no one can remember what the Faceless look like, even moments after seeing them.)

Saturday, November 7

A letter is delivered to the party at the Lamp, detailing a time and place for the party to meet with a representative of the Faceless. That night they go to a poor part of town, far from any of the patrolling Falcons. They meet with a plain-looking woman calling herself **Two Flickering Candle**. They tell her they want to go the Shrine of Dralla. She tells them that she'll see what she can do; she'll send another message to the Lamp. After the party leave the meeting, they realize that they cannot, in fact, remember what she looked like.

Sunday, November 8

In the morning, another letter is delivered, indicating another meeting place and time that evening. Another representative of the Faceless is there. They have arranged a "visit" to the Shrine of Dralla for the party, though they are warned to keep the visit short; the Drallans value their privacy.

The Faceless man leads the party into another remote and lawless part of the city, and goes with them to an abandoned plaza surrounded by squat clay buildings. He leads them into one of them, and moves some furniture to reveal a trapdoor in the floor. It leads to a long underground passage that passes through a stretch of complete (and likely magical) darkness, and past an open iron door.

The Faceless man with them has been growing more and more agitated, and the party let him hang back. He tells the party that about fifty feet down the passage is a door, and that they should knock, and when asked a question, respond with the phrase "Darkness hides our strength." The party go on, discover the door, and knock. There is no answer. And then a *lightning bolt* comes blasting down the passage, from the direction they had come! It is followed immediately by the sound of the iron door slamming shut and locking. It's a trap!

Moments after the door has shut there is a hissing sound, and a white gas begins to fill the corridor, coming out of hidden holes high in the walls. Fortunately the entire party is able to resist the gas, while Oa-Lyanna is able to keep most of the gas up near the ceiling. Meanwhile Flicker works feverishly at the lock of the iron door. He opens it... and another *lightning bolt* zaps more of the party.

Undaunted (and not too badly damaged) the party charge down the hallway, and through the area of magical darkness... which has been strewn with caltrops! *Ow, ow, ow!* Kay is the first to make it through and up into the clay building. As she emerges she smells oil... and then a fiery bottle comes through a narrow window, and the entire one-room interior becomes an inferno. And the crowning touch is that a dozen crossbowmen open fire as soon as she cuts her way through the one door back out onto the plaza, and three or four find their mark.

Still, despite all of the well-laid plans of the Faceless, the party emerge into the plaza relatively whole and not badly damaged.

Exostential Ape: Do you read any Terry Pratchett? Just a curiosity. I love the names in this new place and they seem very oriental in a Pratchett Counterweight Continent-type style.

Piratecat: Good guess! This is exactly where Sagiro got the idea from, although I don't think any of us noticed it at the time. While in Djaw, Dranko varied between calling himself One Radiant Healer (for people he wanted to impress) and Three Slippery Slopes (as a more realistic, descriptive name). I forget the others, although I know Ernie used the name "One Round Hill." Of course. Little bugger has no imagination at all! Dranko made alternative suggestions, but they were all ignored.

We really, really liked Djaw more than Mirj. Those walking topiary were incredibly cool! I think we got a miniature, non-animated bonsai topiary as a souvenir for Eddings.

The crossbowmen are clearly not prepared for the party to still be at fighting strength, and despite being deployed on low rooftops they are overpowered by a combination of *hold person* spells, a *summoned* air elemental, returning fire, and a well-employed whip.

Rincewind: Two lightning bolts, a flaming room and a dozen archers sounds like a lot of damage to me. Why weren't they badly hurt?

Piratecat: At least one of the lightning bolts happened to hit the "rogue" side of the marching order; i.e. the side with Evasion. In addition, everyone but Kay paused for some fast healing before heading back up. Dranko's *decanter of endless water* helped clear a path through the room full of flaming oil, and the crossbowmen apparently choked on their marksmanship. Heck, Dranko himself disarmed two of them with his whip, in an amazingly lucky set of dice rolls. We ended up much better off than we had any right to expect. I suppose an advantage of looking doofy is that people tend to underestimate you.

kidcthulhu: Getting underestimated is one of the Company's best tactics. Especially since we lost Tor! We don't look particularly buff, and Ernie in plate mail tends to get guffaws rather than respect. Insert Cartman voice: "Respect my authoritah!"

Sagiro: Piratecat summed it up pretty well. I was pretty surprised at how well they emerged from the trap. The party saving throw success rate was phenomenal; every single party member made their save against the strength-draining gas (when by rights about half of them should have failed it), and then they made almost all of their saves against what were low-damage-dice lightning bolts. They were able to heal most of the damage by the time they emerged into the plaza, and as Piratecat says, they managed to largely quench the fire with a decanter of endless water. (Also, the ambushers thought the party would need a couple more rounds to break the door down while they were trapped in the burning building. But instead of the fire burning down the door in two or three rounds, Kay used the Woodcutter to chop it open in one.)

And then I rolled lously for my crossbowmen. Sometimes the bad guys have bad days.

Two of the ambushers are captured and questioned separately. The party learn that the Faceless had been both threatened and paid to ambush the party should they show themselves in Djaw... by a person named Lapis! One of the prisoners is allowed to escape, but Morningstar, *detecting thoughts* on the other, sees that he has no intention of reforming or changing his profession. She kills him.



In the House of Shreen the Fair

Run #88 – Sunday, February 13, 2000

That evening, back in the Lamp of Heaven, another note is delivered to the party by the Faceless. It seems that the Faceless want nothing more to do with either Lapis or the party. Included in the note is (what the Faceless claim is) the actual location of the Shrine of Dralla.

Lapis, you may recall, was an enemy spellcaster who was trying to unearth a second blood gargoyle, and who was foiled by Cencerra. The party guess that Lapis's boss is the same as Manzanill's – the mysterious "P" – and that she was sent by "P" to retrieve the Crosser's Maze after Manzanill was killed.

Monday, November 9

In the evening, the party go to the location indicated by the Faceless, a dangerous neighborhood known as "the Hole." En route they occasionally see people in golden robes shining lanterns into alleys and dark doorways; they are clerics of the sun goddess Kemma, celebrating a holiday known as the "Day of Reach."

But soon, as they go further into the less reputable parts of Djaw, the Kemmans are left behind. As they approach their destination, they start to hear noises from the surrounding buildings, as if they're being shadowed. Nothing shows itself.

Finally they reach the Plaza of Glory, a small abandoned place with a broken statue of an angel in its center. There is no obvious church or temple to be seen, but some searching reveals a concealed door; one of the boarded-up doorways is itself a door, boards and all. When they open it, they are challenged by a small kobold-like creature, who demands that they leave all of their weapons outside if they wish an audience within. The party assent, and are led inside...

They find themselves in a dark courtyard, surrounded on all sides by dilapidated buildings. Eyes peer out from the darkness all around them, and the air is full of whispers. A humanoid shape approaches out of the darkness; it appears to be a horribly disfigured man, limping, with a hunched back and one eye covered by his own drooping brow. In a coarse whispering voice, he introduces himself as **Shreen the Fair**, Night-Master of the Temple of the Dark Mother. The party greet him, and when he asks why they have come, they ask him straight away about the Crosser's Maze.

Shreen answers. As he talks, his voice fluctuates, sometimes a cracked whisper, sometimes pleasant and normal, and sometimes rising into a harsh scream. When his voice rises, many rasping and hooting cackles come from the darkness all around them, making it evident that the party are surrounded by dozens of unseen creatures.

kidcthulhu: Someone asked a few days ago how much time Sagiro spends prepping his game. He told us later that he spent several commutes to and from work practicing his voice for Shreen the Fair. I wish you could have heard it. It was like velvet and razor shards and being pummelled with broken cinder blocks. I still get the creeps thinking about it.

Shreen is a horrible and unpleasant person, and he mocks Morningstar, whose connection to Ell is stifled and then severed while standing in this unholy place. But he does give the party information. It seems that some weeks before, a wizardess named Lapis had stormed the Shrine with force, calling upon “spirits of the earth” to force her way in. She had demanded that Shreen surrender any information he had about the Crosser’s Maze, and he had given her the only book in their library that mentions it. According to Shreen, that book talked of a people called the Walkers of the Maze, who used the Maze to travel between the Planes. These people lived in a southern country called Ocir, and it is there, Shreen guesses, that Lapis is now going.

However, Shreen himself doesn’t believe that book is true. He considers its author a heretic, one who holds the blasphemous belief that monsters were originally created by man to be servants, and were then freed by Dralla. Shreen himself has heard a different story. He offers to share it, but first he makes the party, each individually, swear to Dralla that they when they are “finished with the Crosser’s Maze,” they will return it to him. He also makes them swear that they will bring him back Lapis’s head. When they have done so, he tells them what he knows of the Maze.

Shreen was told a story by the previous Night-Master, about a snake-man named **T’sserss**, who learned to walk the Maze. T’sserss had (according to the story) been granted a vision by the Goddess Dralla, that the path to the Maze “begins with the City of False Life, and ends with the City of False Life.” According to the legend, T’sserss made this journey, and eventually walked the Maze and returned to his home plane.

That’s all he knows. Shreen then bids the party be gone, and shuffles back into the darkness; the Company depart to the hoots and howls of the unseen masses hiding in the darkness. They can’t get out of there fast enough. At least their weapons were left undisturbed.



Tuesday, November 10 – Tuesday, December 8

The party decide to spend some weeks training in Djaw. A whole lot of other stuff happens too, during this time. The party consult a sage named **Four Keen Mind** about Het Branoi and the City of False Life (Four Keen Mind actually refers them to a colleague, **Three Surpassing Wisdom**, on the matter of the City). From Mind, they learn that the Hets were towers built and used by a splinter group of the Black Circle called the Insulati. According to legend, the Hets were enchanted so as to be bigger on the inside than the outside, and also to be invisible from without.

About four hundred years ago, the Black Circle decided that they could no longer abide the existence of the Insulati, and the Hets were destroyed, or at least gutted and emptied. The rumor was that they were involved in something so horrible and dangerous that even the Black Circle would not reoccupy them. There were four known Hets, all accounted for: Het Chanob in the mountains between Delfir and Bederen; Het Kai Kin in southern Ocir; Het Runnel in the hills of central Anlakis, and Het Shirfin somewhere in the Endless Wood. Those are the only four; there is no known Het called “Branoi.”

However, there was a *place* called Branoi. It is not shown on any current maps, but Keen Mind has found a map scrap which shows a region called “Branoi” in the uncivilized wilds of northeast Kivia, in a country once known as Surgoil. Presumably, Het Branoi is a heretofore undiscovered Het somewhere in that region.

Het Branoi, in case you don’t remember, is the place where the Eyes of Moirel (speaking through Eddings) said that a third Eye of Moirel was located. The party will need the third Eye (say the first two Eyes) in order to “travel nowhere” (whatever that means) (see session 46).

Exostential Ape: Sagiro, let me just say that I am amazed and awed by your skill in storytelling and giving a place a sense of history and the people who made it. All these little bits that keep floating out of the woodwork that tie in, and very very well I might add.

Do you have a LARGE notebook? I keep one in which I am constantly writing and rewriting ideas and plotlines as well as side plots. I will say that my players have a wonderful time and enjoy my storytelling, but reading these tales of your games I feel like some lowly squire in the presence of a real knight; comparatively speaking of course.

Sagiro: If your players are having a wonderful time, then you’re doing just as well as I am. I do have a big notebook, though over time more and more of my game notes have migrated to my computer. In terms of pulling stuff “out of the woodwork,” my most valuable tool by far is this very diary you’ve been reading. I’d recommend that all DM’s running story-based campaigns keep such a diary, to remind them of dangling plot threads they’ve left behind.

While sparring with other party members and a hired trainer named **Three Sudden Strike**, Morningstar is suddenly (from the point of view of others) enshrouded in darkness. From her point of view, the sparring field vanishes and her companions vanish and are replaced by her Avatar trainer from the Dream. Morningstar spars with the Avatar for what feels like an hour, though it’s only a few minutes in reality. Then the darkness vanishes, and Morningstar discovers that her shield and weapon have been transformed into holy items, augmented in power.



A week later, the party are approached by **One Certain Step**, a paladin of Kemma (the Kivian sun goddess). Step had a dream some weeks ago that he believes concerns the party: he saw a dense jungle, and a small bamboo hut hung over with vines; he saw a jet-black tower inside a ring of rock, with a gate of giant ribs; he saw two great swinging anvils, with small figures running between them; and he saw a huge black circle hanging in the air, with armies of evil pouring through it.

Still dreaming, he saw a sacred text of Kemma, pages dry and cracked and long unused. He saw the book open, and words blazed out of it, but he could not read them. The next morning when he awoke, he went to the church library and found the book from his dream. In it he found an obscure poem whose meaning had never been gleaned, but which he believes is referring to the party. He reads the poem to them:

read the signs as the shadows flow
see a fearsome emerging foe
light must rive the last of five
but don't expect to come back alive

read the signs, you are not alone
those from lands that the foe called home
are fighting the war on a distant shore
to barricade the circle door

know them then by their mix of blood
man and holbytla and child of wood
know them each by their foreign speech
in the court of cats on the day of reach

tell them the door is close at hand
the foe can come forward in any land
his armies will roll through a skysteel hole
and turn their home to a bed of coal

go with them to your certain doom
and be the one in the lightless room
if the light will thrive you must contrive
to go with them to the last of five

Step had observed the party moving through the Court of Cats on the Kemman holiday of the Day of Reach a couple of weeks back, and has been trying to decide how best to broach the subject. In the end, he has decided for the direct approach.

The party immediately make the connection that the “last of five” is Het Branoi, and decide that One Certain Step is destined to go there with them. They agree to take on One Certain Step as a traveling companion. They are pleased to learn that he owns a warhorse (named **Thunder**) and a *flaming greatsword*.



Aravis decides to take a cat as a familiar. He goes to the Court of Cats to perform the ritual, figuring he'll get a good one that way.

Once again, the cats crowd around him, and this is only exacerbated by his *summon familiar* ritual. While he is casting, one particular grey cat walks up to Kay and starts meowing. Kay casts *speak with animals*. The cat says that he remembers from earlier that Kay can speak the cat tongue. He asks Kay to intercede on his behalf, and tell Aravis to pick him. He lists his credentials as a superior intellect and great skill at mousing. This particular cat also thinks that Aravis is “like a cat,” in a way that he can’t explain, but which is obvious to the cats.

RangerWickett: Hey, Sagiro, I need to ask a favor of you. Could you type up a lot of information on the Church of Ell, please? I want to make a prestige class for your game (and mine, since I’m enamored with the idea). I’m not decided yet on the name. Either Dreamwalkers of Ell, or Dreamers of *Ava Dormo*. Either way, I’d like to be able to make a prestige class for this. I know that Morningstar started off with Dreamwalking abilities at first level, so I’d have to find a way to make her power consistent. Perhaps just make the prestige class even better at it.

Anyway, any and all information you can provide about Ell, the Church, and *Ava Dormo* would be greatly appreciated. I think the Dreamscape is one of the most inventive and compelling aspects of your story, Sagiro, and I want to thank you for being an inspiration to my own game.

Sagiro: Here’s some information about the churches of Ell and of Delioch. To give you a frame of reference, a majority (perhaps 80%) of the citizens of Charagan primarily worship Pikon, God of the Harvest. He’s the main “native” god of Charagan. There are also the so-called “Travelers,” six gods who came to Charagan long ago with their flocks of worshippers, fleeing some deadly adversary. They are Delioch, Ell, Corilayna (Goddess of Luck), Werthis (God of War), Brechen (God of the Sea) and Uthol Inga (the Watcher). Of these, Brechen is the most widely invoked, being a sea god of an island kingdom. Delioch, Werthis and Corilayna aren’t as widely worshipped, but have steady and solid bases of followers. Ell is less popular, often being mistaken for a goddess of death. And Uthol Inga is not openly worshipped anywhere; the size of her flock is not known. There are also the non-human gods, primarily Yondalla, Moradin and Corellon Lareithan.

So, info about Ell and Delioch:

Ell, Goddess of Night, Queen of Sleep, Keeper of Dreams, The Dark Shield. The Dreamkeeper’s holy symbol is a flat black inverted triangle. Clerics of Ell must become completely nocturnal, and tend to avoid direct sunlight. Churches of Ell are only open for services and visitors between sundown and sunrise; during the day, all windows are shuttered, and during the night they are flung wide. Clerics of Ell will only offer succor to those who ask, and do not volunteer their aid. Although many people fear Ell, and mistake her for a goddess of death, She is actually a protector of sleeping folk, and it is She who restores health during sleep.

There are three “branches” of the Ellish church. Most numerous are the Hands, who perform most day-to-day tasks, and who tend to those seeking succor at Ellish temples. The Shields are those who combine more combat training with their devotional duties, and are ready to protect the church from aggressors (Morningstar is one of these). The Chroniclers are less numerous, and are wholly devoted to preserving and copying Ellish texts, maintaining libraries at Ellish temples, and generally being the keepers of lore among the Ellish clerics.

A small subset of Ellish worshippers (perhaps one in fifty) are called by the Goddess to be Dreamwalkers (Morningstar is also one of these). Dreamwalkers have the ability to enter *Ava Dormo* (also called the Dreaming), which is similar in some ways to the Astral Plane, in that thought drives action there. It is also an overlay, or echo, of the real world. It’s like the prime material plane, with plants and buildings, but without most of the people. (You may recall that recently some dark evil shadow moved across the *Ava Dormo*, which erased all man-made structures from the *Ava Dormo* except for a few Ellish strongholds.)

Delioch, God of Healing, Patron of the Unwilling Soldier, the Healer, Star of the Soul, the Scarbearer, the Woundtender, the Soulmender, the Veteran. Delioch is pictured both as ever-young and fair healer, and as a scarred battle veteran. In both forms, his right eye gleams with the light of his manifest power, and his left eye gleams with the light of the supplicant’s soul.

There are three main branches to the Mother Church of Delioch, known as the Scarbearers (or Martyred Brethren), the Woundtenders (or simply Healers), and the Soulmenders (the Revered). Contrary to most healing spells, those of Delioch’s clerics (Soulmenders excepted) leave a scar behind as if the wound had healed normally.

Dranko is a Woundtender. Piratecat posted a more thorough description of the church that can be found with session 25.

Kay tells Aravis about the grey cat that wants to be his familiar, and Aravis goes with him. The cat has no name for itself, so Aravis, for the short term at least, calls it **Pewter**.

In my campaign, familiars are normal animals which become magically enhanced by the *summon familiar* ability.



As Flicker trains, he comes back each night particularly tired. He claims this is because of the difficulty of staying hidden from the Faceless, who do not permit non-member thieves to practice in Djaw. Also, he confesses that he has “invested” a large sum of the party’s funds (specifically, the proceeds from the sale of the tiger-man’s statuettes, plus a bit of his own cash) in the upcoming farangi match.

Farangi, also known as the “sport of emperors,” is a game played in a huge arena in the center of town. It is somewhat like soccer, played on an uneven field and with multiple ways to score. Flicker is willing to reveal that he has “an angle” on the upcoming game, and is certain enough of the winner to bet the farm. Some of the party are furious with him (especially Ernie and Morningstar) for risking party funds without consulting them.

When the morning of the farangi match arrives, Flicker is gone, but has left a note for the party. He has gone ahead to the match to make arrangements, and has borrowed Dranko’s magical bag, presumably to transport the winnings he expects. The party eat breakfast and go to the coliseum. There, they sit next to a woman who explains the rules of the game to them. She also mentions that one team, the Lamplighters, is heavily favored, since the Hawks are missing their star Carrier. (The Carrier is the only person on a farangi team allowed to carry the ball and run with it.) Apparently, the Hawks have trained a new Carrier who had never even played farangi before a few weeks ago. And then, just as it dawns on the party...

...the Hawks come running onto the field, and Flicker is with them! The game begins, and it is soon apparent why Flicker was so confident. He was born to be a Carrier. His mixture of strength and speed is excellent, but it is his ability as an Escape Artist that makes him so valuable. Each farangi team has two Ropers, who are allowed to use a 24-foot length of rope any way they see fit, as long as they do no permanent injury to anyone. Often, the Ropers will use their rope to constrain the opposing Carrier, but Flicker is able to escape from every trick the opposing Ropers try. With his help, the Hawks win the game handily.

Flicker expects the party will be thrilled at his little surprise, but they are not amused. What about keeping a low profile? What would have happened if the party had had to leave Djaw suddenly? It’s clear that Flicker hadn’t thoroughly considered some of the possible implications, but on the other hand, he made about 30,000gp profit on the match. He promises to consult the party before trying any similar stunt in the future, and he does seem contrite about the whole affair, so the party generally forgive him.



Quoth the Raven: Kill Aravis!

Run #89 – Sunday, February 20, 2000

The party finally hear back from Three Surpassing Wisdom, on the subject of the City of False Life. The “City of False Life” is the name given to a failed experiment out in the Dry Wastes to the south of Tev. Long ago, mages of Tev thought that they could make a city (which they named “Repose”) in which all drudgery and manual labor would be done by constructs. For many years, it seemed to be working: golems were put to use in building the city buildings, quarrying stone and hauling materials. The wizards build themselves a magnificent Town Hall and Guild headquarters, and other golems were built to defend Repose.

Then, all at once, some disaster struck the city. Some say that the golems all went berserk and struck down their creators. Some say that an earthquake struck the city and the wizards then abandoned it. Some say the city was overrun by monsters despite

The Rules of Farangi, Sport of Emperors (in brief)

The field is large – about the size of a soccer field, but with mounds near the corners and a shallow depression in the center. A low (3-ft) fence borders the playing field. There are four referee towers, one on each mound, and there are four other officials above the field who have had *fly* spells cast on them. At either end of the field are three nets; a small central net worth 5 points, and two larger nets worth 2 points each. Lastly, there is a hoop on a 15-ft pole, and getting the ball through that hoop (by any means) is worth 12 points. The nets are surrounded by a painted circle, and only two defending players are allowed in the circle at once. The ball is about the size of a soccer ball.

Each team fields twelve players. There are nine Kickers, two Ropers, and a Carrier. The ropers can use a 24-ft length of strong rope in any way they want that does not cause permanent injury. The Kickers are basically playing soccer. The Carrier is the only player allowed to pick up the ball, throw it, etc. However, while there is generally no tackling in the game, anything can be done to the Carrier while he’s holding the ball in his hands.

When there is a score, a new ball is immediately flung from a sideline catapult at mid-field. There are penalty kicks awarded for certain fouls, and players can be sent off the field for flagrant fouls. The game is timed by a huge hourglass, turned by the Emperor himself. It lasts for 99 minutes.

Any use of magic, weapons, or special equipment is forbidden, and a team caught cheating must forfeit the game.

its defenses, and the wizards driven out. A few adventurers who have ventured into the Wastes have reported finding the ruins of Repose, but claimed it's not worth venturing inside, since nothing valuable remains.



One night, about three weeks into their training, each member of the party (except for Morningstar) is visited in a dream by Shreen the Fair, who reminds them that they promised Dralla to return the Crosser's Maze to him. Morningstar is aware only of a faint scratching at the edges of her dreams.

A few nights later, Grey Wolf is awoken by the now familiar churning in his gut. He sits up to discover that a small, almost kobold-like humanoid is in his room, clutching a scrap of paper. The little man looks at the paper, looks at Grey Wolf, and then speaks in a strange tongue over his shoulder to some unseen person behind him. Ernie, also in the room, wakes and pulls a weapon on the man, but the man ignores him.

The stranger keeps talking in different strange tongues, until finally, he says "Can you understand me? Can you understand me?" in Charagan Common! Grey Wolf responds that he can. The little man holds out something in his hand; it is a small, green pellet. In halting Common, he says, "Please... it is not permitted for those in my order to take a life. But for the sake of all of them, please, take this. It is quick and painless. Please, take it." He hands Grey Wolf the pellet. Then he looks over his shoulder, and a look of absolute terror crosses his face. "Please..." he says to Grey Wolf – and then a spear blossoms from his chest, there is a tremendous spurt of blood, and the man vanishes.

Before training ends, Aravis has time to analyze the pellet. It is a swift and deadly poison.



Before they leave Djaw, Aravis finishes making himself a *wand of magic missiles*, and Ernie brews some healing potions. (Later Aravis discovers that, having had to use someone else's laboratory and unfamiliar equipment, there is a slight malfunction with the wand. It fires *magic missiles* just fine, but with each use, there is a bright flash around Aravis's head, and his hair changes color and style. The same change affects Pewter's fur. Their hair typically returns to normal after a few hours.)

Grover: A question for Ernie's player – is Wilberforce a tribute to P.G. Wodehouse and Bertram Wilberforce Wooster?

kidcthu: Ernie himself is certainly nothing like Bertie, but yes, I'm a big Wodehouse fan, and did steal the name from there. Good catch.

Speaking of magic items, the party find buyers for a couple that they want to sell: their *cloak of the fire cat* (taken from Hodge at Seablade Point), and a magical mace consecrated to Nifi, taken in one of the battles as they fled Delfir.

Lastly, the party meet with One Certain Step at the gleaming church of Kemma. They have an audience with the High Priest there, named **One Shining Mirror**. Mirror asks the party to go with Step, to investigate a location long thought to be controlled by forces of Drosh, the Harbinger, God of Death and nemesis of Kemma, the sun goddess. The location is more or less on the way to the presumed location of the City of False Life, which is the party's next destination, so they agree.



Wednesday, December 9

With training done, the party and One Certain Step strike out east of Djaw, heading generally for the mountains which separate the Plains of the White Sun from the Dry Wastes. Somewhere in the hills east of the mountains is the purported Droshi unholy ground.

Thursday, December 10 – Wednesday, December 16

They travel across the plains. At first, the party pass through fields and farms, and then across uninhabited grasslands. Eventually the land becomes more rocky and less vegetated, and starts to rise to meet the distant hills. Ravens seem to be flying overhead in slightly higher numbers than might be expected.

Thursday, December 17

Near dusk, a number of ravens stop circling, and dive-bomb Aravis without provocation. Although they prove to be just an annoyance, they turn out to be accompanied by two huge dire ravens, which prove to be an outright danger. They are clearly targeting Aravis (or maybe Pewter, who's hiding in Aravis's pack) and don't attack anyone else.

The party slay the birds without too much difficulty, and they are not accosted again.

Friday, December 18 – Monday, December 21

The party continue to travel into the foothills of the northern Greytowers, heading towards the supposed location of the Droshi unholy spot.

They find one wide pass that leads through the hills, and discover, scrawled on a large boulder in a foreign tongue, the word "Death." Hmm. A few hours later on they discover a more grisly warning: five skeletons are mounted on crude wooden crosses, and in that same language the words "turn back" written nearby on another boulder. Of course, this only confirms to the party that they're on the right track, so they continue up the pass.

Finally they see an actual skeleton walking towards them from up ahead; it seems to have risen right up from nowhere, as though moments before it had been just a pile of bones on the ground. As it approaches a voice comes from it, saying, "Turn back now, or..." But whatever the warning was, the party never hear it, as Dranko calls upon the holy might of Delioch and blasts the skeleton to splinters.

Rincewind: Seems a bit excessive. Why weren't you even going to listen to it?

Doc_souark: We are talking Dranko here; this is the guy who likes to pee on and lick everything.

Piratecat: Not at the same time, Doc!

We had gotten "eevil" warning after warning, and were tired of what appeared to be minor leaguers trying to show off. I *really* wish I hadn't wasted a Turning attempt on just one stinking skeleton...

And as the bone fragments rain down, an ominous sound starts up, from all around them, getting quickly louder. It sounds like the clatter of thousands of dice in a huge wooden cup. And then, from over the hills on almost every side, dozens of skeletons come streaming towards them. Some are human-sized, and some are larger, and some look like the skeletons of giants. And one huge jointed skeletal leg can be seen stepping over the hill in front and to the left.

Piratecat: ...especially after Sagiro upended an entire jar of pennies on the battlemap and said, "Okay. Here are the skeletons." Yipe.

Even more insulting was Dr. Rictus, who asked Sagiro how many of the skeletons we had killed in the 'cliffhanger' run. "One," he answered, and Dr. Rictus burst into laughter. "You sure showed the one skeleton who was boss," he told me later. Jerk.

Dr. Rictus: You know I wouldn't laugh at your pain, PC. Except that this time, your pain sure was funny.

blargney: That pennies-from-the-jar trick is fantastic! Pure intimidation factor. :)

I think I'm going to have to get into building my magical constructs from Lego. Less intimidation, but more fun! You can take off bit by bit as they whack at it.

Skeleton Crew

Run #90 – Wednesday, April 5, 2000

The party talk it over for about three seconds, and decide to turn the horses around and ride back the way they came, before the circle of encroaching skeletons can close around them. They just barely make it, in large part due to Thunder (One Certain Step's warhorse), who has a calming and controlling influence on the other horses. Looking back, they see that the huge leg was part of a forty feet tall bone construct generally shaped like a huge spider. It has eight huge legs, sharpened to points at the bottom. The body is a huge ring of bones, somehow fused together. The head is also not a single skull, but dozens of bones built into a monstrous shape. The head is mounted at the end of what looks like a flat bone platform, half of which is inside and half of which is outside the body-ring. And while the horses are leaving most of the skeletons behind, the huge bone-spider is not falling behind, covering ground swiftly with its eight huge legs.

To make things even more interesting, a huge skeletal tiger comes running at the party from the other direction as they flee. It's thirty feet long, but unlike the spider, this new foe really does seem to be the skeleton of a real creature, most likely a dire tiger. Step charges it, waving his fiery greatsword. Kay and Oa-Lyanna fly upward to attack the spider.

The fight that follows is long and brutal. The mages fly upward on the flying carpet and out of harm's way, while the others do battle with the spider and the tiger. Grey Wolf sees that the rest of the skeletons, along with a second skeletal tiger, are catching up fast, so he slows them down with a *sleet storm*.

Kay attacks while flying, but the platform-mounted head assembly of the spider can quickly spin around the ring. It catches her in its mandibles, which turn out to be two rhino horns grafted into the head. *CRUNCH!* Kay is punctured and in pain.

Makel uses his *wand of wonder* (command word: "Axelthrood"), and it shoots out a *lightning bolt*. He is very pleased. Morningstar makes good use of *searing darkness* to wound the spider. The mages wield *flaming spheres*. Makel uses the wand again... and produces a fierce thunderstorm in his immediate vicinity. Undaunted, he uses it a third time... and the already gigantic spider grows in size! Makel curses, flings the wand to the ground, and charges to attack with his sword.

Meanwhile, Step and Dranko have nearly killed the tiger, and the spider is also looking bad. Finally, the party manage to kill both creatures, though when the spider collapses, it falls on Makel. Ernie calls upon Yondalla's strength, and rushes into the

heaped bones of the fallen spider to save him. At about this time, the rest of the skeletons show up, well over a hundred strong. Most are man-sized, but some are more like ogre skeletons, and scattered here and there are the skeletons of giants, sixteen feet tall. And there's that second huge skeletal tiger...

Dranko uses the Infinity Book, which currently shows the powerful spell *reverse gravity*, to take the tiger out of the combat (the page burns up as the spell is read; each spell from the book is one use only). The mages bombard the skeletons with *fireballs*. But the real damage is done by the clerics and Step, who spend most of the combat Turning wave after wave of the undead. Morningstar especially, with her augmented powers of Turning, blasts dozens of skeletons to bits.

But after each Turning blasts some foes to fragments, more skeletons rush in to fill the gap, and the party are hard pressed, mostly fighting back to back. There seems to be no end to the undead attackers. Grey Wolf, out of spells, is fighting with the magic sword *Bostock*. Kay rides the ragged border of consciousness, and Ernie burrows his way to Makel, moving a huge piece of bone off his chest and healing him just in time.

The clerics keep blasting, and with their last Turning kill the final humanoid skeleton. Victory! ... and not a moment too soon. Several party members have been clawed to or near unconsciousness during the fight, and the party's total resources are nearly depleted. They finish off the helpless and gravity-reversed tiger, and take a breathless moment to survey the field. All the ground around them is covered with a layer of splintered bone, punctuated by pools of their own blood. The party do some quick healing to get at least into traveling shape, and then they retreat back down the pass to rest and recover.



The Importance of Being Ernest

Run #91 – Sunday, April 16, 2000

Wednesday, December 23

The next day, a carpet-riding contingent flies back in the direction of the battle, and then beyond, to see what the skeletons were guarding. They discover that the valley soon flattens out into a rough plain dotted with extremely large freestanding boulders. In one of these boulders is set an iron door, but the carpet riders leave it alone. Fifty yards farther on, they make a much more significant discovery.

The plain is gashed by a wide and deep box canyon, and down on the canyon floor is a huge army of skeletons, thousands strong. There are several of the huge spider-things, along with an assortment of other freakish constructed horrors. Built up along the near edge of the chasm are huge scaffolds, and skeletons seem to be constructing some sort of platform and pulley apparatus. The carpet team doesn't spend a lot of time hanging around, but flies back to the rest of the party to report. They decide not to investigate or become entangled with the undead army, but Morningstar does send a detailed dream back to One Shining Mirror, High Priest of Kemma back in Djaw, warning him of what they've found.

Thursday, December 24 – Tuesday, January 6, 1831

The party travel towards the Dry Wastes and (hopefully) the city of Repose. (The party purchased a map of Kivia back in Djaw that shows unlabeled ruins in the middle of the Wastes, and it is there that the party are generally heading.) The Company skirt the northern spur of the mountains, within sight of the distant woods. The descent takes them away from the wooded hills, and into the gray and barren Dry Wastes.

Wednesday, January 7

While traveling across the hilly Wastes, the party hear a distant bell ringing, right around noontime. At once, flocks of birds start flapping overhead, and indeed fill the sky all around the area. All of them are headed towards a specific spot, not far away. The party head in that direction, crest two more low hills, and see below them a tremendous city wall, largely crumbled away, encircling a large area of ruins. It must be Repose! They descend to the wall, and cautiously enter the ruins of the city.

Almost all of the buildings in Repose have largely crumbled away, but a few walls and roofs are still standing. The streets are littered with debris, including the occasional human bone, and bits of wooden golems. Not long after they enter, a lumbering stone golem approaches dragging behind it the rotting remains of some wooden contraption. It doesn't attack, and the party see that the wooden debris behind it was once a large cart. They discover that it will respond to simple directional commands, and decide it once must have been a sort of automated taxi golem.

The party reach a plaza near the center of town, and find why the birds were congregating. In the center of the plaza is a stone pillar, about thirty feet high and ten feet in diameter. The top five feet of the pillar is actually a hollowed stone basin, out of which once ran six curved troughs, arcing slightly downward and into the ruins of the city. (Currently, all but one of the troughs has broken off near the base.) Floating above the pillar, supported by nothing, is an iron ring, fixed in space. About five feet off the ground are six spokes, like those on a ship's wheel, protruding from a black metal ring wrapped tight around

the pillar. A clay golem is walking around the pillar, slowly pushing on one of the spokes. As the ring turns, a small trickle of water comes out of the floating iron ring and drips into the basin. The birds crowd around, greedily drinking the water. Elsewhere in the plaza are the remains of other clay golems, that presumably once all were used to turn the “water wheel.”

The party decide to head to the Town Hall, which they heard about from Three Surpassing Wisdom back in Djaw. They don’t know where it is, but they cleverly instruct the taxi golem to go there and then follow it. They find themselves standing in front of a magnificent stone building, three storeys tall. Though there are places which look like windows, they are completely filled in with stone. There are wide marble steps leading up to great stone double doors. Two metal circles are set into the ground near the stairs. There are more bones than usual in and around these.

The party approach the building, and as they do so, two large stone figures appear, one on each of the metal circles. Each of these tall golems has heavy anvils bolted onto its arms in lieu of hands. Through a *magic mouth*, one of the golems speaks: “Greetings, travelers. We regret that the Repose Town Hall is closed, pending the return of Maker Kinnvhad. Authorized visitors should perform the usual ritual. Unauthorized people should not attempt to enter the Hall; anyone doing so will be executed. We apologize for any inconvenience.”

The party don’t go closer, and after a few moments, the golems vanish. However, each new approach towards the building brings them back, with the same warning.

The party contemplate different ways of avoiding the golem guardians. They use *stone shape* to disrupt the stone around one of the round metal platforms, hoping this will disrupt whatever sort of teleportation the golems are using. But when Aravis casts a *knock* spell on the double doors, both golems return, and immediately attack the party. A brutal fight ensues; the golems are difficult to damage, and dish out horrendous damage with their anvil-ended arms. One Certain Step’s face is smashed in by one blow, and he is barely saved from death by a healing spell.

But before the battle is over, disaster strikes. One of the golems catches Ernie with a devastating two-anvil combination. The first catches him in the gut, lifting him bodily off the ground. The second comes swinging in from the side, and hits him in the face. His neck jerks violently around with a sickening snap, and his body falls to the ground. Dranko rushes over, but it’s too late. Ernie is dead.

The rest of the party manage to defeat the golems, but the victory seems hollow indeed.

PitMonkey: NNNOOOOoooooo... not poor little Ernie!

Master Of Heaven: YES! DIE HALFLING, DIE! MUUAHAHAHAH!

Kidcthulhu: Ernie’s death came as a surprise to all of us, including Sagiro. He was really stunned, and I think I was in shock. I knew I should have stopped and healed before closing on the golems, but hey, that’s Ernie all over.

Master Of Heaven: To explain my fit of chaotic evil behavior, out of all the PCs the only one I decided I wouldn’t mind dying was Ernie. Damned whiny little halfling. “I have serious issues of faith, and am becoming depressed.” Why didn’t anybody say, “Suck it up, little man, we’re trying to save the world here!”?

By the way, why doesn’t this party have more bloodthirsty maniacs in it? They keep walking away from hordes of enemies, enemies that should be crushed under their heels like puny, squirming insects! They should have smashed the skeleton army to dust. Break out the *fireballs* and *Turning*, with a few tactics, and they would’ve been decimated, I tell you.

And what’s with running away from 2nd Edition orcs? You should’ve turned around and blasted them to smithereens. They are puny 2nd Edition orcs, do not fear them! Smash and bash them! Come on guys, engage some armies, I long to see you hack’n’slash your way to victory.

Rincewind: Does Ernie stay dead, or do they do another resurrection-quest? And if he is staying dead, will you be telling us what ‘Wilburforce’ means? It’s a bit callous I know, but your plot-secrets-driven campaign affects the readers just as much as the players!

Master Of Heaven: Obviously they resurrect him, all the players are talking about it as if he comes back. What a shame. I want to see a crazed halfling barbarian join the party, screaming wildly and charging into battle thirsting for blood, ripping out the still beating heart of the Orcan scum they face, then eating it. Not this little wimp who cooks for the party.

Evil Josef: Hello! Long time reader and a first time commenter. I’ve been checking this thread for a very, very long time now and I’m quite impressed with not only your game-mastering abilities and storytelling, but by the impressiveness of your players’ abilities to tell their stories as well. As our friend MasterOfHeaven shows, the party could just as easily descend into mindless violence, but the characters have been much more than that – fleshing themselves out in ways some D&D characters ever fail to do. They seem like real heroes despite the opportunity to be something less.

Keep up the good work. I really enjoy the posts! (And find that damn bracelet belt, already! Sheesh...)

Sagiro: I’m glad you like the posts! I’ll take this as another opening for praising my players; they really have struck (what I think is) the perfect balance between roleplaying and butt-kicking. Each one of their characters is interesting and deep, often surprising me and always entertaining me. We have huge amounts of fun at the gaming table.

Funny you should ask about the bracelet! (I assume you mean the one taken off the Wilburforce statue.) The party really hadn’t heard anything about it since session 12, years of real time and game time ago. But just tonight (session 114!), its relevance resurfaced in the form of a *sending* cast to Ernie by the long-absent Embree. They’re currently in no position to do anything about it, but you’ll hear all about their current predicament in an upcoming post that might be titled: “Gelatinous Cube Diving.” And that’s all I’ll say about that for now.



Much discussion follows about what to do with Ernie. He has said in the past that he would want to be brought back if he still had an important task left undone, and this is obviously the case now. In the end, because time is pressing, they decide to fly him straight back to Djaw on the carpet at the fastest possible speed. Hopefully, some priest at the church of Yondalla there will be able to raise him from the dead.

Yondalla has a significant presence in Kivia. There is an entire nation of militaristic halflings, called Appleseed, about 500 miles northeast of Djaw. These halflings worship Yondalla in her soldier/protector role, whereas in Charagan she is more known as the Mother of the Hearth.

Thursday, January 8

While the carpet team (Morningstar, One Certain Step and Flicker) flies to Djaw (bearing all of the party's wealth in case it's asked for), the others try to figure out how they're going to get into the still sealed Town Hall. *Summoned* earth elementals are unable to force their way in, and Kay's magic warhammer makes no noticeable dint in the doors, stone walls, or roof.

Meanwhile, the carpet team arrive in Djaw after a 24-hour fly-a-thon over the mountains and across the plains. A priest at the temple of Yondalla takes them in, and announces that he won't know until the next day if Ernie can be restored.

Friday, January 9

The party members return to the church early in the morning, and are told that yes, Ernie can be brought back from the dead. In return, the party are asked to make a large donation to the church, and are also told that they must agree to accept some additional task that Ernie will know upon coming back to life. The raising, says the priest, will take about three weeks. The carpet team pay the money, swear to do whatever task ends up set for them, thank the priest profusely, and start back immediately to the ruins of Repose.

Back at the ruins, Aravis has discovered that *gaseous form* also doesn't allow entrance to the Town Hall, and that *dispel magic* cast on the doors is not sufficient either.

Saturday, January 10

The carpet team arrive back at the ruins, and give the others the good news about Ernie. Later that day, the party finally gain access to the Town Hall – a combination of a *dispel magic* simultaneous with a *knock* on the front doors does the trick. Carefully, the party enter the long abandoned building.

The first floor is uninhabited; the doors open into a lobby-like area with a smashed desk at the far end. The party discover two more round metal discs, which they surmise to be where the anvil-golems stood when not brought out to defend the building. Other parts of the first floor were clearly used once for storage, though nothing valuable (or indeed, recognizable) remains in the storerooms. There is a wrecked dining room, and a large kitchen. In the kitchen, there is a golem made of wood with iron supports, with one leg mostly broken, and wearing a chef's hat. It still moves feebly about, and when the party request a meal, it even goes feebly through the motions of cooking, grabbing long-rotted ingredients off a nearby shelf. This makes the party think of Ernie, which just makes them more depressed, so they leave the golem behind and ascend to the second story of the building.

The second floor looks like the main golem construction area. Most of the storey is taken up by a large room with a slightly raised pedestal in its center. There are shattered bits of wood, clay, stone, and bone scattered all around the place. Lying half on the floor and half on the pedestal is a battered and broken iron golem. There is also a large bloodstain on the stone floor nearby.

A few smaller workrooms are arrayed around the large central room. In one of these is a desk on which rest some finely crafted wooden hands, and some wooden arms and legs are propped up against the wall. In another room is a set of hinged stone casting molds for various limbs and torsos. Others rooms contain scattered and rotten parchment, various broken bits of wood, and assorted laboratory equipment. It looks as if some tremendous fighting had raged all about the place.

From one of these workrooms, a voice can be heard shouting from a closet. Carefully, the party approach, and open the closet.

kidcthulhu: I can now post another quote, which I couldn't give out before.

Morningstar: "Oh crap, Ernie's dead. Now what are we going to eat?"

Piratecat: To which Dranko replied, quite logically, "Well, we could eat Ernie. He would have wanted it that way." Well, I thought it was funny.

RangerWickett: I think it's funny too. And very noble of you, Dranko. It's always hard to sever the ties to your lost friends, and I know many people shy away from cannibalism. But hey, Dranko, you're a real friend, and you don't let pesky things like your lack of halfling recipes get in the way of obeying your friends requests.

So... um, I hate to ask, but did Dranko lick Ernie?

Piratecat: Ewwwww. No.

wmuench: Hey, it would only be cannibalism if Ernie was a half-orc.

Cor Azer: So if Ernie is dead, who is kidcthulhu playing in the meantime? Or do the three weeks of game time pass in one session?

LightPhoenix: kidcthulhu, if I'm not mistaken, plays Morningstar.

Piratecat: Nope, Morningstar is played by a different woman. Kidcthulhu played Makel during the time Ernie was dead. Makel's really our "pass-around" NPC; if we have a guest player, they usually get him.

Just for reference, women play Ernie, Kay, Morningstar, Kibi the dwarf, and (occasionally – guest player) Makel; men play Dranko, Aravis, and Grey Wolf; Flicker, (usually) Makel and One Certain Step are NPCs.

What they find inside, sitting on a high shelf, is a beautifully crafted iron head, worked and detailed like stone, and with two large emeralds in place of eyes. Heaped in the closet below the head is a jumble of smashed wooden limbs. A human voice is coming from the head: it begs to be released.

When the party remove the head from the shelf, it begins to shower thanks on them. It identifies itself as **Five Silent Crow**, and announces that it once was the Emperor of Djaw. Over the course of a subsequent discussion, it also claims to have been the Emperor's chef (the finest in the world!), a mighty warrior, a powerful wizard. Sometimes it's many of these at once. In the midst of its babbling, it starts wailing that it cannot move its eyes from looking fixedly ahead. And that it cannot eat. It asks frantically about its body, to which it expected to be attached, but the party don't have the heart to tell it about the wrecked body in the closet.

The topmost floor of the building contains a large (and wrecked) lounge, and a completely burned-out library. It also contains two hallways with a number of emptied-out bedrooms. But the last of these bedrooms is not empty. There is a painting on the far wall, and a scroll tube on a desk, both of which radiate magic. Nevertheless, the party march into the room, and someone picks up the scroll tube. Immediately, the door slams shut and magically seals itself. There is a faint hissing sound, and after a few seconds, it becomes clear that all of the air is being magically sucked out of the room! A *magic mouth* appears on the painting and says: "Hello, Kollvhad; just speak the name of our favorite dessert."

The party spend about twenty seconds blurting out all the names of every dessert they can think of, but the air keeps getting thinner and thinner. And then someone remembers the pot of magical pigments that Aravis has been carrying around. He pulls them out and starts to draw a tunnel out of the room. With no time to spare, and some of the party already unconscious, he finishes, and those still conscious drag the others out of the room to safety.

Breathing freely once again, Flicker opens the scroll tube, and receives the warm greeting of a *fire trap*. But he is easily healed, and the party find a letter inside the tube:

My dear brother Kollvhad,

No doubt you will be shocked when you arrive here; things have gone terribly wrong in the past few days, and Repose has been abandoned by all save myself. I am counting on you knowing the right words for the guards at the door, the same words we have been using since we were children.

I will try to sum up the events of the past week, as best I can. One of our guests, an artist named Szanser, turned out to be a treacherous and powerful wizard. He had been following closely the progress of our utopia for decades, and had studied magics that let him gain control of our golems. We make no secret that the wealth we collect from our guests is usually at hand, and this was his goal. Six days ago he seized control of over half of our golems, and the carnage was terrible. The Town Hall, as you will have seen, was wrecked, and many of our best Makers were killed. Rynne from Dir-Tolia was killed, as were Anahd, Vellesa, Six Staves, Quisvhad, and all of their apprentices. Many others were killed whom you do not know, arrivals in the time since you left on your journey. Those who survived announced that Repose was a failure in the end, and have departed.

I have been left with a different and more pressing problem. The wizard who fought us has been banished from the plane for a time, but we could not kill him. Before he was removed, he swore he would return, to kill me and all my family. I think he means to try. I traveled back to Tev, to consult with the Black Circle about what I might do about Szanser, and received an extremely long and curious reply. It was this:

"Many lines of destiny are about to cross, past, present, and future. There is a way to keep the foe away forever, a thing crafted long ago, made of metal and magic and thought. It is called the Crosser's Maze, and it sits undisturbed, far away, waiting to be taken. Forty miles south of the Whistling Stone, one hundred miles east of Posada's Tears, beneath an unending ceiling of green; here is the Maze. It waits for the right hand to take it, and when it is brought forth, letters will be writ in the past, signs etched in the present, and runes carved in the future. Waste no time. You are a Maker. Make the journey."

I don't understand all of it, but it is clear that this thing called the Crosser's Maze will protect us from Szanser. Posada's Tears is the name for a great cataract in the Jungle of Dreams, far to the southeast. The Circle has given us good advice in the past; I have resolved to travel there, and find this Maze.

In the past few days, I have cleaned up the Hall somewhat, restored some of the wards, and set two guards at the door. Our valuables are as safe here as anywhere; Glaum will protect them. I would stay longer, but Szanser is probably wasting no time finding a way back from wherever we sent him, and I fear for our family's safety. I hope that I will return to find you here, returned successfully yourself from your journey into the Astral. See what order you can make of what you find, and together we will start to rebuild anew. Given my fast means of travel, the long miles between the Wastes and the Jungle should not be more than a matter of weeks. Perhaps we will see each other before the end of next month.

Your brother, always in hope,

Kinnvhad



Run #93 – Wednesday, May 10, 2000

Glaum This!

The party go back down to talk with Five Silent Crow. He still talks at length about his old glory days as Emperor of Djaw. He also claims that Kinnvhad's and Kollyhad's favorite dessert is "Kai Kin Custard." (The party are disgruntled, because one of the desserts they had blurted out was "custard." Close, but not close enough!)

Using a *memory read*, Morningstar learns that Crow was once an old and dying wizard, and that some colleagues of his had worked out a spell to transfer his mind into a golem body. The city of Repose was the only place with the resources to carry off the spell, and so he was going to be taken there. The only problem with the spell was that there was no guarantee when Crow's consciousness would awaken inside the head. And when that eventually happened, the head was in the closet, and the Town Hall had already been abandoned. Crow's insanity seems well explained. The party promise to take Crow back to Djaw with them when they go, and he promises them all the rewards that a former Emperor can bestow.

The group then spend some time speculating about the Crosser's Maze. A thing made of "metal and magic and thought" (as the letter states) is the best description of the thing they've found thus far. There is even some suspicion that Five Silent Crow's head is the Crosser's Maze, though this seems unlikely.

As Flicker is wont to point out, the letter from Kinnvhad also mentioned valuables, that have so far not been in evidence. But there is one more door left unopened on the top floor of the Town Hall, and mapping done by the party shows a large space still unexplored. They open this door, and see an empty stone room with a carpeted floor, and two doors, one on each side wall. When some of the party enter the room and approach the doors, they (the doors) vanish, and the illusion of the chamber is revealed. The walls and ceiling are not stone, but flesh – a sickly pink flesh filled with horrid eyes and wide, gibbering mouths!

A thick curtain of flesh spills from the ceiling and covers the doorway through which about half the party entered. In the melee that ensues, the disgusting creature lashes at party members with fleshy pseudopodia, and is able to pin some of its foes with strong, fleshy ropes. The gibbering mouths make it difficult to cast spells, and the touch of the creature slowly drains strength away from its victims. But the party are able to overcome the creature (called "**Glaum**" in Kinnvhad's letter) through sheer force of numbers; as it dies, it melts into a sickening puddle of fleshy goo, with the stuff from the ceiling dripping onto the floor. And as Glaum melts away from the far wall, a last door is revealed, and beyond it is a small room containing a great deal of monetary and magical wealth. There is much rejoicing.



Run #94 – Wednesday, June 28, 2000

Ernest Redux

Sunday, January 11 – Wednesday, January 14

The party journey back to Djaw.

Thursday, January 15

While traveling across the uninhabited wilderness, Grey Wolf experiences a "gut-churner," and two young children appear nearby. They are holding crude fishing poles, and both are clearly scared. They look around in surprise and fear, and at first cringe away from the party. After showing that they mean no harm, the party learn that the older girl (around nine years old) is named **Rey**, and the younger boy (about four) is named **Cole**. They live on a small farm near a city they call "Chinniphath." They are poor and hungry and say that the "bad king" takes daddy's food and doesn't pay him what it's worth. Daddy says the food goes to feed a big army the bad king has.

The party spend some time worrying about what to do with the kids, though they realize that they'll probably vanish. They give the children some money and food, and a short while later, they do in fact disappear, hopefully back to their family.



Physical description of the party, by Piratecat:

Morningstar of Ell (Shield of Ell and Dreamwalker from Kynder Hold): Tall, gangly, skinny, with long white hair that won't stay dyed. After being treated like an outcast while growing up, she's found her family within Ozilinsh's Company. Extremely competent at battle tactics, and intolerant of needless danger.

General Kay "Windstorm" Olafsen (half-elven ranger from Cyric): Half-elven and somewhat plain, with brown hair that often blows about. An interesting mixture of naivete and worldliness; "big city" scams and ploys often work on her, as she was raised in a tiny town. She tends towards the cynical, but trusts someone completely once they have proven themselves. Despite her status as General, she seldom directs the battle plans of anyone other than Oa-Lyanna. Kay has a fierce temper, and thinks nothing of mercilessly slaying evildoers or using force to question a prisoner.

Aravis Telmir (mage from Feslin): Aravis is a sophisticated-looking scholar with a dry, ready wit. He shuns illusion spells, preferring magics that transmute shape, and he thinks little of wading into a battle using *fist of stone* and good tactics. He's the smartest person in the Company, and it shows. **Pewter**, Aravis's feline familiar, is enthusiastically similar in attitude.

Dranko Blackhipe (half-orc rogue and priest of Delioch in Tal Hae): Horribly scarred, often wearing black and red clothing and a fake eyepatch. Dranko's "the world hates me, so I'll hate 'em back first" attitude has been greatly reduced by the closeness of the Company. He still has a longing for the trappings of respectability and power – impressive clothes, titles, jewels – but he lacks the ability to tell tacky from classy. He loves things that are unique, and like Flicker he takes more chances than Morningstar usually approves of. He likes to taste things (magic items, mostly), and smokes hideous cigars.

Ernest Wilburforce Roundhill (halfling priest of Yondalla and fighter from Dingman's Ferry): Ernie is your typical "hobbit" style halfling, with hairy feet and a big belly and a large, happy grin plastered across his round, open face. Growing up, Ernie hated bullies more than anything in the world, and that prejudice has carried into his adventuring life as well. He is an astonishing cook, the soul of the party, and one of the few things that makes traveling bearable.

Grey Wolf (half-elven wizard and fighter from Ghant): Grey Wolf has a reluctance to talk about his past that annoys almost everyone. He is convinced that the party is ultimately doomed, and pessimistically expects the worst from any given situation. The rest of the group are pushed towards optimism in order to compensate; in fact, when Grey Wolf thinks things might be okay, the rest of the group start to get nervous. He also has a fondness for wading into battle, sword flashing and teeth gritted.

Flicker Proudfoot (NPC) (halfling rogue from Tal Hae): Flicker is more of a 3E halfling. He loves to take outrageous chances and make unwise choices, and despite a streak of cowardice he's almost never let the party down.

Makel Troutman (NPC) (navigator and fighter from Feslin): Makel is a solid, dependable fighter and ship's navigator who has mostly beaten his drinking problem and turned his life around. He is weatherbeaten and average-looking, and more dangerous with the two swords hanging at his belt than anyone guesses. He tends to feel overwhelmed and outclassed, but usually manages to hide his fears.

One Certain Step (NPC) (paladin of Kemma from Djaw): Step is a paladin, the kind that treats people as well as he can, not the kind that lords his holy stature over the less fortunate. He's a brave and genuinely nice person who sometimes lets his bravery overwhelm his common sense.

RangerWickett: What's a 'Shield of Ell,' and why is Morningstar one?

Sagiro: To quote from a previous post (because I'm lazy), "The Shields are those [clerics of Ell] who combine more combat training with their devotional duties, and are ready to protect the church from aggressors (Morningstar is one of these)." Basically they're a subset of Ellish clerics who get more combat training, and thus are expected to fight for the church should the need arise.

Morningstar is one because, well, that's what her player decided for her character background. Morningstar showed some natural aptitude early (being exceptionally tireless and agile, if not terribly strong), plus it was a way to get her more "out of the way" from the regular goings-on at her temple (she was always something of an outcast, and hadn't been expected to get the divine calling to be a true Ellish cleric).

[...any and all information you can provide about Ell, the Church, and Ava Dormo would be greatly appreciated...] As for Ava Dormo, it's not as rules-laden as you might think. In some sense Morningstar's player and I are both discovering more about it as we play. I do have certain basic rules in mind for "how it works." Here are some brief written notes I've taken about it:

Ava Dormo (AD) is a sort of alternate or parallel reality. Physically, it mostly resembles the real world – buildings tend to be in the same places, and the actual landscape is the same. Largely, AD keeps up with the real world in this respect, meaning that if you tear down an old building and build a new one, the new one will be there in AD. Occasionally, in places with strong magical or AD histories, an older edifice can be found in AD, or older features might be present in a newer setting.

In order to enter AD, one has to be asleep, or in a special trance created for that purpose. Typically, a person has to go to sleep planning on entering AD, and that person must also have an innate ability to make the journey. Occasionally, a person will accidentally dream their way into AD, but not be able to do much there. A dreamer must go to sleep thinking of where they want to find themselves in AD.

Once in AD, a dreamer can simply walk around. That's the hard way. An adept dreamer can move around via a form of teleportation, wherein she focuses on a place that she can see, and is there. At first, this can only be done across short distances, but with much practice a dreamer can move as far as she can see, very quickly.

Also, a dreamer can always teleport to any extremely familiar place in AD. Usually these places are specially prepared strongholds or "home bases" for the dreamer.

AD has many fewer objects than the real world, especially small ones. A person who enters AD can, if they wish, arrive with "dream versions" of any objects they are holding when they fall asleep. If they don't explicitly plan on any objects going with them, they'll show up in whatever their normal clothing is. Armor won't automatically go along.

Once in AD, a dreamer can create dream versions of simple objects. If armor and weapons are often carried, these can be recreated in AD. Complicated items (including scrolls and other writings) are possible to create, but again it takes practice.

RangerWickett: Thanks for the heads-up on Ava Dormo. Now I understand why those two were able to have their red armor, while Morningstar was just sorta screwed.



Friday, January 16 – Sunday, January 18

They continue traveling back to Djaw.

Sagiro's Story Hour, Part One

Monday, January 19

In the evening, while camped, a swarm of rats come upon the party unawares, and attack without provocation. Their attacks are aimed entirely at Aravis. A *fireball* takes care of many, and Aravis goes gaseous to avoid their bites and scratches. Then a larger creature approaches, cautiously – it is a cross between an overgrown rat and a man. It announces itself as a Warden, and warns them that, should the party try to kill it, they are surrounded by thousands more rats who will attack and kill them all. The party listen to what it has to say.

The Warden says that it has been sent by the Council of Nine, to kill Aravis if possible, and to warn him if it's not. It doesn't know why it was sent, only that Aravis is a dangerous enemy. The Warden's warning is that Aravis is not to approach the Endless Wood for any reason. If he goes in, he will be killed. With his message delivered, the rat Warden flees into the darkness, and the party hear the sounds of hundreds of rats leaving with him.

What the heck, they all wonder, is the "Council of Nine?"



Tuesday, January 20 – Monday, February 3

The party finish their journey back to Djaw. A few days out from the city they pass a pair of field scouts, sent by the Emperor of Djaw himself. There are many such scouts, on the lookout for an army of undead that might be advancing out of the mountains. It seems that Morningstar's dream message was received and taken seriously! In fact, in the fields that surround the city, many soldiers are being given extra training in the use of simple blunt weapons, the better to fight skeletons with.

Also during this time, Kay surprises everyone by saying "yes" to Dranko. "Yes what?" Dranko replies.

"Yes, I'll marry you," says Kay. Several jaws drop.

Dranko desperately tries to remember when he asked her. (It was after the battle against the tiger-man, meant as a throwaway line of gratitude.) Dranko, a low-charisma half-orc whose marriage prospects were never particularly good, instinctively says, "Sure!"

Although it won't be spelled out in these run summaries, their engagement didn't last very long. Ernie gave Dranko many lectures about actually being in love with the person one marries, and Dranko was forced to admit that he agreed to marry Kay more because he figured he'd never get hitched otherwise.

Tuesday, February 4

The party go immediately to the church of Yondalla, and there is a joyful reunion with Ernie, freshly returned from the dead.

(During the interim, Ernie had found himself back at the Inn Between, helping with the cooking duties beside Dolly and Barnabas. One evening Dolly approached him and quietly told him it was time to go back; his time for eternal rest had not yet come. Before he returned to the living, Ernie was made to promise two things as payment for being brought back to life. One was that some time after the party's current quest, they'd have to come back and help the halflings of Appleseed, whose people will be in a great peril from which only the party can save them. The second promise is that when the Nifi priest Qalonno next demands that the party return the flying carpet *Burning Sky*, Ernie must assent and give it up. Ernie agrees to both of these things, though he doesn't actually tell the party about the promise to give up the carpet.)

One Certain Step is able to convince his church to lend him a keelboat, to expedite the party's travel down the river towards the mountains. It is their intent to go to Levenmud (and perhaps the dwarven lands of Gurund), to learn of a way across the Stoneguard mountains.

The supposedly impassable Stoneguard Mountains run southwest to northeast for 1000 miles, from the central southern coast of Kivia into the deserted wastes far to the north.

Looking at their map of Kivia bought in Djaw, they see that there are three choices for reaching the Jungle of Dreams, to the east of the mountains. They could go around to the north, but that would (at best) take them many months of travel through dangerous uncharted territory. They could go south to the coast, but that would also take more time, and necessitate travel through two countries with reputations for political intrigues and xenophobia. Plus they'd need to find a boat, since their *folding boat* (*Burning Sail*) cannot be floated in Kivian waters.

Near the end of the river, past the southernmost of the Jewels of the Plains (Levenmud), is the small dwarven kingdom of Gurund. Several dwarven villages are indicated in the mountains themselves, and while there are no passes marked, the party hope that the dwarves will know some way across the mountains to the jungle beyond.



Wednesday, February 5

The party depart Djaw aboard the *Floating Light*, a ship that belongs to the church of Kemma. They sail down the river towards Fanaam, the last city before Levenmud.

Thursday, February 6

In the late morning, the *Floating Light* reaches a portage-way. A small riverside village has grown up around the area, and for a fee a group of teamsters will move the ship a few hundred yards downriver, bypassing some unnavigable rapids. As the party leave the ship and walk into the little village, they are approached by a hooded figure who then reveals himself to be **Qalonno**, the Delfirian priest who has been after the flying carpet. He demands that the party return it, claiming that this time, knowing the party's combat abilities, he knows he can take the carpet by force if necessary.

And then, to everyone's surprise, Ernie hands over the carpet.

Hatching Dragon: Was the idea of the PCs having to give [the flying carpet] back something you had planned from 'way back', or did you come up with it as an excuse to get rid of a item that was 'messing up' your campaign? By messing up I mean things like hauling a corpse cross-country in far less time than you might have expected for a resurrection? Another example, ferrying the PCs over obstacles, therefore defeating an encounter quicker/easier than you'd intended? I suppose a similar question could be asked about their *folding boat*, even though that's obviously an 'enhanced' (and holy!) version of the one in the DMG. I really like the *unseen servants* as crew; might have to swipe that, even though I don't recall seeing that spell 'making the cut' to 3E.

Hmm... now that I think about it I can't really see you admitting to it even if you had contrived to 'do away with' the pesky carpet; it'd be too likely to upset PCs, never a wise thing for a DM to do.

Piratecat: Sagiro is a good DM, and if he did want to take away an overpowered magic item, I'm sure he could find a fair way to do so.

That being said, the carpet wasn't (in my opinion) overpowered. I believe that Ernie was commanded to hand it over to the enemy because (semi-metagame) death requires a sacrifice, on the part of the person raised. Ernie loved that carpet, and would miss it – and so the carpet was what went. Plus, Qalonno claimed it was a holy relic, so Yondalla was probably petitioned by Nifi to get it back. Ernest died, and she could no longer refuse.

Kidcthulhu: The carpet really wasn't that overpowered. It certainly had little effect on our overland movement rate, as we were generally loath to split the party for hours on end, and stuck to walking or riding. I think Piratecat's hit it on the head. When Mrs. Horn died, we had to make sacrifices to get her back. When Ernie died, sacrifices were again required, and I don't think Sagiro wanted to repeat the same shtick.

But boy oh boy, did giving that thing up suck. Ernie loved that carpet more than his mother. OK, maybe not more than his mother, but certainly more than his distant uncles.

Sagiro: Regarding taking away the flying carpet, Piratecat and Kidcthulhu have pretty much nailed it.

You have probably noticed that PC death in my game is fairly rare. The flip side of that coin is that bringing people back from the dead is never as trivial as just casting a spell. There's always some large cost or consequence, above and beyond the already significant cost of losing a level. Mrs. Horn's death (you'll probably recall if you've read this far) required a number of specific promises, and sparked some tasks and quests that are still ongoing to this day. I made it a bit simpler in Ernie's case, not wanting to repeat myself ("Okay, second round of promises everyone!"). In addition to losing the level, and the party making a large monetary donation to the Church of Yondalla, Ernie had to agree to give up his favorite possession. (Oh, there's a Greater Purpose behind it, too, but the party don't know about that yet.) And finally the party as a whole had to agree to an unknown quest that is still somewhat obscure in its details – that they'll have to come back to Kivia someday and help the halflings of Appleseed, who will be facing some dire threat.

Qalonno smiles, takes it, and starts to walk away. When the party call after him, promising that they'll meet again, Qalonno responds by saying, "Well, when that day comes, I wonder how many of you will still be alive." And with that, he pulls three small glowing red stones from his pocket, and drops them on the ground. Then he starts casting a spell. The party try to thwart Qalonno before he can escape, but attempts by Aravis and Grey Wolf to *mage hand* the glowing stones back into the rolled-up carpet fail. Still, just as Qalonno finishes his spell and vanishes, Kay shoots him in the shoulder with her magic *arrow of wounding*, which she's been saving for a special occasion.

The three red stones erupt in flames, and when the flames die down three large red salamanders are left "standing" in their stead...

Salamander Tango

Run #95 – Wednesday, July 12, 2000

A brutal fight ensues against the three salamanders. The creatures are snakes from the waist down, but humanoid from the waist up. They wield long iron spears that are glowing red-hot. Flames play up and down the bodies of these creatures and along the spears themselves. Their long reach with the burning spears makes melee combat against them quite a challenge.

The largest of the salamanders also demonstrates its ability to cast large *fireballs*, and the fire damage not only doesn't damage the creatures, it seems to heal them. A couple of minutes and many third-degree burns later, the party overcome the monsters (as each salamander is slain, it pops out of existence in the manner of a *summoned* creature). One teamster had bravely (but ineffectually) joined the fight while the other commoners hid; although he is knocked out by fire damage, he somehow survives the encounter, and the party heal him.

When the portage of the ship is complete, the party pay the teamsters and head down along the river to meet up with their ship and resume their voyage. En route they pass a trio of slavers, members of the Guild of Chains, leading a string of six dwarves in chains going the other way. A brief, tense encounter follows, but the slavers don't seem to consider the party a real threat. But as the slavers leave, Aravis can't resist; he casts *gaseous form* on the last dwarf in the line, using Pewter to deliver the touch.

The slavers demand to know what happened, but the party feign ignorance, and since there's no proof of wrongdoing (and since the party outnumber them three to one), the slavers depart, grumbling. But the dwarf, named **F'Guz**, becomes desperate to return to the slavers! F'Guz tells the party that when any slave tries to escape or revolt, his family and village are made to pay. The party reluctantly let him go back to the slavers, but they vow that when they're done saving the world, they're going to come back and free the dwarves from the oppression of the Guild of Chains.



The Sea of Snakes

Run #96 – Sunday, July 23, 2000

Friday, February 7

The party sail into the city of Fanaam, stopping only long enough for Aravis to pick up some alchemical supplies and for some of the others to procure materials for on-the-road training. (Fanaam is famous for its alchemists, and it is rumored that the Alchemists' Guild there pretty much runs the city from behind the scenes.) On the way out of Fanaam, all ships must pass beneath a huge wooden archway built out over the river. Any ships that cannot fit through it will also be too large to sail through the Sea of Snakes, a swamp to the south through which the river runs for many miles.

The party ask about the Sea of Snakes, and learns that it gets its name from (surprise!) a large snake population. The man at the arch tells them to watch out for snakes dropping from trees onto the deck, and that they should sleep below decks if possible. There are manned guard posts along the main river route, to help defend from the occasional predations of "snake-skins" (lizard men) that live deep inside the swamp.

Saturday, February 8 – Monday, February 10

The party enter the Sea of Snakes. It's a shifting swamp, with a maze of barely navigable channels marked by buoys to indicate what size ships will safely be able to pass. Trees growing on the banks form a canopy overhead, and often Makel has to navigate carefully to prevent catching the mast on low hanging branches, or catching the boat on large snags in the channels. Oa-Lyanna proves invaluable, being able to finely manipulate the sail and maneuver the ship.

There are swarms of insects, and of course snakes (some poisonous) are constantly dropping onto the deck. Makel carefully guides the ship, while the party stay alert for signs that lizard men have moved markers or are waiting in ambush. In the evenings, the ship docks at one of the guard posts, and the party are advised to sleep below decks, put out all lights, and make as little noise as possible.

There is some dispute as to whether the Sea of Snakes is more or less pleasant than the Mouth of Nahalm.

Tuesday, February 11

In the afternoon, the party realize that they have taken a wrong turn; up ahead they see a guard post, but it proves to be half destroyed and abandoned. They are not attacked by lizard-men. Instead, they are attacked by a large force of green bugmonkeys, identical save in color to the bugmonkeys the party encountered long ago beneath Gohgan's basement back in Charagan.

They swarm the boat, even after the mages clear out a bunch by *fireballing* the trees. Some approach from the water, trying to climb the side of the boat; water elementals are *summoned* to help deal with these. Other bugmonkeys drop from the trees above, and soon the deck is swarming with them. Kay, Ernie and Grey Wolf position themselves to protect Makel, while he turns the boat around as quickly as possible. Everyone does their share of fighting (with Kay in particular laying waste to the enemies, sending them flying off the boat), and eventually Makel steers the boat to safety. The bugmonkeys give up their attacks, and the party are able to continue on their voyage.

That night at the next guard post, the party learn that no one has heard of bugmonkeys, but that now a mystery has been solved. A piece of bugmonkey shell had been discovered amid the wreckage of an abandoned boat some weeks back, but no one knew what it was.

Wednesday, February 12

At last, the *Floating Light* emerges from the Sea of Snakes, and the city of Levenmud is within sight on the opposite bank of a wide delta.



Nasty, Brutish and Short

Run #97 – Monday, August 7, 2000

The party land the boat in the wide and busy harbor, and walk into the unwalled and bustling city. On their way to a recommended inn (The "Snake's End") they reach the auction ring outside the Guild of Chains headquarters in the center of town. The day's auction is getting ready to start, and while a majority of the slaves in the cages are human, one of them is a dwarf.

Morningstar pushes her way to the front of the gathering crowd, and casts *Rary's telepathic bond* on the dwarf. His name is **Azer**, and in a brief telepathic conversation with him Morningstar learns that while Azer knows nothing of any means to cross the Stoneguard Mountains, there is an old village elder he knows of named Athulf who might be able to help. Athulf lives in the dwarven village of Culud, southernmost of a string of small villages south of Gurund City.

Azer also asks not to be set free; he doesn't want to be bought by anyone in trouble with the Guild of Chains, and he would probably just be recaptured and sold again before too long. He's depressing to talk to. That afternoon, the party leave Levenmud and begin the journey to Culud.

Thursday, February 13 – Sunday, February 16

The Company travel eastward, up into the mountains, to Gurund City. Every twenty miles or so along the road is a Guild of Chains outpost; the party remain aloof from the slavers who stand guard.

Monday, February 17

They arrive in Gurund City, which is hardly bigger than most average-sized human towns. The dwarves actually have a thriving mining economy, and the standard of living does not seem especially poor. But there is a large Guild building on the outskirts of the city, serving as a constant reminder of who's in charge. The party waste little time in Gurund City, and head south immediately along the mountain road.

Tuesday, February 18 – Monday, February 24

Travel to Culud.

Tuesday, February 25

The party arrive in Culud and seek out the dwarven elder **Athulf**. He's old and crotchety, and has little hope for his people, but he is willing to share his knowledge and opinions. For starters, Athulf reveals that some dwarves are traitors to their race, and are paid squealers for the Guild of Chains. The party should be careful about who they talk with; Athulf doesn't know exactly who can be trusted. Regarding the predations of the Guild, the healthiest young adult males are usually taken as slaves (about a hundred dwarves are taken each year). Even in the few generations that this practice has been going on, the dwarves have noticed a decrease in lifespan. It's basically a depressing time and place to be a dwarf, but the Gurundians lack the numbers, the strength and the will to do anything about the powerful Guild of Chains.

Decades ago the halflings of Appleseed raised a small army, marched southward, and temporarily broke the Guild's hold on the dwarves of Gurund. But some enemy of the halflings (presumably the Anlakis, their warlike neighbors to the west) launched an assault on Appleseed, the halflings had to withdraw their forces, and the Guild soon took hold again.

Regarding a way through the mountains, Athulf doesn't know of any, but he is old enough to remember hearing stories from some dwarves who were only one generation removed from those who lived in the mountains. He knows that the dwarves once lived under the mountains, and that the Empire of Great Gurund stretched all the way across them. But the dwarves were driven out of the mountains long ago – perhaps by ogres, perhaps by a dragon, perhaps by something else – and they sealed off

KidCthulhu: So ... would anyone be interested in snippets from Ernie's diary? He kept it while we were in Kivia, as a running letter to his mom. It would be a repeat of plot we've already had, but might be amusing.

Dear Mother,

How are you? I am fine. Things are very interesting here in Tev. There are halflings here. They come from a place called Appleseed, and they are very different from us in Dingman's Ferry. They are fighting a war against some big 'uns who want to take their land. Yondalla defends them well, but they are a fighting people, and do not get to enjoy the small joys of life. That said, I only hope and believe that we of Dingman's Ferry would be so brave in their place.

We have had a very interesting time here. I cannot begin to describe the many people and places I've seen. The city of Djaw is the largest and most splendid place I've ever seen. Two Tal Hae's could fit inside it and have room for more.

The food here is very good, but very different from our food. They do not roast and boil, and their bread is flat and has no leaven. They cut the food up very small and cook it in a very hot pan. I will cook some of it for you and father when I come home. You will like it once you get used to it.

Dinkeldog: I liked the info on the food. Definitely what's nearest to a halfling's heart.

Plane Sailing: Whenever I read Ernie, he comes over absolutely as "old school hobbit," rather than the gypsy toddlers with amazing strength that 3E portrays as halflings. I think that a lot is missed by not having the home-and-hearth loving little folk who are nonetheless doughty when roused!

KidCthulhu: I agree with you completely, Plane. 3E halflings are one of my only gripes with the system. Dumb, dumb, dumb.

Ernie is definitely a halfling in the Tolkien sense. He was created to be 75% Sam and 25% Frodo (all the mysticism, none of the whining). I'm glad you like him. He's a role-playing challenge for me. It's hard not to get the dirty jokes, to never swear, and to be nice to people all the time. If it weren't for that "doughy when roused," I'd probably go mad.

Fade: Ernie always seemed relatively brave to me. Oh well, halflings.

Ciaran: Given that he's a cook, I suppose this makes sense. Perhaps this is the Yondallan form of transubstantiation?

Aravis: Gee, and I thought he was 50% Sam, 25% Frodo, and 25% Frito... I agree completely about 3E halflings though. I much prefer the somewhat unwilling adventurer, yet perfectly suited for it when they actually make it out into the big wide world model of hobbit. (Oh yeah, and pudgy not svelte!)

Plane Sailing: Exactly! The skinny new halflings look like humans with some strange photographic effect to shrink them (OK, that's forgetting the bizarre egg-shaped head too). It seems to me that kender were much more of the role-models for this new breed of halfling – and I think they would have been better to have bitten the bullet and created a new race like the kender and allowed the good old hobbit/halfling to continue as he was. Ten square meals a day, that's what REAL hobbits are about!

KidCthulhu: Kender, blaugh. Kleptos with ponytails.

all of the old tunnels that emerged from their former home. Athulf does seem to think there would be some hope for his people if they could escape back underground, but he doesn't consider this a possibility because the underground is so extremely dangerous. He also suggests a general area where they might find one of those blocked-up tunnels, in an area with some seismic activity that might have opened one of the passages. (Also, that area is far from dwarven settlements, which means less risk if something dangerous escapes.)

The party tell Athulf that there are places in the world where dwarves are free and strong. Even if they can do nothing else, they will tell those other dwarves about their enslaved kin and perhaps they will send help. In addition, Morningstar gives Athulf a thousand gold pieces to aid the dwarven cause. He is quite overwhelmed. Morningstar decides that she'll try to send dream messages to Athulf, letting him know what they find under the mountains.

deash: Is it me or do these dwarves seem a bit on the wimpy side? I surely hope there is a dwarven underground movement 'cause if they have no fight at all then they deserve their fate.

Sagiro: Well, keep a few things in mind:

- The total dwarven population is quite small. They couldn't absorb the likely casualties.
- The Guild of Chains is immensely powerful in that region, and controls all trade into and out of the dwarven lands.
- If any dwarf attempts rebellion, escape, or otherwise challenges the Guild, terrible retribution is visited on the village, and usually the family, of the offending dwarf. They've demonstrated this enough times through torture and murder that the dwarves' collective will to rebel has been entirely broken at this point.

Yes, finding a way to wipe out the Guild of Chains is on the Company's master "To Do" list.



Statues in the Dark

Run #98 – Friday, August 18, 2000

The Company depart the home of Athulf and the dwarven village of Culud, heading southward into the mountains along narrow and seldom used trails. One Certain Step realizes right away that Thunder will be unable to navigate the mountainous terrain, and sends her back to Levenmud.

There are some minor earth tremors as they travel, but nothing devastating. The party camp in a small cave along a winding ledge trail. No crack opens up in the back with goblins leaping out in ambush.

Wednesday, February 26

The next day the trail peters out, and the party are obliged to scramble up and down steep rocky slopes, often using ropes for security. After half a day of this weary meandering, the party crest a peak and see some distant ruins in the bowl-shaped valley below. Dranko jumps and *feather falls* down, while the rest lower themselves down the steep mountainside with rope. Aravis slips as he starts his descent, but fortunately is caught by Makel, while Pewter hangs on to his master with his claws. Eventually, all are safely down at the bottom.

Some exploration of the ruins reveals: (a) that they are dwarven in size and construction; and (b) that there is an entrance into the mountainside on the eastern side that is entirely blocked up with stone. It looks like a controlled cave-in was used to thoroughly seal up the opening. Morningstar casts a *thought capture* there and finds a thought of someone who is satisfied with a job well done. Aravis uses *gaseous form* to seep slowly through the cave-in and discovers that it can be bypassed about thirty feet in, though it's completely dark in the interior. He returns with his report, and the party make a plan.



Thursday, February 27

The next day, Aravis casts *gaseous form* on all of the non-halflings, and they seep through the cave-in into the tunnel beyond. Aravis then *dimension doors* to transport himself, Flicker and Ernie. With *continual flame* torches out, the Company find themselves in a wide but low-ceilinged corridor, clearly dwarf-made, heading east through the mountain. This continues straight for a while, though there are short, meandering branch tunnels that lead to featureless dead ends.

The party find some rusting and rotten mining picks scattered about. There are also small creatures living in the darkness, cat-sized black and gray blind lizards that hop about on their hind legs. They seem harmless. The main tunnel opens into a large natural cavern, filled with stalactites, stalagmites, and some hoppers. The party choose one of the two branching tunnels leading out from it, and continue.

Soon after, they find that the hallway has collapsed, but the collapse has broken a hole into a new cavern. This one is larger than the previous one, and bends away out of sight. There are signs that mineral veins have been mined out of this new cavern, but (to Dranko's dismay) there are no signs of treasure remaining.

Near the back end of this cavern, Dranko spots something moving in the darkness, high up on a rocky formation. He looks... and is instantly turned to stone! Ernie instinctively looks for the attacker, and he too becomes petrified. The rest of the party, looking in horror at the statuesque forms of their companions, catch on and shield their eyes. Morningstar casts *detect thoughts* and gets a slow, patient thought of something waiting for the still-living creatures to go away so that it can eat.

The party spend a short time thinking about what they should do; the creature, whatever it is, is content to sit upon its rock. Morningstar summons a small earth elemental that immediately moves to engage the creature in combat, but the elemental is dispatched fairly quickly.

Morningstar then decides to take matters into her own hands, ties on a blindfold, and climbs up to engage the creature while blindfolded. All her years of blindfighting training pay off in spades; going on slight noises and instinct, she manages to pulverize the creature with her holy weapon. (A celestial badger summoned by Grey Wolf delivers the killing blow, though Morningstar has done the vast majority of damage.) With the creature killed, the party get to observe it safely; it's a large six-legged lizard, which Kay remembers is called a basilisk (having seen one described in Gadrunas' library).

Aravis conjures up a *Leomund's secure shelter* for the party to stay in that night...

Friday, February 28 – Saturday, February 29

...and the next "day" (who can tell, underground?), Morningstar casts the *break enchantment* spell on the statues of Ernie and Dranko. It works on Ernie, but to everyone's disappointment Dranko stays a statue.

In fact, it takes two additional days before her spell takes effect and Dranko is restored from his petrified state.

Sunday, February 30

The party continue on, and at the far end of the cavern there are three passages leaving it. On the right is a passage with stairs leading down into the darkness, and a musty smell emanates. On the left is a passage with stairs going up, and fresh air can be faintly detected from that way. The center way continues straight, leading into another dwarf-tunnel, though taller and wider than the previous ones. The party choose this last one.

It leads past a pair of wrecked and defaced churches of Moradin; gems have clearly been pried out of wall-mounted holy icons, and a secret closet has been long since discovered and plundered. A crude graffito arm has been scrawled on the wall, with a gnarled, hairy hand drawn to be "gripping" a tarnished metal hammer that was clearly holy to the dwarves.

At last the corridor ends at a set of large wooden doors (one bent back on its hinges) through which a sliver of daylight is coming. Little can be seen through the crack (as a nearby boulder blocks most of the view), but Oa-Lyanna can sense fresh outside air coming through. The party push open the doors, and beyond them is an extremely steep, narrow valley, perhaps fifty yards across and a hundred yards long. It's more like a cavern open to the sky. Birds wheel overhead, and an eerie wind blows through.

In the center of the valley is a huge dragon skeleton, mostly intact. Its rib cage and spine tower overhead, and the skull is larger than a man. Dranko immediately climbs on it. On the other side of the skeleton from where the party emerged, built into the rock face on the other side of the valley, is a very large pair of iron doors. Between those doors and the skeleton is a pile of skulls (some hopper skulls, and some... larger), surrounded on three sides by wooden stakes with runes carved in them.



The Shocking Truth About Lizards

Run #99 – Thursday, September 7, 2000

The party do some brief investigation of the skull pile and stakes; Aravis determines that there is some minor warding magic on it, though when Kay flies down into the warded area from above, nothing happens.

Right now, my friends and I (Kay says hello) are in some tunnels. The tunnels used to be home to a kingdom of dwarves. The dwarves had to flee from a monster who had invaded their home. We need to get through the tunnels to get to the other side of the mountains, but I hope that we can get rid of the evil which lives here and give the dwarves back their home.

The dwarves in this place are slaves, which is just terrible! They are very sad, and have no hope. We tried to free one of them, and he actually asked to be returned to slavery because if he were missed the slavers would go back to his village and take his family. I really hate slavers.

Apparently the halflings tried to free the dwarves hundreds of years ago, but they could not hold against the slavers and the big 'uns trying to take their land. When we are done here, we intend to free the dwarves. It's the right thing to do.

But I was talking about the dwarven tunnels. We are trying to find a way through to get to a jungle on the other side. In the jungle we hope to find a magical item called the Crosser's Maze. We don't know where it is, or even what it is. But our bosses need it, so here we are.

Aravis: Sigh... we were so naive...

The party decide to camp back in the tunnel out of which they emerged into the valley. Their camp includes a *Leomund's secure shelter*, and standard watches are set out at the mouth of the tunnel. During her watch, Kay sees the large iron door on the other side of the cavern open up. An ogre comes shambling out carrying a bag of skulls, which he rolls onto the pile while chanting something she can't quite make out from so far away. She sends Makel inside to wake the others, but by the time they emerge (quietly) outside, the ogre has finished his ritual and has returned through the iron door.

Monday, March 1

The next day, the party decide to continue the journey in the only likely direction – through the iron door. It is barred from the other side, but Aravis solves that with a *knock* spell, and in they go. After resetting the bar, they head down into the darkness, with Dranko moving ahead at point, beyond the range of the party's *continual flame* torches...

As the Company proceed down the tunnel (which is straight and wide, built for ogres rather than dwarves) they start hearing a distant sound of metallic tapping, as if many miners are at work. A couple of minutes later, Dranko approaches a T-intersection. While he is still about fifteen feet from it, he hears the sound of ogrish screams coming from the right-hand branch of the T, and intermingled with the screams are loud zapping noises as if bolts of electricity are being discharged.

A few seconds later, eight ogres come tearing out from the darkness on one side of the tunnel, and on into the darkness on the other side, shouting wildly. The last ogre is caught from behind by a tremendous arc of electricity and drops to the ground in a burning heap! By this time the rest of the party are almost at the intersection. They cautiously turn the corner to see what was chasing the ogres, and a bevy of dog-sized lizards comes swarming out of the darkness. Aravis launches a *fireball* that takes instant care of the lizards in front, but many more behind continue to charge forward.

Kay and Grey Wolf step forward to meet the charge, when the lizards all stop for a moment. An electrical discharge erupts from a lizard somewhere in back, and it quickly arcs from lizard to lizard, until a thick strand of blue energy is launched out of the body of the foremost lizard. The bolt strikes Kay in the chest, knocking her backwards and doing tremendous damage.

I seldom use a creature from the *Monster Manual* without altering it slightly. For the shocker lizards, I toned down their "big area zap," making it a single-target zap instead. I don't think I made any other changes.

Grey Wolf then toasts most of the remaining lizards with another *fireball* while Dranko rushes forward to heal Kay. At this point Makel and Aravis see that two ogres have come back to investigate; in fact, they are rushing towards Aravis! Makel intercepts one of them, executing a bull rush and actually managing to deflect the heavier ogre's course away from Aravis.

Morningstar then steps up and delivers a *searing darkness* spell, heavily wounding the second ogre. The rest of the party join the fray, and soon the two ogres, along with a couple of surviving lightning lizards, are dispatched. Dranko announces that fried lizard is actually quite tasty, as the party drag the dead ogres into a side corridor.

The party then head carefully down the tunnel from which the ogres had come. At the end of the corridor they find another cross corridor and a large room directly ahead. To the left, the cross corridor appears larger and better hewn while to the right the corridor is smaller and not as well cut. Quietly investigating the large room, Dranko discovers about a dozen or so ogres hacking away at the rock at the far end with mining picks. They're not mining, but simply expanding the size of an otherwise empty and featureless room.

Then the party hear a group of ogres coming from the left corridor, and deciding that discretion (in this case) is the better part of valor, they slip back to the corridor where they had found the lizards. Unfortunately, Ernie's plate mail makes it nearly impossible for him to move quietly. A troop of a dozen well-armed ogres marches across the corridor, but the last in the line stops, hearing a strange and suspicious clanking sound from around the corner. It starts moving toward the party to investigate...



Ogres, Ogres Everywhere

Run #100 – Friday, September 29, 2000

Grey Wolf then feels a sharp pain in his guts, and Kibi appears – directly on top of the ogre! He's riding piggyback on the ogre warrior, and it's an even bet as to which of them is more surprised. The ogre flails about, dislodges Kibi, and begins to cry "Gish! Gish!" (in Ogrish: "Dwarf! Dwarf!"). The party decide that this would be a good time to rush out and attack. The approaching ogre lets out a further shout of alarm, and the fight is joined.

The first thing Morningstar does is cast a dog-leg-shaped *wall of stone*, sealing off the room full of ogre miners and this latest ogre's military friends. Immediately the party hear the angry shouts of the trapped miners, and the sound of picks being hammered against Morningstar's wall. But while those ogres are sealed in, the other ogres in the troop can be heard running away, and the party soon realize that they are probably just finding another approach to their current location.

After making short work of the lone ogre (who puts up quite a fight, wielding a greataxe in one hand and a large battleaxe in the other), the party decide that discretion really is the better part of valor in this case. They take off blindly down one of the corridor branches (armor clanking loudly) before those other eleven ogres show up.

The chase is on, and oh, what a chase it is. The party run swiftly through what seems like a maze of straight tunnels meeting at right angles. Behind them echo the angry shouts of ogres. Every time it seems like they've lost the pursuit, only a few more moments pass before the echoes are upon them again, and they are forced to keep running. Makel does notice at one point, as the sounds of ogres are close behind, that there's a sheet of skin-paper tacked to the stone wall at one of the junctions. He grabs it as he runs by and stuffs it into his pack.

Hatching Dragon: I'm almost afraid to ask what skin-paper is.

arcady: Technically just 'vellum.' Which is a very common material to make paper out of. Though usually not made from sentient beings.

kidcthulhu: Unless you count sheep as sentient beings. I, for one, think those little buggers are up to something.

PlaneSailing: Kidcthulhu, you've been reading too many Gary Larson cartoons!

Eventually, the party begin to hear the sounds of ogres coming from many different directions through the tunnels; the monsters have split up, and are moving in on them from multiple directions! Realizing that a fight is inevitable, they stop at a tactically defensible spot and prepare. Dranko uses a *stone shape* to create a chest-high (to a human) wall across one approach, to slow down encroaching ogres without completely cutting off an avenue of retreat. And then the ogres arrive, and launch a fierce attack.

The fight that ensues is an ugly one, and not just because the ogres are ugly, though they are. Most of them are armed with greatclubs, and two Ogre Elite Double-Axe-Wielding Bad-Asses™ show up from the direction of the low wall. Blood of several races is spilt, and *fireballs* and *lightning bolts* fly from the fingers of Grey Wolf and Aravis. One ogre runs off during the battle, and One Certain Step gives chase.

Another ogre decides that the best way to deal with a pesky wizard is with a good old-fashioned ogre-style grapple; he charges Aravis (shrugging off attacks of opportunity), picks him up, and slams him head first into the stone wall. Lights explode behind Aravis's eyes, and he slumps to the ground stunned, but Morningstar fires off a *searing darkness* and finishes off that ogre before it can do the same to the wizard.

The fight rages on for a few more rounds, but the party gain the upper hand, and eventually every last ogre is dispatched. Step comes back, but grimly reports that the fleeing ogre outran him and escaped. It seems inevitable that soon all of ogredom will know about the intruders...



Prisoners!

Run #101 – Tuesday, October 24, 2000

Surrounded by ogre bodies, the Company have a fast and heated discussion about what to do next. The priests and wizards are down on spells, although no one is badly injured. Although a quick vote is almost 50/50, it is decided to press ahead before word gets out to all the ogres. At this point Grey Wolf's stomach clenches, and Kibi once again disappears.

Using the vellum map that had been grabbed, the group manage to negotiate their way through the maze of tunnels, avoiding both ogre searching parties and hunting shocker lizards. It appears that the ogres are deliberately mining the area in a search for something. Finally going off the area shown on the map, the group reach a chasm in the earth. On the other side, unguarded, is a large raised wooden drawbridge and an enormous wheel to crank it; behind this is an ogre-sized door, the second the group have seen since they entered the tunnels.

The tunnels are full of ogres, and creatures we call Low Slung Lightning Lizards. There was also a creature that turned some of us to stone, but we got better.

The ogres aren't very happy to see us and they chased us for a long time. We finally had to stop and confront them. It was a very hard fight. Aravis got picked up by an ogre & made into a mage sandwich. (You haven't met Aravis. He's very nice. His parents all got killed by bugbears, and sometimes he's very sad. He has a nice grey cat named Pewter. I'll introduce him when we come back.)

Luckily for Aravis, Dranko (you remember Dranko. He's the rude one, but his heart's in the right place. He and Morningstar are going to get married, although they don't know it yet. Dranko almost married Kay, but they didn't really love each other, so they didn't) was sharing his wounds, so Aravis didn't die.

I faced some of the ogres, and they didn't hurt me much. Kibi came back, and that was good, although it made Grey Wolf's tummy hurt. Kibi made a big Lightning Bolt, which hurt a lot of ogres. I don't know how long he will stay, but it's good he's here now.

Flicker used his new giant killing sword while he was Blinking (moving in and out, that is, not moving his eyelids). He slew an ogre with one blow. One for the halflings!

And then Aravis got used as a battering ram. It hurt him (& Dranko) very much. If he hadn't been sharing Dranko's life force, he would have died. He'll certainly have a sore neck for days.

While Flicker and Dranko try in vain to muster the strength to lower the bridge, the rest of the group decide that they don't have enough resources to penetrate the ogre stronghold. No one is even sure that the other side of the mountains can be reached through this path, and it worries a number of people that they had expected to be using dwarvish tunnels, not ogrish-carved ones.

Giving up on the drawbridge, Dranko realizes that the answer to their problem is literally at their feet, and lowers a rope into the chasm. The crack in the earth doesn't go down very far, maybe thirty feet, but it does extend out of direct line of sight from the ogre entrance. One by one, the group lower themselves down the rope and set up a cold, nervous camp at the far end of the chasm, a hundred feet from the drawbridge. One person is assigned to sit and watch the door at all times.

Soon after the group camp, the doors swing open and dozens of ogres march out across the lowered drawbridge, armed for war.

Two ogres are left to guard the entranceway. The party, listening carefully from below, overhear the guards discussing whether there really is an army of Gish (dwarves) attacking the stronghold. The party snicker, and sleep fitfully, ever conscious that caves do strange things to sound.



Tuesday, March 2

In the "morning" (who can tell, underground?) the guard has changed, and the group have prepared a plan. Flicker is loaded down with every single protective item he can use, and is layered with spells to keep him silent, invisible and combat-ready. Then, with his *short sword of giant slaying* ("Hey, I got an ogre-slaying knife! It's +6 against ogres!" "You're not there!") and his *ring of blinking* allowing him sneak attack damage on every strike, Flicker climbs up – alone – to kill the ogres.

Mentally linked to Flicker and Dranko, Morningstar recounts Flicker's progress as he clammers up and takes the first ogre by surprise. Taking it down almost immediately after two solid hits, Flicker turns to the second ogre, who is prevented from summoning help by the *silence* spell Flicker carries. The fight is a bit longer and Flicker is hurt, but he dispatches this ogre as well, and the group climb to the entrance as the ogres are rolled into the chasm and hidden. While Flicker is healed and congratulated, Kay uses her Woodcutter sword to partially saw through the supports on the drawbridge; the next group of ogres to come that way will get a very rude surprise.

Opening the big doors reveals a huge cavern, layered with stalagmites and stalactites. Dranko is turned invisible by Grey Wolf and scouts ahead with Flicker, hugging one wall. Oddly enough, there are no guards, although occasional faint sounds are heard from somewhere up above them. No trap can be detected, though, so the rogues return and the party inch forward.

More than a hundred feet into the cavern, the group discover why ogre guards aren't needed; a stalagmite in the middle of the room suddenly comes alive, whipping a tentacle out and strength draining Kay down to a fraction of her normal strength! The group react quickly, hanging back and using missile fire, but quickly learn why this tactic doesn't work on a roper... Gooey tentacles shoot over sixty feet into the main body of the group, draining strength from more party members.

Even worse, the sound near the top of the cavern becomes louder, and camouflaged boulders are rolled away from balconies, revealing several dozen ogres with missile weapons. By the end of the second round, with more ogres pouring into the far end of the cavern, Kay and Aravis completely immobilized by strength loss, and another party member at a 4 strength, the group are forced to heed the unintelligible commands of the ogre chieftain and surrender.

Dranko is the only one not yet captured. Still invisible, he climbs the wall to get out of the way of marching ogres, and is able to overhear the brief questioning that occurs when the ogre chieftain finds a tribe member who speaks Kivian Common. The ogre asks about Kibi and if an army of invading Gish is behind the group; the party refuse to answer.

The shaman casts *detect magic* on the captured group, and his eyes nearly bug out of his head. He orders that the group be stripped of all belongings under his observation, and takes every magic item with him as he leaves. Everything except for Morningstar's *ring of free action* (which she manages to pawn off to an invisible Dranko), including the *bag of holding*, is taken away. As the prisoners are dragged away as well, Dranko chooses to eventually follow the shaman (and the magic items)

More ogres came, but we saw them soon enough to Fireball them.

Makel's wand actually did something useful, and made a green ball of fire. The ogres went after Kibi, but Morningstar Protective Slept him so the ogres couldn't kill him. They sure do hate dwarves. The last ogre tried to flee, but we cut him down.

Flicker disappeared after the ogres. Sometimes he doesn't have the common sense Yondalla gave a mule. He wasn't hurt, and he didn't get waylaid. He spotted some LSL lizards, so we piled up the ogre bodies for the lizards to eat and slow them down.

Dinkeldog: I like the nonchalant, "The last ogre tried to flee, but we cut him down."

"Hey Ma! We just cut down a fleeing ogre!" "That's nice, dear. Just don't track blood into the house."

KidCthulhu: Yeah, Ernie kind of found it tough to describe things to his mom. He wanted to tell her about his life, but yet not shock her so much that she ordered him to come home this instant.

instead of the prisoners, since he is still mentally linked to Morningstar. She gives him a description of their path as the several hundred ogres slowly leave the central cavern and roll back the ambush boulders, eventually leaving him in the dark... completely alone.

RangerWickett: Dude, you guys were zeroed!

In my game, the players have a bitter resentment of rule 0. I mentioned it once, and now whenever something doesn't fit their preconceived idea of what the encounter should be like, they joke that I just used rule 0 to change things on them mid-game. Or if they want to try something cool, and I say it's not possible (like the hydromancer using his control water spell to make elementals), they say I'm "zeroing" them.

On the downside, they make this joke a lot when things look grim for their characters (they don't mind, but they poke fun at me when I try to be vicious). On the upside, the language of the game has cleaned up considerably, so if someone comes by while we're playing, they'll hear "Zero you, buddy!" instead of whatever insult the fighter would've said. Did I mention my group is wacky?

But dang, great job for Flicker! You should've just sent him in alone. He could've taken out all the ogres. Y'know, cast an illusion on him to make him look like a dwarf, and the ogres would all be panicking that a dwarf made it into their fort and has been slaying them all. When it's really just a hobbit named Sa... err, a halfling named Flicker.

So, Sagiro, were you trying to get some magic out of the PCs' hands?

Sagiro: I didn't really have an agenda going into this series of adventures. What I *did* know is that it would be very important for the party not to: (1) get into a fight wherein they demonstrated that they were a major threat; and then (2) allow one of the ogres to run off and warn the others that some bad-ass adventurers were causing trouble and slaying ogres left and right.

But that's what happened. If the party had made preventing #2 a priority, things would have gone much differently. But with time to plan an ambush, the ogres really had the upper hand in a big way.

I thought there'd be a pretty good chance things would turn out the way they did. I also thought the party might use sneaking guerrilla tactics to make it through without being taken prisoner, though that would have required a lot of planning and skill, along with some luck.



The Great Escape (Again)

Run #102 – Sunday, October 29, 2000

Dranko, being the only party member still free, decides to follow the ogres who went off roughly in the same direction as the shaman and the chieftain. He still has an *invisibility* spell active, and has all of his magic items – including a *potion of glibness* (originally given to him by Abernathy as a farewell present), his *boots of true stealth* (+10 bonus to Move Silently rolls, leaves no tracks), and his *robe of blending* (+15 on Hide checks). Following closer to the ogrish guards than he probably should, he shadows them into a tiny guard room, and then (tumbling out through the other door with barely an inch to spare) into the interior of the complex. He then explores the complex as best he can, even though he ends up clambering up walls to avoid ogres and scuttling from shadow to shadow in an effort to remain unnoticed. He finds barracks upon barracks of bedrolls, massive kitchens, huge halls, an armory... but lots of locked doors, and no big heaping pile of magic items.

Getting taken prisoner is really a terrible thing. We were trying to sneak into the ogre caverns and they had a very scary monster guarding the entrance. It looked like a stalagmite, which is a big stony, pointy thing that sits on the floor of the cave, but it had tentacles and a mouth full of teeth. The tentacles hit Aravis, Kay and Makel and made them feel very weak. Then, when we were weakened a whole bunch of ogres came pouring out.

I wanted to fight, but I couldn't stand against all of them, and they would have killed my friends. Big bullies. I hate being taken prisoner.

Unknown to Dranko, Pewter (Aravis's feline familiar) is also still free, and is exploring the complex and reporting everything back to Aravis. Aravis instructs him to try and find Dranko, but Pewter has little luck for quite some time. Finally they meet each other, and Dranko sticks Pewter into a sack at his belt. After Dranko is unable to understand Pewter's attempt to communicate Aravis's instructions ("Damn it, cat! Learn how to draw!"), Aravis and Pewter amuse themselves by insulting Dranko back and forth across their mental link.

Meanwhile, all the prisoners have been marched (or carried, in the case of those too strength-drained to walk) along the banks of an underground river to a row of damp prison cells. Locked in individual cells in complete darkness, they are left with only their clothing. Even holy symbols are taken from them. One by one, they are dragged from their cells and questioned by ogres. The ogre that speaks Kivian Common is there as a translator, but since the ogres have removed the group's magical translation earcuffs, no one except Aravis (who learned the language the hard way) and One Certain Step can understand him. This frustrates the ogres no end, who are deeply interested as to where the dwarf and half-orc have gone to.

RangerWickett: What did the ogres interrogate the PCs about? Anything aside from what they were doing down there?

Sagiro: The ogres' questions were along two primary lines: What are you doing down here, and WHERE IS THE DWARF??!! For some reason they're especially paranoid about a dwarven invasion, and seemingly Kibi's appearance has already started a wave of rumors throughout the ogrish community.

The group give no satisfactory answers, and are tossed back in their pitch black cells, as the shaman and chieftain return to the chieftain's rooms. In the darkness, Morningstar lapses into a trance, and prays to be allowed to make a holy symbol from the

cloth of her robe (her black Ellish holy robe has numerous inverted triangle designs, which is the holy icon of Ell). While in this trance she has a sudden sharp vision: her black triangular holy symbol, but right side up rather than inverted. Along with the image comes a voice: You must concentrate on this, if you are to have any hope of escape.

When Morningstar comes to, one of the cloth triangles near the hem of her robe has fallen out. It is filled with the power of Ell, and Morningstar knows it will serve as a holy symbol.

Hungry and irritable, Dranko follows a food-laden guard into a series of rooms that (at last) is the chieftain's. On a table is a massive pile of items (*Wow! That bag of holding holds a lot!* he thinks), and the chieftain and his shaman are experimenting with item after item. The shaman has a full head of long, blond, flowing hair, no doubt from using Aravis's slightly flawed *wand of magic missiles*. The chieftain is wearing Ernie's *gauntlets of ogre power*, along with a few other of the party's items. Dranko slowly slinks behind a statue in the corner of the room, and settles in to wait.

Doc_souark: How is the wand flawed? I must have missed that one.

Sagiro: Aravis crafted it in a foreign city, using someone else's lab and ingredients. Under these non-optimal conditions, *something* went awry with its construction. It fires *magic missiles* just fine, but it also changes the hairstyle and color of either Aravis or the user of the wand, whenever it's fired. It's not even consistent in that regard. The ogre clearly caused his own hair to change color/style. But in another game, Grey Wolf used the wand – and Aravis's hair changed color. Such are the unpredictable ways of magic.

Piratecat: Not only does Aravis's hair change, but so does Pewter's, his familiar. Now *that's cool*.

Hatching Dragon: Well it's pretty obvious you haven't consulted Pewter about the 'coolness' of this side-effect.

coyote6: That could be useful – "They're looking for a blond? *Magic missile* an apple – now I'm not blond!"

kidcthulhu: The difficulty with using the MM wand as a disguise generator is that few of its results have been as useful as blond. They tend to run more to pink, purple, pink-purple stripes, completely bald (and Pewter loved that one!), that kind of thing.

Plus, (teaser!) Aravis isn't really subtle anymore, no matter what the wand does...

Hatching Dragon: Actually I think you can stick that case of blond in with the 'not so useful's with the rest. How good do you think an ogre looks in blond? I'd think about as good as a cat would without hair.



As one of the few people not strength-drained, Grey Wolf is dragged from his cell, stripped of everything but his pants, and marched through torch-lit corridors to an arena. He isn't surprised to find himself surrounded by howling ogres. *I knew we were all going to die*, he thinks to himself. *Looks like I'm first*. In front of him is a large ogrish champion, clearly looking forward to a little elf-beating as public entertainment.

While he doesn't know the language, Grey Wolf understands what is expected of him, and steps forward with style. Grinning through snagged teeth, the ogre champion steps up as well, and Grey Wolf gets an excellent look as the ogre pulls back his massive fist. Around them, the ogres begin to hoot and cheer in thunderous voices, and the ogre swings at Grey Wolf...

As the ogre connects, Grey Wolf is knocked back across the rough fighting ring, and the ogres cheer for their champion. It's nowhere near the simple fight they expect, though; even without knowing unarmed fighting, Grey Wolf loses his temper and launches himself at the ogre. He braves AoO's time and time again, landing punch after punch while being solidly beaten by the ogre's rock-hard fists. Within less than a minute of dirty tricks and brutal punches, Grey Wolf is staggering... but so is the ogre, and the audience has gone from cheering their champion to cheering the half-elf who is putting up such a good fight.

Finally, Grey Wolf moves in for the kill, but is clubbed down into unconsciousness by his badly hurt opponent. Instead of dragging him back to his cell, they carry his limp body somewhat respectfully back, and dump him into the darkness where he slowly regains consciousness.

Meanwhile, Dranko has spent hours crouching behind the statue, watching the ogre chieftain and the shaman try magic item after magic item. At long last, the two depart (to go to the Grey Wolf gladiator exhibition), leaving only a huge elite guard ogre in the room. The elite guard's curiosity slowly builds... and he begins to experiment with several of the multiple magical devices laid out across the table. Dranko uses the opportunity to *summon* several celestial badgers on the opposite side of the ogre.

Pewter: Boss, he's going to attack the ogre! We're gonna get killed!

Aravis: What an idiot. I can *dimension door* out of my cell to you, Pewter, whenever you need me. If Dranko starts bleeding a lot, let me know. Sigh...

As the ogre tries removing the ring he had just slipped on, thinking it will make the badgers go away, Dranko vaults out and sneak attacks the guard. The ogre makes the bad mistake of turning to fight Dranko instead of killing off the one remaining plucky badger; with his opponent flanked, every attack is a sneak attack, and Dranko connects far more often than he deserves to.

Within two rounds, the ogre topples like a poleaxed steer, and Dranko starts congratulating himself while Pewter looks on in disbelief. Before Dranko can do more than consider stealing all the magic items and fleeing, the weakened Aravis *dimension doors* in, and Dranko wipes the drool off his chin and tries to look innocent.

PlaneSailing: I think I detect a minor slip-up... Celestial badgers are Tiny animals, with 0 ft reach – they don't threaten an area, thus they can't flank and Dranko shouldn't have got his sneak attacks against the ogre guard! Of course, I could be barking mad here and I don't have the PHB to hand to check it up...

smetzger: You are correct; they have a reach of 0 feet. That just means they have to be in your square to threaten you.

PlaneSailing: Ah, I suppose that might cover it. (Although, do they flank in that case? DM's call, I guess!)

Sagiro: I couldn't find anything to indicate that they don't create a flanking situation, once they've closed into the square of the defender. I made the call on the fly.

They gather up as many items as they can quickly stuff into the *bag of holding*, leaving behind many non-magical luxuries in favor of the more valuable items. (“Hey, look! I haven’t seen this for years. And Aravis, check it out! Ernie’s still carrying around a couple of those gartine planks!”) Dranko snags Aravis’s unused *earcuff of translation*, putting it on and activating it to let him speak Ogrish. As soon as they are both ready, Aravis *polymorphs* himself into an ogre (boosting his drained strength), Dranko uses his last pinch of *dust of illusion*, and then downs his *potion of glibness* that Abernathy had made for him.

Striding boldly out of the room disguised as the chieftain and a guard, Dranko and Aravis bumble and bluff their way past the numerous guard posts en route to the prison cells. On the way, the magically persuasive half-orc easily convinces everyone that the Gish (dwarven) invasion has started, and that the shaman is a traitor. He informs the troops that they should attack the shaman and the other “doppelganger” chieftain on sight, no matter what excuses they make (+30 to Bluff checks! “Hey, your boot’s untied. Made you look!”). With an ogre guide leading them, Dranko, Aravis and Pewter the cat make their way through the complex, finally feeling like the worst is behind them. Hah.

Meanwhile, upon Aravis’s departure, Morningstar and Kay orchestrate their escape. With *stone shapes* and *summoned earth elementals*, they manage to release about half of the Company. When Dranko and Aravis arrive, the rest are freed, while Dranko dispatches the guards off to go fight the imaginary dwarfish invasion. Their reluctant guide leads all the Company on a “prisoner exchange” away from the cells, through numerous passages (including the arena where the still groggy Grey Wolf fought), to a massive door. There the guide leaves his “chieftain” to his own devices, and the party open the massive locked and trapped door to wander deeper into the mountain.



Hours of cave-walking later, the group reach some sort of “no-man’s land,” a series of huge portcullises that can only be opened if ogres on both sides of the gates turn the cranks at the same time. Clever *polymorphing* on Aravis’s part makes this possible, and the group slip through from the territory of one ogre tribe... to the territory of another. Deciding to try a different tactic this time, they knock on the door, and demand to the surprised ogre who answers it that they must immediately be brought to the chieftain. Much confusion and delay later, the Company are brought before a shaman/advisor to the new ogre chieftain.

“Here’s the deal,” growls Dranko, pushing his luck. “I’m not the chieftain, and these aren’t my prisoners that I’m selling to you. We just killed more than two dozen ogres across the way. We did it quickly, and very efficiently, and we could do the same here. But we’d prefer not to. We want passage through your mountain; in exchange we give you details on your enemies’ tactics, strength and defenses. And I recommend...” – as Aravis *polymorphs* through a series of threatening shapes – “...that you make the right decision.”

The shaman casts *detect lies*, and discovers that the Company are not in fact bluffing; he so doesn’t believe it that he tests the spell to make sure that it is accurate. He invites the Company to rest and dine. The group take him up on the offer, checking for poison, and when the ogre returns to say that they need to verify that the group are telling the truth, everyone agrees that resting is a fine idea. Many people are still weak or low on spells, and the benefit from recharging is considered a worthy trade-off for the unlikely chance of ambush.

Given both food and straw pallets to sleep on, the group are locked in a defensible pantry, and settle down for the night – still amazed that they pulled it off, and that they managed to recover many of their magical items in the process.

The ogres threw us in some dark, smelly cells. They did bring us food, but it was terrible! What the ogres didn't know was that Dranko and Pewter were free. Dranko was invisible, and Pewter is just naturally sneaky.

Dranko found our stuff, and managed to make himself look like the ogre chief. He sent all the ogres off to fight an imaginary dwarven army. He found us, and we got out by Morningstar summoning some earth creatures to dig us out. We ran and ran and finally came to a set of gates which marked the line between the two ogre kingdoms.

Ancalagon: SWEET!!! Escapes are always fun, but that one went amazingly smoothly!

If I were the ogres (the new tribe), I would SO let them pass through. Ogres are a bit slow, but they aren't that stupid... and the info they are getting could be very valuable to boot.

Aethan: That's good stuff. I love bluffing and tricking, rather than fighting. Good going, guys! Yay, Dranko!

Sagiro: Yeah, Dranko had been carrying that *potion of glibness* around for a long time, and picked a great place to use it.

DRANKO: (*paraphrased*) "You, guards, get off your butts! The Gish are invading! Wait, except for you. We need an escort to the prison, and then to the border with the other ogre tribe. We're selling the prisoners now so that they don't escape during the fighting."

DM: (*thinking*: that's not really a sensible plan, given the circumstances. And why would he need another escort, when he already has Aravis as an ogrish guard? But then, he does look like the chieftain...) "Um, OK, make me a Bluff check."

DRANKO: (*rolls*) "48."

DM: (*thinking*: Holy %\$#@!) (as ogre) "Yes, sir! Whatever you say. Let's go!"

PIRATECAT: (big grin)

dayknight: Any idea on how soon the characters will get back to the original continent? I miss the tight focus the story had back then (not that I dislike it now). It seems like it has been forever since their path was on that of the prophecies. Please bring them back home soon!

P.S.: This is not meant as criticism. I love the story!

Sagiro: Interesting observation. I actually felt like the story was *more* focused during this stretch. They had one specific long-term objective (find the Crosser's Maze and bring it back to Charagan), and all of their efforts were directed towards that goal.

Back in Charagan, they had much less of a clear idea what they were working towards. They'd chase down Eyes of Moirel, but why? They knew that "P" was a big enemy, but who is he and what does he want? And what are the red-armored people doing?

Here in Kivia, it's just "What and where is the Crosser's Maze?" and "How do we get it?" I'll bet the answers surprise you!

Rincewind: Grey Wolf is the Crosser's Maze. Am I right?

Evil Josef: Grey Wolf must not be a very good Crosser's Maze if he can't even keep Kibi from accidentally switching planes. :-)

Hatching Dragon: Bah, the Crosser's Maze would stop anything up to and including a god from moving across the dimensional barriers. Poor old Kibi answers to a higher power, namely the **Dungeon Master**! These creatures of unspeakable power wield an object that makes Greater Artifacts pale by comparison; yes, I'm speaking of the *plot device*. This item not only warps, but can actually create and destroy entire realities with but a thought!

So, while Grey Wolf may (or may not) be the Crosser's Maze, it's pointless to use Kibi's 'travels' as any sort of basis for your theories.

Sagiro: I'll be the first to admit that Kibi's off-again, on-again *summoning* is a plot device. It makes it easy to incorporate a character who's only able to play a few times a year, due to the player living in another state.

But, it was a plot device created out of plot- and character-related bits that were already in place. That is, I thought to myself, "How can I arrange for Kibi to only be around occasionally, and have him always show up near the party, using plot elements I've already established?"

Grey Wolf's "gut-churners" made for a tailor-made reason, though I'm not (yet) going to tell you why. But I didn't have to alter anything else, or invent any secondary plot devices, in order to incorporate the whole thing with Kibi. (Later, though, Kibi's unique connection to Grey Wolf ends up helping the party out of something that they *really* wanted to get out of...)

As for Grey Wolf himself being the Crosser's Maze – well, that's a possibility. It's something the party eventually guessed might be the case. But I won't confirm or deny that guess quite yet. You'll find out soon enough!

Rincewind: Hmm... Sagiro is implying that Grey Wolf is in fact responsible for Kibi's appearances. That would explain why someone wanted him to poison himself earlier – he is the key to fully opening the dimensional gate.

The Crosser's Maze is definitely *someone* though. They have to give it back to the temple of the God of Abominations afterwards, and Sagiro wouldn't miss a chance like that. Maybe Pewter is the Crosser's Maze? That explains why people tried to steal him earlier.

RangerWickett: Sagiro is the Crosser's Maze! Yeah, that's right, Mr. Ambiguous Danger Death. I don't know why, but my wacky-sense tells me that it's him.

Schmoe: I know, I know! The Crosser's Maze is a religious trinket that Grey Wolf accidentally swallowed many years ago in that foreign market with the bad falafels. Ever since, he's had those "gut churners."

Maybe when he gets the *\$#& kicked out of him he'll get the Maze and use it to escape!



*The Quest for the Crosser's Maze***The Great One is Free**

Run #103 – Sunday, November 12, 2000

The party stew for a while in the locked and guarded pantry. They are brought food and water, but are not allowed to leave. They discuss various tactical options for taking on this new ogre tribe (the Sumik), should it come down to a rumble. Time passes. They cast *identify* on the staff they stole from **Galk** (the chieftain of the Kurth ogre tribe); it is a *staff of earth and stone*, that can cast both *move earth* and *passwall*. Useful!



Wednesday, March 3

It is almost two days later when the party are visited by a new ogre shaman named **Tran**, accompanied by another shaman who immediately initiates his truth detection ritual. Tran speaks: “We’ve spent some time gathering reports from the Kurth, learning the truth about your story. You stirred up quite the hopper’s nest over there. And it appears your claims of… aggression… were not exaggerated.

“Our tribal council has met at length to discuss what to do with you. The Kurth are willing to pay a great deal for your return; they blame you for the death of Galk’s shaman, and badly want revenge. Furthermore, they have threatened us with violence if we allow you to escape. We are forced to weigh the damage you could do to us in a fight, against the consequences of letting you go. And we have spoken to Galk’s people; you had already been defeated and locked in prison. You only escaped because they were lazy. We fight better than the Kurth. We could defeat you with sheer numbers, and your vast magical wealth could make it worth the losses we’d suffer.”

The members of the Company exchange worried glances, not much caring for this line of reasoning. But Tran lets out a long breath, and continues: “We’ve decided to offer you a deal. If you can fulfill your part, we will show you the way out of the mountains, to the east. According to the Kurth, you have powerful magics at your disposal. We have seen with our own eyes that you can change shape. Do you have magic that can turn living creatures to flesh who have been turned to stone?”

The party admit that yes, they can do that.

“Long ago, the wisest of our shamans was turned to stone by one of the foul creatures that moved in during the dwarvish occupation. Even the most powerful of us have been unable to restore him. Our deal is this: you give us five handfuls of gems as you have already pledged, and restore our Great One to living flesh, and we will show you the way out of the mountains, and make no hindrance to your departure.”

The party talk among themselves in Charagan Common, weighing the pros and cons of the deal. The money is no issue, but some have reservations about helping the ogres. In the end, though, they decide that continuing on their mission is paramount, and agree to Tran’s terms. Morningstar needs fifteen minutes to prepare a *break enchantment* prayer, but other than that, they’re ready to go.

The party are escorted out of the pantry. They are heavily, heavily guarded as they are marched through more hallways and caves (though these are lit with torches, unlike the halls of the Kurth). At last they are ushered into a large chamber, and two dozen ogre guards array themselves around the walls. The bloody fist, holy symbol of the ogre god, is displayed prominently on the walls, but the room is empty of furniture or other adornment. There are four ogres in the center of the room already, and these reach down and grab four large iron handles bolted into the floor. Straining, they lift a huge stone slab off the floor, revealing a wide staircase leading down into the darkness. Several ogres go down ahead of the party, and even more follow behind.

After about twenty steps, they reach a smaller room, with another door facing them. Here there are tall pedestals shaped like rising fists, capped with bowls of thick red blood. The party are instructed to completely immerse their hands in the blood, if they wish to enter the holy sanctum where the petrified Great One awaits. Nervously they do so, and then they are commanded not to wipe or wash off any of the blood until they have exited the sanctum. The ogres open the second door, revealing a second staircase. The Company descend.

The stairs lead to a roughly circular shrine, some forty feet in diameter. At one end are two more stone fist pedestals, and between them is the stone body of the Great One. He is over ten feet tall, muscular, and has two great bat wings half folded behind him. Skulls of gnomes, lizards and ogres are strewn at his feet. Morningstar has second thoughts.

“Take care,” warns Tran. “Treachery will be met with swift death.” The party have fleeting thoughts of smashing the statue and using the *staff of earth and stone* to escape, but (probably wisely) decide against it.

Morningstar prays to Ell for guidance and protection, and fervently hopes she is doing the right thing. Ell grants her the *break enchantment* miracle, and slowly the Great One comes to life. As Morningstar touches the stone body of the creature, the blood on her right hand starts to move; it feels like it's crawling on her skin. As her restorative magic pours into the creature, the bloodstain shrinks, but leaves behind a disturbing fist-shaped mark on the back of her hand.

The Great One's wings fan out, and its lungs draw their first breath in many years. Its skin is tinged a light blue color, and it regards Morningstar with a keen gaze that hints at intelligence beyond typical ogre-kind. Tran prostrates himself before the creature. "Great One, we have returned you to the flesh from your long sleep! The Sumik have kept you safe, and now you are brought back to life!"

The Great One speaks to Morningstar, in a deep, resonant voice. "I have been as stone, I know. I remember well the basilisk; the last thing I saw before my sight fled. Is it you who have restored me?" Morningstar nods.

It continues: "Then you are the Slayer, and by your hand the circle is complete. I thank you. When the time comes for the Throggun's ascension, you will be summoned, and you will slay again. Return here at once." As the Great One speaks these lines, Morningstar feels an unpleasant tingle on the back of her hand.

"Now," the winged ogre continues, "there is much to set in order. Shaman, what bargain did you make with this person?"

"We promised that she and her kind should go free, beyond the eastern wall."

"Then fulfill your promise. Leave me now, all of you. I must pray."

The Great One turns its winged back on them, and kneels before the pedestals. The party are escorted back up the stairways to the upper chamber, and the great stone slab is replaced.



Without further ceremony, Tran and two dozen additional ogres take the party to the edge of the Sumik territory. That journey takes about two hours, through many dark ogre caverns and tunnels. They pass sparring rooms, sleeping caves, and crude chapels to the hideous ogre god Luthark. One tremendous cavern has a polished floor and a huge stone fist rising from the center, while greenish mold casts an eerie glow all around. The party also pass through a mining operation where dozens of chained and guarded gnomes are hacking away at a stone wall with picks.

Eventually the group hear the sound of a distant falls, and the noise grows louder until after another few minutes they are brought into another huge cavern. A thunderous waterfall crashes down from the darkness near the ceiling and into a pool that fills most of the cavern. A river exits the pool to the southeast.

Tran speaks his final words to the party: "If you follow that river for two sleeps, you will reach the eastern edge of the mountains. If you are sighted again within the boundaries of the Throggun Empire, you will be considered invaders and dealt with as such." And the ogres turn around and go back to their homes.

The river has carved out a wide tunnel for itself, about twelve feet wide, with two-foot-wide banks. The party travel gingerly along one narrow and slippery bank, tied together for safety, with *continual flame* torches providing a small pocket of light in the otherwise utter darkness. There are several near disasters, and in one stretch the Company improvise with ropes and spikes to navigate a short waterfall.



Oh dear. What a busy day. We've just managed to escape from one band of ogres, only to be sitting in the pantry of another band of ogres. No, don't worry, they're not going to eat us. At least I don't think they will. They seem to be slightly more civilized than the last group.

The other ogres had wanted to buy us from the old ogres as slaves. We convinced them that it would be better to let us buy our way out. They have proposed that we restore one of their first warlords who had been turned into stone and pay them some money. I hate to pay these bullies, and I hate even worse to do them any favors, but we don't have a whole lot of choice.

So we're waiting for tomorrow morning when Morningstar can cast the spell to turn the warlord back from stone. We're having a very good talk about our plans. Boy, do we have a lot of things to do. Oh, and I can't forget to add "Help the halflings in Appleseed" to the list. It's kind of a divine command.

It's been very weird. I don't feel any more good than I used to, but I get closer and closer to the goddess. It gets harder and harder to live the right kind of life. The things around me are so complicated and sometimes the line between the good way and the bad way is so very thin. I guess I must be doing all right, as Yondalla has not withdrawn her grace from me. But I sometimes wish I could go home where things are simple and good.

If I go home before this is done, though, there won't be anything good and simple anymore.

Thursday, March 4 – Friday, March 5

After about two days of walking, their bank narrows even more, and then dwindles away to nothingness. The party cross the river and walk for a while along the other bank, but a hundred yards later that bank too disappears. The party halt, wondering what to do. The river rushes fast and sure into the darkness, but the ceiling is too low for *Burning Sail*, their folding boat.

Morningstar casts *Rary's telepathic bond* on Aravis, and then Aravis *polymorphs* himself into an owl and flies down into the tunnel, a few feet above the flowing river. But even this scouting plan is foiled, as the ceiling of the tunnel starts slanting downward until finally it touches the water.

Faced with a tunnel entirely underwater, Aravis takes a deep breath and turns into an otter (planning on turning into a fish if he runs out of air). He swims on through the darkness for another hundred feet, and the river gets faster and faster. Then he sees a spot of brightness up ahead, rushing towards him. He realizes what's happening, but it's too late; the current is inexorable, and Aravis is swept along the last fifty feet of the river...

...and out the side of the mountain, a thousand feet above the ground! He can see a beautiful valley stretching out below him, and the silver strand of the river snaking off into the east. On the eastern horizon is the dark line of the jungle, still several days' journey away. Closer in that direction, he can see a tiny village (at least, it looks tiny from up here) only a half day's walk distant. Then the otter starts to fall...

Kesh: I just had the most hilarious image of an otter flying out the side of a mountain... Great story, Sagiro! Can't wait to see how they deal with the (half-fiend?) ogre later.

coyote6: Half-fiend, or half-dragon? (With the blue skin indicating that electricity effects wouldn't be terribly useful?)

wmuench: Actually, my guess would be half-fiend ogre mage, based upon: (a) blue skin, (b) wings, (c) greater intelligence.

Piratecat: Actually, Sagiro has succeeded in scaring the crap out of me with that creature. It hasn't done anything... in fact, it was quite polite (oh yeah, LE all the way), but it is bad news incarnate. I was moderately in favor of the plan to reanimate it until I got a look at it. Once I did, I realized what a huge mistake we were probably making, but there were no other options at that point that didn't result in us being creamed by ogres. By turning it back to flesh, we have altered the whole balance of power in the area, and the only reason we didn't completely balk is that we were focused on "higher goals" – getting the Crosser's Maze.

And thus, Sagiro gives us a choice where neither path is a good one, and both have consequences, and both lead to plot. He's a bad man.

Tor Bladebearer: Hmm, reading all the tales of what's happened since I left the party, maybe it was a blessing in disguise... you all probably would have had to forcibly restrain me to keep me from trying to take out all the Guild of Chains soldiers. Not to mention wanting to carve my way through the ogres. And mister blue-winged ogre... bad news.

I'm glad to hear that Dranko and Kay didn't actually tie the knot. The worldview damage that poor Tor would take when he found out would probably kill him on the spot...

Fortunately it's a simple matter for Aravis to turn back into a bird before he falls very far. He communicates this new turn of events to Morningstar, who informs the rest of the group about their new predicament. They spend some time formulating a plan to get them all out. That plan is this: Grey Wolf will cast *fly* on Dranko and Makel, who will shoot through the waterfall and join Aravis. Grey Wolf himself will use Dranko's *ring of feather falling*, and tie himself to most of the remaining party members with short (under ten feet) lengths of rope. Dranko, Makel and Aravis will spot the *feather falling* group in case any of the ropes snap.

But the river is narrow enough that someone will still be left out using this scheme. Kay has used up her *fly* spell for the day, but Morningstar has an idea. She will use her *protective sleep* ability on Kay, and the party will just throw Kay's body into the river.

A reminder: *protective sleep* is a granted Ellish ability that lets a cleric put a willing target into fifteen minutes of absolutely protected slumber. The sleeping target cannot take physical or magical damage during this period.

At least they tell Aravis about this last part of the plan before they execute it. Kay is put to sleep, and her body tossed into the river. There are a few tense moments as her body becomes lodged in the waterway, but after a minute it works itself free, and Kay's recumbent form goes rocketing gracefully out into the air... and falls a thousand feet to the rocks below.

Even knowing that Kay is protected from all physical harm, Aravis can't watch. He drags her body to shore, turns her over to drain the water out of her lungs, and watches as she dozes on peacefully. The others soon come rocketing out of the mountain-side, and Grey Wolf's ring immediately kicks in. They fall slowly for a while, and then the duration of the spell runs out, and they get an exciting plunge of a few yards before it kicks in again.

I'm not sure we won't pay for this day. Thinking about it makes my flesh crawl. This is exactly the kind of grey, shifty moral thing that makes me so scared and angry. We released the ogres' warlord and he turned out to be a terrible, scary, bad, evil-looking creature with bat wings. Dranko thought he was a dragon creature. Morningstar thought he was a demon. All I know is that I fear for the dwarves. This creature is probably what drove them out in the first place. And we've released it. I hope the Crosser's Maze is worth it.

Eventually all are safely down on the banks of the river. Dranko and Aravis fly in the direction of the village to scout it out, and are met by two small humanoid creatures coming the other way. They are about four feet tall, simply dressed, and look a little bit like the gnomish slaves the party saw in the ogre kingdom. They approach Dranko and Aravis curiously, and start to speak to them, but neither speaks the language. Dranko casts *comprehend languages*, but this only lets him understand them (and not they him).

Using a combination of sign language and pictures drawn in the dirt, Dranko communicates to the two small people (named **Pan** and **Foona**) that they're friendly, have a group of friends a couple of miles away, and came from somewhere far to the west. Pan and Foona are two members of a peaceful gnome-like race called the Yuja who live by the banks of the river. They are amazed by Dranko and Aravis's use of magic. "It's like the Light!" they exclaim. They invite the party to their village for dinner.

The Yuja village consists of simple wood and thatch huts, and its population isn't more than a couple of hundred. The party are treated with awe and trusting friendship – a welcome change after their recent adventures in the mountains. Their leader is a woman named **Sora** (who is also the village healer), and Morningstar casts *Rary's telepathic bond* on her and some other party members to allow better communication. The party ask if there are any sick Yuja that could use special healing

magic, and Sora takes them to a small hut built on the outskirts of the village. Another Yuja named **Pleah** is there in bed, her breathing shallow and raspy. Above her head have been hung a number of small carved wooden trinkets.

Sora has been tending to her using time-honored herbal remedies, but mostly it just eases the patient's discomfort. Pleah is suffering from the Wasting Sickness, from which the Yuja do not recover. None of the party clerics have *cure disease* ready, but they tell Sora that if Pleah survives the night, they'll be able to help. Sora is extremely grateful.

The Yuja hold an impromptu feast in honor of their strange visitors, and they bring out their most revered possession to show to the Company. "Magic!" they proclaim. It's a torch with *continual flame* cast upon it, similar to the ones used by the Sumik ogre tribe. It must have fallen in the river and washed up on a nearby shore. The Yuja believe it a gift from Sada, the river god. (The party know that the Kivian God of the Sea is named Posada, and figure there's a connection.)

The Yuja ply the party with delicious fried fish and juicy fruits that grow in abundance near their village. They light a huge bonfire, and there is much dancing and singing and game playing. The language barrier is no hindrance, and Ernie teaches some of the Yuja children to play leapfrog. At last, under a cool and star-filled sky, the party fall happily asleep without fear or worry.



"Void in the Glass, I Return to Thee"

Run #104 – Sunday, December 3, 2000

Saturday, March 6

The party wake the next morning under a clear sky, to the sounds of Yuja children running around the village. Some of the children have carved small wooden trinkets and give them shyly to party members. Again using *Rary's telepathic bond* to communicate with Sora, they learn that the patient (Pleah) is still alive, though growing sicker.

They all go to the hut where Pleah convalesces, and see that more wooden trinkets have been hung over her bed, for luck. Dranko casts *cure disease* on Pleah, while Ernie casts *lesser restoration* and some standard *cure* spells for good measure. The raspy breath of the patient becomes deep and steady, and they leave her to sleep. Sora and the other Yuja proclaim it another miracle.

Sora has consulted with the village elders, to gather any knowledge about the jungle that might help the party. They have heard tales of a carnivorous plant creature called a "red vase," which looks like a large red urn turned on its side with something shiny at the bottom. When creatures go in to take the shiny object, the plant turns "upright," and digests the victim.

We're now making our way out of the ogre caverns by a river which has tunneled through the rock. I nearly fell in, but we'd roped ourselves together and Kay caught me. We got past a waterfall and a slippery narrow bank, but now there's no bank.

Oh, boy. I think I want to give up this adventuring thing. Aravis turned into an otter to explore the river, and got shot out the side of a cliff. The drop is apparently over 1,000 feet. Kay just went out the tunnel, protected by the sleep of Ell. Oh sweet Yondalla, I don't want to do this.

We're supposed to tie ourselves to Grey Wolf and then fall out the hole and Feather Fall (a spell which makes you fall slowly) together. I hate heights!

Water and heights. Sweet Yondalla's cinnamon bun, why did I ever leave home?

Aaaaagh! That was the single scariest thing I've ever done. We floated and then we fell and then we floated and then we fell into a pool. It was awful. But we all survived and weren't hurt, so I guess it's all for the best.

I hope I can be a good person; 'cuz if I'm not, Hell is going to be making that fall, again and again...

According to the tales these plants are quite large, capable of devouring a full-grown Yuja.

Grey Wolf spends the day calling a familiar. The rest of the party expect that he'll call a wolf, but instead he chooses a monkey, and at the end of the day he finds himself bonded to a small but long-tailed monkey that he names **Edgar**.

Sunday, March 7

There is some discussion about how best to interpret the directions gleaned from Kinnvhad's letter: "40 miles south of the Whistling Stone, 100 miles east of Posada's Tears." Does that mean one travels 100 miles east and then 40 miles south? Or are those directions by which to triangulate? Most of the party think that the huge waterfall through which they were ejected from the mountains must be Posada's Tears (described by Kinnvhad as a "great cataract"), though Kay and Aravis point out that the letter specifically says that waterfall is in the jungle, not a few days' travel west of it. Regardless, the party set out eastward, generally following the river as it tumbles down the wooded foothills towards the dense jungle beyond.



Monday, March 8 – Tuesday, March 9

The party journey overland towards the jungle.

Wednesday, March 10

Eventually the hills flatten out somewhat, and the party plunge into the jungle (they have stopped following the river, which bends away southward). Progress through the dense foliage is slow going; in some places they can make good time along game trails, but usually they have to hack their way through hanging vines, press through stands of saplings and underbrush, and step over huge, gnarled tree roots.

The jungle is teeming with life. Insects buzz all around them. Dozens of brightly colored butterflies flit about the tree trunks and flowers. Birds fill the air with the sounds of cawing and the fluttering of wings. Small, furry rodents and things like porcupines scurry through the underbrush, while huge tree sloths hang in the boughs above. Occasionally some larger jungle denizen wanders by, but nothing decides to mess with a party of nine humanoids. Each night Aravis puts up a *Leomund's secure shelter*, and the party sleep comfortably inside.

On the first night in the jungle, Morningstar receives a dream visit from Previa, who has both good news and bad news. The good news is that she has researched a prayer (*direct dreaming*) that will allow Ellish Dreamwalkers to appear in *Ava Dormo* anywhere they want, *including* on the other side of Posada's Boundary. This means Morningstar will be able to visit all of her students at once, back home in the dream Charagan. Furthermore, a powerful cleric from Kallor named **Swan** has joined the cause. And Swan has learned a prayer (*dream anchor*) that will allow Dreamwalkers to take other people (who don't have to be Dreamwalkers themselves) into *Ava Dormo*.

The bad news is that the High Priestess of Ell in Kallor finally issued an official decree, that the Illuminated Sisters of Ell are no longer considered a legitimate branch of the Ellish church. While there have not been any hostilities, the Illuminated Sisters have been cut off from any financial support from the mother church, and furthermore, clerics who have declared for the Illuminated Sisters are forbidden from casting spells while on Ellish holy ground. Previa estimates that over a hundred priestesses have now decided to join the Illuminated Sisters, and reports that Amber has already begun expanding her church in Tal Hae.

Sparrowhawk: Ell is a misunderstood goddess whose followers have often been persecuted, right? It seems to me that the Illuminated Sisters have been doing more to gain acceptance for the church than the main church, reaching out to people instead of being secretive and insular. So why has the High Priestess declared them heretical? I'd say she's afraid of them becoming too popular, and hence a threat to her power. I like plotlines like this; I wonder how this will affect things when the company gets back to Charagan.

Piratecat: Not to foreshadow too much, but we recently put together a bunch of clues and have a pretty good idea of the horrible reason why she's acting this way. We don't have proof yet, but we sure are worrying...



Thursday, March 11

The next day, the party hear a number of animals crashing through underbrush towards them from the north. A small stampede of porcupine-like creatures crosses the game trail the party are following, and continues on to the south. They are followed by

Well, now I remember why I love doing this job. We've met the nicest people called the Yuja. They are good, simple people, living in a clean little village. They don't have much, but they are like hafflings in their good hearts. We are staying with them today. They have some sick people here, and I think we can help them. The leaders of these people are the healers. I think that's marvelous!

We spent two days in the village and it was the best time I've had in months.

numerous other animals, and the party can see more of this stampeding for as far as they can see both east and west. Kay casts *speak with animals*, and learns that the animals are fleeing from ants. Ants?

The party decide that the animals know best; they take off as fast as they can in the same direction as the animals. Soon they reach a swift, deep stream, and it looks like the fleeing animals on the other side have lost some of their urgency. The party ford the stream, while the animals on the other side disperse.

Once on the other side, the Company see why all the animals were fleeing. An advancing carpet of red is spreading across the jungle floor, felling saplings and devouring underbrush as it flows. It reaches the stream and stops; the party see that the ants comprising the swarm are each about the size of a human thumb. As the party watch, the ants start to make a bridge of their own bodies to cross the stream, but it looks like it will take them at least an hour. The party use that hour to hustle on to the east, out of the path of the encroaching insects.

At night, Morningstar casts *dream anchor* and takes most of the party with her into *Ava Dormo*. At Morningstar's suggestion they spend time trying to create objects familiar to them, and trying to move by thought in the fashion of Dreamwalkers. Only Ernie has any real success, and the whole thing is mentally tiring for everyone involved.



Friday, March 12

On the third day, the party see that they are passing near a large area of jungle inhabited by 'red vases.' They carefully avoid getting too close to them, and aren't fooled by the glittery silver things at the bottom of the "bowls."

But Dranko gets too close to one, and a number of the hanging vines (which have been omni-present in the jungle) twine

suddenly around his limbs and waist, and hoist him into the air and over the now tilted upward bowl. Aravis lets fly with a *lightning bolt*, aimed at the bowl; part of it is fried, but the vines drop Dranko into the bowl, which then closes over him. Dranko, his voice muffled but understandable, shouts out, "Lightning or fire?" Aravis answers, "Fire," whereupon Dranko casts *protection from elements: fire* on himself. Then Aravis wastes the plant creature with a *fireball*.

Standing in the smoking ruin of the dead 'red vase', Dranko casts *speak with plants*, and issues a stern warning to the other plants in the vicinity: mess with us, and meet the same fiery fate! He receives no answer from the surrounding vegetation, but the party make it through the area with no more attacks by the carnivorous plants...



Saturday, March 13

The next day, the party are continuing to trek through the jungle when they are attacked in an ambush. It seems that the jungle itself is attacking – specifically, two large mounds of rotting underbrush and vegetation rise up and whip cable-like vines at the party. A battle breaks out, and the fighting is fierce. The party learn the hard way that *lightning* only strengthens these plant creatures, and that fire is of limited utility. And while the party seem to be doing well at the start of the fight, more and more of the things rise up out of the underbrush as the rounds tick by. By the time they've killed four of the creatures, six more have appeared, and the monsters are wearing the party down. Aravis has *polymorphed* into one of the plant creatures, and is doing well fighting back, but more than one party member drops unconscious, and things look grim.

That's when a huge human fighter comes charging into the battle, wielding a greataxe. He is soon joined by a half-orc in a chain shirt, wielding a pick in each hand. There is a moment of great tension, as the party think these might be Lapis's friends, come to kick the party when they're down. But the two newcomers attack the plant creatures instead, doing significant damage. Also, a *searing light* spell blasts out of the jungle from a different direction, annihilating one of the remaining foes. (Predictably, two arrows fly from the jungle as well, aimed well at Aravis, who looks just like the plant creatures. He turns back to his human form, shouting angrily.)

With the help from the newcomers, the remaining plant creatures are dispatched. Four more people enter the area: a female elven archer with a longbow made out of bone; a female human priest wearing a holy symbol of Tiria, Goddess of War and Chaos (and whose followers are engaged in endless war against the halflings of Appleseed); a male kobold with a dagger and shortbow; and another elven woman, unarmed save for a dagger at her side. There is an awkward moment as the party realize who she is, and she confirms their suspicions by introducing herself as **Lapis**.

Then we took to the jungle. It was very hard to get around, with huge tree trunks and vines as big as my arm. Once we saw a river of ants swarming along the jungle floor. They were cutting down trees (!) in their path and all the animals were running away. We had to cross the river to get away.

Piratecat: Let me refresh your memory.

Lapis: bitch-sorceress who works for the mysterious and evil "P," assigned to get the Crosser's Maze before we do. Hired the Animators to kill us. Arranged for the Faceless (the Thieves' Guild in Djaw) to kill us when we went looking for the church of Dralla. Got to the church of Dralla before we did, using earth elementals to extort information from Shreen the Fair. Has dogged our footsteps for a year in game-time, and is the inspiration for innumerable pieces of obscene graffiti that Dranko doodles on walls while he's bored.

And now she's helping us? She must not have seen that graffiti.

Sparrowhawk: What kind of plants were those? Tendriculos?

So now we meet Lapis. If she's helping the company now, it proves that thing about nice enemies and mean allies. This works whether she's really an enemy or an ally. Hmm.

Lapis wastes no time getting to the point. "I was hoping you wouldn't force my hand," she says, "but we had little choice. You see, we need you alive, just as you need us. We've been wandering in the jungle for some time looking for the Crosser's Maze, but you actually know where it is. We need you to take us there. And you need us, because you don't know the password needed to actually acquire the Crosser's Maze. Yes, you need a password. That leaves us at something of an impasse."

There follows a very tense day, wherein Lapis wants to be chatty, and is eager to learn the party's motivations. Most of the party, on the other hand, don't want to have anything to do with her, reasoning that anything they say might give away information that Lapis doesn't have. Only Dranko and Aravis seem willing to chat. Lapis promises that tomorrow, she'll swear under truth magic that she does, in fact, have a password that she believes is needed if one is to obtain the Crosser's Maze. (She does, and does seem to be telling the truth.)

Although Lapis doesn't talk in great detail, the party learn the following from talking with her: she finds Shreen the Fair just as repugnant as does the party; she followed the instructions in the book she stole from Shreen, and traveled to the southern country of Ocir. It was there that she learned that the Crosser's Maze was in the jungle, and that there was a passphrase involved.

She claims that there were some political difficulties in obtaining that information, and denies using physical force in getting it. She freely admits hiring both the Animators and the Faceless to kill the party, and is disappointed especially in the Faceless for having failed.



Sunday, March 14 – Tuesday, March 16

For the next few days, the tension remains high. Lapis seems quite amiable, though most of the party still refuse to talk with her. She seems especially intent on talking with Kay. "Have you seen the bones stacked at Verdshane?" she asks. "That is how the Spire has always treated the Elhen Tarathi. First to fight, first to die."

Kay responds with a scathing remark about the elves killed in Ghant, by the blood gargoyle released at the behest of Lapis's employer, "P." Lapis admits remorse over that attack, but stays convinced that her employer is doing what is best in the long term for the elves and the kingdom as a whole. Frustratingly, she offers no additional details about why she believes this. She is clearly convinced, however, that if her side loses, the peoples of Charagan will end up miserable and enslaved.

"But your side is trying to help the Enemy break through into Charagan!" the party say. "How is that helping anything?"

Lapis says no more on the subject. Two of Lapis's henchmen, the half-orc **Snokas** and the human fighter **Byrmyn**, seem friendlier than the others. Makel chats up Byrmyn, trying to establish a camaraderie betwixt sellswords, but it's clear that Lapis hasn't told him any real information about the Crosser's Maze.

One evening, while we were wandering through the jungle we were attacked by a giant mound of weed and branches. It was 7 feet tall and smelled terrible. Then another rose up, and another! They were very, very strong and very scary. Everytime we cut one down, another sprang up. And then Aravis cast a Lightning Bolt and one got bigger! That was not good. Aravis tried another trick and turned into one of the shambly things.

Just as we thought all might be lost, a man with an enormous axe and a half-orc with a big sword ran into the clearing. We weren't sure if they were friend or foe, but they started fighting the shamblers, so we let them. What else could we do?

We finally beat the shamblers, although Aravis took an arrow from out of the woods, from someone who thought he was a real shambler.

Then, as we stood there, a whole bunch of people came out of the woods. The woman who was their leader was someone we'd never seen, but we knew who she was. Lapis. The woman who's been tracking us since we came to this continent. The one who hired the Animators and the shadow guys in Djaw. The one who summons Elementals to kill people and cause chaos. She's... she's... I don't even know if I can say the word for what she is.

She told us that she had been following us, and that we needed to work with her. There is a password to the Crosser's Maze, she said, and I know it. You know how to get there. You need me and I need you.

It was terrible, but true. And wounded and beaten as we were, there was nothing we could do about it.

Madriel: Ernie has such refined sensibilities. Just can't bring himself to call people names.

KidCthulhu: Well, certainly not in a letter to his mother!

Each night the camps separate, and both sides put up *Leomund's secure shelters* to sleep in. There is no fighting between the two groups, but lots and lots of tension. Eventually, the party come to the conclusion that something must be done before they reach the Crosser's Maze. After all, once they arrive, Lapis and co. will have no more use for them, and will probably try to kill them.

They devise a cunning plan to gain leverage: Flicker will sneak invisibly, using Dranko's *boots of stealth*, into Lapis's camp one morning while they're preparing breakfast. He'll dump some of the addictive Powder they've been carrying into their oatmeal. That will give them some bargaining power, since only the party know how to prepare the antidote. Ernie (as a cleric of Yondalla) has strong misgivings about poisoning someone's food, but agrees to go along with the plan.

Tor Bladebearer: Oh no, have we sunk to poisoning now? I hate Lapis as much as the next guy, but I bet that was a rough and non-universal decision...

kidcthulhu: It was a tough decision, and Ernie was not at all crazy about doing evil unto folks through their food. The fact that we have the antidote (or the formula at least) was the only thing that made it remotely palatable to him (no pun intended). But he still feels really guilty about it.

Piratecat: Yeah, it certainly wasn't unanimous, but less controversial than you would think. We were desperate for *anything* which would give us some leverage over Lapis. In a straight fight she out-muscled us, and she knew something we *had* to have... It was just a matter of time before she would figure we had served our purpose, and then ambush us unexpectedly. Our pathetic attempts to confound her weren't working terribly well.

Even more importantly, we had the formula for the poison cure, and she didn't. We could give her the alchemical formula at any time if she followed through. It was insurance for not dying in the middle of the night, *Leomund's secure shelter* dispelled and no one wearing armor as the area-effect spells hammered home.

It didn't work, of course, all thanks to that obnoxious, sneaky, very dangerous kobold. I think you may like our follow-up plan a bit better.



Wednesday, March 17

Flicker manages the sneaking part of the plan just fine. He even manages to dump the Powder into the food that Snokas is preparing. But Lapis's kobold henchman senses something, and shouts an alarm. Another of Lapis's companions casts *detect magic* while Flicker scampers away. And unfortunately, while the Powder doesn't detect as poison, it does detect as slightly magical.

Lapis barks a quick order that no one eat the oatmeal. It is too late for the half-orc Snokas, who has already eaten a spoonful, and likewise for Lapis's elven archer. But the gambit has essentially failed; Lapis and the rest of her crew have avoided the Powder. They dump the rest of the oatmeal onto the ground.

After both groups have packed up again and are on the march, Lapis casually approaches the party and asks: "So, what did you put in our breakfast?" The party clam up and don't respond. "Well, it makes no difference," she says, seemingly unperturbed. "Though I'm disappointed in you."

In secret, the party send out a scouting expedition of flying *polymorphed* party members (Aravis and Dranko), and they see in the distance a small cluster of rocky hills rising out of the jungle. As they approach, they can hear that wind blowing through a formation of boulders is causing a clear high-pitched keening. The Whistling Stone!

Aravis and Dranko return and report. Kay then starts to lead the party along a meandering path, figuring that if they follow a straight line to where they think the Maze is, Lapis's group will be able to figure it out on their own.



Thursday, March 18

But the next day, Aravis and Dranko (again while scouting) discover a clearing in the jungle a few miles away, and a small bamboo hut in the center of that clearing. Seemingly "painted" on the grass is a green ring, about sixty feet in diameter and glowing slightly, with the hut at its center.

Dranko and Aravis approach the ring but do not cross it. Aravis tosses a stone across the ring, and nothing happens. But when he tosses a field mouse across, there is a bright flash, a dome of green force appears for an instant around the hut, and the creature is vaporized. Hmm. They fly back to the party to report.



Friday, March 19

By the next night, the party have a plan. Aravis will *polymorph* Morningstar and himself into birds, and they will fly back to the hut. Morningstar has prayed for 17 (yes, seventeen) *thought capture* spells. She plans to cast them all around the green ring, figuring that *someone* must have left behind the thought of the passphrase while trying to gain access to the hut and (presumably) the Crosser's Maze.

They land in the clearing without incident, and Aravis returns Morningstar to her normal form. She begins casting *thought captures* at various locations around the circumference of the green ring.

The first five are “duds”; she finds thoughts of people experiencing sudden confusion or terror, and one, more coherent thought of a person wondering what was going to happen to himself. But the sixth *thought capture* does the trick. She collects a coherent thought of someone deliberately speaking the words: *Void in the glass, I return to thee.*

She and Aravis (connected via a *Rary’s telepathic bond*) have a quick consultation, and Morningstar decides she will speak the words and see what happens. Aravis (in owl form) retreats to the edge of the clearing while Morningstar approaches the glowing green ring. “Void in the glass, I return to thee!” she says. The green ring flashes, and turns into a glowing white ring.

Morningstar takes a step across the ring... and vanishes. The *telepathic bond* is immediately cut off. And the glowing ring turns back to green.

Aravis immediately starts flying back to the camp at top speed. There is a brief, hurried discussion when he arrives, and they decide they can’t waste any time in finding out what happened to Morningstar. They have enough flying ability (via spells) to fly the whole party for about 45 minutes, but after that they’ll have to walk.

Unfortunately, while two people *polymorphed* into birds have been able to sneak away quietly, there’s no way for the whole party to make a stealthy getaway while crashing through the tree canopy. As they burst out above the jungle, they can hear a bird cawing loudly, and then sounds of Lapis’s camp beginning to stir. They take off at top speed.

After 45 minutes they land back in the jungle, and begin a desperate dash towards the clearing and the hut. Fearing both for Morningstar’s life and being caught by Lapis, they push themselves to the limit. Of course, “the limit” is slow, as they bushwhack their way through the jungle in the dead of night, but there is no sign of pursuit.

By the time they emerge into the clearing hours later, many in the party are limping with cramps and pulled muscles. They stagger towards the glowing green ring, and Aravis utters the phrase, “Void in the glass, I return to thee.” The ring again changes to white. Still no sign of Lapis.

They step across. There is a blinding flash...



Hatching Dragon: Firk ding blast it! I just knew that you’d use that damned ending as soon as Morningstar suffered her mysterious fate. Stop lolly-gagging around and post another installment so we know what happened.

I sure hope this isn’t the ‘great alternate plan we came up with’ mentioned before, i.e. “we run faster than they do.” Mostly it just won’t work, as I’m *certain* there’s some means of tracking you to where you all disappeared. And of course your bestest buddy knows the passphrase to get ‘into’ wherever you all ended up. That ‘squawk’ you heard as you left is very likely someone’s familiar, and very likely followed you to find out where you went. If they were lying about knowing the phrase they likely know it now, via that bird. Heh, it should be interesting (if painful) when you try to explain what you were doing when they eventually catch up to you all.

Kidcthuuhu: Yeah, we knew we’d been spotted, but running like hell was our only option. Perhaps they could tell where we’d gone, but we knew we had a head start on them. Anyway, running pell-mell to or away from something is one of the Company’s specialties. Perhaps this written narrative does not properly convey how amazingly freakin’ clever this plan was. Or perhaps we should have stayed around and let Lapis die of old age in the jungle?

Sagiro: I think the “great plan” wasn’t so much the running part as the figuring-out-the-passphrase part.

When I set up this scenario, I had no idea how they were going to get the passphrase from Lapis. Force and intimidation? Cunning and guile? Honest bargaining? It never occurred to me that they’d try carpet-bombing the area around the hut with *thought captures*!

As for Lapis and co., you might not have seen the last of them. And here’s a pseudo-teaser: the next installment of this Story Hour is 100% guaranteed *not* to be what you expect...

Quartermoon: [Hatching Dragon: *I sure hope this isn’t the ‘great alternate plan we came up with’ you mentioned before...*] That depends on what you consider their ‘plan’. I think the *polymorphing* and discovery of their goal and the code phrase, all without being discovered, was both clever and went rather well. The only hitch came when Morningstar went through – that is what caused the mad rush – and I wonder if her action was part of the group’s original plan. I’m guessing it was not...

Hatching Dragon: Doh, yah, that was pretty clever after all, I suppose. I take it that by memorising *thought capture* 17 times that Morningstar used every slot she has for that one spell?

As for ‘not what you’re expecting’, well, duh! That’s always a given from this campaign. With a bunch this creative it’s nearly impossible to predict what they’re going to do. When I got to that bit about them tossing in a rock, and then a bird (*POOF*), I got the idea of using *polymorph any object* followed by *dispel magic* to turn PCs into rocks and toss them over the boundary to investigate the hut.

Zaruthustran: Good plan, *Hatching Dragon*. Or, they could have sent a few people to sneak ahead, cast an illusion over the hut and circle, and led Lapis’s crew so that they walked right over the Circle of Death. A little wind gust from the air spirit and a bull rush or two to take out the survivors, and you’ve eliminated the competition. Zap!

Piratecat: This was our initial plan, actually. Sadly, the mass murder of neutral hirelings got to us, and we realized all the ways that this could go wrong and leave us worse off. Morningstar hadn’t intended to disappear... when she did, it forced our hand. Thank goodness she told Aravis the password before she stepped forward!



Dranko surveys the common room of The Sands of Time, the inn that employs him as a bouncer. He spots a pair of likely troublemakers right away – an overdressed Citizen is trying to provoke a tired-looking Worker at a table near the corner. He catches the eye of his partner, One Certain Step, and motions with his head towards the increasingly loud pair.

Kay, the house musician for The Sands of Time, has just finished a song for a small crowd around the stage. Looking out over her appreciative audience, she also notices the brewing commotion near the other side of the commons.

Ernie is hard at work in the kitchen, and thinks he has things well under control, but his bumbling assistant Flicker (who's knife-quick but just doesn't understand cooking) has left a roast in the oven too long. Smoke is starting to pour out of the brick furnace, and so Ernie hurries over to rescue the blackening meat. "Go stir the soup, and chop up some more carrots," he tells Flicker.

Grey Wolf and Aravis are kept quite busy tending the long bar, as the demand for drinks is high and steady. Makel roams the floor, taking orders and picking up empty mugs and plates. It's a typical crowd for an evening, a mix of Citizens and Workers taking their ease after a day of leisure or toil, respectively.

Up in her room, Morningstar, owner of The Sands of Time, reviews the inventory and silver coin tally for the day. Since opening for business three weeks ago, the inn has been bustling with activity, and she needs to increase deliveries of almost everything. She had a week by herself to get the place ready, and then another day assigning jobs to the others who arrived later. The Sands of Time had been a popular night spot, one of the best known spots in the Azure District, and many Citizens and Workers were happy to see it reopen after being closed for several months.

Morningstar can smell the aromas from the kitchen wafting up to the upper floors, roasting meat and vegetable stew and... hmm, a bit of smoke. Ernie is an excellent cook, and she expects the popularity of the inn to increase in the coming months. Everything seems to be going quite smoo...

CRASH! Oh, for crying out loud. It seems that the inevitable has finally happened.

Down in the commons, Dranko and One Certain Step were unable to stop the brewing fracas in the corner from becoming an all-out bar brawl. There wasn't much they could have done; the Citizen, clearly having imbibed a bit too much ale, punched his companion in the face with no real provocation. Oddly, said Citizen has a big grin on his face, and Dranko gets the sense that he's been intending to start a fight this whole time.

Seconds later, chairs and bodies are flying, patrons are ducking under tables, and fist-fights break out all over the place. Kay spots a large man beating up on a smaller man who's not even fighting back, and goes to his rescue. Dranko and Step, with help from Aravis, Grey Wolf and Makel, wade into the fray trying to break up individual fights. The Citizen who started it all still has a big smile on his face, despite a bloody nose and a cut above one eye. He's obviously having the time of his life.

After a few minutes of fighting, while the employees of The Sands of Time are still getting things under control, eight Bluecoats march silently into the common room from outside and stand at attention just inside the doors. No one pays them much attention, and they don't actually do anything (and probably won't, as long as no one tries to actually kill anyone else).

Eventually the employees of The Sands of Time manage to quell the brawl. Ernie intentionally sets some greens to smoking in the kitchen, and then starts yelling "Fire!" to entice people into leaving. With Morningstar shouting that the inn is closed until tomorrow, the last unruly patron files out, followed by the still silent Bluecoats.

Morningstar looks about in dismay, assessing the damage. Tables and chairs have been broken, dishes and glasses smashed, and here and there are small bloodstains from especially violent outbursts. She immediately details a plan of action to get the place into business shape for the next day, and puts everyone to work. Everyone will get an extra silver for working overtime, assuming the job gets done.

The party know certain things. They know that they're in the City of Zhamir, which goes on forever and is... all there is. Morningstar re-opened The Sands of Time about a month ago, and the rest of the group started working there about a week after that. Before that...? Well, who cares, really. What's important is that they're Workers in the fine city of Zhamir, performing a valuable service for the Citizens. It's a fine life. They could be like the so-called "rabids" (who have gone crazy and live in the City Below), and they're indeed fortunate to be entrusted with a popular establishment like The Sands of Time.

Yes, it's a fine life...

Tiefling: Uhh... (checks calendar) Nope. It's definitely not April 1st. I quit.

MavrickWeirdo: So the Crosser's Maze is *The Matrix*?

Ancalagon: *The Matrix*? Cool!! Are the female PCs dressed in black PVC? Was the bar fight full of martial arts? Is the chief of the Bluecoats called Agent Smith?

Hatching Dragon: Don't you just love it when 'reality' takes a sudden left-turn onto WTF Street?

Sparrowhawk: You're right. That wasn't what I expected. How did you implement this, game-wise?

Sagiro: Have I mentioned recently how great my players are? I ran this scene with no explanation whatsoever. When everyone was seated at the gaming table and ready to go, I started right off with:

"So, Dranko, it looks like there might be trouble brewing over at that corner table. There's a Citizen who looks like he's had a bit more than is good for him. The other bouncer here at The Sands of Time, One Certain Step, has noticed it too."

"Kay, it's been another appreciative crowd, and your singing voice is in full form tonight. Each of your songs is getting good applause and table thumping from the customers, and a few throw silver pieces. But it looks like there's a disturbance brewing over in the corner."

"Ernie, you've got the meal pretty much under control, but as usual your assistant Flicker is making a mess of things. In fact, you smell that smoke is coming from the oven... he's burning the roast!..."

And my players just ran with it. As soon as they realized what was going on, they picked it up as smoothly as you could hope. They'd occasionally ask quick clarifying questions, like "What's a Citizen?" and "How big is the inn?", but there was no lengthy pause for a long explanation of their situation. I tried to drop facts into the narrative as seamlessly as I could, to help obviate the need for such an explanation, like saying "In the three weeks you've been working here, there hasn't been any kind of commotion like this one," to let them know how long they'd been working there.

I think someone asked what they did before they started working at the inn, but I just kind of waved it off and said, "You're not sure, but it doesn't really matter," and my players immediately got the hint that it didn't matter to their characters, either.

Yeah, it was kind of a weird (and potentially risky) experiment, but I know my players, and they rolled with it perfectly.

They have no important possessions beyond their clothing and basic necessities, but in each of their rooms is a very large locked trunk. Often at the end of a hard day, their minds start to wander in an unpleasant fashion, but this can be eased by sitting in their own room and meditating upon their trunk. Something locked inside helps keep them grounded, and focused on their important labors.

Of course, they would never dream of opening the trunks, even if they could.



The morning after the brawl sees the party continuing their cleanup effort, which is proceeding nicely. Kay goes out to the Avenue of Illusions to recruit a new performer for tonight's crowd. The Avenue is always crowded with Citizens showing off their magical abilities, mostly creating clever and dazzling illusions. Kay finds a likely one of these, and convinces him to perform at The Sands of Time for a reasonable quantity of silvers.

The rest of the crew finish repairing and cleaning the common room, and Ernie begins preparing the evening meal. Everyone is happy and content, just the way Workers should be. Except Morningstar. Something is bothering her. She's not sure what, but she feels it every morning when she leaves the inn and walks to the market to arrange for deliveries. It's nothing specific, just a nagging feeling of unease. But each day it passes quickly once she starts walking, and the demands of her position become her primary focus.



Another day passes, and things go more smoothly. There are no brawls, no unexpected surprises. But the next morning, when Morningstar again sets out for the market, she stops. She finally realizes what's been gnawing at her these past few days. It's the sign on the shop across the street, the sign that reads:

RUBY STREET CHANDLER

Something about that sign... something... something...

Oh my god...

The lettering on the sign is stylized, and the ‘A’ in CHANDLER is a filled-in black triangle. Just like she saw in her meditations in the ogre prison, when she prayed to turn a piece of her robe into a holy symbol.

The ogre prison!

And it all comes back to her. All her lost memories come flooding back, and she remembers who she is, and the hut in the jungle, and the Quest for the Crosser’s Maze. All of it. She rushes back inside, and orders everyone into the storeroom for a emergency staff meeting. She tells everyone about her revelation, and one or two party members are immediately snapped out of their memory-robbed state. But not all of them. Some of them think Morningstar has gone mad, and inflicted a similar madness on some of the others. They flee.

A madcap chase ensues, with some party members chasing after others, yelling out details of the party’s past, hoping to jar their memories back. It works on some of them, but Grey Wolf and Aravis hold out for a long time. Grey Wolf locks himself in his room and then climbs out the window while (from his point of view) his deranged companions shout out gibberish at him.

Meanwhile, Flicker (who has been “freed”) starts in on the trunks in their rooms, that some of them suspect hold their belongings. But as soon as he picks the lock and opens the first one, a loud alarm sounds, ringing all around the inn and up and down the street. He moves on to the next trunk (Kay’s, which holds the Woodcutter sword).

Finally Grey Wolf is snapped out of it (“Remember how much your stomach hurts when Kibi shows up?”) and the party are entirely free of the memory-sapping power of Zhamir. Once Flicker has opened Kay’s trunk, opening the rest of them goes much faster, and within ten minutes, the party have equipped and re-armed themselves.

And that’s when the Bluecoats show up. There are a dozen of them, wielding swords, and they march into the inn and demand that the party surrender in the name of the Sultan. Instead of giving themselves up, they give the Bluecoats a *fireball*, which roasts most of them. The Bluecoats don’t bleed normal blood, instead shedding a glowing golden light which splashes everywhere when they’re injured. After the *fireball*, there’s glowing stuff all over the place. The party defeat the rest of the Bluecoats in an easy battle, and then flee into the city before more can arrive.

kidcthuuhu: I’m trying to remember what it was that snapped Ernie back. It was something different for each of us. Morningstar was pretty upset that just saying “Yondalla” to him didn’t work. I think it was someone mentioning the sight of an anvil coming straight for his head. The memory of a recent death really focuses the mind wonderfully!

They spend the day on the run, bolting through streets. Curious Citizens and Workers watch them, but none of them take any action to stop the running party (after all, Bluecoats will deal with any trouble). The Company run past open markets full of haggling Workers, more Illusionists showing off their prowess, snake charmers and rope-trick artists, and many Citizens just out for a pleasant walk in the warm and bright day. (There is no sun in Zhamir, though the sky brightens and darkens on a regular schedule. And the temperature never varies from a comfortable range of mid-day warmth to evening coolness.)

The ground in Zhamir is uniformly flat, and the architecture of the city, while it varies from avenue to avenue, is uniformly opulent. The Company pass a number of strangely built houses and other odd buildings, but the strangest is the Museum of a Thousand Steps. It has no walls or roof, but numerous staircases of different styles wind around and up and down among floating exhibits. Statues and paintings hang in the air, and Citizens walk up and down the stairways admiring the works of art. It’s just maze-like enough that it piques the party’s curiosity, but the Workers who guard the “entrance” (a freestanding archway in front of the only staircase that touches the ground) inform them that only Citizens may enter the Museum. The party ask how they know they’re not Citizens, and this question puzzles the guards. “You’re... just not,” they say, assuming that the party are jesting. That at least tells the party that they won’t be able to impersonate Citizens and fool any of the inhabitants of Zhamir.

They press on, though to where they’re not sure. As the light grows dim, the party find that they have left civilization behind, though the city and buildings have continued. After half an hour in which they see no other living soul, they find themselves approaching an immense wall, which is unexpected because as Workers they “knew” that Zhamir went on forever. The wall is made of opaque glass, that looks like it should be reflective but isn’t. It stretches out to the left and right, as well as upwards, as far as they can see.

Grey Wolf casts *see invisibility* to see if anything interesting shows up – and it’s a good thing, too. He spots Lapis’s small kobold companion standing still and silent in the shadow of a building some 60 feet away. The kobold is watching them intently, and it notices right away that it has been spotted. It cries out, and a *lightning bolt* comes flashing out of nowhere and scorches half the party!

Immediately the party find themselves beset by Lapis's henchpersons, and a bloody battle ensues. The beefy fighter (Byrmyn) charges into the party, swinging his greataxe. Step responds in kind. Arrows from Lapis's archer come raining down. Kay responds in kind. There is a flurry of spells from both sides; *fireballs* from Aravis and Grey Wolf, and a *flame strike* from Lapis's Tirian cleric.

Lapis herself then attempts to cast the spell that the party have learned is her *modus operandi*, and the Company brace for an onslaught of earth elementals – but the spell fizzles, and nothing is summoned! It seems that summoning spells don't work in Zhamir, much to Lapis's dismay. She casts another spell, that the party discover is a hemispherical *wall of force* when it protects her from a return *lightning bolt*. Aravis casts *dimension door* and appears inside the force sphere with her, but she then *teleports* out of it, leaving Aravis trapped.

The fight rages on, with Byrmyn fighting fiercely and trying to break Step's greatsword with his own greataxe. The half-orc Snokas fights with picks in either hand, and the kobold (named **Skahnji**) manages to dodge and evade every spell cast his way.

Another *lightning bolt* comes crackling out from a new direction, blistering the party; Lapis has reappeared. Aravis has managed to free himself by using his *staff of earth and stone* on the stone road, and crawling out through a tunnel of his own making. Then he uses it to create a pit beneath Snokas and Byrmyn; both fail to leap out of the way, and fall in. Meanwhile, Step has fallen unconscious from fighting with Byrmyn, but Lapis's cleric and archer have been slain. Lapis herself, who by now has been caught in enough spell blasts and hit with enough arrows that she's on her last legs, *teleports* away one last time.

Skahnji finds himself the last of his group still standing; he leaps onto Step's body and holds a dagger to the paladin's heart. "Back! All of you! Or I plunge this into his chest!" There's a brief stand-off. The party inch back, not wanting to make any sudden moves. Many actions are held.

But Step is lying unconscious and possibly bleeding to death, so Dranko takes the chance. He casts his last remaining distance healing spell on Step. Step reflexively shudders and takes a sharp breath. Skahnji shrieks, "Betrayed! You asked for it!" and plunges his dagger downward. Step twitches, hardly having opened his eyes, and goes unconscious again. The party then jump on Skahnji en masse, dragging him off the body and dispatching him in short order.

The *cure* spell and the dagger have effectively canceled each other out; Step is barely, barely alive, but fading quickly, blood pooling beneath him from the knife wound. Kay steps forward to cast a healing spell... and finds that her connection with Pikon, God of Nature, is gone. She concentrates intensely, praying with all of her being for Pikon to answer her... and a small trickle of divine energy comes to her from somewhere (she senses) far above her. Healing energy pours into Step's body, and once again he is saved from the brink of death.

Only Byrmyn and Snokas still remain, trapped in Aravis's impromptu hole. Byrmyn hoists Snokas out of the pit, but he refuses to come out himself. Aravis has spotted Bluecoats approaching, so the party take Snokas as a hostage and leave Byrmyn to the tender mercies of the city guard.

Into the Maze

Run #106 – Sunday, January 14, 2001

With the Bluecoats approaching, the party quickly ask Snokas where in the city Lapis and co. have been staying, and they start moving in that general direction. But they send Morningstar back first (invisibly) to the scene of the fight, to cast a *thought capture* where Lapis was last seen. The thought she gets is one of someone thinking, *By the Circle, I hope I don't die*. She sees that a squad of Bluecoats is standing stoically around the edge of the pit into which Aravis dropped Snokas and Byrmyn. Aravis flies over the surrounding area, and Dranko checks briefly for signs of a blood trail, but Lapis is not in evidence.

The party spend some time interrogating the affable half-orc mercenary Snokas. It seems that Lapis and her crew found themselves in Zhamir in a similar state as the Company – memories wiped, and employed in a large smithy with the warrior Byrmyn in charge. The cleric of Tiria (**Erelia**) was granted a vision by her goddess which snapped her out of the city's thrall, in the same way as Morningstar's recognition of the inverted Ellish holy symbol. After breaking open their chests of possessions (as did the party) and fighting off the Bluecoats who arrived (as did the party), they fled into the city (as did the party). After some days of wandering and sleeping in parks they found an abandoned tannery and holed up there, and Lapis then hired as many messengers as she could to find news of either the Company or the Crosser's Maze. No messages had come back regarding the Maze, but two days ago, a messenger had arrived with news of the party, and Lapis and co. had immediately set off to track the party down.

Snokas adds a request that someone in the party take up the duty of casting *neutralize poison* on him every day, to stay the effects of the Powder that had been slipped into his food. Morningstar agrees to do this.

The party discuss their options, and whether or not Lapis would have retreated back to the tannery. They end up deciding that the strange museum they had seen earlier that day must be related to the Crosser's Maze, and head back that way instead. The museum is closed for the night, unguarded, so the party spend some time exploring it, nominally pretending to be cleaning the exhibits. Although there are many bizarre and curious works of art there (not to mention the strange "architecture" of the place itself), the party find no clues to the nature or whereabouts of the Crosser's Maze. Tired, they go to a nearby public park and go to sleep on the grass.

That night, Kay has a dream in which she is back in the woods of Cyric, traveling with another ranger whom she does not know, but recognizes as a mentor. Although most of the dream is hazy, she remembers one specific bit quite clearly. The other ranger turned to her and said (paraphrased), "I hope you realize how much effort that required. It may not be possible in the future. And tell the others: treating my name with disrespect will do them no good in the long run."



Next morning, the party discuss what the dream meant. At first they ascribe it to having something to do with their exploration of the museum, but that explanation doesn't sit right with Kay. She eventually realizes that the "effort" mentioned must have been that of her healing spell that saved One Certain Step's life, and that the "disrespect" is the party's consistent lighthearted mockery of the Pikonish religion. Kay has never considered that she draws her power from Pikon, having assumed that it comes from nature and the world itself; this dream certainly implies some stronger connection between the two. The party spend some time praying sincere thanks to Pikon, and Kay's discomfort eases.

According to the Charagan calendar of holy days, there are many Pikonish holidays throughout the year on which it is customary not to work. This has led to an ongoing string of in-party jokes about how followers of Pikon must always be lazing around, having one of their many days off.

After some more discussion, the party decide that the Maze is probably somewhere in the City Below, an undercity full of madmen that they had heard some references to back at The Sands of Time. Unfortunately, they have no good leads as to where to find an entrance (there are no sewers in Zhamir; the chamberpots empty themselves each night, as do the street-sweepers' buckets). The party elect to follow Snokas towards the tannery, hoping to find something useful there, while keeping an eye out for entrances to the City Below.

And at about this time, the true nature of Zhamir suddenly occurs to Dranko. It's a city with a towering glassy wall, and there's supposedly nothing beyond it. There are no hills; in fact, the city is unnaturally flat. There is no sun. Kay was able to channel a trickle of holy power from somewhere high above them. To get into the city in the first place, they had to speak the words "Void in the glass, I return to thee." And according to Shreen the Fair, this would be the "City of False Life."

Zhamir is a City in a Bottle.

Piratecat: I have the suspicion that if we could get into that hut, we would find an old wooden table. And on that table would be a bottle. And in that bottle... would be us.

Sparrowhawk: [Recalling that the Hets are supposed to be bigger on the inside than the outside, I was wondering] if Zhamir is Het Branoi. But it isn't really bigger on the inside; people are just smaller than they are outside. Besides, the place called Branoi is in the northeast of Kvia. The Company are in Ocir now, which is in the south of Kivia. So they still have a long way to go before they can go home.

Sagiro: Your comment has made me realize that I left out a relevant detail in a previous post. When the Company were in the Repose Town Hall (following Ernie's death) [session 92], they discovered the skeleton of a half-man, half-snake creature in the room where the air was sucked out (you may recall that the party saved themselves from this trap using *Nolzur's marvelous pigments*).

So according to Shreen the Fair, this snake-man (T'sserss) learned that the path to the Crosser's Maze both started and ended at the "City of False Life." Except that it turns out that there are two Cities of False Life. One is Repose, the failed golem-powered utopia in the Dry Wastes, and the other is Zhamir, the City in the Bottle. If that snake-man body is T'sserss, it implies that he got as far as the first City (Repose), but was killed before he read Kinnvhad's letter about the jungle location of the Crosser's Maze.

Shreen's story included the detail that T'sserss eventually found the Maze, but there's that snake-man body as evidence that he failed.



Later that day, the party find themselves walking down the wide pedestrian avenue known as the Avenue of Illusions; numerous Illusionist performers are generating fantastic visual displays for the entertainment of passersby. It is here that Morningstar notices that the party are being followed by a Citizen in a fancy rust-colored cloak. She walks some distance ahead of the others, to more discreetly cast *detect thoughts*, while Dranko walks off to the side of the avenue and uses his magical robe to change his appearance. He then waits while the rust-cloaked gentleman passes him, after which Dranko sneaks up behind him. "You only have a few seconds to live," Dranko says, "unless you tell us why you're following us."

The man stops, and chuckles a bit. "Because I want to talk with you," he says.

“About what?” Dranko demands.

“I believe you’re looking for something,” he replies. “Some... acquaintances of yours are looking for it too.” Morningstar is detecting no thoughts from the man, which makes sense; from previous experience she knows that Citizens have no discernible thoughts.

The man and the party retire to a nearby park for a little chat. His name is **Pog**, and he has come by some interesting information. It seems that someone named Lapis had sent out numerous inquiries, regarding both a thing called the Crosser’s Maze, and a group of people whose description matches that of the party. That could hardly be a coincidence, thinks Pog. He asks if the party might also be looking for the Crosser’s Maze. They admit that they are.

And Pog tells them that he knows where it is, and even offers to take them there. It is the property of an acquaintance of his named **Solomea**, and he will take the party to visit him for an interview. The party are highly suspicious, especially when he offers to accept payment contingent on how well their meeting with Solomea goes. But he seems genuine, and the party agree to go with him. Solomea, he tells them, lives in the City Below, and Pog knows one of the few ways down to that place.

Pog also offers the less good news that he had sent a message back to Lapis at the tannery, with directions to that entrance into the City Below. Which means that Lapis may possibly be en route, or even be there already.

Pog leads them to the edge of the Ochre District, also known as the “Ghost Quarter.” It is a huge section of Zhamir that is entirely uninhabited; according to Pog, this occurs from time to time as the Citizen population of Zhamir changes. Aravis does a brief flyover checking for signs of Lapis, but there are none. Dranko casts an *augury* to find out if “finding Lapis in the City Below will cause weal or woe.” The answer comes back:

Irrelevant. The mind is already wandering.

“Crap!” Dranko exclaims. He takes it from the *augury* that Lapis has already found the Crosser’s Maze.

The party follow Pog into the Ghost Quarter, and after a few minutes he turns off a street into what looks like an abandoned guild house. Kay does some tracking and finds some relatively fresh mud on the ground inside the house. Pog leads them into a back storage room and opens up a trapdoor in the floor. A long vertical shaft is beneath, leading down via ladder into the darkness. Dranko jumps in and *feather falls* down. Pog then warns the group to “ignore the shrieking” and not to talk with anyone. He also tells them that they may meet a partner of his named **Mazzery**, who is also a friend of Solomea.

Down they all go. Nearly 150 feet down, the vertical shaft opens onto a wide stone corridor with a black glass floor. The party surmise that they have reached the bottom of the bottle that contains the city of Zhamir. Screams, loud sobbing, and maniacal laughter all echo throughout the City Below, which seems to be a latticework of straight stone corridors and mostly empty rooms.

A small child huddles near one wall of a corridor, begging for water. Pog warns the party to ignore him, but Kay and Ernie cannot abide the child’s pathetic pleas, and give him water to drink. He takes a sip, and then begins screaming that he’s been poisoned, and launches himself at Kay, scratching and kicking. He does not relent until Ernie knocks him out.

Shaken, the party continue on, while screams and babble resound all around them. At one point, an old man pokes his head out of a dark room, and the party recognize him from a portrait in Repose; it is **Kinnvhad**, but he is mad beyond help, and goes into fits when the party ask him about details of his former life.

At last the party are brought into a small room with wooden benches, and with one simple door at one end. “Solomea is through there,” Pog tells them. “Don’t speak too loudly to him, and understand that he is quite eccentric. I won’t be going with you; he is quite particular about that when he talks to strangers. There will be a short length of hallway, which opens into Solomea’s room. Good luck!”

The party head through the doorway, and the hallway stretches into the darkness before them. As they pass the threshold, each feels a slight shiver, and a feeling of unease comes over them. Morningstar casts *thought capture* – and immediately goes unconscious. She comes to after a few seconds, with a splitting headache. They continue on.

After about twenty more seconds of walking, it is clear that this is no “short length of hallway.” They turn to look back towards the door – and see that there is no more door. Rather, the hallway ends at an endless, star-filled space, like a stone catwalk hanging out over an abyss.

In fact, the space is slowly advancing towards them, and the hallway itself is being “eaten away” by it. Dranko walks to the edge, taking constant steps back to stay on solid ground. He can see that the space extends in all directions; the hallway empties out into a vast starry void.

The party are essentially chased along the hallway by the encroaching void, but after half a minute they can see the same void ahead of them as well. But with nothing else for it, they continue ahead until they find themselves standing on a wide iron disc, floating all alone in space. All around them, above and below, stars twinkle in the night.

Then the face appears. It is unimaginably huge, taking up a full quarter of the horizon, its distance impossible to gauge. It is an old man's face, with stringy grey hair and a mostly-salt salt-and-pepper beard and moustache. And it begins to laugh, a slow, resonant chuckle that booms through the void. It speaks in a voice that echoes from everywhere. "Welcome to the Maze. Welcome, to my mind. See what the Maze has done to me, and... what it will... do to you. It is... but a reflection of your minds, which are now in my mind. Ah, yes, I'm afraid you won't be leaving. Yes, I'm very afraid."

Then, in a softer voice, with a clear note of panic in its pitch: "Very afraid."

And finally, in a soft voice filled with unmistakable terror: "Help me..."

The face fades away, leaving them alone on an iron disk floating in the void. Then, high above them, something fills the sky. It is a vast iron labyrinth, terrifying in scope, stretching through the blackness as far as the party can see. It is upside down from their point of view, as if the gods themselves are holding it inverted high above their heads.

And it is descending. Closer and closer it comes, filling all space and thought; the sky is a huge iron maze, and it is falling. Then they notice that another equally large maze is rising up from the depths below their floating disc. For a few brief seconds, they can see that both mazes are irregular, mostly filled with even iron-walled passages, but with various strange features dotting the expanses – rooms, walls of other materials, blotches of color. But the two labyrinths, falling from above and rising up from below, seem as though they are going to crush the party like a pair of monstrous jaws.

The party brace for their collision...

Checkmate

Run #107 – Tuesday, January 30, 2001

...and the mazes meet with a thunderous clang of metal striking metal. But the party are not crushed. Both mazes, above and below, have a round iron room in their very centers. And it is here that the Company now find themselves – at the center of a labyrinth that stretches out to eternity.



The party regard their surroundings. The walls, floor and ceiling are flat grey iron. There are some cobwebs up where the round wall meets the ceiling, but there's no dust on the floor. All is quiet, save for a sound of even, steady breathing that echoes all around.

They spend some time debating where they really are and what they should do. They decide that they're either in the Crosser's Maze, in the mind of Solomea Pirenne, or possibly both. And clearly they need to find Solomea and rescue him, but none of them are sure how.

While they ponder, they hear occasional skittering sounds above them, as if a small animal is running around on the other side of the ceiling. There is no sign of any other life. Thinking that they might be in a place where thought can affect reality, they all concentrate (in unison) on Solomea, thinking of how to find or help him. Dranko and Grey Wolf receive a brief flash of a mental image: a small white chess pawn. Aravis and Ernie get a different image: a growling brown wolf.

Further similar experimentation (thinking about other things) doesn't yield anything useful. They try thinking of Solomea one more time, and several of them get a mental image of a large silvery-grey spider.

Eventually they decide to start moving, and leave the starting room by one of the two exits with Kay leading the way. They find themselves wandering a maze of iron corridors, some ten or fifteen feet wide, some narrow enough to force them into single file. In one ten-foot-wide stretch, they come across a section of mirror set into the iron wall, with an adjacent mirror set in the floor. Aravis tries to use the wall mirror to *scry* for Solomea, but gets only a sharp pain in his head for his efforts.

They spend a minute or two examining the mirror, but there doesn't seem to be anything special about it, so they move on. As they go (with Kay picking her way through the maze in a fairly arbitrary fashion), they see more sections of walls, floor and ceiling replaced with inset mirrors. One time, they see a large (dog-sized) grey spider scuttle from around the corner, clinging to the ceiling. It runs to one of the ceiling mirrors, and vanishes inside, as if the mirror were a hole in the ceiling. When the party go to investigate, the mirror is just a mirror, solid to the touch.



Turning another corner, Kay finds herself confronted by an old man about fifteen feet away. He's dressed in an old grey robe, and has a white beard and thinning white hair. His right arm is stunted and withered, only about half the size of his healthy left arm. The fingers on the right hand are twisted at cruel angles. His face is the same as they saw filling the sky when they first arrived. But after a few seconds the image fades, and Kay is simply looking at her own reflection in a mirror.



They continue through the bleak iron maze, listening to the slow sound of the omnipresent breathing. Then Kay passes a mirror which doesn't reflect her own image back. In fact, she doesn't see anyone's reflection – except for Morningstar's. Each party member looks in the mirror, but the only thing they can see is Morningstar's reflection. Morningstar herself stands in front of the mirror and looks in – and her reflection shimmers and distorts, and becomes that of Shreen the Fair, Night-Master of the shrine of Dralla in Djaw.

Shreen speaks in his hideous modulating voice: "Greetings, night-child. I want you to remember your promise to me, to bring me back Lapis's head, and the Crosser's Maze. You promised. You *promised!*"

Morningstar responds with cold disinterest: "Do you have anything relevant to say to me?"

"Oh, yes," says Shreen. "Remember. You made a sacred promise, invoking the name of Dralla while standing on Her sacred ground. I can see in your heart, that you intend to twist your promise and the words you spoke. But Dralla knows the true meaning and intent of our pact. If you dare try to twist Her sacred intent, you will pay dearly. Oh yes, you will pay!"

And then Shreen fades from the mirror, and nothing can now be seen in it. Slightly shaken, the party move on.



Kay takes another turn at a fork, and sees that the corridor ends about twenty feet down, and the end is painted a bright white. But when she goes forward to investigate, she sees that instead the hallway opens into a perfectly white room. Another exit leaves the room at the opposite corner.

More interestingly, Solomea is there, laced into a straightjacket and strapped down to a bed. His eyes are open, and his face twitches. His right arm is the same withered stick the party saw in the mirror. Next to the bed is a small table, and on the table is a chess set. He seems to have already lost the game; his black king is toppled over in resignation. When the party approach, he begins to mutter, rave and whimper. "I just wanted to be young, that's all I wanted," he cries softly. "I was so old... I thought it would be easy... I just wanted to be young again."

Ernie offers him water, but he grows agitated and warns them not to touch him, or the chess pieces on the table. But he also says that he's desperately thirsty, and would love some water. Solomea seems to have a severely split personality; one facet is cruel, and speaks harshly to the party, often taunting them. Another facet seems sympathetic and grateful, and tries to whisper hints and warnings to the party as if it's terrified of being discovered. A third facet is simply raving, uttering words of hopelessness, when they mean anything at all. Ernie leaves him some water where he can tilt his head and drink, and he seems extremely grateful.

Then he looks down at his arm, and starts to whimper, and then scream: "Get it off me... Get it off me! GET IT OFF ME!!!" Small silver spiders are emerging from his sleeve and walking along his arm. Kay has Oa-Lyanna blow the spiders onto the white floor of the room, where they crawl away. Again, Solomea thanks them, and then starts raving to himself again.

Suddenly, in a clear voice, he says: "I never learned my lesson. When you are starting on a journey, you must always have the end in sight, if there is to be hope of success. Remember that. And remember: in my Maze you are your own worst enemy, and your own best hope." Just as he's falling asleep, he mutters to the party, "Go, go, help me, please... you can... buy things..." And then he falls into slumber.

The members of the party look at one another. "Did he say 'buy things'? Huh? Did we mis-hear?" Morningstar casts *protective sleep* on him, so that his sleep will be peaceful and undisturbed.

Kay leads them out of the room, and onward into the maze. Heeding some of the lucid words of Solomea, they now endeavor to keep images in their minds of finding and rescuing Solomea, thus "keeping the end in sight."

The Maze beyond this room is different. The ceiling is still grey iron, but the ground is honest-to-goodness springy grass. The walls are painted floor to ceiling with a continuous mural of a pastoral scene, with meadows, lush hillsides, green trees, and a bright blue sky with puffy white clouds. The overall composition of the murals is extremely clever, demonstrating an excellent sense of perspective along the curving walls of the maze. But the individual details – the trees and clouds and flowers – are crude, as if drawn by a child. The party also notice that many of the trees have spider-webs drawn in the boughs – spider-webs, not

cobwebs. From somewhere far off, coming from – inside? – the mural, there is the sound of a wolf howling, though there is no sign of a wolf.



Around a corner of this new aspect of the maze, the party come across something truly bizarre. One section of the wall is shimmering slightly, and a mild breeze comes out from the pastoral meadow. To Oa-Lyanna, it feels real. But the bizarre (and mighty disturbing) part is not the breeze. About thirty feet “inside” the mural is a floating horror. It looks mostly like a beholder – a floating orb about five feet in diameter, with numerous small eyestalks protruding from the top (the right-most eyestalk is only half as long as the others, withered and brittle). But the truly horrific part is that Solomea’s human face is stretched across the entire front-facing hemisphere of the creature. Instead of a single beholder-eye, Solomea’s own two human eyes, horribly stretched, look at them across a stretch of lush grass. His human mouth is huge and twisted, with oversized teeth poking out at odd angles.

The Solomea-beholder floats above a picnic table that is laden with oddments. It beckons them forward in a friendly but faintly hysterical voice, to come forward and have a chat. Hesitantly they approach, stepping into the mural and walking across the grassy slope to the table.

Ernie, always desiring to be friendly, asks the beholder if it wants to hear a joke. The others are aghast, but the creature says, “Sure!”

Ernie proceeds to tell the old saw about the brass rat, and when he reaches the punchline, “Do you have any brass tax-collectors?” the beholder starts laughing uproariously. “I haven’t heard a good joke in so long,” he says. “Thank you!”

The beholder bobs expectantly, and tells the party that some of the things on the table are for sale, if they’re willing to pay the price. “What price?” they ask.

“A little of what’s best in you,” it replies amiably. “And of course, the payment cannot be rescinded while you’re in this place.”

Among the items on the table are a picnic basket, a quill and inkpot, and a pair of spectacles, but these are not for sale, and the beholder warns them not to touch them. The items the beholder is willing to part with are all small crystal figurines, each about the size of a finger:

- A small red crystal spider;
- A small clear crystal minotaur;
- A set of white crystal chess pieces; the king and pawns are not for sale.

When the party ask what these items are good for, the beholder responds, “Oh, you’ll know, you’ll know. And trust me, you’ll be glad to have them.”

Flicker: *(eyes the basket the beholder says is not for sale, with an eye towards stealing it)*

Ernie: It’s not that special; it’s just a picnic basket.

Kay: Yeah, guarded by a giant flying eyeball with a crazy man’s face stuck to the front!

Morningstar decides to buy the minotaur figurine... she reaches to take it, and feels her mind become unfocused and muddled; she has lost two points of Wisdom. Ernie decides to go for it all, and reaches for the queen chess piece. The beholder warns him, “That one is very expensive. Higher value comes with a higher price.” He takes it anyway, and weakness floods his body as he loses six points of Strength. Kay takes one of the chess knights, and loses two points of Dexterity. And Step takes the crystal spider, losing two points of Charisma.

When the party ask what else they might find in the maze, the nasty personality takes over. “It doesn’t matter,” Solomea snaps. “You’ll never get out of here.” Then, in a faint voice, “Thank you for the joke.”

The wolf howls again in the distance, and the beholder tells them, “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you from the wolf...” It drifts closer, and whispers in a soft voice, “...just don’t beat me.” And then: “Get out of here!” It turns its back (such as it is) on the party, and they are unable to get anything else out of it. The party walk back across the meadow to the hallway, and continue on.



Abruptly they find themselves facing an empty black void, as the hallway empties into a pitch-black abyss. As they watch, an object appears in the blackness: it is a baby’s crib, suspended in the black void.

Tentatively the party step out into the blackness, and find that there is (fortunately) a floor to hold them up. As they move forward, they see that a baby is lying in the crib, cooing happily. Behind them, from nowhere, a voice speaks. “The Silver Recluse. Not as aggressive as the Forest Widow, nor as deadly as the Ociran Acid Spider. But the Silver Recluse’s venom is as fast-acting as any.”

Solomea is standing behind them, dressed in a white robe with a golden fleur-de-lis on the front. He gestures towards the crib. As if they were watching a movie and the camera suddenly zoomed in, the crib grows larger, nearer, and they can now see a small grey spider crawling on the baby's right arm. The baby idly brushes it with its left hand, and immediately the spider plunges its fangs into the fleshy pink right arm.

Ernie reaches forward, desperate to grab the spider from the baby, but his hand goes right through the scene, as if it were naught but an illusion. Then the 'camera' zooms in again, until the fangs of the grey spider are as big as swords, sinking repeatedly into the baby's arm. The baby shrieks in pain. Solomea in the robes shakes his head sadly. "My father's healer did what she could, but she did not have enough time."

The baby's right arm is turning a sickly grey, spreading outward from the bites. "I remember it all with such clarity. It seemed so large to me at the time. And the pain. I was an infant; there was no understanding. Just the pain. Just the pain..."

The crib and baby vanish, and Solomea's robed body suddenly becomes made up of thousands of small grey spiders. The resulting tower of arachnids collapses onto the floor, and the spiders start swarming towards the party! At Kay's hasty request, Oa-Lyanna blows the small spiders back into the black void, and the party flee back the way they came...

Zaruthustran: *thud* (embarrassed) Sorry, dropped my jaw on the floor.

Sparrowhawk: Sagiro: you, sir, are an artist. I would take my hat off to you if I was wearing one. Marvelous stuff. I read this to remind me what it's all about. It inspires me. Thank you so much for the story.

Ancalagon: I haven't fawned over this stuff recently. Let me do so: Sagiro, I am impressed. This goes beyond what most people can hope to achieve in a game! Looking forward to hearing more.

PlaneSailing: For some reason I can't get the hideous spider-things from the *Lost in Space* movie out of my mind. Sounds like the party is wandering through someone's nightmares and memories, doesn't it?



Now, though, the halls are the plain grey iron that they were back at the start. The party talk among themselves, and despite the warnings of some to keep their thoughts fixed on their ultimate goal, others start talking about the chess theme, and the beholder's whispered warning: "Don't beat me." And just about then the hallway empties into a large empty iron room; there is another exit on the opposite side. When all of the party have gone into the room, the whole place transforms.

On the floor, a huge chessboard pattern appears. The white squares are marble, and the black squares are dark mirrors. A few seconds later, on the opposite side of the board, a set of living chess pieces appears. The pawns are all black crystal spiders, the size of large dogs. The rooks are siege towers atop miniature elephants. The bishops are tall robed men, both with a book in one hand and a staff in the other. The knights are armored female warriors, holding swords and seated atop black warhorses. The queen is tall and regal, and wields a flaming sword. The king wears a robe and a crown but is unarmed.

Then a balcony appears high on the wall above the black pieces, and Solomea as a middle-aged man is standing there, leaning on a railing with his one good arm and grinning. He wears shimmering black robes, similar to that worn by the black king. Off to the side of the board, an enclosure of smoky glass appears.

Solomea speaks: "This is Ri'Jan, a game with which some of you are familiar. I was quite fond of playing, back in the... old days. I was never able to beat that confounded Three Corners, no matter how hard I tried. He'd never let me forget that I couldn't beat him. But now I'll play against you. Play wisely; the penalties for capture cannot be restored by your spells in... this place. Now... I think the drunkard and the coward should be pawns. Oh, and the fool as well."

Flicker, Makel and Snokas are suddenly teleported to the starting positions of three white pawns. White spiders appear to take up the positions of the remaining pawns, and a white king appears opposite his black counterpart. "Now," continues Solomea, "the rest of you take up positions as you'd like."

As the party move to take up their positions on the chessboard, Ernie and Kay feel warmth coming from the chess figurines they had purchased from the beholder. Ernie goes and stands in the queen's spot, and puts down the figurine. As he does, the flaming sword of the black queen is extinguished, the queen bows her head... and vanishes. Kay steps onto a knight's square and does the same. The black knight opposite her dismounts from her warhorse, bows her head, and also vanishes.

The rest of the party take their places: Dranko and Morningstar are bishops, Step and Grey Wolf are rooks, and Aravis is the other knight.

Solomea frowns. "A handicap game, I see. I've never played such a match. Very well. I'll still get my revenge on Three Corners. It's your move!"

Many in the party have never played chess, and don't have much to offer in the way of strategy beyond, "Hey, that black horsewoman is getting close... maybe I should move?!" But the two wizards, Aravis and Grey Wolf, have some knowledge of the game, and they direct the moves of the white pieces. Solomea is a good player, and he has the advantage that the party are unwilling to trade pieces (except for their own spider-pawns). Early in the game, Aravis and Grey Wolf realize that they can gain a serious tactical advantage by trading Flicker's pawn. Flicker's clearly terrified but tells them to do what they must. They instruct Flicker to move forward to a vulnerable square. He does. And then one of the black crystal spiders crawls along the diagonal and spears Flicker through the gut with a pointed crystal leg. Flicker screams in pain, vanishes, and reappears a second later in the dark glass enclosure alongside the board, unconscious.

Caliber: Mayhap I haven't paid the attention this Story Hour deserves but I seem to have forgotten something. Snokas? Who's he? Or she?

Piratecat: Snokas is Lapis's former half-orc lackey, who we first poisoned in the jungle and then defeated in Zhamir. We took him captive, as we felt responsible for his poisoning, and he then joined the party until we could cure him and let him go his own way. He's not the brightest half-orc in the Company (if you catch my drift), but he's an able warrior and neutral enough not to pose any problems.

Solomea may be good, but so are Aravis and Grey Wolf, and Solomea isn't skilled enough at Ri'Jan to make up for his starting lack of material. His style is naturally aggressive, and this proves his undoing. Dranko, picking up on clues from Solomea's table banter, starts to mock Solomea. "Now I know why you couldn't beat Three Corners," he taunts. "You're not much of a player. You're hardly a challenge." And more like that. As a bishop, Dranko places himself in a protected square, but vulnerable to a black rook. "I'm surprised Three Corners even bothered to play with you," he says, grinning. And Solomea loses control, and takes Dranko's bishop with his rook. Dranko is crushed beneath the foot of the miniature elephant, and there is a horrible moment when everyone can hear the sounds of his bones snapping like twigs – and then he too appears in the enclosure, out cold. But White then captures the rook, and the material advantage becomes even greater.

Black's entire king's side is exposed to a relentless attack, and a few moves later it's clear that White has won the game. Solomea plays out the string like a caged animal, seeking only to make some last-minute capture of a white piece. He manages to do it; Makel is captured near the end, knocked in the head by the staff of a black bishop. But then Aravis and Grey Wolf maneuver the black king into checkmate. The enemy king takes off his crown and bows low before crumpling to the ground.

Solomea on his balcony screams in rage. Then he abruptly vanishes, as do the walls of the enclosure holding Dranko, Flicker and Makel. The captured party members regain consciousness, but Dranko discovers that he has been struck blind, and Makel and Flicker both feel weak and clumsy. The others help them towards the exit. Behind them, the pieces remaining on the board are shattering, spraying pieces of black and white crystal all around the room. The Company fly from the chess room as quickly as they can.

Zog: Interesting. I was expecting the party to throw the match – "please don't beat me" was the whispered message, right? Was there any thought on this... ideas on why it was good or bad?

Piratecat: We didn't even consider throwing the match. Or rather, we did, and it became very clear that it would be a *bad* idea. Chess puzzles are such an old chestnut, and yet this one scared the patootie out of us. When we figured out that we actually had to play, and that something awful happened to our pieces when we got captured, I know I started to sweat; you see, Sagiro is a better chess player than any of us. The handicapping was a wonderful trick.

I remember how I felt goading Solomea to capture my piece (Dranko). It was an awful move for him to make, but he was getting emotional – so I unloaded some of my very best insults, with great effect. Not knowing what was going to happen to me afterwards made it all the scarier.

Kidcthulhu: It became pretty clear that beating him was actually the right thing to do. Cruel Solomea was ascendant in that room, and to show weakness or do less than our best with him would have been fatal. And as for "Don't beat me," well, you'll see...



Back into the iron corridors of the Maze they go. As they progress, they hear from somewhere far ahead of them a horrific scream, a male voice, crying out in pain. At the same time the slow sonorous breathing (which has not changed in all the time they've been in the Maze) quickens for a few seconds, and then returns to its original speed. Not knowing what to make of that, the party continue on.



After another few minutes, they start to hear a dull, rhythmic sound coming from somewhere ahead. As they home in on it, the noise resolves itself into the distinct sound of an axe chopping wood. They turn one corner, and find themselves looking out onto an outdoor scene. There is a hut in a forest clearing. In front of the hut is the same picnic table they saw with the beholder. And nearby is a young man, with a shriveled right arm, chopping logs on a stump with his left arm. When he sees the party, he waves them over, and invites them to sit at the table.

He seems quite friendly, and goes into the hut to bring them food and drink. The party help him chop some of the wood, and Kay uses the Woodcutter sword to carve a divot in the stump, making future chopping easier for the one-armed man. When the young Solomea comes back out, and they are all seated, he tells them more coherently about what's happened to him.

"When I first arrived in Zhamir," he says, "it was an accident. I was a member of an order called the Walkers of the Maze, and we used the Crosser's Maze to travel the planes. But when I had grown old, I thought I knew how I could use the Maze to travel back along my own line, and make myself young again."

"I was a fool. Instead I was brought to the City in the Bottle, which by its nature draws errant travelers into itself. My mind was wrecked, but the Maze was with me, and I destroyed several Workers and many Bluecoats before I found my way down into the City Below. Finally I met and... absorbed... two Citizens. You've met them: Pog and Mazzery. No one had yet escaped my mind once they were drawn in, but Citizens have a strong tie to Zhamir, and they returned to their bodies. Furthermore, they now knew what I was, and knew my potential. They have used me ever since."

"Often, when powerful people (like yourselves) are drawn from the various Primes into Zhamir, they (again, like yourselves) manage to dislodge themselves from the City's grip. They typically reclaim their possessions, which (as yours were) are kept near to them so that they stay sane longer. Pog and Mazzery are always on the lookout for such people. They lure them down here, and they become lost in my mind... in the Maze. I kill them all, you see. I'm insane."

The party ask Solomea where Pog and Mazzery are right now. "Looting your bodies, I imagine," Solomea answers. "They're stockpiling. I don't know for sure, but I think they're planning eventually to make an assault on the Sultan himself, and make themselves rulers of Zhamir."

The party then ask Solomea if Lapis is in the Maze with them. "Yes, I'm afraid she is. She believes very strongly in her cause. But I don't have much hope for her. She doesn't have what you have, and as a result, I think she is doomed."

"What do we have that she doesn't?" they ask.

"Friends. Anymore," Solomea answers.

Suddenly, the cruel aspect of Solomea's personality takes control. "It doesn't matter to you, of course. You're not getting out. Never. You can't escape me, any more than the others did." Then, softly, "You have to find me. Please, help me. Quickly... go! Go..."

Sparrowhawk: Quick question: When did the Company meet Mazzery? I don't recall them meeting anyone with that name.

Sagiro: They haven't met him yet. He's Pog's partner, but the party never actually saw him before they were drawn into Solomea's mind.

Kidcthulhu: You can imagine our concern at that casually thrown out, "Oh, he's probably looting your bodies." Each and every person sitting around Sagiro's kitchen table was thinking, in this order:

(a) We're not going to stand for THAT! and

(b) If they've been looting all the bodies, they must have gotten some pretty good stuff. Hmm.

Two more reasons to make us want to get the hell out of here.



The Minotaur Guardians

Run #108 – Sunday, February 11, 2001

The party retreat from the area, back into the dull iron corridors of the Maze. Makel and Flicker are greatly weakened, the penalty for their capture in the chess game. Dranko is blind and needs to be led by the others. And Ernie, Kay, Step and Morningstar are still feeling the effects of their payments to the beholder for the purchased figurines.

The breathing continues, steady, unabated. Morningstar is now leading the way, and the party wander through the branching iron pathways until Morningstar is brought up short by a barrier of opaque black glass. It seems like a mirror with no reflections, but Flicker, peeking through the ranks, claims he can see something in the glass. He wriggles his way to the front of the line, looking intently at the glass. Then he starts to shout: "No! No, no, don't open it! Please!"

The black surface shimmers, and now everyone can see what Flicker sees:

Tor Bladebearer is standing in a musty stone room, about to open a large wooden trunk. Next to him is Mrs. Horn, dressed in mourning black.

"Don't worry," she says. "I'm sure it's safe. Flicker would check if there was any chance it was dangerous. Open it."

"Nooooooooooooo!" Flicker shouts, but it's too late. Tor opens the chest, and there is a huge fiery explosion. Mrs. Horn's body collapses in a charred heap.

"No, no, no no no!" Flicker cries. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I was afraid!" He runs into the room, through the opening that had been glass before, and starts beating his fists against Tor. Tor just stands mute, looking down at Mrs. Horn's body.

For a while, Flicker is inconsolable. He admits that, back beneath Gohgan's basement, he had thought he should probably check the chest for traps, but he was too scared. He rationalized it, and let Tor open the chest, and it cost Mrs. Horn her life. "I killed her, and then we brought her back and that killed Abernathy! I killed Abernathy!"

The rest of the party (mostly Ernie, Morningstar and Dranko) talk him down from his despair. Ernie tells him that Dolly and Barnabas are both proud of him, and of what he's accomplished since. Morningstar assures him that it wasn't his fault; that none of them thought to stop Tor from opening the trapped chest. And Dranko tells him that he's proven many times since then that he's no coward, and that he should stop whining, and get on with his life.

His resolution bolstered, Flicker agrees to leave the incident in the past and move forward into the Maze. A door appears on the opposite wall from where they entered, and the party plunge once more into the iron hallways. Dranko, still blinded from the chess game, is guided by Aravis and Grey Wolf.



After another few minutes the party turn a corner, and they find themselves looking through a large stone archway into a sunlit hedge maze beyond. They can see twelve foot tall hedges forming a wide avenue straight ahead, some wooden benches near one wall, and, about twenty feet or so away, a tall statue of a woman against the opposite wall. Once all the party have walked through the arch into the hedge maze, there is a sharp sound behind them, and they realize the archway has been closed off by a large mirror. Set above the mirror is a crystal eye; Flicker stands on Makel's shoulders and investigates, but the eye is inert and not particularly interesting.

More investigation shows that the hedges aren't actually plants; they're made of metal, sculpted with meticulous detail to resemble natural flora. They're sharp, too, as Flicker discovers while demonstrating the "keep your hand on the left wall" method of maze navigation. The party also find a freestanding mirror on the ground, at the foot of the statue. It has a string by which it can be hung, so the party hang it on the outstretched hand of the statue, which seems like it might be there for just that purpose. Nothing happens. Hmm.

In addition to the slow breathing, the party can also hear a scuttling sound coming from the other side of many of the hedge walls. Dranko thinks the place smells like the spiders encountered in the crib room, so they all proceed with caution, slowly navigating the hedge maze and watching for an attack.

As they proceed, they find more and more mirrors lying about. Some are mounted and hanging on the metal hedges. Some are lying on the ground, or leaning up against various statues. Thinking that the mirrors might be gateways through which spiders could come, they turn all the mirrors face down, or with their reflective sides up against the walls of the maze.

At last they reach the center of the Maze, in which there's a bubbling fountain at a four-way intersection. At this point, the grey spiders attack, climbing over the walls in great numbers, each the size of a large dog. Grey Wolf starts things off with a *fireball*, intended to explode out and above the hedge, where it will get several of the spiders they can see, and hopefully many still waiting to climb the wall. Unfortunately, none of the party have yet discovered that there's an invisible "ceiling" covering the maze like a huge transparent lid, just at the height of the twelve foot high hedges. **KABOOM!** All of the party are caught in the blast, and much cursing follows. Many nearby spiders are also roasted, but more come to take their place, somehow swarming over the walls despite the invisible ceiling.

In the ensuing melee, many saving throws are rolled against the venom of the spiders, but only Aravis fails, and he's drained down to (gulp) a 1 Strength. Also, Morningstar reminds One Certain Step about the red crystal spider he bought; when this is tossed to the ground it grows to many times its original size, until it's slightly larger than the grey ones attacking them. This red spider turns out to be a killing machine, and takes care of many silver spiders all on its own.

Meanwhile the rest of the party are acquitting themselves nicely. One spider leaps down onto Makel's left arm, and he smashes it into the metal filigree of the adjacent hedge, killing it. Eventually all of the spiders are killed, and while many are wounded from spider bites, only Aravis has been weakened. Morningstar gets him back up to a 5 Strength with a pair of *lesser restoration* spells. The red crystal spider stops moving when the last grey spider is dead, done with its purpose.

About this time, from somewhere off in the distance (ahead of them), the party hear a bloodcurdling shriek of a woman. It cuts off abruptly, and for a few seconds after, the omnipresent breathing quickens. Then it reverts to its slow steady pace.

The party make their way to the opposite end of the circular hedge maze, finding more loose mirrors as they go. They find what is probably the exit – a stone archway – but like the entrance, it is filled in by a large mirror, and has a crystal eye set in the rock above the arch. The party ponder how to try "opening" this second arch, and make a few unsuccessful tries. Then Makel and Dranko speculate that perhaps the various mirrors around the hedge maze should be placed in such a way that would

let the two crystal eyes “see each other.” This takes some time and effort, lining up all the mirrors just so, but eventually all are in place except for a final mirror held by Aravis. As he tilts it into position, he feels it become fixed in space. The eye above the exit gate flashes, and the mirror dissolves away, leaving a clear way out. Success!

RangerWickett: And if I were DM, right now as the PCs are about to go through the exit, I'd have some difficult thing come up so somebody has to stay and defend the mirrors to let the rest of the party escape.

Anyway, cool gimmick with the two eyes. And this place is odd. A ‘glass ceiling,’ huh? Sorry, I think I just flashed back to 2E.



Beyond the hedge maze is a completely black room, with faint light shining through a door visible on a distant wall. As the party move in, a window pane appears high up in the air, floating. Then a teenage girl appears, sitting in the window frame. She laughs, and says “Ernie! Quick! Catch!” Something comes hurtling down from her window. Ernie instinctively turns to catch whatever it is – and is crushed by a large anvil. It breaks several ribs and knocks him unconscious. The girl laughs in an annoying giggle. Dranko is blind but recognizes the laugh – it’s Praska.

“Dranko!” she calls. “See what I did to your friend? Oh, how silly. Of course you can’t see!”

“I know you’re not Praska,” growls Dranko. “You’re just part of my own imagination.”

“Not true,” Praska responds. “Some of this place is from your mind, but some is drawn from the universe itself. And I know everything, Dranko. I’m part of the Black Circle now, and we know things. I’ve already foiled several schemes that the church of Delioch was cooking up. I see everything, and no one can tell.”

“If you’re real, and not just part of my mind,” Dranko says, “tell me something I don’t already know.”

Praska doesn’t answer, and Dranko snorts. “I thought not. Let’s go.”

But as the party head toward the door, Praska calls after him. “Here’s something you don’t know. You know how Harmon always suffered from a bad back? You did that to him, you know. One of your pranks; he slipped cleaning up the pig’s blood you got all over the floor, and his back has never been the same since. He couldn’t get one of the clerics to heal him without admitting how he’d gotten hurt, and didn’t want to get you in trouble. He never had the heart to tell you. There. Something you didn’t know.”

“You’re not Praska,” Dranko says defiantly. “And we’re moving on. Goodbye.” They leave her behind, listening to her grating laugh.



The Company keep moving. They’re now back in the “standard” iron corridors of the Maze, listening to the slow breathing. A few minutes later a ten foot long section of iron wall vanishes, and is replaced by a translucent amber-colored section of wall. The party can see another section of similar amber wall beyond that.

Soon, all around them, sections of iron wall are being replaced by lengths of translucent amber force-walls. To most of the party these new walls are solid, like a *wall of force*, but Morningstar feels her minotaur figurine begin to grow warm. To her, the new amber walls seem almost invisible, and insubstantial. Some experimentation shows that whoever is holding onto the minotaur figurine can pass through the walls as if they didn’t exist.

Soon the iron walls have vanished altogether; the party find themselves in a dynamically shifting maze of amber sections. Then humanoid shapes start appearing out in the shifting sea of amber, like shadows moving in and out of the walls.

And then the minotaurs attack. Large, brutish, with gleaming horns and sharp battle axes, they move through the maze from several different directions. Flicker starts by activating his *ring of blinking*, which allows him to make some wicked sneak attacks. Dranko, blinded, is still able to start off with a *prayer* spell, that turns out to make a world of difference. Ernie, weakened from his purchase of the chess queen, calls upon the Strength of Yondalla, and feels the power of his goddess (as eight points of Strength) fill his veins. One Certain Step swings his *mighty flaming greatsword* and scores a mighty blow, but the minotaur is strong and does not fall. Aravis fires off a *lightning bolt*, searing two more, but these also endure the blast. Kay tries using the Woodcutter sword to attack the axe handle of the nearest minotaur, but her attempt fails, and her remaining two swings are deflected by the beast.

There are seven minotaurs, and four of them launch a vicious series of axe and goring attacks. In short order, many in the party find themselves suddenly short on hit points. Morningstar answers with a *flame strike*, badly wounding three more. Grey Wolf starts firing off crossbow bolts, and Makel steps forward to engage the nearest minotaur.

And then the walls of the maze shift again. Aravis is suddenly left trapped in a cul-de-sac of amber walls, his only way out blocked by a minotaur. The remaining minotaurs attack, taking advantage of the new configuration of walls. And from the blurry amber outskirts of the melee, more minotaurs can be seen moving in to join the fray. Snokas fights bravely, and spears the nearest minotaur with his heavy pick.

The battle that follows is bloody and vicious, and made more confusing by the ever-shifting walls. Everyone suffers from the cruel slashes and gores of the creatures; even blind Dranko, safely in the middle of the party, takes some of Aravis's injuries from a *shield other* spell. Almost everyone is brought to below half their hit points, and a few people (Flicker, Step, Makel and Dranko) come perilously close to death. Snokas isn't so lucky; a flurry of axe blows, finishing with a critical hit, tears his body to pieces. He screams as he dies, and the sound of the omnipresent breathing around them quickens briefly. More minotaurs have also joined the fight, making an even dozen in all. Things look grim indeed, and parts of the labyrinth keep shifting, changing the tactical battlefield.

Only the constant use of healing from all the party clerics, as well as from Step, keeps anyone else from dying. Makel is reduced to five hit points before getting healed back up. Dranko, flanked by two minotaurs, takes 58 points of damage in a single round, and he drops to the ground (actually with eight hit points remaining, but hoping that the minotaurs will keep fighting his still standing comrades). Aravis finishes off a couple of the beasts with *magic missiles* from his wand, and after spending most of the combat casting spells, Morningstar-the-person pulls out her morningstar-the-weapon and does some serious damage.

At last the final minotaur is slain, and no more come out of the shifting amber labyrinth. Most of the party are out of spells, or nearly so. The walls start winking out one by one, until the party are left standing on an iron floor in a vast darkness. The shimmering form of Solomea Pirenne appears in their midst, smiling.

"Well done!" he beams. "The minotaurs were the true guardians of the Crosser's Maze. You have defeated them, and now I am free. I am here to give you the Crosser's Maze. Which of you will take it?"

Ernie volunteers, and Solomea places into his hand a small round iron labyrinth, glowing slightly. "You can use this to get out," Solomea says. "All the way out, of the Maze, and the bottle as well. Wherever you want to go. Simply wish it to be, and it will be."

"What happened to Lapis?" the party ask. Solomea clucks his tongue, shakes his head sadly, and vanishes.

There is a brief discussion about where to go. If they go straight back to Charagan, it's not clear that their magical rope from the Spire will function to bring them back to Kivia. (That's because the rope will bring them back to the exact location on Kivia where it was used the first time, which would be nowhere, really.) In the end, Ernie makes the wish that the party "appear somewhere safe, but near the tower of Het Branoi, and with Lapis's body and all of her possessions, along with all of our own possessions."

The blackness around them is gone. The party are now in a dry stone cave, looking out onto a gentle hill in what seems to be fading sunlight. In the cave with them are piles of all of their belongings, as well as Lapis's body. All of their wounds are healed, and their drained ability scores restored.

At the top of the hill, a stone tower is visible. Het Branoi! They've made it! Not only have they found the Crosser's Maze, but they've been freed from Zhamir, and been spared what would have been a hike of hundreds of miles to the region of Branoi. The party breathe a collective sigh of relief.

But then Dranko says, "I thought Het Branoi was supposed to be invisible." And immediately it is. The tower up on the hill blinks out of sight. Hmm. That's odd.

Then Dranko hears it. The slow sound of breathing. It's still with them.

And they realize it's all a sham.

As they come to that realization ("I knew that seemed too easy"), the cave vanishes, and they are back in the Maze, still wounded, still drained, still trapped. Dranko is still blind. Makel swears like the sailor he is.

Almost out of spells and weary from the fight, the Company decide that they should try to sleep and regain their strength. But even that is denied them; in the Maze, sleep is impossible. After an hour of trying, they give it up, shoulder their packs, and prepare to face whatever else the Maze has in store for them.



Rincewind: How many of the party believed Solomea when he claimed that it was all over? I knew that was wrong from the start (it's just not Sagiro!), but I expected the Crosser's Maze to do something horrible to whoever took it.

Piratecat: All of us at first. We knew it was simpler than it should have been, but Sagiro was very convincing, and we had just been thrashed within inches of our lives – less, in Snokas's case. We got hopeful. That made it all the more crushing, of course, when it turned out to be unreal.

Sagiro handled the shifting labyrinth in a fascinating manner. He drew the maze out on a battlemapper... then, each round, he'd place a different 2"-by-2" cardboard tile on the map. These tiles were also drawn with maze sections, but different ones, and as they overlaid the original maze we used the new walls. It worked amazingly well.

Your Own Worst Enemy

Run #109 – Sunday, February 25, 2001

As they walk across the endless iron floor through the black void, more shapes start to appear and disappear around them. They are bookshelves, long bookshelves, flickering in and out in a vaguely maze-like configuration. Then at once they all become solid and real, and the Company find themselves in a luxurious library, surrounded by stacks of books. Mirrors hang from the shelves in many places, making the library seem almost infinite in scope.

In front of the party is a long table, and behind that table is sitting Solomea, a young scholar with spectacles and his withered arm bound to his body. "Please, sit down," he says in a calm voice, and comfortable chairs appear for all the party. They sit. Some notice that a few books are open on the table; their pages contain no words, but many are splotched with ugly bloodstains.

"You are doing well," he says, looking at each of them closely. "I found myself wondering just who... hold on a minute... oh, that's fascinating!" He has fixed his gaze on Grey Wolf. "Oh, that's very interesting. Do you know, **Ivellios**, that someone has been tampering with your mind?"

None of the other party members knew that Grey Wolf's real name was Ivellios, in case you were wondering.

Grey Wolf shakes his head no. "Ah. Well, they have. The memory that you think most clear is nothing but a fable! I think your friends will find this interesting as well. I'm sorry if this is uncomfortable for you; look!"

He gestures to the broad side of a long bookshelf, and it shimmers, and now the Company can see in it a clearing in a green forest, and a small house in the clearing. It looks real, and the sounds and smells coming from the scene are absolutely genuine...

A young Grey Wolf is there in the scene, mending a wooden shed a few dozen yards from the house. Suddenly half a dozen mercenaries bearing the insignia of a grey wolf come marching into the clearing. Grey Wolf's father comes out of the house while Grey Wolf watches.

The mercenaries demand tribute from his father, who refuses and orders the mercenaries away from his home. And without further warning, one of the grey wolf company draws a weapon and strikes down the father where he stands. Grey Wolf screams and rushes the men, holding only the hammer with which he was mending the shed. The scene blurs. One of the mercenaries is now holding young Ivellios, and the last thing he sees is the pommel of a sword coming down at his head...

...and the scene is gone. In the library, the party are looking again at the side of a wooden bookcase.

"A terrible memory," Solomea says sympathetically. "I'm sorry to make you relive it. But it is a fiction, planted there by those who want to hide the truth from you. Do you want to see what really happened that day?"

Grey Wolf slowly nods.

"I'm afraid it's not any happier," says Solomea, as he gestures at the bookshelf.

The same clearing appears, with the same house, but with the "camera" at a different angle. Grey Wolf is working in the kitchen with his mother; outside, his father is turning earth in a small garden. As they watch, three men and a woman in silver cloaks emerge from the trees.

One of these steps forward and speaks briefly to the father. The two exchange heated words. Then the woman and one other man grab the father; the speaker makes a motion with his hands up to the sky, draws a longsword, and with one swift stroke hacks Grey Wolf's father down. Grey Wolf's mother has moved to the doorway; she screams and charges out of the house. The fourth silver-cloak casts a spell, and both Grey Wolf and his mother are paralyzed. The swordsman speaks briefly to the mother, and then slays her as he did the father.

As he approaches Grey Wolf, the watching party can clearly see that the clasp of the silver cloak is a seashell. He moves to strike down Grey Wolf just as he did with the parents, but is suddenly riddled with arrows; sixteen grey wolf mercenaries come out of the woods, and overwhelm the other Silvercloaks in a brief battle. Grey Wolf is still standing there, paralyzed and afraid. The mercenaries then have a discussion:

"What do we do now?" asks one.

"We go back and report to the Silvercloaks that the job is done," says the leader.

"And this one?" the first one points to Grey Wolf.

"We don't want him poking around, asking questions about the godsdamned half-shells. And we cannot apprehend him; there are still spies in the group. We have our orders. We modify his memory. Make him think this was just an attack by bandits looking for... tribute. Heh. Loot the house, to make it look like it was just a robbery. Then... oh, throw him into the woods, and set the house on fire."

The image vanishes, and the library with it. The party find themselves back in the labyrinth of iron corridors. From somewhere in the distance, the sound of a wolf howling echoes faintly...

Plot refresher: the Silver Shell is a zealous organization that formed in direct opposition to the Black Circle. They haven't been heard from much in the past few centuries, since the Black Circle was all but wiped out. But the party have crossed paths with that group twice before. Once was when they found a Silver Shell agent spying out the dwarven tavern that was the front for Manzanill's excavation below Hae Charagan. The other was when they rescued Rosetta, a Silver Shell agent who had been imprisoned and tortured in God's Thorn.

Destil: Finally! You've mentioned a number of times how your players provide a lot of the flavor for your world and adventures in their backgrounds. And you've repeatedly said, "Especially Grey Wolf," or something to that effect; but all we've seen thus far was the effect planar distortion has on him and his connection to Kibi. So we are finally going to see some of that background unwrapping I hope, as I've been wondering about this for most of the Story Hour...

Of course now the story will change directions again and I'll find out that no-one knows just what's really going on with Grey Wolf, I suppose...

Sparrowhawk: Yeah, we now know something we didn't before. *But*, it only serves to further our confusion! What happened in that little scene of Ivellios's memory?

Here's what we know: Some people, wearing silver cloaks clasped with the insignia of the Silver Shell, executed Ivellios's father after exchanging angry words with him. They then magically paralysed Ivellios and his mother, killed his mother, and were about to kill him when they were stopped by armed men wearing the insignia of a grey wolf. The leader of the mercenaries said that they should "go back and report to the Silvercloaks that the job is done." Then they modified Ivellios's memory, casting themselves as bandits who killed Ivellios's parents and looted their home. Ivellios took on the alias Grey Wolf because of this terrible, but false, memory. But what does that all mean?

To me, it suggests that there was a schism in the Order of the Silver Shell. The Grey Wolf mercenaries were hired by "Silvercloaks" to get rid of those particular people who wore silver cloaks, and they were obviously members of the Silver Shell. But why did they kill Grey Wolf's father? Did they have some prior connection with him? What I wouldn't give to hear what they said! And who are the Grey Wolf mercenaries? They must have been really confident if they put themselves into Grey Wolf's false memory as the murderers of his father. In any case, they are a newly-revealed force in this war. Their motives and alignment are nigh impossible to guess at.

Also, I don't think that Solomea can lie to them. I'm pretty sure it was an illusory Solomea who gave the false Crosser's Maze to the Company; a trick of the Maze itself. Just like Shreen the Fair and Praska were probably illusions (since I doubt that anyone outside the Maze can communicate with those inside). Solomea is a prisoner, not the jailor. We've seen many of the things he said come true already, and not even the evil part of his personality has outright lied to the PCs. But I am just waiting for the next update; then we'll all be one step closer to knowing what's going on. (Hint, hint!)

Piratcat: Sparrowhawk, good analysis! Grey Wolf's player has been very secretive with his background, never once discussing it. We learned more from that fifteen-minute encounter than we did from years of adventures. We already knew that the Silver Shells are sometimes fanatical; I think that's what we were seeing in the true, unmodified memory.

A few posts from now, you'll discover something chilling about Grey Wolf. Suddenly, the reason that we are prophesied to betray him (while his enemies try to keep him alive) becomes crystal clear, and you'll learn the true extent of our problem!

Kidcthulhu: We hate learning the true extent of our problem. It's so much nicer muddling along doing our little task list – "Find Crosser's Maze: check." The true extent of our problem is horrific indeed. If this were a different game system, SAN checks would be required.

Zaruthustran: SAN checks, huh? So, what crazy, warped revelation could be more unnerving than what we've already read? Hmm...

Maybe, uh, maybe the party has been wandering the Crosser's Maze since post 1.

Maybe Grey Wolf is the evil bad guy/Solomea.

Maybe Moe is about to serve Barney the City in a Bottle.

OK, now that last one's just silly.



After some more wandering, the walls start to fade, becoming windows onto a beautiful outdoor scene. It's the same scene as the one depicted by the child's painting when the party met the beholder version of Solomea, but this time it's real. They can see green rolling hills, stands of tall trees, and flowers blooming everywhere.

Then some objects and people start to come into view. A road snakes through the scene, and there is a carriage pulled up by the roadside. Four stoic armed men stand around the carriage. Fifty yards down a gentle hill from the carriage, a family is having a picnic at the edge of a small wood. A blanket is spread out and a picnic basket sits next to the small boy. The boy's right arm is stunted and useless.

Suddenly a dark shape springs from the woods; it's a snarling brown wolf, rabidly foaming at the mouth. Some of the party try to run forward into the scene, but there's some invisible barrier blocking them, keeping them in the hallway. The wolf leaps

immediately upon the mother; the child springs to his feet, points his left hand at the wolf and utters arcane words. A spray of dazzling colors flashes out, and both the wolf and the mother drop unconscious. The four guards are running down the grassy hill, too late to intervene.

The boy's father, who had stood by frozen for the few seconds in which the attack occurred, gets to his feet. He picks up a sword lying by the blanket, and runs the wolf through. Then he barks at the guards to return to the carriage.

The small boy is beaming with pride, and the father, having dispatched the wolf, calls his son over to him. But the father's expression is grim, and the smile on the boy's face turns quickly to one of confusion and then pain as his father turns him over his knee and begins to beat him with a heavy switch. "An abomination, you are!" he snarls at his son. "How could you disappoint me like this, practicing vile sorcery on your own mother! You are the son of nobility, not a filthy scale-blooded wizard!"

And as he administers his punishment, the child turns his tear-streaked face to the party watching from afar, and cries out, "Help me!" The barrier preventing the party from intruding on the scene shimmers and vanishes, and they all go charging across the field to help the child.

As they approach the picnic blanket, and demand of the father that he cease beating young Solomea, the father looks up and snaps, "Begone! You are not wanted here." And with that, a wave of nausea sweeps over the party. Some of them shrug it off, but Aravis is knocked to his knees, his mind suddenly filled with the memory (and pain) of having his head slammed into a rock wall by a huge ogre. Kay is similarly stricken, feeling the shock and heat from the blast of the lightning lizards from the ogre caverns. And Morningstar's mind is filled with the horror of being crushed in an iron maiden by a troll, so many months ago.

Those who are still standing repeat their demand that the father unhand the son, but Ernie is more furious than any of them. "You should be ashamed of yourself!" he yells at the father, his temper completely lost.

"My son has brought shame on our house!" the father insists. "He has..."

"He has not!" Ernie shouts. "He was brave, and did what he had to do to save your wife, and probably yourself as well! You should be rewarding him, not punishing him. Who cares about his blood? And anyway, doesn't his blood come from you? And instead of rewarding him with love, you punish him, beat him? If anyone has dishonored himself and his family, it's you! You are a coward, and a bigot, and..."

As Ernie's tirade has gone on, the father has grown silent, and his expression has gone from anger to fear to embarrassment. And just when Ernie is coming to the end of his breath, the father suddenly disappears. The child looks up at Ernie, his expression a mix of gratitude and fear. "Thank you," he says in a small voice.

The child and picnic and meadow vanish, and the party find themselves standing in a small but elegantly appointed room. There are beautiful paintings on the walls, and a fresh smell wafts through an open window along with the sounds of children playing. Solomea, grey-haired and gaunt, is lying peacefully in a bed beneath the window, his withered arm resting on his chest. His face shows serenity and contentment.

He realizes that the party are in the room with him, and he sits up. "You're here. Good. There's someone who wants to say something to you. She's lost most of her mind, but there's still something she needs to say..."

Lapis appears in the room. Her eyes are wide and wild, two windows onto madness. In a hurried voice she starts babbling: "Please, I beg you. You must stop him. It doesn't matter who rules in the end, not really. I see that now. But you have to stop Naradawk. He'll enslave everyone. He's too powerful. I... we... can see his armies, massing beneath the iron gates of Chinniphath. All the swords of Charagan can't stop him. They can't. Only the Maze can stop him. Only the Maze. Only the Maze..." And then she is gone again.

"She is gone," Solomea says sadly. "She had no hope, walking the Maze alone. It was too much for her."

He beckons the party to him, and they crowd around the bed. "You have been... so kind to me. Your good intentions shine from you into my mind. You fought against my fears, and won. You tried to save me from the Silver Recluse. You gave me

RangerWickett: I take it that "Don't beat me" meant that Solomea didn't want his dad to beat him?

PlaneSailing: That's what I was thinking too. Fiendishly cunning, saying "don't beat me," then facing them with a chess game where they could have decided they ought to lose... because they didn't know the correct context for the expression. Very sneaky. My players wouldn't have got it (heck, I wouldn't have thought of it).

Sagiro: It's safe to say at this point that you take correctly. Recall that the context of the comment was: "Don't worry. I'll protect you from the wolf... just don't beat me."

Kidcthulhu: At the risk of blowing my own horn, I consider the confrontation with Solomea's dad to be Ernie's finest moment. He worked himself up to a fine old righteous fury. We halflings are a doughy folk when roused, and Ernie has seldom been more roused.

Yes, I did spell it "doughy" on purpose. Longstanding party joke.

Quartermoon: No need! Ernie has always been my favorite... and he has shone in more ways than one during recent posts! Joke-telling, for instance.

water when I was thirsty, and..." He turns his old face to Ernie, and tears are rolling down his face. "And you... you told me a joke, when I thought I would not hear a joke again for an infinity of tormented years. For this, I will warn you of some of what is to come. You are almost... to the end. But it is in my nature to take guardians to myself, from those who enter my domain. The core of my mind is guarded by the last group of adventurers to make it this far. They will not be easy to defeat, for they are as persistent and talented as you. But I will try to help you, when I can. I may be able to... remove... some of the powers of your enemies.

"And this also I will do for you. I will heal you, and I will give you rest, in a place where you will be free of worries. Prepare yourselves. Tomorrow will be a telling day. For all of us." He lays his head back on his pillow, and the room vanishes from around them...



...and the members of the Company find themselves standing in the living room of the Greenhouse!

Even better, the various weaknesses inflicted elsewhere in the Maze have fallen from them. Ernie feels strong, and Kay feels nimble, and Morningstar's mind is cleared. Flicker and Makel feel strength and agility return, and Dranko can finally see again. Argol and Smeggy come running up, meowing loudly, clearly happy to see them.

They hear the sound of footsteps coming down the main staircase, and they stop their relieved chatter to see who's approaching.

It's Abernathy.

"Is it really you?" they ask. The old wizard looks around, his expression one of curiosity and mild surprise.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," Abernathy says. "It's true that the Crosser's Maze generates reality out of your own memories. But it's also true that Solomea's awareness extends far into the multiverse, and in some sense encompasses it. And I certainly feel real." His eyes twinkle in just the way they all remember.

"I'm very proud of you, you know," he says. "You've grown so much since that day I brought you all to my tower. I feared for your safety, back in the old days. Now your enemies should fear you. I had a good feeling about you from the start, but you've surpassed my greatest expectations."

He turns to Flicker. "You should listen to your friends. You have nothing still to prove regarding your bravery, so as Dranko says, stop your whining and get on with it." He smiles as he speaks, and Flicker blushes.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to work." He winks at the party. "Lying on the beach all day takes some doing!" And with that, Abernathy goes back up the staircase and is gone again.

The party sleep soundly in familiar beds.

SnowDog: Very impressive, Sagiro. I don't know if it's just because the story is being retold by its GM, and it's easy to make it look this good after the fact (somehow I doubt this, based on the players' posts), but this is perhaps the most satisfying conclusion (or near conclusion) to a sub-story I've seen in a long time. From a GMing point of view, it must have been very gratifying to see the expressions on your players' faces as this all played out.

Putting myself in the players' shoes, I can easily imagine the great sense of closure here, and getting ready for the final confrontation and knowing the end (at least of the Maze segment) was in sight. Excellent storytelling.

Piratecat: It was as satisfying in-game as it was here. Especially after Ernie's wonderful berating of Solomea's father, and his peaceful thanking of us – so different than the fake resolution that had previously occurred.

Zaruthustran: Wow. (I begin all my posts with "wow".) *Superb* characterization, Sagiro. You could have gone through the meeting with Abernathy without ever telling us his name, and we all would have known who it was, just by the way he talked. Nice work!

Zaruthustran: Request: Another summary. Sorry, but this campaign is wonderfully complex and my feeble human brain can't keep it all straight. So, who is the Bad Guy, why does he need the Maze, and how does the Black Circle relate to all this?

Sagiro: Here's a quick summary:

There are several bad guys. The capital-"B" Bad Guy is Naradawk Skewn. His father (being an Evil Tyrant™) was banished to another plane long ago, and now Naradawk is trying to break the planar seal, come forth with his armies, and conquer the Kingdom of Charagan.

There's also the mysterious "P." P is the boss of Manzanill (a now-dead mage who was spying on Abernathy via a chain of flunkies) and Lapis (who is currently vying with the party for the Crosser's Maze).

There's also Mokad, the Scarbearer who defected from the Church of Delioch and now serves the emerging Black Circle (an evil cult that was the primary religion under the rule of Naradawk's father). Mokad may have another plot brewing, which you'll learn about before too long...

There's also the Sharshun, a splinter faction of the Mors Tarathi (a now mostly extinct flavor of bald dark-skinned elves, who centuries ago were enslaved by Naradawk's father). The party's best information about the Sharshun is that they want to "bring back their dead emperor." It's not clear if they mean Naradawk, his father, or someone else entirely. But from talking to the Sharshun (Inivane) who they freed from God's Thorn, they know that the Sharshun served Naradawk's father, and called him "Emperor."

The Sharshun are trying to collect the Eyes of Moirel, perhaps to "travel nowhere," but no one's sure what that means, either.

The Crosser's Maze is a legendary artifact; one of its main powers is (supposedly) the prevention of planar travel. "P" has sent Lapis to retrieve it. The Spire (the good guys) believes that P wants it to keep it out of his enemies' hands. Ironic for him, then, that the Spire might never have known of its existence if not for his own letters to his henchman Manzanill.

As for the Black Circle, their involvement is unclear. What's known is that Mokad (and presumably by extension the Black Circle) funded Manzanill's excavation of the blood gargoyle that attacked the city of Ghant. The purpose of that attack was to distract the Archmagi, who are otherwise directing all their attention to keeping the planar *gate* sealed and Naradawk on the other side of it. Which implies that the Black Circle is working towards the same end as Naradawk.

All of this also implies a connection between "P" and Naradawk:

- (1) Naradawk wants the Archmagi to be distracted;
- (2) Manzanill was in charge of unleashing the blood gargoyle as a distraction;
- (3) Manzanill was working for P.

Hope that makes things clearer!

Ancalagon: Wow. What a great series of posts lately! That return to the Greenhouse was especially touching.

Sparrowhawk: I concur that these last few posts are among the best runs from this campaign so far. The incredible challenge of the Maze, the fake victory, revelations of Grey Wolf's past, and now this last post! Hats off to Ernie for taking Solomea's dad down a few notches! That really made my day. Solomea's gratitude must have been so satisfying after going through all that. And the reunion with the late Abernathy made me smile. I really wish I could play in a campaign like that!

They aren't out of the woods yet, of course. Solomea said that they have to fight an adventuring party that's just as good as them if they are to conquer the Crosser's Maze. You know what that means. It means that it's time to kick some ass! Yeah!! Fight! Fight! Fight!

LightPhoenix: I'm guessing the last adventuring party didn't quite make it through to the end. And personally, I'm betting on Grey Wolf being a member of the Black Circle, but that's just me...

Kosh: My hypothesis: The Silver Shells wanted Grey Wolf... His parents wouldn't give him up, so they killed them... I suspect they would've only knocked out Grey Wolf if they hadn't been killed by the Grey Wolf (that makes sense, really, it does)...

There must be something really special about Grey Wolf... I suspect that he is one of many who have the 'gut-churning' near planar travel... The gut-churning is a negative response, so it must be a preventative measure... I think the Crosser's Maze must be powered by these individuals to prevent planar travel... Thus some groups would want them dead, while other groups would want them safe, at any cost (even killing Grey Wolf's parents)...

Maybe the power of each of these individuals (in game terms, 'level') is in direct correlation to their effectiveness in preventing planar travel... Thus the high-level Grey Wolf would be an integral piece...

But this logic is thrown off track by the prophecy that the Company will have to kill Grey Wolf... Possibly these persons are needed to open a gateway... Somehow they focus or aid planar travel... Kibi always shows up near Grey Wolf, right?... These people (or just Grey Wolf) could be a sort of homing beacon to that plane... He is a shining light used to plot course...

The reason I suspect that there are multiple 'beacons' is that only a few Silver Shells ever bothered him about it... If it all hinged on him, then I suspect a larger contingent (one from each side, actually) would have tracked him down... The being who tried to give him poison spoke many different languages before getting the right one; this leads me to believe that he went to hundreds of different persons from all over the plane, trying to get them to kill themselves... In fact, I believe that being to have used Grey Wolf as a beacon to find him in the first place...

That's my story and I'm sticking to it...

RavenSinger: Hey Sagiro, a first-time poster here. I just want to pass along a big thank you for your Story Hour. It has made many a dull hour at work highly, highly entertaining. Your originality and storytelling ability are absolutely first-rate...

One question: you have said that you have gotten through about half of the original story arc. If it doesn't give away too much, could you tell us what have we been through so far that was in that original story arc? I am putting together a long-term campaign, and I am finding myself getting lost in minutiae very quickly.

Sagiro: For me, the key is to stay away from the minutiae for as long as possible!

Seriously, when I say that I feel I'm about halfway through my original story arc, that's only in the grossest of terms. When I started my campaign I knew only a few things about it. I knew the characters and motivations of Naradawk, "P," and the Sharshun. I knew what the Archmagi were trying to do to thwart the bad guys. I knew what the Masking was. And I had a handful of unfocused ideas about the PCs' character hooks (mostly provided by my players), like Oa-Lyanna, and Ernie's "Wilburforce" heritage. But the number of things that I *didn't* know when I started would probably astound you. At the risk of "pulling back the curtain" for my PCs, here's a partial list of terms that were *not* in my original pre-start-of-the-game plans:

- The Crosser's Maze
- Kivia
- The Burning God
- Mokad
- The Eyes of Moirel
- King Farazil the Soul Eater

I developed all of these ideas, and looked for ways to weave them together, as the story was unfolding. I'd have crazy ideas and look for ways to make them work with the story.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about. I had an idea for a cool wolf-pack creature – the Seki. I introduced it through the letter from Tharnius that the Company found. Morningstar surprised me by asking the Chroniclers at her church to research it, so I thought about what might have been written about it in the past.

And then I had the idea that an old warning about the Seki might also include a warning about something else. And the Soul Eaters made a good complement – a single mind in many bodies as opposed to many minds merging into a single body (which is what the Seki was). I figured that some time later, after I'd had more time to think about it, I could introduce a Soul Eater into the plot and see what it did.

But I didn't worry about it just then. I just planted the seed in case I wanted to use it later. And eventually I did – it became King Farazil, assassin-at-large and Important Plot Element.

And that's my "secret" (such as it is). Plant lots of seeds as you go. Don't worry about them all at once, up front. You'll go crazy. The only reason my campaign seems so full of detail is that I and my players have spent *five and a half years* adding detail to the story.

Of course, the second part of the seed-planting plan is to keep track of everything. It makes it easy to incorporate new ideas and make your players think you've been planning it all along! And the best way to keep track of everything is to write a Story Hour! It's fun, and if you're lucky you'll end up with kindly people telling you how much fun it is to read your story.

My last "secret" is the most important. Find good players. Make sure they understand up front what kind of campaign you want to run, and make sure you understand what kind of game they think is fun. Without my terrific players, I'm just a third-rate hack.

OK, I've probably rambled on too long at this point. But to answer your original question (what has happened to bring my players "halfway" along the story arc), it's mostly a matter of: (a) how close Naradawk's plans are to fruition; and (b) the long-awaited revelation of a couple of pieces of knowledge that will be revealed in the next few posts.



The next morning, the party rise, refreshed and ready to face the final challenge. Looking out the open door of the Greenhouse, they see a curious sight. It looks like Tal Hae, but strangely reconfigured. A single wide avenue runs straight from the door to a distant stone tower. On either side of the street are various familiar buildings that in the "real" world are scattered all over the city, but now are all visible at once. Resolute and hopeful, the Company walk out the door and down the street towards the tower. In preparation for any impending trouble, Grey Wolf casts *invisibility* on Dranko, and *endure elements (fire)* on himself.

After they have a gone a short way, the scene around them begins to shift and flicker. Buildings are vanishing and being replaced by other images: foreign places, rooms, forests, buildings and people the party have never seen. The perspective changes confusingly. Undaunted, they continue on.

Some of the scenes on the sides of the road become sharper, more real:

- Solomea sitting at a chess table, across from a small grinning man.
- Solomea and three other robed figures running in terror down a dark tunnel, pursued by a beholder.
- A beautiful green meadow, with Solomea's smiling parents at a picnic cloth.
- Solomea grinding a glass lens.
- The Silver Recluse crawling on a baby's arm.
- A circle of men and women in long navy robes, standing around and touching a central figure with something glowing on his forehead.
- A vast city of crystal towers.

And then, the images start to become familiar:

- A panorama of the Mouth of Nahalm, with a Ventifact Colossus in the distance.
- Morningstar training with Clariel back at Kynder Hold.
- Tor about to smash a green glass seal, as the party crowd around the Death Kiss in the Black Circle bestiary.
- Flicker, grinning, picking the pocket of a boorish halfling who's complaining about the service in his parents' inn.
- The Company standing around Abernathy's deathbed, hearing his last living words.
- Kay as a small child, listening to her mother sing an Elvish song, while a breeze flutters the curtains.
- Sitting and eating with the Yuja around a great bonfire.
- Ernie waving goodbye to his parents as he sets out for Tal Hae, *Pyknite* strapped to his side.
- The Ventifact Colossus looming over the city of Sand's Edge, while Stormknights and Utholites battle in its shadow.
- Dranko being whipped by Califax with a leather strap, leaving red marks across his back.
- King Farazil the Soul Eater in Sovrenna's body, falling back from the burning gates of God's Thorn and then laughing as she rises from the mud.
- Aravis standing mute, looking across a burned field at the burned-out shell of his home.
- The keelboat *Floating Light* gliding through the Sea of Snakes.
- Grey Wolf facing a small kobold-ish creature handing him a small green pellet.
- The Company standing in the huge glass cylinder beneath God's Thorn, the air above full of globes.

These images are flashing faster and faster, and all around them now. The street has long since ceased to be visible. And then, all at once, the images cease. The members of the Company find themselves in a huge... room? – with stone walls and an iron floor. It's like no room they've ever been in, but at the same time it's shockingly familiar.

Set in the floor are two shallow pits full of squirming, squeaking rats, just like those beneath Gohgan's basement. Near those, along one wall, is an iron maiden, the very one that a troll closed on Morningstar years earlier. In another part of the room are rows of pews, arranged as they were in the defiled Temple of Brechen during their fight against Hodge.

One corner of the room seems to be broken open, and it opens onto an endless desert of fine shifting sand – the Mouth of Nahalm. In the center of the room, set into the floor, is a large obsidian black circle.

The Company have only a few seconds to take in this crazy amalgam of battle sites and horror taken from their own past. But they realize that something is about to happen, and quickly cast some preparatory spells. Ernie and Grey Wolf cast *shield*. Morningstar casts the cold version of *fire shield*. Aravis casts *stoneskin* on Kay. Dranko casts *protection from evil*.

Then the guardians that Solomea warned them about appear in the room around them:

- There is Ernie, clad in dark grey plate mail, a black circle emblazoned on the breastplate.
- There is Flicker, with horrible tiger-like features and his palms curving backward away from his fingers.

- There is Dranko, his orcish features grossly exaggerated, and wearing a grey eyepatch with a black circle on it.
- There is Grey Wolf, wearing a silver cloak with a shell insignia.
- There is One Certain Step, wearing grey armor with a downward-facing wavy dagger on the front – the symbol of Vinceris, Kivian demigod of murder and assassins.
- There is Morningstar, wearing her usual black robes, but with a Black Circle holy symbol hanging around her neck.
- There is Aravis, his body deformed, with bugbear-like features and black beady eyes.
- There is Makel, flames playing around his body, his face horribly burned.
- There is Kay, hunched over slightly, with a deformed orc-like face.

The eyes of all their foes blaze with a fierce hatred.

The battle begins...

Rincewind: I have to ask: what would happen if one of the Company cast *true seeing* at this point?

Sagiro: I'm not sure – I would have made a judgement call at the time. It would probably have been one of two things:

- (1) They'd see just what they were seeing without it, since the *true seeing* was based in the same weird frame of reference as everything else (though it would have indicated if one of their foes was using an illusion, was invisible, etc., just as it should).
- (2) The caster would have experienced a sharp head pain, possibly taken a couple points of damage, and possibly blacked out for a round. (That would be in keeping with the effect of trying to *scry* in the Maze, which I had already established.)

As it happened, no one cast it, so I didn't have to worry about it.

Cor Azer: While most of the Company would translate easily enough to 'evil' versions, what did you do for One Certain Step since he's a paladin (or so I believe). Did you go blackguard or just make him an evil fighter?

I'm curious because I don't know what level the Company are at, so I don't know if the blackguard prestige class would be available.

Sagiro: I didn't make Step into a blackguard – I just kept all of his normal abilities, with good and evil swapped for relevant powers. At this point the characters were in the 7th-9th level range. Specifically:

Kay: 9th
Morningstar: 9th
Dranko: 9th
Flicker: 9th
Ernie: 8th
Grey Wolf: 8th
One Certain Step: 8th
Aravis: 7th
Makel: 7th

Quartermoon: I have to admit that the "yourself as your nemesis" motif is a particular favorite of mine. This must have been a terrific session to play! I'm eager to read what happens...!

Piratecat: Yeah, we were facing enemies as competent as we were: we were facing ourselves. And those bastards used our tactics, too!

KidCthulhu: PC and I have been holding our breath for several days, waiting to see if any of you would guess who the guardians would be. Some of us (the players) had guessed during the game, but weren't sure if Sagiro would really try a trick as old and occasionally hackneyed as that.

But just like the chess game, he took an old chestnut and gave it new (evil) life. Curse him, Baggins. Prepare for the kicking of butt.

Zaruthustran: So... if everyone else's mirror version is a Black Circle, why is Grey Wolf a Silver Shell? Unless... HE IS A BLACK CIRCLE IN REAL LIFE! (stunning chord)

What's the mirror version of Oa-Lyanna?

Do the evil mirror characters have neat little black goatees like the evil mirror Spock in *Star Trek*?

KidCthulhu: Yes. Even the chicks. But the Heroes had shirts which were ripped just enough to be tantalizing, and a little trickle of blood from the corners of their mouths. That ought to even things up.

Blackjack: Sadly, this need not be a joke if the Company's chicks were dwarves...

Zaruthustran: Solomea's words were very clever. He said he takes guardians from those who enter his domain, and that his core is guarded by the last group of adventurers to make it this far. I think our heroes are the only adventurers to make it this far, and Solomea took his guardians from them. Neat. Very clever, Sagiro.

Rincewind: I was expecting the guardians to be Lapis's group actually – sure, only Lapis got in, but since this place draws from people's minds, the rest of the group could have been recreated (or at least created as Lapis saw them). That would also mean that Lapis got here ahead of them, maintaining Sagiro's 'evil quotient'. Of course, his version works even better.

Sparrowhawk: I just realized that this must be *the* battle, the one Piratecat mentioned a ways back. He said that they fought a very powerful enemy, several party members died, and that Dranko got enough XP to make 10th level. Dranko was 9th level at this point. PC also mentioned that they got *information*, that most valuable of commodities. KidCthulhu bragged shortly thereafter that the players finally knew who P was, and I guessed that was (among) the info they got that session.

Now I think I know, too. P is someone the Company has met already. P is for Pog. Think about it: how did Lapis know the password to Zhamir? My theory is that Pog and Mazzery have some way of piercing the magical barrier surrounding the City in a Bottle to communicate with allies on the outside. They need the Crosser's Maze to escape, which is why they called for Lapis to come with a war-party. Of course, the Company has thrown a wrench into their plans by defeating Lapis in battle, and now they have a good chance of ending up in control of the Maze. But they're probably going to wake up without any weapons or armor or magic items, but I'm just assuming that based on something Solomea said. I really don't know what's going to happen.

Now, how about Grey Wolf being a member of the Black Circle? I think it's within the realm of possibility. We've already seen that the Black Circle is an apparently benign presence in Kivia. We've learned that the Hets were fortresses of an ancient Black Circle faction that was declared heretic by the main church. Perhaps this was the Black Circle that is allied with Naradawk, and that the party has been fighting all this time. And perhaps Grey Wolf is on a mission to destroy the renegade faction. But what I want to know is what a Silver Shell would be doing with a bunch of Black Circle priests. And what's with the Flicker-shasa? And the mutant Aravis and Kay? What's the evil version of Oa-Lyanna?

Zaruthustran: Ooooo, good one, Sparrowhawk. I think the racial characteristics are just more mirror things. Elves as bugbears, humans as orcs, etc. That would explain Flicker-shasa: halfling → rakshasa.

dinkeldog: Yeah, but Ernie's a halfling, too.

Zaruthustran: But your P = Pog thing is intriguing. It got me thinking of something else: what if the City in a Bottle is where Naradawk is trapped? What if Naradawk is the Sultan? That would explain why Pog and Mazerry are stockpiling magical weapons and items. Not to make an assault on the Sultan, but to make an assault on Charagan.

What if, in gaining control of the Maze, they are somehow helping Naradawk escape?

Piratecat: People's dark reflection was the thing they hated most:

There is Ernie, clad in dark grey plate mail, a black circle emblazoned on the breastplate.

Pretty straightforward. Other than bullies (and maybe rats), Ernie detests the Black Circle and all they stand for.

There is Flicker, with horrible tiger-like features and his palms curving backward away from his fingers.

Flicker had his butt kicked by the rakshasa back when we were trying to find the cure for the Powder addiction. He was ambushed by it while he was alone, and it scared him terribly.

There is Dranko, his orcish features grossly exaggerated, and wearing a grey eye-patch with a black circle on it.

Let's say that Dranko is fond neither of his orcish side, and the baggage it entails, or the Black Circle that caused Mokad to split his temple.

There is Grey Wolf, wearing a silver cloak with a shell insignia.

As you just learned, Grey Wolf has a serious grudge against the people who killed his parents. Who knew (until last session) that it was the Silver Shells?

There is One Certain Step, wearing grey armor with a downward-facing wavy dagger on the front – the symbol of Vinceris, Kivian demigod of murder and assassins.

Straightforward.

There is Morningstar, wearing her usual black robes, but with a Black Circle holy symbol hanging around her neck.

Likewise.

There is Aravis, his body deformed, with bugbear-like features and black beady eyes.

Bugbears killed Aravis's parents, who were of noble birth; while he was away, they raided and burned the estate. (At this point, if anyone says "Aunt Beru! Uncle Owen!", they have to pay the piggie.) He maintains a grudge.

There is Makel, flames playing around his body, his face horribly burned.

Makel was badly burned in the Temple of Nifi back in Seablade Point, which was where the Fire God worshippers began their invasion of Charagan through the gartine arch.

There is Kay, hunched over slightly, with a deformed orc-like face.

Kay's chief species enemy is orcs, and Oa-Lyanna is still furious about how the Kesh (orcs) brutalized her race. (In fact, one of the reasons that Dranko broke off his engagement to Kay was pressure from the wind spirit, who was none too fond of his half-orcish heritage.)

This part of the story will be presented in an unusual format. The inimitable Dr. Rictus did me the great favor of recording the results of *every single action* that took place in the following combat. So for this installment, I'm just going to run through the initiatives, character by character, with every action described.

Members of the opposing "evil party" are described straightforwardly as "Evil Kay," "Evil Ernie," etc.

Ready? Here we go...

Kay opens up by shooting her *mighty longbow* at Evil Grey Wolf. One arrow finds its mark, dealing 12 points of damage.

Evil Flicker immediately activates his *ring of blinking*. (This seems to confirm that their enemies are equipped the same as they are...)

Evil Makel uses his magic short sword to fire off a *Melf's acid arrow* at Aravis, and this also hits.

Dranko uses his *protective ward* power on himself, to give him a large bonus on his next saving throw.

Flicker activates his own *ring of blinking*.

Aravis uses his *wand of fireballs* and fires at one group of enemies. The Company have appeared in one general area in the center of the room, but their evil counterparts are in two groups, one on either side of them. The 30-point *fireball* engulfs Evil Morningstar, Flicker, Kay, Grey Wolf and Makel. Evil Flicker evades, ducking behind a pew. Evil Morningstar is partially protected by her *fire shield*.

Evil Grey Wolf hits the whole party with a wimpy 16-point *fireball*.

Evil Aravis hits the whole party with a less wimpy 26-point *fireball*. Many saves are failed.

Evil Dranko casts some spell at Kay, but she makes a saving throw and is unaffected.

Evil Kay fires her own bow at Aravis, and like her good counterpart she scores a 12-point hit with one arrow.

Grey Wolf casts a *fireball* at the same evil group as did Aravis, but the flames are weak and scattered – full damage is only 9 points.

Ernie casts *silence* at a point in space near to where Evil Morningstar is standing.

Makel uses his own sword to fire an *acid arrow* at Evil Aravis, but misses.

Evil Ernie casts a spell at Kay, but again she makes her saving throw and is unaffected. Ernie mocks his evil counterpart: “That was stupid, Ernie! I happen to know that your portion size is tiny!”

Morningstar casts *healing circle*, restoring 10 hit points to everyone but Dranko.

Evil Step takes a double move towards Aravis.

Evil Morningstar, realizing that she’s in a magical *silence*, picks a direction and moves away until she starts hearing things again. Then she casts a 32-point *flame strike* at the party. Most saves are made.

One Certain Step runs to protect Aravis from his evil counterpart. He uses his *smite evil* ability and deals 18 points of damage to Evil Step.

Kay runs up to Evil Grey Wolf and attacks, but misses.

Evil Flicker, *blinking*, sneak attacks Kay for 16 points of damage, but her *stoneskin* absorbs most of the damage.

Evil Makel launches a full attack at Kay, but only hits once, and only 1 point of damage gets through the *stoneskin*. Aravis takes 4 points of acid damage from the *acid arrow*.

Dranko casts *prayer*, getting all of the party except for Aravis, and also encompassing many of the enemy.

Flicker, *blinking*, sneak attacks Evil Makel, but blinks out at just the wrong time. His sword thrust goes into the Ethereal Plane.

Aravis casts a 30-point *fireball*, roasting Evil Dranko, Evil Aravis, Evil Step, and dozens of rats. Evil Step fails his save and is looking near death.

Evil Grey Wolf tries to maneuver out of the *silence*, but eschews the most direct route to avoid attacks of opportunity from Kay, and doesn’t manage to find his way clear.

Evil Aravis fires off a 24-point *lightning bolt* at Step, Makel and Grey Wolf. This reduces Step and Grey Wolf to 1 hit point each! Makel makes his save but still goes unconscious.

Evil Dranko casts *hold person* at Flicker, but Flicker makes his save and is unaffected.

Evil Kay is now battling Good Kay toe-to-toe. Evil Kay swings and hits once for 9 points and again for 11, but the *stoneskin* takes almost all the damage. Still, Kay’s *stoneskin* is running low at this point.

Grey Wolf lobs yet another *fireball*, this one for 16 points. It gets Evil Aravis, Evil Dranko, Evil Ernie, and the other rat pit. There’s a lot less squeaking in the room now.

Ernie moves and casts *cure moderate wounds* on himself, curing 8 hit points. Meanwhile, Makel lies unconscious on the floor, bleeding.

Evil Ernie moves and casts *protection from good* on himself.

Morningstar casts a 28-point *flame strike* of her own at Evil Aravis and Evil Dranko. Evil Aravis makes his save for half, and Dranko evades it entirely.

Aravis: Hi, all. Yes, I am the one and the same Aravis from Sagiro’s Story Hour. I recently caught myself up on his postings and thought I would throw out a few comments...

First, a little insight into Aravis. He is a bit manic/depressive. This comes from a lot of guilt over his parents and my own personal feelings (which came across as his) that he was really out of his depth when he joined the party and why in hell did Ozilinsh think he was good enough to join this group and why did he ever think adventuring was better than studying in his master’s tower. He is mostly over that, but those feelings resurface when he does something stupid in combat.

This leads to my second comment. I do have to admit that during the ogre battle where he got his head bashed it was due to something really dumb. Aravis closed to melee with the ogre after casting *fist of stone*. Sagiro promptly taught me a lesson.

To give more compliments to Sagiro, he also picks up well on his players’ emotions. As an example, in the Maze when we saw Shreen, I was one of the folks he looked directly at when reminding us of our promise. Sagiro had picked up on Aravis’s sense of fair play and this has been on Aravis’s mind ever since.

About the chess game, I got a real sinking feeling knowing Grey Wolf and I had to sacrifice our own party members and not knowing that we were not killing them.

Two corrections to the last couple of Story Hour posts:

1. I cast *fireballs* in the final battle from spells and not from the wand. It had not been created yet.
2. There was an omission of one scene where I finally came clean about what the king had talked with me about many months before. I am not sure what led up to it (it was a few months ago), but we were given the impression that being successful in the Maze had something to do with friendship and truth (and the American way...). As such, Aravis felt he had to clear his soul and admit to Morningstar that the king had given him the task of spying on her as he did not trust the Church of Ell. This was another thing affecting Aravis’s self-doubts and he finally realized the party’s friendship was more important to him than his oath to the king.

Evil Step, gravely injured, attempts to *lay hands* on himself. To his shock and the party's delight, nothing happens! This may be what Solomea was talking about when he promised to "remove some of the powers" of their enemies.

Evil Morningstar casts *searing darkness* at Ernie, dealing him 17 points of damage. This brings Ernie down to 1 hit point again, and shows the wisdom of his previous curing action.

One Certain Step *lays hands* on himself for the full amount – 24 points. This only makes Evil Step more frustrated at his own failure.

Kay and Oa-Lyanna, surrounded by three enemies, use their *whirlwind* power, doing 14 points of damage to each of their targets. Evil Makel is left stunned by the attack.

Evil Flicker is unfortunately not stunned. He delivers a *blinking* critical hit to Kay, dealing 19 points of damage even after the *stoneskin* absorbs its share.

Evil Makel, stunned by the *whirlwind*, does nothing but try to clear his head. Aravis takes another 4 points of damage from residual acid.

Dranko casts *cure light wounds* on Grey Wolf for 8 hit points.

Flicker delivers a sneak attack of his own to Evil Makel, dealing 15 points of damage. Evil Makel crumples to the ground, dead. The party cheer.

Aravis casts *haste* upon himself.

Evil Grey Wolf finally finds his way out of the *silence*, and *fireballs* the party (and Evil Step, who's in its radius) for 20 points. Grey Wolf, already badly injured, fails his save, but is barely alive thanks to an *endure elements*. Makel, already unconscious and bleeding to death, has no such protection. When the fireball clears, his dead body is charred and smoldering.

Evil Aravis then follows this up with a well-placed *lightning bolt*. Grey Wolf and Step are caught full on in the blast, and both are struck dead! Things look grim.

Evil Dranko tries to use his ranged healing ability on Evil Step, but this ability also fails him. Thank goodness for small favors.

Evil Kay only manages to score one hit on Good Kay, and it bounces entirely off the *stoneskin*.

Ernie casts a *cure* spell on himself, but rolls poorly and only gains a few hit points back.

Evil Ernie casts *shield of faith* on himself.

Morningstar casts a *cure* spell on herself.

Evil Step attacks Aravis, but misses.

Evil Morningstar follows the example of her good counterpart and also *cures* herself.

Kay responds by slashing at Evil Morningstar with her swords, but doesn't manage to drop her.

Evil Flicker then sneak attacks Kay, but he *blinks* out as he attacks, and misses.

Dranko distance-heals Aravis for 6 points.

Flicker, having killed Evil Makel on his last turn, steps forward to attack Evil Morningstar. His blow is perfectly placed; he *blinks* in with his sword stuck entirely through his victim's body. Evil Morningstar slides off the sword, still standing but near to death.

Aravis casts *haste* on Morningstar, then *polymorphs* himself into an ogre, healing himself 7 hit points in the process.

Evil Grey Wolf peppers Morningstar with 11 hit points of *magic missiles*.

Evil Aravis, knowing a good thing when he sees it, *hastes* himself.

Evil Dranko pulls out his *book of infinite spells* and starts flipping through its pages, hoping to find one that can have a serious effect on the battle.

Evil Kay takes another 10 points away from her counterpart's *stoneskin*. At this point, there is only 1 point remaining out of the 70 points of protection from the *stoneskin* spell.

Ernie *cures* himself for 14 hit points.

Evil Ernie double-moves towards the thick of the fight.

Morningstar, now *hasted* by Aravis, casts *searing darkness* twice in rapid succession. The first does 15 points of damage to her own evil counterpart, burning right into and through the Black Circle holy symbol around her neck. Evil Morningstar drops, unconscious. The second *searing darkness* strikes Evil Grey Wolf, but only for 8 points of damage.

Evil Step attacks Morningstar with his greatsword, but misses.

Good Kay attacks Evil Kay and hits twice for enough damage to knock her foe out of the fight.

Evil Flicker sneak attacks Kay, proving that Good Flicker isn't the only halfling-sized killing machine in the battle. He criticals for 21 points of damage and the last point of *stoneskin*.

Dranko, who has been invisible since walking out of the Greenhouse this "morning," finally takes an offensive action. He sneak attacks Evil Aravis, misses, and becomes visible for his efforts.

Flicker tumbles around Evil Ernie and swings his short sword, but misses.

Aravis fires 11 points of *magic missiles* at his double, and then (still in ogre form) charges at Evil Ernie. Having learned a hard lesson back in the mountains about ogres and grappling, he wrestles the smaller halfling to the ground.

Evil Grey Wolf gives Aravis some *magic missiles* in return, and does the same amount of damage – 11 points.

Evil Aravis attacks Dranko with his *rod of the vampire*, but misses. Then he takes a step back and fires off more reliable *magic missiles*, doing 14 points of damage to the half-orc.

Evil Dranko casts a spell, and then moves forward to deliver a touch attack on Good Dranko. It's an *inflict serious wounds* spell, and Dranko takes 20 points of damage.

Ernie attacks Evil Flicker, and hits twice despite the *blinking* of his target, dealing out 15 points of damage.

Evil Ernie tries calling upon the Strength of Yondalla, figuring that will help him escape from Aravis's ogrish grasp. But his attempt is futile; like the specially granted divine powers of the other evil clerics, this one too fails to work.

Morningstar casts *divine power* to improve her melee ability, and then closes with Evil Dranko.

Ancalagon: What happened to Evil Step? Shouldn't the second *fireball* bring him down?

Sagiro: Hmm. Good question. Two explanations that I can think of:

- (1) I missed transcribing something from Dr. Rictus's fight log.
- (2) Dr. Rictus missed logging some occurrence during the battle (which would hardly be a criticism of the good Doctor, given how much he was trying to keep track of during a fast-moving 18-participant combat).

I guess the moral is that there were bound to be a few omissions or inaccuracies in something this complicated. I wouldn't sweat it.

Kay casts *cure light wounds* on herself, healing 11 points of damage.

Evil Flicker attacks Kay, and while he *blinks* out on his first attack, he connects on the second for 17 points of damage. Kay drops unconscious, and would be dead had she not just healed herself.

Dranko uses his distance healing ability on Kay, *curing* her of 12 points of damage and bringing her back to consciousness.

Flicker attacks Evil Grey Wolf but misses.

Aravis, knowing first-hand what it feels like, charges with Evil Ernie towards the nearest stone wall and slams him into it. But Evil Ernie's plate mail absorbs the shock, and Evil Ernie is still struggling. Aravis then tries to use Evil Ernie as a bludgeoning weapon against Evil Aravis, but Evil Ernie wriggles free before he can be used as a club.

Evil Grey Wolf swings his sword at Flicker but misses – the *blinking* is making it tough for the two to hit each other.

Evil Aravis fires off two *magic missile* spells at Morningstar; the 8 missiles do a total of 25 points of damage. Ouch!

Evil Dranko casts *dispel magic* on Morningstar, and checks against six different spell effects, including *fire shield*, *prayer*, *haste* and *divine power*. To her great relief, he fails to dispel a single one!

Ernie attacks Evil Flicker, but both of his swings miss.

Evil Ernie attacks Aravis twice, and both of his swings miss. Tough round for the Ernies.

Morningstar *cures* herself for a much needed 23 points of healing, then attacks Evil Aravis. She fumbles, dropping her weapon.

Kay stands up and attacks Evil Flicker, and she misses. That little bugger is hard to hit!

Evil Flicker attacks Kay twice, and he returns the favor of missing.

Dranko casts *hold person* on his evil twin. It works! Evil Dranko is *held*.

Flicker attacks Evil Grey Wolf, and succeeds in one of his sneak attacks. Evil Grey Wolf drops to the ground. A killing machine, I tell you!

Aravis, having dropped Evil Ernie, grapples his own evil double. He squeezes with his massive ogrish arms and deals 7 points of damage.

Evil Aravis, not having many options while being grappled by an ogre, uses his *ringblade* to stab at Aravis. He hits, for 5 points of damage.

Evil Dranko, magically *held*, uses his *robe of blending* to take on the appearance of another ogre, in a pathetic desperation move. No one is fooled.

Ernie slashes at Evil Flicker and actually connects, doing him 8 points of damage.

Evil Ernie casts a spell and tries to deliver a touch attack to Aravis, but fails to hit.

Morningstar casts *hold person* at Evil Flicker, but he *blinks* out at the right time and avoids the spell. Morningstar then goes back to melee, picking up her weapon and swinging at Evil Ernie. It's a solid hit, delivering 17 points of damage.

Kay launches a full attack at Evil Flicker, but the nasty little halfling *blinks* out on all three swings, much to everyone's dismay.

Adding more injury to injury, Evil Flicker attacks Kay, landing a 13-point sneak attack that drops Kay unconscious.

Dranko delivers a *coup de grace* to his *held* counterpart. The evil half-orc's head is pulped with a mace blow.

Flicker attacks Evil Flicker, but with all the *blinking* going on does not manage to score a hit.

Aravis throws his own evil double into the iron maiden, and gets the door partially closed. There's a crunching sound from inside.

Evil Aravis, not yet dead, pokes his *wand of magic missiles* through the iron maiden's door and zaps Aravis for 10 points of damage.

Ernie tries to *cure* Kay, but fails his Concentration check to cast defensively, and his spell fizzles. Kay is still down.

Evil Ernie attacks Morningstar, but his blows are deflected by her armor and shield.

Morningstar steps around Evil Ernie's *shield* spell, but slips on the slime that was surrounding the rat pens. As she's *hasted*, she stands back up and swings her weapon at the evil halfling, but misses.

Kay lies on the ground bleeding to death. Evil Flicker decides to not wait for nature to take its course. He bends down and slices Kay to ribbons.

Dranko moves to flank Evil Ernie with Morningstar. His sneak attack deals 11 points of damage, which sends Evil Ernie to the mat.

Flicker finally gets the *blinking* in sync with his own weapons. He hits his evil twin twice, both sneak attacks, and deals a total of 42 points of damage. Evil Flicker is very, very dead.

Aravis tries to slam the iron maiden shut on his evil double, but can't get good footing on the bloody and slimy floor. Still, there's more of that crunching sound, and Evil Aravis whimpers.

But he's not dead yet! He uses his wand to *magic missile* Dranko, doing 19 points of damage.

Ernie tries to heal Kay, but it's no use. Evil Flicker did his job well, and Kay is dead.

Morningstar, who well remembers what it's like to be caught in an iron maiden, finishes off the battle herself. She takes a running charge into the mostly closed door, and there's a hideous wail from within that dies out a few seconds later. Blood pours out from the bottom.

The last enemy has been dispatched. But the price is high – Makel, Grey Wolf, One Certain Step and Kay all lie dead.



Ancalagon: GASP!!! Half the party is dead!

Oh dear! Excellent fight.

Blake: Of course, getting killed in the Crosser's Maze may not leave you as dead as the usual kind of getting killed does... especially when you're fighting your evil selves. Maybe those who died in the battle just woke up. Maybe the ones that didn't die, but whose evil counterparts did die, woke up evil...

Stelyos: WOW!!! What a pivotal combat! How's the Company going to recover from THIS??

As mentioned, wonderful player characters make wonderful campaigns.

Sparrowhawk: Damn, that was BRUTAL! I think that may be the first description of an RPG battle in which the combatants were slipping on the floor because it was slick with blood! I can't wait to find out what's going to happen now that they've killed the guardians! In fact, I'm so excited that I can't not end a sentence in this post with an exclamation point!

Rincewind: What was Flicker's body count in that battle? Four?

Kosh: That took guts, Sagiro... I take my hat off to you... (*takes his hat off to you*)

A fantastic battle... A tired idea, but well placed... The hints leading up to it made it even more fun, at least for us watchers... if I were a player, I would've strangled you... Now come the secrets... (*rubs hands greedily*)... I can't wait...

PlaneSailing: Favourite part of battle? Ernie mocks his evil counterpart: "That was stupid, Ernie! I happen to know that your portion size is tiny!" Telling observation? *Blink* + rogue sneak attack = awesome combination. There are not going to be any *rings of blinking* in my campaign, I can tell you. Hey, that Dr. Rictus must be a fast writer!

kidcthulhu: Yeah, you can tell the inimitable prose style of Dr. Rictus. And yeah, Ernie has to really get Flicker to be the new front-line fighter!

dinkeldog: How does the party get to betray Grey Wolf if he's dead? (Unless the betrayal is resurrecting him when he'd rather stay dead, I guess.) Also, with Kay gone, what does Oa-Lyanna do?

Piratecat: Dinkeldog, that will be revealed any day now...

This fight was brutal... just brutal. Our evil selves kept battering us with area attack spells, and as a result Dranko was on the defensive and healing people almost the entire battle. I hate being on the defensive. We clustered up, and we had a little bit of bad luck – there was a point when I thought we were all going to die – but we managed to turn the tide in the end. The knowledge that this was it, we were fighting for the real prize and there would be no mercy, certainly helped focus our attention.

But the price was high, eh? What happens when we leave the Maze? And what is happening to our bodies? And how do we take the Crosser's Maze with us? And what are Pog and Mazzery doing right this very instant? And how the @#\$! do we get out of the bottle?!

Mere seconds after the last foe is gone, the entire room vanishes, leaving the five remaining party members standing in a black void. Solomea is there before them, old, but with an expression on his face like that of Abernathy on his last living day. On his forehead is a disc of silver lines, like a labyrinth. Silver lines run all over his skin as well. Small lights zip along the tracery.

Solomea speaks: "The Maze can at last be freely given. It only exists in the mind, and should go to someone of high intellect and with knowledge of the arcane. Anyone else would be driven mad by its very presence. Do not use it without great care, and probably not even then. It takes a great amount of training to use the Maze, and without it even those who think they're able to use it will succumb to its power. I, Solomea, have been defeated by it, and my mind was broken long ago. But my mind is also one with the multiverse, and I can see the truth in things. In return for your help, I will answer your questions about..."

But his face twists horribly, and the dark side of Solomea asserts its dominance one last time. "No!... No, we will do no favors for the ones who would kill us, who you are going to let... hmm... No, I think I will. Perhaps your appropriate torment will come from knowing what was almost in your grasp. I see that what you most lack, and most desire, is knowledge. And you know so little about so many things. Here is what I will do. I will answer one question for you, and only one, regarding those things that I can see in the web of the multiverse. Afterwards, you'll have the answer to one question... and be haunted by all of the answers you might have had, that I could have given you."

"Consider: some of the answers you will find less relevant than you might think, and others more. Some answers will be brief, and others long. Some you would find satisfying, others less so. Some may raise yet more questions. But enough of my invaluable counsel. Here are your questions. Choose one." And he spits out a litany of eight questions:

- 1. Why did Califax warn you not to trust Praska?**
- 2. Why are people trying to kill Grey Wolf?**
- 3. Who killed Grawly and Thewana?**
- 4. Why are rats and ravens attacking Aravis, and why do cats think he's "like a cat"?**
- 5. Where is the body of Sagiro Emberleaf?**
- 6. What is the purpose behind the schemes of the Sharshun?**
- 7. What is the full meaning of Step's poem?**
- 8. Who is 'P'?**

The party debate. Some questions – mostly those concerning only individual party members – they don't even consider. But there are a few that they find hard to choose among. They would love to know who killed Grawly and Thewana, since that could be critical to the safety of the Spire. They very much want to know what the Sharshun are up to, and strongly consider asking the question that concerns them.

But in the end, the final question seems too important to pass up. "Who is 'P'?" they ask.

Solomea smiles. "I will tell you.

"'P' is the first initial of Parthol Runecarver, a name you may have heard. Your masters in the Spire have certainly heard of him. Long ago he was one of the greatest Archmagi on Charagan. But he strayed from the path of servitude to the people, believing the mages themselves should rule outright.

"Frustrated that his fellows in the Spire did not share his lust for power, Parthol found a way to communicate with Naloric across the planar boundary, and it was only by Parthol's treachery that Naloric was able to come back through the *gate*, bringing his army. His treachery cost the Elhen Tarathi their lives. He never told Lapis that part. When Naloric was defeated, Runecarver faked his own death and went into hiding.

"Now he plots with Naloric's son Naradawk for the same purpose: to have his revenge upon the Spire. By his machinations the blood gargoyle was loosed upon Ghant, and while Fylnius was distracted, Meledien, Octesian and Restimar were brought through to Charagan. And with their help Parthol has goaded the humanoids to the heights of war, a war which is forcing the Archmagi to more immediate need, leaving the *gate* even less well secured.

"Oh, but it is a dangerous game the Runecarver plays, and his schemes are as deep as his malice. His days are filled with fear, despite his power. What if Naradawk finds out? What if Mokad, who doesn't even know Parthol is alive, finds out?

"In the end, Parthol wants the same thing you do, my friends. But he needs Naradawk to topple the Spire, before he breaks it.

"And takes its place."

Solomea's face contorts as his benign personality takes control again. "Now, quickly. Who will take the Maze from me?"

Aravis steps forward. Of all the Company his mind is the most keen, and he has deep knowledge of the planes. Solomea reaches out his hand towards Aravis's head. "Again, I warn you, be extremely cautious, and do not seek to plumb its depths, lest it destroy you. It will always seek to distract you, call to you, but that path will lead you to madness. Beware!

"But I will do one last thing; I will help get you out. All of you. Golden strands, my friend, golden strands. Take them with you. But focus only on them; do not let the expanse distract you. Now... please... take it! Take my doom from me..."

Solomea's hand touches Aravis, who is nearly overwhelmed by the shock of the contact. His mind is filled with a cacophony of images and strange ideas and vast spaces and lines of power and endless magic and swirling lights and colors and...

...he shakes his head, and concentrates on Solomea's last words: "Golden strands." All around him are twisting cords of golden light, one rising from each of his companions, even those recently slain. They travel in close formation out into the unfathomable void. Aravis feels a close affinity to his friends and their ties to reality; it seems that friendship has its own manifestation in the maelstrom of the Maze.

He reaches out to the essential cords of his companions, grasps them with his mind, and is swept up with them, hurtling into the eternal cosmos where magic and thought are inseparable...

Ancalagon: Wow. Those eight questions...

I must say that "Who is P?" was a good choice. Was it the best? I realise that some of those questions refer to events so long ago that I'm not even sure what they mean (I'm really looking forward to that summary – hint, hint).

One that struck me was, "Where is the body of Sagiro Emberleaf?" Why is this important? I always thought he was, ultimately, a minor player... a trusted agent, yes, but nothing more.

Of course, maybe some worthless questions were planted to confuse the heroes.

RangerWickett: Where is the body of Sagiro Emberleaf?

"In the bottom of a river at the base of a mountain, assimilated into the bodies of the offspring of the several thousand fish that ate him."

Rincewind: Why are rats and ravens attacking Aravis, and why do cats think he's "like a cat"?

He's an awakened cat that got polymorphed into human form during 2nd Edition, failed his system shock roll and thus thinks he's a human?



For Kay, Makel, One Certain Step and Grey Wolf, what they experience cannot – and should not – be explained. A description of even approximate accuracy could by itself be enough to tear the sanity out of any mortal soul. So it is just as well that they have no clear memory of what it was like to be one with Solomea's lunacy.

Grey Wolf's eyes snap open. His mind rings with echoes of that madness, and he instinctively shuts it out. A survival reflex. He knows that to give ear to those echoes would break his mind. Kay, Makel and Step experience the same thing upon waking; each has a memory of death, and something far, far worse beyond death. Now they are alive again, but their minds are not the same. There are fine cracks there, and an errant thought could be enough to shatter their psyches like crystal. All four who died in the Maze have lost two points of Wisdom, permanently.

The others also open their eyes. They were standing in the void, watching Solomea reach out to Aravis, and now...



...now they are lying on the floor of a stone corridor. Mazzery is nearby, rummaging around in their *bag of holding* and pulling out handfuls of loose coins and jewelry. Pog is struggling to finish getting Ernie out of his plate mail. Snokas's body is lying close at hand, but there was no golden cord for Aravis to take, and no life remains in him.

It comes to each member of the Company that less than a minute has passed since they fell unconscious, drawn into Solomea's mind.

The two rogue Citizens of Zhamir are entirely unprepared for Solomea's latest victims to actually get *up*. After all, *no one* survives in the Maze. Actually killing the victims is typically an afterthought, a final distasteful task to perform after divesting their prey of all worldly goods. As a purely practical matter, armor is easier to take off a living person than a stiffening dead one. And why should they get blood all over what are about to become their own possessions?

It only takes the party a few seconds to overpower Pog and Mazzery, who have no idea how to fight. Soon the two of them are trussed up like pigs. Pog is babbling all sorts of lies about how surely they can come to some agreement, and how there's no need for hostility, and how it's not how it looks, and how pleased he is to see the party alive, and...

WHAP! Makel belts him in the chops.

Dranko gets right to the point. "Where's the rest of the loot?"

"Loot?" Pog says innocently.

"You were looting our bodies. I'm sure we weren't the first. Solomea told us you were stockpiling. Well? Where's the stockpile?"

Pog gulps. "We... might have some odds and ends tucked away, but I'm sure you wouldn't be..."

"Take us there. And don't try anything."

But before Pog moves, Makel looks over at Aravis. "Er... Aravis. What... happened to you?"

The rest of the party look towards Aravis and give a collective gasp.

On his forehead is a silver metal disc about two inches in diameter, protruding ever so slightly from his skin. Closer examination reveals it to be a finely detailed labyrinth. But that's not the creepy part.

All along his neck and arms (and one might assume the rest of his body) is a tracery of metal lines. Occasionally a dot of white light flashes along one of these lines. But that's not the creepy part either.

No, the creepy part is his eyes. He has no pupils. No irises. No whites. Where a normal person has eyeballs, Aravis has two windows into black, star-dotted space.

So, by the way, does Pewter.

Sparrowhawk: Man, I hope that's not permanent. If it is, they'll have to figure out a way to hide it. Wouldn't do having people stare at Aravis (and his companions) everywhere he goes. It would attract attention. Rumors might get around. Certain People might hear these rumors. Evil stuff would ensue.

Hatchling Dragon: I'm thinking that Aravis would be getting a hefty bonus to Intimidation checks with those looks. I know that I'd have a hell of a time just trying to talk to someone that freaky-looking. I wonder if his contact with the 'cosmic all' grants him any type of special vision, à la Darkvision.

Aravis: The intimidation possibilities were not lost on Aravis...

After the Company verify that Aravis is OK and can see just fine, Pog leads the party down a couple of hallways and stops before an imposing iron door. “It’s right through there,” he says eagerly.

“Is it trapped?” they ask.

Pog mumbles under his breath, but when prodded he admits that yes, there are traps that will go off if some passwords aren’t uttered.

“You’re going first, so we suggest you dispel the traps,” the party tell Pog.

Pog meekly complies, and the door is opened.

OH. MY. GOD.

They are looking at a treasure room like none they’ve ever seen.

It’s a large stone room lit with *continual flame* torches all around the walls. There are several wooden tables set around the room’s perimeter. One is piled with finely crafted and probably magical weapons, and next to it is one heaped with potions and scrolls. Some large bags stuffed beneath the table of weapons are spilling with coins of all different kinds.

In one corner is a huge pile of mundane weapons, armor and random items – mirrors, spikes, coils of rope, a ten foot pole leaning up against the wall, lanterns, a grappling hook, tents. A table in the opposite corner from the “junk pile” is festooned with obviously enchanted items of all descriptions. There is a set of green-covered books in their own metal cages leaning against a table leg. Perhaps most intriguing is an obsidian black circle with an interior diameter of about a foot. It has 30 diamond studs on it, and two small round gaps where diamonds could be set.

“It’s the mother lode,” whispers Flicker.

“Treasure bath!” exclaims Dranko.

They re-bind and gag Pog, and prepare to get down to business...



Rincewind: We all know something nasty is going to happen here. Sagiro’s not going to give that lot away easily. The question is, what?

RangerWickett: Chapter 110: Solomea appears in the doorway, holding a bundle of papers in his good hand, mumbling to himself. Then he looks up and says, “Oh, crap! Um... forget you saw me.”

He vanishes, and then the party realizes... THEY'RE STILL IN THE MAZE!

Sagiro: Sheesh! Easily? What, a monumental combat that ends up costing half the party two points of permanent ability score damage wasn’t nasty enough? Man, if I were really as evil as you people seem to think I am, my players would revolt!

No, at this point in the game I figured the PCs had earned a hefty reward. I mean, in the 16 runs since they had fought Glaum (the guardian of Repose), they had fought dire ravens, salamanders, bug-monkeys, a basilisk, ogres, shambling mounds, Bluecoats, Lapis and her party, a dozen powerful minotaurs, a swarm of strength-draining spiders, and the Evil Mirror Party™. And for all that, they had barely *broken even* in treasure (what they took off the bodies of Lapis’s party was balanced by what they lost in the ogre caverns, and nothing else they had fought had any loot).

The stick does no good without the carrot. I’d been beating them with a pretty big stick. I figured they deserved a big carrot.

Sparrowhawk: So, what is of note in that treasure hoard? And how the hell will the Company take it with them?

Piratecat: Treasure bath!! Sagiro may ask me to delete this; if so, I’m pleased to do so, since he’ll probably include this description in his story. But in the meantime, I thought I’d let you ooh and aah as much as we were about now...

Pog and Mazzery’s storeroom is about 30 feet long and 15 feet wide, lit with *continual flame* torches. Around its perimeter, pushed up against the walls, are several large wooden tables, piled high with loot. It seems like Pog and Mazzery have spent some of their free time organizing the plunder they’ve divested from its Maze-bound owners.

A table a few feet from the door (to your right, looking in) is covered with various weapons and armor, all of which are detecting as magic. Most of these are radiating weakly; they include:

- two identical daggers with silver handles.
- a smooth yew short bow.
- a polished steel buckler.
- 37 steel-tipped arrows, in two non-magical quivers.
- a shiny chain shirt.

- a blood-stained breastplate.
- a set of banded mail with a red lion on the front.
- a huge tower shield with the design of an upward-facing squid.
- a large steel shield, without device, but with black ornamental designs traced around its edge.
- a short sword with a spiraled-leather handle and chunk of red rock on the end of the pommel; it is warm to the touch, and radiates weak evocation magic.
- a black wooden javelin with a sharpened bone point; it radiates weak transmutation magic.
- a beautiful longbow with leather bands; it radiates minor divination magic.

A few of the weapons and armor are radiating stronger magic; they include:

- a curved sickle with a long sharp blade; it radiates moderate transmutation magic.
- a glimmering bastard sword whose entire hilt/pommel/hand-guard assembly is a cleverly carved red dragon; it radiates moderate conjuration magic.
- a set of finely made but slightly greasy feeling leather armor; it radiates moderate conjuration magic.
- studded leather armor whose studs are a dull green color; it radiates moderate abjuration magic.
- a short rust-colored scythe blade on a short handle; it radiates moderate necromancy magic.
- a dozen black arrows with green feathers, in a leather quiver; the arrows radiate moderate transmutation magic.

Beneath the table with the magic weapons are a number of sacks overstuffed with coins of dozens of different varieties. There's a good mix of copper, silver and gold coins and chits, along with some made of unknown metals. A few hundred have gold edges around a carved wooden center. Near the bottom of the pile is a leather bag with almost a thousand squarish platinum pieces. Altogether, there are probably around 5,000 coins in the sacks.

Pushed up next to the weapons table is a smaller table with a potion rack at the back (closest to the wall), and a small crate containing 8 scroll tubes. There are 12 full vials in the potion rack, and 4 empty vials.

In the far corner to your left is a huge stack of mundane items, none of it radiating magic. It is an unorganized heap with mundane armor and weapons, spikes, coils of rope, lanterns and torches, tents, bedrolls, several mirrors, and a grappling hook. A ten foot pole is leaning up in the corner. It will take some time to sort it all out.

In the far corner to your right is the table that practically blinded Ernie when he cast his *detect magic*. Upon closer examination, much of that magic is coming from a large wicker basket on the floor next to the table.

Leaning up against the wall near the back of the table is the first thing to catch your eye: an thin obsidian black circle with an interior diameter of about twelve inches. It has 30 small diamond studs set into one side of the obsidian, and there are two empty gaps where two more diamonds might have been once. It is radiating strong enchantment magic, and moderate divination and necromancy magic.

There's a beautiful (non-magical) purple silk and velvet cloak set with precious moonstones, and nestled carefully in its folds is a crystal globe the size of a tennis ball, in which swirls a thick green vapor. It radiates strong conjuration magic.

Near one edge of the table is a beautiful latched mahogany box about the size of a shoebox. It radiates moderate amounts of both illusion and enchantment magic.

Draped over the box is a small but disturbing item: it's a thin gold chain like a necklace, and hanging from it is a tiny red and blue beating heart, about the size of a small marble. It radiates strong transmutation and moderate necromantic magic.

The remaining items are stacked on that table and in the wicker basket, wrapped in various shirts and dresses:

- a round stone medallion on a steel chain. The stone has a carving of a shield, and it glows with an amber light. It radiates moderate abjuration magic.

- a silver ring with a flat metal device, on which a black blur constantly moves. It radiates weak transmutation magic.
- an elaborately carved wooden horn, onto which is burned a scene of warriors fighting in dense fog. It radiates weak conjuration magic.
- a three inch tall perfect glass replica of an oak tree, with a dark brown trunk, spreading branches, and hundreds of tiny, impossibly carved green leaves. It radiates strong transmutation and conjuration magic.
- a blood-spattered headband of white linen, with the spatter marks on the front vaguely forming a design of a helmed head and face in profile. It radiates moderate transmutation magic.
- a four inch diameter gold circlet, with three interior gold spokes meeting a large blue diamond in the center. The whole thing glows with a soft golden light. It radiates strong transmutation magic.
- a lavender block of fragrant incense, wrapped in a black ribbon. It radiates moderate enchantment magic.
- a round, flat emerald about the size of a nickel. It has twelve facets, five of which are dark, and seven of which glint unnaturally bright in the light of the torches. It radiates moderate enchantment magic.
- a set of parchment cards, each with a beaten gold border, and all tied with a silver string. The outward-facing sides of the top and bottom cards both depict a colorful jester in blue and green motley, and a red and gold three-belled cap. He holds a jester's staff with a likeness of himself, and he's in a capering pose. The cards radiate strong illusion magic.
- a leather belt with a round brass buckle in the shape of a closed eye. It radiates moderate divination magic.
- a pair of ordinary-looking spectacles. They radiate moderate divination magic.
- a thin silver wand with a pair of wings on the business end. It radiates weak transmutation magic.

The most powerfully radiating magic item in the room is a dark blue steel cube, two inches on a side. One side is solid black. Another side has a large glowing white rune etched into it, a rune unfamiliar to you. The remaining four sides are covered with indecipherable tiny white letters and symbols. It radiates strong transmutation, conjuration and evocation magic, and weak abjuration magic.

On a wooden shelf above this magic-laden table are a number of valuable (non-magical) *objects d'art*:

- four emerald rings (very slight flaws in each).
- a brilliant fire opal in a silver setting, on a silver chain.
- a golden chalice set with a dozen small rubies (two of which are missing).
- a harp carved of exotic wood, with an ivory inlay and studded with zircons.
- a jade statuette of a dolphin.
- a crystal decanter with a huge (and seemingly perfect) emerald set in the clear crystal stopper.

Also up on this shelf are three (non-magical) green leather books with strange runes on the covers. Each book is entirely encased in a latched thin wire cage, hardly bigger than the books themselves.

A few feet down the wall from the magic table, down on the stone floor, is a small but finely carved wooden chest, inlaid with ebony, mostly full of small gems and rings (probably about 200 gems in all). It also contains two small diamond-studded black-circle pins (like you've seen on the Sharshun), a silver anklet, a silk pouch holding about 50 polished jet marbles, and a magical white cubic stone that is probably an *ioun stone*.

I'm afraid that's all.

Ancalagon: Afraid that's all!?!? My god, most dragon hoards are smaller than this! You guys hit pay-dirt; hope your *bags of holding* are large enough.

Sagiro: There was a little bit of sarcasm intended there...



Grey Wolf begins to feel that familiar churning in his gut, but it's milder than usual. It continues for about three minutes, and then suddenly the pain in his stomach becomes almost overwhelming. Aravis feels an odd twang in the part of his brain that holds the Crosser's Maze, as if a taut fiddle string had been violently plucked.

And Kibi appears in the room. The usual reunion takes place, with the party giving Kibi an account of all that has happened since his brief appearance in the ogre caves.

After spending a few more minutes gawking at the piles of treasure, the party suddenly wonder what has become of Solomea. They un-gag Pog just long enough to ask him and are directed to a room a few turns down along the subterranean halls.

Flicker pops open the lock and a foul smell wafts out: the odor of a sickroom. When they push the door open, they are met with a grim scene.

Solomea's body rests on a rickety and filthy bed, with a dirty bedpan by his side. One corner of the room is an open latrine. Some moldy bread crusts litter the floor. The room reeks of sickness and death; Solomea's body lies lifeless, sore-riddled skin stretched over thin old bones. He had been barely kept alive, but no longer. Solomea's suffering, mind and body, has ended.

Some party members want to kill Pog and Mazzery on the spot.

It gets worse. Realizing that they need to bring back Lapis's head to satisfy the demands of Shreen the Fair, they force Pog to lead them to the bodies of their victims. The party are brought to a small room like a dark pit, and this smells worse than Solomea's room. In it are thirty or forty bodies in various stages of decay. The freshest is that of Lapis, lying on top of the heap. Grey Wolf is lowered into the room, where he hacks off Lapis's head with his sword and brings it back up.

Now the party *really* want to kill Pog and Mazzery, but instead they decide that an appropriate punishment will be to leave the two of them tied up for the Bluecoats to find, with a note indicating their plan to overthrow the Sultan of Zhamir, and their guilt in the deaths of dozens of people.

Back in the treasure room, most of the party begin hastily packing away all of the loot (most of it into the *bag of holding*). While this is going on, Aravis sits quietly in a corner and concentrates on the Crosser's Maze. He gets a quick flash of an image: vast spheres floating in space, permeated and surrounded by colored volumes of energy. It's a fantastic vision of the Dance of the Planes, and it knocks Aravis unconscious in about one second. He comes to a few moments later.

Carrying the body of Snokas and the head of Lapis, as well as the trussed-up persons of Pog and Mazzery, the Company ascend out of the City Below and into the abandoned district. Their immediate plan is to have Kay *fly* up to the "roof" of the Bottle, carrying Flicker, to see if there's an opening at the top. Morningstar uses *Rary's telepathic bond* to keep in touch with them.

Kay is distracted before she gets more than a hundred feet up. About 500 yards away, at the closest "wall" of the Bottle, is a huge crowd of Bluecoats – perhaps three hundred in all – swarming around the base of the wall. A bright light twinkles on the wall but she's too far away to make out what it is, so she flies over for a closer look.

What she sees is quite strange. The twinkle turns out to be a large swath of light, as if someone had thrown hundreds of buckets of glowing paint on the wall. The Bluecoats nearest the wall are pouring light out of their own eyes and fingertips and into the glowing patch on the wall. As they do so, the patch gets smaller. Kay watches while two of the Bluecoats empty themselves entirely in this manner, their blue uniforms falling empty to the ground; others move forward to take their places. More Bluecoats are arriving on the scene all the time.

As Kay gets close, she starts to feel pulled towards the glowing swath, and the party suddenly realize that what she's seeing is a hole in the wall of the Bottle, a hole which the Bluecoats are hastening to close. Kay flies down closer to the top of the swath (about twenty feet off the ground at this point), with Flicker dangling by her legs. He flips himself into the light... and vanishes! He is also snapped out of the *telepathic bond*, indicating that he has left the plane, and thus adding more evidence to the theory that it's a hole in the Bottle.

Kay barely manages to avoid getting sucked through herself, and flies back to the party. Meanwhile the others have moved forward to a spot just around the last corner before the crowd of Bluecoats. Dranko has gone first, invisible, and is perched atop the nearest rooftop (about sixty feet from the hole).

They form a plan to get everyone else through. Aravis *polymorphs* into a pegasus, so that he can fly two others (Morningstar and Makel). These three fly up to the roof to join Dranko. Kay flies back, picks up Step, and heads back to the wall. Kibi casts *haste, invisibility* and *fly* on himself, picks up Ernie, and also flies towards the roof.

That's everyone... except Grey Wolf. Oops. And now a bunch of the Bluecoats at the back of the crowd have noticed the various flying party members, and about a dozen of them start advancing towards Grey Wolf. *Screw this*, he thinks, and lobs a *fireball* at them. They are burned, but keep on coming. Morningstar sees this from the rooftop, and helps Grey Wolf's cause with a massive *flame strike*. **WHOOOM!** Seven of the twelve Bluecoats become smoking smears of glowing light on the ground. The remaining five keep advancing, and about fifteen more detach themselves from the crowd and start marching over.

By this time, Kibi has decided to change course and fly down to rescue Grey Wolf, but he finds that he's not strong enough to get both Ernie and Grey Wolf into the air. Aravis sees this, and realizes he'll have to fly down to rescue Grey Wolf, but he's already got Morningstar and Makel on his back and can't carry any more. Being a pegasus, he can't tell them to dismount, and so he rears up and tries to throw them. Makel falls off, but Morningstar, not understanding Aravis's motive, makes a riding check and hangs on. *Well, good enough*, thinks Aravis. He flies down with Morningstar and lands by Grey Wolf.

At this point, Grey Wolf tosses one more *fireball* at the five nearest Bluecoats, and gets two more before the remaining three attack him, one landing a blow with its sword. But he's able to climb on Aravis's back, while Morningstar, finally realizing what the plan is, dismounts. Aravis flies back to the rooftop with Grey Wolf, and Kibi is strong enough to lift Ernie and Morningstar. Whew.

Meanwhile Kay has flown with Step over to the ever-shrinking glowing hole in the wall. Bluecoats continue to pour their essences into the gap, and now the hole is only ten feet high and about five feet wide. This time Kay is not strong enough to keep herself from getting dragged into the hole. She and Step both vanish into the glowing rift.

That leaves Aravis, Makel, Dranko, Morningstar and Grey Wolf atop the building, all of them thankful that the Bluecoats don't have ranged weapons. Still, their chief concern now is that the hole will close before they can fly the sixty feet over the heads of hundreds of Bluecoats. Kibi, still carrying Ernie and Morningstar, flies over and makes it into the hole with time to spare, though two Bluecoats manage to slice Ernie's dangling legs with their swords as he flies overhead.

Aravis is only strong enough to carry two passengers, but Dranko has a plan. He quickly rigs a rope harness around Aravis's pegasus midsection, and holds on to the other end. When Aravis flies off the roof, Dranko's *ring of feather falling* kicks in, and so Aravis is able to tow him while carrying the other two. They fly towards the shrinking exit...

...and Dranko sees that while the pegasus will make it, he's hanging too low, and is going to smack into the wall below the hole while the others make it out. Not relishing the thought of being scraped off and dumped into the midst of hundreds of Bluecoats, he desperately pushes off with his feet against the heads of the Bluecoats nearest to the wall, as they try to hack at him with their blades. He fails once, but at the last possible moment, he plants his feet squarely on the head of one of the Bluecoats who's pouring light into the hole. He kicks himself up, and just makes it through the bright fissure after the others...



Sunday, April 5

...and there they all are, breathless, in a clearing in the jungle, just on the other side of a glowing green ring that surrounds a lonely hut. They're free!

Kesh: Woo! Now that's how you make an exit! Loved this whole Crosser's Maze experience, Sagiro... can't wait to see what they do now that they're out...

Tor Bladebearer: YAY!! WOOHOO!! Congratulations to the whole party on finally getting the Maze, and as usual to Sagiro for his masterful campaign... :-)

Did I mention... WOOHOO!! Boy, Tor could spend quite a while stacking all that coinage. Did you guys just haul everything off in the *bag of holding*? Once, a long time ago, we were paranoid about accidentally putting an extra-planar device inside another extra-planar device...

Once you guys catch up to real time, I'll unload with a number of questions on dangling plot threads I'm still wondering about... I still think Sagiro let you off easy though. Back in MY day party members would get killed if we forgot to check a single chest for traps! And we liked it!

Now what's Sagiro gonna do next to top THAT?!?!

Piratecat: Oh, God. You had to ask, didn't you? You'll see... oh yes, you'll see. We're in the middle of it right now. Here's a hint: it makes one party member very happy. It upsets several other party members. It's tied into the plot more than we could have imagined. We may be able to make a major difference in the enemy's plans. And so far, it's killed a member of the Company!

I have the sneaking suspicion that we're in over our heads (*grin*). Put it this way: just last game, we were lamenting how much we missed Tor, and how much fun he'd be having in our current predicament.

Zaruthustran: Bravo! Bravo! ENCORE! Nice work, everybody. And way to go Sagiro on NOT explaining the Bottle, the hut, the Sultan, and the circle. I mean, what's up with this random hut in the middle of some godforsaken jungle, with a city in a bottle ruled by – of all things – a SULTAN, that "by its very nature" sucks in planar travelers and replaces their identities with that of a servant class, while still keeping their items nearby? Who knows? Not us! Just another colossal mystery in Sagiro's rich world.

Questions: Who broke the bottle/made the hole through which the party escaped? Why did you carry out the body of the mercenary? What happens if you poke Aravis in the eye (besides getting hit with a retaliatory *fireball*)?

Aravis: You may find your boots have been used as a litter box...

Piratecat: We think the bottle was broken by Kibi's abrupt entrance. Good thing his player was in town that day; otherwise, who knows how we'd have gotten out?

We took Snokas's body with us because we felt responsible for his death. If we hadn't poisoned him, he would never have helped us in the Maze... but help us he did, and we didn't want to leave his mind trapped in that swirling maelstrom of insanity. In a few posts, you'll watch as Morningstar tries *raise dead* for the very first time...

LightPhoenix: And logically, things go horribly, horribly wrong...

Rincewind: You have a choice who to betray: Aravis or Shreen?

kidcthulhu: That's no choice at all. Shreen. In a heartbeat.

Aravis: That depends upon what you mean by 'betray.' Aravis has promised to bring Shreen the Crosser's Maze when the Spire is done with it. He will insist on doing so. However, he did not promise that Shreen would *like* the results of being brought the Crosser's Maze...

kidcthulhu: Aravis, you da mage. Yeah, we promised to bring it to him. We didn't say anything about giving it to him. Nor did we say anything about it being in a usable form. But he can have Lapis's head. No charge.

dinkeldog: Hey, and the good news: you still get to betray Grey Wolf!

Remembering that the green barrier will *disintegrate* anything that touches it, they move hastily away, and then several of them collapse onto the grass. Oa-Lyanna is overjoyed to be out in the open air, and Kay offers a silent prayer to Pikon.

After a few giddy minutes of celebrating their escape, they turn to some of the more pressing and sobering matters. Morningstar casts *restoration* on Grey Wolf, hoping to undo the permanent Wisdom drain from dying while in the Maze. It fails.

Then Dranko casts *speak with dead* on Snokas to find out if he wants to be *raised* from the dead. The results are disturbing; the deceased Snokas is unable to answer Dranko's questioning. His eyes are wide open, and his mouth is twitching, and he manages to gasp out a barely intelligible "*Help... me...*" before collapsing. Clearly he is not quite entirely dead; they surmise that part of his soul must still be trapped in the Crosser's Maze.

Morningstar then goes into *Ava Dormo*, and uses the *direct dreaming* spell to travel to the Ellish temple in Tal Hae. Obsidia is there, and she is overjoyed to see Morningstar again. Morningstar asks Obsidia to relay a message to Ozilinsh via Eddings, asking if they should come home immediately with the Crosser's Maze, or if it would be acceptable if they were to stay in Kivia for a time (there still being the matter of Het Branoi and the erstwhile Eye of Moirel).

Monday, April 6

The next day the wizards start casting *identify* on the large pile of magic items. That night, Obsidia again meets Morningstar in *Ava Dormo*, and has a message from Ozilinsh: "Things have become unstable; while not immediately urgent, we'd like you to come home at your earliest convenience."

Tuesday, April 7 – Friday, April 10

The party spend a few days camped in the jungle, while the wizards keep *identifying* the new-found loot. Then, Ernie uses his *rope of return*, kept safe these many months, and in a flash the party are *teleported* back across Posada's Boundary, and in fact right into the secret room in the Greenhouse behind the bookshelf. There is much, much rejoicing at being home. Eddings and the cats are well, and extremely pleased to see the Company back safe and sound.



One of the first things the party do is contact Ozilinsh on the crystal ball, and their Archmage patron immediately *teleports* over for a short debriefing. He is fascinated by the Crosser's Maze and the physical changes it has made to Aravis. The party start to give him a summary of their trip, but he stops them. "The Spire wants to convene very soon," he says, "and you can tell all of us then. And we'd like for the council to meet here, in the Greenhouse. Unfortunately, the Meeting Tree was attacked and burned to the ground several months ago, and the Greenhouse is the only place secure enough to gather all the leaders of the Spire together."

The party do insist on warning Ozilinsh that the mysterious "P" is in fact Parthol Runecarver, but Ozilinsh finds that highly unlikely. Parthol is remembered as a hero, a great Archmage who died in the decisive battle against Naloric Skewn. On the other hand, Ozilinsh muses, he has long thought that the *boxes of transport* (used by Gluefoot and Frohwirth, two of P's lackeys) were crafted by someone extremely powerful. It will bear investigation. Then Ozilinsh leaves, needing to get back to the Tower and make sure Mrs. Horn is holding up.

Eddings tells Dranko that a letter has arrived for him: it's a long list of numbers, several pages long, similar to the one Califax used to send his "coded" message about Manzanill's operation beneath Hae Charagan.

Dranko then immediately goes to visit Turlus Whitecake – before having bathed or changed his clothes. (Remember, all of the party's spare clothing was lost in the ogre caverns.) Turlus tries his tight-lipped best to get Dranko out of his shop as soon as possible, as Dranko's stench immediately starts causing other customers to leave.

After a wash, the clerics go to visit their respective churches and report in. The halflings at the church of Yondalla are overwhelmed by Ernie's tales, and want him to give a sermon in the near future.

Morningstar goes to visit Amber at the Illuminated Temple of Ell and she too is asked to give a sermon. More priestesses have come to join the Illuminated Sisters, and Amber reports that the combat training in *Ava Dormo* is going well, though a bit more slowly than she'd like.

Dranko visits his old mentor Harmon at the church of Delioch. He mentions that he found the Candlestick of St. Jenniver, and while Harmon is impressed, he's also incredulous that Dranko didn't bring it back with him. "You had one of the most sacred relics of our faith in your hands, and you left it with some farmer?!" Also while visiting the church, a novice delivers a letter for Dranko that is filled with scrambled letters clustered in blocks.

On his way back from the church, an unfamiliar voice sounds in Dranko's head: *Dig beneath the oak tree planted in the park three blocks south of the ducal palace*. He walks on as if nothing has happened, and makes his way by a roundabout route to the tree in question. He scares off a couple sitting on a nearby bench by acting crazy, and then digs up a scroll tube buried at the foot of the tree. Inside is a thin piece of onionskin parchment on which are drawn several hollow rectangles.

What's more, Grey Wolf has found that a letter was left for him at the Mages' Guild, which is also filled with meaningless scrambled letters. But when the onionskin blocks are overlaid upon the page of numbers, and those blocked-off numbers are applied to the scrambled letters, a message is gleaned:

Dranko,

I cannot take chances, hence the subterfuge. The Circle is strong enough in their powers of divination that I dare not take fewer precautions. I warn you: do not discuss this anywhere exposed, and destroy all the papers when you're finished.

I have been on the run since that day many months ago, when you saved me from the temptations of the Circle. They are searching for me, so I dare not stay in one place long. It is taking all of my abilities to keep them from me; what they seek, they usually find.

I know some of their plans, Dranko, though not all. This at least I wanted to tell you; you must keep your companion Grey Wolf alive at all costs. For a while the Circle needed him alive, but they now have a terrible power waiting to be used. If he dies, they'll have him; a variant on the miracle of absolute resurrection that works even against the will of the soul. They may seek to kill him, and then use that power to have him in their clutches. They still need him alive, when the time comes.

And that time is not too far off – perhaps half a year, I'm not sure. I don't know what history you know, Dranko, but an ancient and evil emperor named Naloric Skewn once ruled the kingdom and was banished by the Archmagi. His son Naradawlk is trying to return. The plane on which he is trapped is heavily sealed against planar travel, and the only gateway between the two is secured by the kingdom's Archmages. Perhaps Abernathy has told you this already.

But Mokad seeks a better way. He wants to bring the two planes into absolute alignment, occupying the same space and time as each other, for just a short while. In that window of opportunity, he and his vast armies can step across, as easily as crossing the threshold of your house. Grey Wolf is the key; he is the axle around which both worlds turn. I don't know why or how. But I fear the only way to stop Mokad is to kill Grey Wolf, at the very moment of Mokad's ritual. And we must stop him, Dranko. Naradawlk's power is terrible, and he and his forces would overwhelm the kingdom, Archmagi or no.

I wish I could tell you where the ritual is taking place, but I was never privy to that information. The only thing I learned that might help you is this, which I gleaned from a brief glimpse of a letter sent to Mokad: the ritual of concurrence must be held "beneath the open noon sky, and yet not beneath the direct watch of the sun." That clearly sounds like what sages call an "eclipse," where the gods set the moon in front of the sun

for a brief time. Some sages claim that they can predict such things by watching the heavens, but none that I have asked think an eclipse will occur in the next three years.

It will not be safe for me to try contacting you again for some time. Good luck, and may the hand of the Healer guide you.

- califax

PlaneSailing: Lots of great, crunchy information here – the players must be overjoyed... or not, as the case may be. Maybe ignorance was bliss after all. How is One Certain Step taking the sudden change of continent? Has anyone given him a translator ear-ring yet?

LightPhoenix: [dinkeldog]: Hey, and the good news: you still get to betray Grey Wolf!

And now we have a glimpse as to why. Oh happy days! Evil, evil Sagiro, how will Old Grey get out of this one, I wonder?

Rincewind: He won't necessarily do so – the termination of the threat will presumably be the end of the campaign, and there might not be a way to save him. I suggest you start keeping him under sedation – you never know when he might get strange ideas about running away from you.

I wonder if they really do have three years, or whether the Evil Bad Guy will use a ritual to cause an eclipse?

Piratecat: Dranko had another thought. The center of Ell's worship takes place in a city that is always shadowed, where the light of the sun never falls. What if Mokad is hiding there, and that's where the ritual is going to happen? This would certainly explain the strange rift in the Ellish church, and the feeling that Morningstar has unseen enemies working at cross-purposes to her.

PlaneSailing: Ooh, good thinking! What an excellent tie-in to other events that would be (although perhaps not from Morningstar's perspective, obviously...).

Piratecat: I think Sagiro wants us to think that it might be an eclipse, which immediately made me suspicious, so I started thinking of alternatives. Great big clouds aside, I couldn't come up with anything other than this, but it makes a whole lot of sense. If I were an evil cult who specialized in knowledge and memory, I know what church I'd want to infiltrate...

kidcthulhu: We'll let the story unfold on the Church of Ell, but I can tell you that Morningstar is none too pleased.

First the Church of Delioch, then the Church of Ell. What's next? I'd say Yondalla, but the Church of Yondalla has little money, no influence, and the halflings aren't exactly considered important by the rest of the kingdom. That said, Ernie's on full alert.

Tor Bladebearer: C'mon, Ernie, we've known about the secret cannibalistic halfling sect of Yondalla since we first visited Dingman's Ferry...

Then again, maybe it's not cannibalism if you only eat humans... :-)

PlaneSailing: Perhaps now is the time to ask what the significance of "Wilburforce" is, and what the statue that looked like Ernie was for...

Ravager: That's just it! They DON'T know (or at least I think they don't).

LightPhoenix: You mentioned identifying stuff... Mayhap someone would be able to update the treasure list, or post a new one, outlining what each item is? And on the subject, how do you work *identify* in your campaign? Only the lowest enchantment, or one enchantment per casting?

Sagiro: One of my few house rules is that we use the 2nd Ed. version of *identify*. And with three mages casting the spell twice each (once before leveling, and again afterwards) they pretty much figured out what everything was.

For those curious, here's a full list of the identified loot:

Pog and Mazzery's storeroom is about 30 feet long and 15 feet wide, lit with *continual flame* torches. Around its perimeter, pushed up against the walls, are several large wooden tables, piled high with loot. It seems like Pog and Mazzery have spent some of their free time organizing the plunder they've divested from its Maze-bound owners.

A table a few feet from the door (to your right, looking in) is covered with various weapons and armor, all of which are detecting as magic. Most of these are radiating weakly; they include:

- two identical daggers with silver handles.
daggers +1
- a smooth yew short bow.
shortbow +1
- a polished steel buckler.
buckler +1, light fortification
- 37 steel-tipped arrows, in two non-magical quivers.
arrows +1
- a shiny chain shirt.
chain shirt +1
- a blood-stained breastplate.
breastplate +1
- a set of banded mail with a red lion on the front.
banded mail +1

- a huge tower shield with the design of an upward-facing squid.
tower shield +1
- a large steel shield, without device, but with black ornamental designs traced around its edge.
large steel shield +1
- a short sword with a spiraled-leather handle and chunk of red rock on the end of the pommel; it is warm to the touch, and radiates weak evocation magic.
short sword +1, flaming
- a black wooden javelin with a sharpened bone point; it radiates weak transmutation magic.
javelin +1, returning
- a beautiful longbow with leather bands; it radiates minor divination magic.
longbow +1, distance

A few of the weapons and armor are radiating stronger magic; they include:

- a curved sickle with a long sharp blade; it radiates moderate transmutation magic.
sickle +2, keen
- a glimmering bastard sword whose entire hilt/pommel/hand-guard assembly is a cleverly carved red dragon; it radiates moderate conjuration magic.
bastard sword +2, dragonbane
- a set of finely made but slightly greasy feeling leather armor; it radiates moderate conjuration magic.
leather armor +2, slick
- studded leather armor whose studs are a dull green color; it radiates moderate abjuration magic.
studded leather +1, acid resistance
- a short rust-colored scythe blade on a short handle; it radiates moderate necromancy magic.
kama of weakness: on a critical hit, this weapon does 1d8 points of Strength damage in addition to normal critical damage.
- a dozen black arrows with green feathers, in a leather quiver; the arrows radiate moderate transmutation magic.
arrows of slowness: if struck, the target of these arrows must make a Fortitude save at DC 18 or be affected by a *slow* spell for six rounds.

Beneath the table with the magic weapons are a number of sacks overstuffed with coins of dozens of different varieties. There's a good mix of copper, silver and gold coins and chits, along with some made of unknown metals. A few hundred have gold edges around a carved wooden center. Near the bottom of the pile is a leather bag with almost a thousand squarish platinum pieces. Altogether, there are probably around 5,000 coins in the sacks.

Total value of all coins: 10,358gp

Pushed up next to the weapons table is a smaller table with a potion rack at the back (closest to the wall), and a small crate containing 8 scroll tubes. There are 12 full vials in the potion rack, and 4 empty vials.

The potions are:

<i>bull's strength</i>	<i>aid</i>
<i>spider climb</i>	<i>cure light wounds (x4)</i>
<i>heroism</i>	<i>cure moderate wounds (x2)</i>
<i>fire breath</i>	<i>cure serious wounds (x1)</i>
<i>blur</i>	<i>invisibility</i>

The scrolls (with caster level):

minor arcane:	<i>feather fall (1), invisibility (3)</i>
minor arcane:	<i>grease (1), blur (3), protection from arrows (3)</i>
medium arcane:	<i>spectral hand (5), displacement (5), charm monster (7), emotion (7)</i>
medium arcane:	<i>fireball (5), nondetection (5)</i>
major arcane:	<i>cone of cold (9), programmed image (11), Bigby's forceful hand (11)</i>
minor divine:	<i>sanctuary (1), spiritual weapon (3)</i>
medium divine:	<i>inflict serious wounds (5), remove blindness/deafness (5), neutralize poison (7)</i>
major divine:	<i>spell resistance (9), heroes' feast (11), heal (11)</i>

In the far corner to your left is a huge stack of mundane items, none of it radiating magic. It is an unorganized heap with mundane armor and weapons, spikes, coils of rope, lanterns and torches, tents, bedrolls, several mirrors, and a grappling hook. A ten foot pole is leaning up in the corner. It will take some time to sort it all out.

In the far corner to your right is the table that practically blinded Ernie when he cast his *detect magic*. Upon closer examination, much of that magic is coming from a large wicker basket on the floor next to the table.

Leaning up against the wall near the back of the table is the first thing to catch your eye: an thin obsidian black circle with an interior diameter of about twelve inches. It has 30 small diamond studs set into one side of the obsidian, and there are two empty gaps where two more diamonds might have been once. It is radiating strong enchantment magic, and moderate divination and necromancy magic.

This is a Black Circle spellbook. Pressing one of the diamond studs causes the space inside the ring to fill with a glowing white script. The spells in this book are:

- 1: *comprehend languages, detect secret doors, identify, true strike, cause fear, chill touch, ray of enfeeblement*
- 2: *detect thoughts, locate object, ghoul touch, scare*
- 3: *clairaudience/clairvoyance, tongues, halt undead, vampiric touch, gentle repose*
- 4: *arcane eye, detect scrying, scrying, contagion, fear*
- 5: *prying eyes, Rary's telepathic bond, animate dead, magic jar*
- 6: *legend lore, true seeing*
- 7: *greater scrying, vision, control undead*

There's a beautiful (non-magical) purple silk and velvet cloak set with precious moonstones, and nestled carefully in its folds is a crystal globe the size of a tennis ball, in which swirls a thick green vapor. It radiates strong conjuration magic.

acid fog globe: when broken, this globe will activate an *acid fog* spell centered on itself.

Near one edge of the table is a beautiful latched mahogany box about the size of a shoebox. It radiates moderate amounts of both illusion and enchantment magic.

magical forgery kit: it contains three compartments. The first has a light green feather quill. The second has a signet ring with a symbol of a "C" on it, and a block of sealing wax. The third contains a small ink-pot. The quill is a *quill of forgery*, which adds +10 to any Forgery check. The signet ring (feather device) casts the *illusory script* spell on any letter sealed with it. The ink-pot appears only one-third full, but any quill dipped into it will become inked, and it produces any color of ink the writer desires.

Draped over the box is a small but disturbing item: it's a thin gold chain like a necklace, and hanging from it is a tiny red and blue beating heart, about the size of a small marble. It radiates strong transmutation and moderate necromantic magic.

amulet of energy: it can be activated at the start of a round as a free action. It triples speed for the round and does 10 points of subdual damage each time it's used. Each such use expends a charge. It has 9 charges remaining.

The remaining items are stacked on that table and in the wicker basket, wrapped in various shirts and dresses:

- a round stone medallion on a steel chain. The stone has a carving of a shield, and it glows with an amber light. It radiates moderate abjuration magic.
shield medallion: it grants the wearer Damage Reduction of 20/+3. This doesn't stack with other Damage Reduction.
- a silver ring with a flat metal device, on which a black blur constantly moves. It radiates weak transmutation magic.
ring of evasion: the wearer can activate it as a free action (on anyone's turn) to gain the Evasion ability. The wearer must still make a Reflex save as normal. Each use expends one charge. It has 5 charges.
- an elaborately carved wooden horn, onto which is burned a scene of warriors fighting in dense fog. It radiates weak conjuration magic.
horn of fog: once per day it can be blown to create an obscuring mist, that expands ten feet per round. The horn must be blown continuously; after five rounds, the user must make Fortitude saves each round to continue. The DC is 15, +1 per round beyond the fifth.
- a three inch tall perfect glass replica of an oak tree, with a dark brown trunk, spreading branches, and hundreds of tiny, impossibly carved green leaves. It radiates strong transmutation and conjuration magic.
tree figurine: when touched to any tree, that tree turns into a treant that will obey the owner. The effect lasts for ten minutes, and is only usable once.
- a blood-spattered headband of white linen, with the spatter marks on the front vaguely forming a design of a helmed head and face in profile. It radiates moderate transmutation magic.
headband of ferocity: it allows the wearer to take normal actions while having between -9 and 0 hit points.
- a four inch diameter gold circlet, with three interior gold spokes meeting a large blue diamond in the center. The whole thing glows with a soft golden light. It radiates strong transmutation magic.
diamond of recall: a spellcaster holding this item and concentrating on it can fill an empty spell slot with any known spell of that level or lower, as a full-round action (instead of taking the usual fifteen minutes). This item can be used once per day.
- a lavender block of fragrant incense, wrapped in a black ribbon. It radiates moderate enchantment magic.
incense of meditation: burned during eight hours of prayer, it causes all prepared spells to be Maximized (as per the feat).

- a round, flat emerald about the size of a nickel. It has twelve facets, five of which are dark, and seven of which glint unnaturally bright in the light of the torches. It radiates moderate enchantment magic.
gem of fighting prowess: when affixed to the pommel of a weapon, the wielder can make one extra attack in a round, at his highest attack bonus. Each use of the gem expends one charge and blackens another facet. It has 7 charges remaining.
- a set of parchment cards, each with a beaten gold border, and all tied with a silver string. The outward-facing sides of the top and bottom cards both depict a colorful jester in blue and green motley, and a red and gold three-belled cap. He holds a jester's staff with a likeness of himself, and he's in a capering pose. The cards radiate strong illusion magic.
 (unidentified, though the party suspect it is a *deck of illusions*.)
- a leather belt with a round brass buckle in the shape of a closed eye. It radiates moderate divination magic.
belt of intuition: it grants a +1 bonus to all Wisdom-based skills while worn.
- a pair of ordinary-looking spectacles. They radiate moderate divination magic.
glasses of inversion: to the wearer they have no effect on normal sight, but for one continuous hour per day they can be used to see the opposite face of any object. This works to a range of 20 feet.
- a thin silver wand with a pair of wings on the business end. It radiates weak transmutation magic.
wand of levitation, 14 charges remaining.

The most powerfully radiating magic item in the room is a dark blue steel cube, two inches on a side. One side is solid black. Another side has a large glowing white rune etched into it, a rune unfamiliar to you. The remaining four sides are covered with indecipherable tiny white letters and symbols. It radiates strong transmutation, conjuration and evocation magic, and weak abjuration magic.

Mordenkainen's cube: the four script-covered sides, when pressed, cast the following spells, all as a 15th-level caster:

1. *Mordenkainen's faithful hound* (1/week)
2. *Mordenkainen's lucubration* (1/week)
3. *Mordenkainen's magnificent mansion* (1/month)
4. *Mordenkainen's sword* (1/month)

On a wooden shelf above this magic-laden table are a number of valuable (non-magical) *objects d'art*:

- four emerald rings (very slight flaws in each).
- a brilliant fire opal in a silver setting, on a silver chain.
- a golden chalice set with a dozen small rubies (two of which are missing).
- a harp carved of exotic wood, with an ivory inlay and studded with zircons.
- a jade statuette of a dolphin.
- a crystal decanter with a huge (and seemingly perfect) emerald set in the clear crystal stopper.

Total value of these items: 13,200gp

Also up on this shelf are three (non-magical) green leather books with strange runes on the covers. Each book is entirely encased in a latched thin wire cage, hardly bigger than the books themselves.

These are three spell books, containing the following spells:

Capillo's Arcana, Volume 2

- 3: *explosive runes, sleet storm, tongues, suggestion, fireball, major image, fly, shrink item*
- 4: *Evard's black tentacles, confusion, locate creature, wall of ice, wall of force, rainbow pattern*

Capillo's Arcana, Volume 3

- 5: *wall of iron, mind fog, false vision, fabricate, stone shape, teleport, permanency*
- 6: *greater dispelling, Bigby's forceful hand, Tenser's transformation*

Capillo's Arcana, Volume 4

- 7: *spell turning, Bigby's grasping hand, power word: stun*

A few feet down the wall from the magic table, down on the stone floor, is a small but finely carved wooden chest, inlaid with ebony, mostly full of small gems and rings (probably about 200 gems in all). It also contains two small diamond-studded black-circle pins (like you've seen on the Sharshun), a silver anklet, a silk pouch holding about 50 polished jet marbles, and a magical white cubic stone that is probably an *ioun stone*.

Total value of these items: 25,860gp

The *ioun stone* is a *caster's stone*, that reduces armor-caused spell failure chance by 5%.



Raiders of the Lost Orc**Nobody Expects the Silver Inquisition!**

Run #111 – Tuesday, March 20, 2001

Saturday, April 11 – Tuesday, June 10

The party train. Dranko goes with Flicker to visit the Smoke House, the halfling inn run by Flicker's parents. He plays cards with a notorious halfling card shark, **Porridge Greenbuck**, and loses a few hands before activating his new magical *glasses of inversion* (which he was wearing when he came in). After activating the *glasses* he fares much better, and leaves for the night with a few gold in winnings.

Piratecat: Those *glasses of inversion* are just perfect for using while playing cards... Dranko also got the forgery kit (+10 to the skill!). Oh, happy day!

Morningstar has decided that she is going to raise Snokas from the dead, at the altar of Amber's Illuminated Temple. Word of the impending miracle spreads, and by the time it's time for the actual event, about eighty Sisters of Ell (including many from the main branch of the Temple) are sitting in the pews, waiting to witness the raising. Four novices have been assigned to assist Morningstar, and they help prepare the body, light the proper tapers, and generally set things in order.

Morningstar then casts *raise dead*. To all observers, Morningstar and Snokas are sunk into deep shadow. Morningstar sees all around her go dark, and she is infused with the holy power of Ell, which streams through her and into the body of Snokas. Just as she is completing the spell, a voice sounds in her head: *When Snokas has returned to life, bring him at once to the High Priestess Milanwy*. Then the power recedes, and the two of them emerge from the holy shadow. Snokas's chest rises as he sucks in his first breath. The assemblage of Ellish priestesses begin to chant in admiration and awe.

But all is not well. As the party feared, Snokas's mind appears still to be trapped in the Crosser's Maze, and while alive, he is in a catatonic trance. Morningstar immediately sends a novice to take a message to Milanwy at the main branch of the Temple, and then walks the docile Snokas into a waiting antechamber.

Less than an hour later, the novice returns with orders from the High Priestess to bring Snokas to her immediately. Morningstar and some other party members do so. Once there, Milanwy has Snokas taken inside; she herself had a vision during the raising that she should take Snokas and pray for him; she doesn't yet know to what end. To Morningstar's surprise, Milanwy has words of admiration and praise for the successful execution of the miracle of raising the dead.



One of Kay's first priorities is to make inquiries about her father and brothers who are fighting against some of the humanoid invaders, and also about the Yrimpa. She learns that her family is likely fighting in Sentinel against orcs, but that casualties there have been light. (The orcs in those mountains seem to be focusing their efforts at the eastern end of the Kalkas Peaks, near the city of Hae Kalkas. Sentinel is the city at the far western end of the mountains.)

The Yrimpa have been extremely valuable in assisting the Werthians as they battle against the Delfirians on the Balani Peninsula. It's a good thing, too, since the Werthians are suffering more severely from attrition than are the Nifi worshippers.



Morningstar is visited at the Greenhouse by Swan, the Ellish Dreamwalker who researched the miracle that allows Dreamwalkers to bring non-Dreamwalkers into *Ava Dormo*. She has some disturbing news to tell. It seems that until recently Swan was a trusted advisor to High Priestess Rhiavonne, the leader of the Ellish religion on Charagan. Being interested in the new teachings of the Illuminated Sisters, Swan has been doing research into the history of the Ellish religion.

She has found evidence that the Ellish religion was originally one of protection and dreams, and that the "night angle" currently practiced evolved because it was during the night that people were most helpless and in need of protection (and also when they dreamed). Also, it was once the case that almost all Ellish Priestesses were Dreamwalkers. But as Ell became thought of less as a Goddess of Dreams, and more of a Goddess of Night, the number of Dreamwalkers dwindled.

When Swan said these things to High Priestess Rhiavonne, she was called heretic, uttering the words of an apostate. Rhiavonne accused Swan of pandering to Amber and the Illuminated Sisters, as if that by itself were a heresy. Swan considered that reaction to be very out of character for Rhiavonne, with whom she had always been able to be quite frank. Swan decided to leave Kallor for a time and travel to Tal Hae, but before she left, she learned that she had been excluded from several meetings, even before revealing her "heretical" findings.

This meeting causes Morningstar and the party to become very suspicious of Rhiavonne and the Ellish Temple in Kallor, believing that it may have been infiltrated by the Black Circle as was the Church of Delioch.



During the training time, Aravis decides to do some experimenting with the Crosser's Maze. He hasn't tried to concentrate on it since he knocked himself out trying back in Zhamir. He tries again, and the same thing happens: he has a momentary vision of vast spaces and the dance of Primes through the various non-solid planes, and then he (and Pewter too, by the way) blacks out. Undaunted, he tries again the next day, prodding mentally the great black void lodged in the back of his mind. This time he manages to hold the vision for a couple of seconds before its immensity overwhelms him. Day after day he tests his limits, concentrating on the Maze for as long as possible.

After three weeks of this, he is able to focus on the Maze for a full minute before tiring. He can "see" around him the sphere of the world, translucent, and yet paradoxically he can also see its boundaries and the scope of the world. Around it float three interpenetrating seas: the Ethereal and Astral Planes, and *Ava Dormo*, the Dreaming Plane. In the distance he can see other Primes, each at the center of a swirling well of energies. Smaller "pocket dimensions" float around and among the Primes.

Beyond even that, Aravis can see a greater scale of things. The whole of the space enclosing the primes is a tall cylinder. A huge city sits atop the cylinder, and around it is an infinitely expansive cylinder, with Outer Planes radiating out of the center. Above and below the Grand Cylinder are huge black expanses that hurt to concentrate upon.

The last thing Aravis sees is that Charagan's Prime is almost in contact with a second, shadowy Prime. There is constant back-and-forth transfer of magical energy from the two proximate Primes.

thatdarncat: Hmm, Kibi must be having fun wherever she is. If I recall correctly, she was helping fight in a war or with a resistance movement against some powerful force...

Hatching Dragon: Hmm... is right. Let's go over things again, shall we? Kibi disappears to another plane (player leaves/returns) because of a botched summoning long ago. Every time Kibi does this, Grey Wolf gets a "gut churner" sensation. Grey Wolf is the 'corner stone' around which the Company's and the "shadow" Prime rotate/interact. Kibi was (apparently?) summoned to help fight in a 'rebellion' on another world, against an 'evil force.'

Anyone else see where this is leading? Yup! Kibi's on the Shadow Prime fighting the (too lazy to look it up) Big Nasty Villain and his Army of Evil™. Now to get the PCs to 'pump' Kibi for info on her rebel friends. The Dark Side will never triumph!

Rincewind: Or fighting for the Big Nasty Villain...

Sagiro: Just a quick note: Kibi is a he, not a she, though his player is a woman. And in Kibi's adventures, there has been no mention of an evil emperor or other powerful person named Naradawk, or a place called Chinnipath, or really any evidence of any kind that he's been summoned to Naradawk's "prison Prime." (In fact, the Prime to which Naradawk was banished is particularly difficult to enter or leave from other planes. That's why he hasn't simply cast *plane shift* or some other "standard" plane-traveling spell to escape. And that's why the Spire sent him there all those years ago.)

Which is not to say that Kibi's adventures won't be relevant to the Quest of the Company™ at some point.



Without warning, Ozilinsh *teleports* into the secret room and comes quickly down the stairs. The Spire Council wants to meet... in the Greenhouse, in an hour! In his typical scatterbrained way he apologizes for the short notice, but for security reasons no one was told exactly when the meeting would be until a few minutes ago. They can expect the attendees to start showing up in the secret room about an hour from now. Having dropped this bomb, Ozilinsh goes running back up the stairs and *teleports* away.

Then Dranko drops another bomb. He uses his *snow globe of mirage arcana* to turn the living room into a serene outdoor scene, with stars and a bright moon shining in the night sky. He turns somewhat awkwardly to Morningstar. "So, I was thinking, if we're both still alive a year from today, would you like to get married?"

Morningstar accepts, and there is much rejoicing. When Dranko afterwards asks the others "How'd I do?" Kibi responds: "But... you didn't even offer her any beer!"

Then follows an hour of rushed preparations to get the Greenhouse cleaned and organized for a meeting of the Spire...

kidcthulhu: The thing Sagiro hasn't mentioned about the meeting of the Spire is the tizzy Ernie went into when he heard all those people were coming over. He went a little crazy with the cooking and cleaning. He looked like a bad '50s sitcom when the husband is bringing the boss home for the first time.

RangerWickett: Hey, Sagiro, if you're still writing this Story Hour in another year, wanna give me all your D&D stuff? Sorry - just, the randomness and abruptness of Dranko's proposals confuse me. Maybe I've just missed the earlier attraction, but Dranko just seems to come out of nowhere.

Blackjack: It's been my experience that this sort of thing develops via innuendos, turns of phrase, body language... that is to say, stuff that doesn't warrant inclusion in a message board summary. I mean, it's not as if you're going to see:

...and with the last orc dead, Jane *mass heals* the party.

Then Steve and Mary go on a date to a nice French restaurant.

Next, the party assaults the tower...

Piratecat: Just as Dranko and Morningstar's gradual romance over the last six months or so hasn't been a focus of the plot, the actual proposal wasn't dwelled upon, but it's worth mentioning something amusing. Dranko, nervous as anything, went and asked almost every other PC what he should do while proposing. "Give her beer," advised Kibi the dwarf. "Women like beer." "Make it romantic," said Aravis. "Maybe a field of stars. Here, use the magical snow-globe." And so forth. So when the proposal actually occurred, it took place in an odd amalgamation of cultural courting rituals. Thus, Kibi's comment makes a little more sense.

Their courtship started after the debacle with Kay's acceptance of Dranko's proposal back in Kivia, when Dranko realized that he couldn't marry her because he actually loved Morningstar instead. This was confirmed by a conversation in the ogre caverns when everyone but Dranko was captured, and he and Morningstar exchanged confessions over their *Rary's telepathic bond* as she was being hauled away. (Pity poor Flicker, who was also on the bond and had to listen in!)

Neither of them consider themselves to be a good catch. Both have always been outcasts. It's an interesting pairing. The one downside Dranko has seen so far is that Morningstar is more worried than normal about his survival in combat, getting upset when he does things that are stu... er, that are hard for people without great vision to appreciate. He wanted to get married in a year: (a) because Kay wanted to rush things; (b) because he has no guarantee that he'll be alive a year from now, so better safe than sorry; and (c) he's a little nervous about the whole idea and wants to put it off. It also made some sense; an anniversary of returning triumphant is a good time for a wedding.

PlaneSailing: What a soppy romantic you are!

I can't think that my players' characters would ever end up getting romantically inclined with one another – they all seem a little too "spiky" with one another (and to be honest I don't think the possibility has even crossed the minds of the players!).

I'll see what happens when my campaign has been running for several years straight...

RangerWickett: And, how will the archmages react to holding their meeting 'outdoors' inside the Greenhouse? I think it'd be a nice little prank.

Piratecat: One edit: the *mirage arcana* was not of an outdoor scene, with moon et al. Dranko used the globe to turn the entire living room into an endless field of stars, with no floor or walls visible. It was quite beautiful, until someone tripped over a chair.

Aravis: In regards to Dranko's seemingly quixotic romantic life, it should be pointed out that, as complete as Sagiro's Story Hour seems to be, he does not record *everything* that occurs. For example, I think he left out the ugly paper bat incident.

coyote6: All right, I'll bite. What ugly paper bat incident?

Piratecat: Do we *have* to go into this? I mean really... Oh, fine. Remember the hookbats when we first got to Kivia? They were the disease-carrying bats that gave everyone the cannibalism disease, such that an entire fortress became ravenous until cured with garlic. Dranko had been infected, and they scared him pretty badly.

Aravis and Grey Wolf thought it would be funny to make a fake hookbat out of paper and wood, paint it black, and dangle it over Dranko's nose on a piece of string while he was sleeping.

Ha. Ha. Jerks.

Quartermoon: I love the way the 'down time' in this campaign is as interesting as the quests are.

I love the way Morningstar's *raise dead* spell was turned into an event – instead of just, "OK, you lay him out on the couch and *raise* him."

Blackjack: Couldn't agree more. I always enjoy it when this sort of thing is given the aura of the miracle that it deserves!

LightPhoenix: Hahaha, I can see the scene now...

A sharp knocking snapped Morningstar out of her worried sleep. Since the business with the Church had gotten so out of hand, she could barely focus on anything. She had grown up with these people, she cared for many of them, and she didn't want to see them hurt – those with Amber or those at the main church.

Morningstar rolled off the couch as Eddings let himself in. She shuddered, looking at his empty eyes, which she had never gotten used to. "Wha' iss it, I's sleeping..."

"I'm sorry to wake you, but there are more people outside, demanding another miracle."

"Tell them go 'way..."

"They are most insistent. There's a crowd starting to form... I think you should come out."

Morningstar growled and stumbled outside in her night shirt. Several of the men were ogling her, but she didn't care at this point... she just wanted to be able to sleep and rest without being bothered by petitioners. On the ground there was a young man, maybe twenty years old at the most. "All right, lay him down on the couch..."

"The couch, oh holy priestess?"

Morningstar sighed. "Do you want him alive? The couch. Now."

Quartermoon: I, too, wish we had been given more of the blooming of Dranko and Morningstar's relationship – it would be important to the plot, from my point of view anyway! But then, perhaps Sagiro is hesitant to write about such things...

kidcthulhu: One of the reasons the Company have bonded so strongly is that they feel very isolated. Even in the middle of a city, they know that they are the only people around who know what they know. Their early years of enforced ignorance and their later years on the other continent have really made them trust each other, and no one else.

Half an hour later, right on schedule, the guests start arriving. Each of them is immediately (and without warning) subjected to the "bright light in the face" test, administered by several party members with *continual flame* objects. This is done on the off-chance that the still at large King Farazil, Soul Eater, is secretly riding around in the body of one of the council members. The reaction of the guests ranges from good-naturedly amused to mildly annoyed, and none of them flinch away from the light any more than would a normal Soul Eater-less person.

Most of the guests were present at the last Spire Council meeting to which the Company were invited. There is Yale, the gaunt woman who serves as advisor to King Crunard (not present). There is Cencerra, the elven adventurer whose own group prevented Lapis from loosing a second blood gargoyle over a year earlier. There is Matthias, High Priest of Pikon. There is Nigel, Duke of Harkran. And there is Ozilinsh. There are four people present who were not at the Company's last meeting, though they have met two of them before. They are:

- Dalesandro, High Stormknight of Werthis. (The Company have met him before, after the attack of the Ventifact Colossus at Sand’s Edge.)
- **Alykeen**, Archmage of Minok. He is a polite and well-kempt man, seemingly in his fifties, with a trimmed black beard and moustache.
- **Salk**, Archmage of Hae Charagan and new leader of the Spire following the mysterious death of Grawly. Salk is an extremely old-looking man with a wry sense of humor.
- Lastly, there is Rosetta, the 1000-year-old member of the Silver Shell, whom the party rescued from God’s Thorn before they left on their journey to Kivia.

(You may recall that she had been tortured in fiery stasis for all of that time. You may also recall that the Silver Shell is an organization whose fervent purpose is to destroy the Black Circle and its agents. It hadn’t been heard from for several centuries, but has become active again with the recent rise in Black Circle activities.)

When everyone is assembled, Salk opens the council meeting: “Friends and fellow Spire members, I wish to start by thanking our hosts for their hospitality on such short notice. I want to assure everyone here that this house is utterly safe from scrying or infiltration. It seems that Abernathy, with his typical prescience, made this place a sovereign sanctuary before his death. In many ways it is safer even than the Tree was... and a good thing, too.

“We will hear everything about our hosts’ recent quest in good time, but there are number of important events that I’d like to mention first. Not everyone here knows everything that has happened recently, and I’d like to make sure we’re all fully caught up.

“First, we still don’t know who is responsible for the deaths of Grawly and Thewana, or how the assassin or assassins managed to infiltrate their tower. We have found evidence that powerful divine magic was used at the scene specifically to foil divinations. Unfortunately we have been unable to overcome that magic, and are no closer to an answer than we were before. It is our general thinking now that the Black Circle was responsible; divination and the traffic of information has ever been their stock-in-trade.

“Most of you know this already, but Ozilinsh’s Company is not aware of the events at Verdshane during their absence, so bear with me now as I bring them up to date.”

He turns to address the party more directly. “You’ll be happy to know that Verdshane has been abandoned by the red-armored warrior woman Meledien and her mercenary army. In your absence Meledien continued to release foul creatures from Kinnet Gorge, and Cencerra and her group have been dealing with them. A thing like a huge black ball of shadow attacked Woodfork, killing dozens of citizens. Cencerra’s group killed it, with one casualty.” Salk turns briefly to Cencerra. “We’re all sorry for the loss of Gregor.” Cencerra nods stoically, and Salk turns back to the party.

“After that, an army of 150 seasoned warriors was spared from other fronts and sent from Minok to dislodge Meledien. They were met on the road by a long green serpent released from Kinnet Gorge. It had an ability to shift in and out of the Ethereal Plane, and it killed over a hundred of the soldiers before they brought it down; the decimated force turned back to Minok.

“Lastly, a wyvern seemingly made of quicksilver assaulted Minok itself, and in the end Alykeen had to come to the city’s defense. This was extremely ill-timed for us, as Alykeen was holding up some critical warding spells at the time. It probably shaved over a month off the time it will take for Naradawk to force his way through the planar *gate* at Verdshane. Worse, the *gate* itself has become unstable, a weakness that the enemy may be able to exploit.

“After that, we decided that we could suffer no more distractions from that direction. Cencerra and her band led almost 300 warriors (all that could be spared) and successfully drove away Meledien’s mercenaries. Meledien herself escaped, but now there are one hundred soldiers guarding the ruins, and another hundred guarding Kinnet Gorge. Crime has increased in Tal Hae since then, since many of the soldiers were taken off the streets here. Everyone hopes that the gnoll lord of Calnis won’t take this opportunity to march down the road and attack.”

Tor Bladebearer: I am reminded again that gnoll + Eye of Moirel = bad news. Calnis is a disaster just waiting for the worst possible time to happen.

Sagiro: (whistles innocently)

Cencerra speaks: “I personally fought against Meledien in hand-to-hand combat. She is incredibly accomplished as a swordswoman, and might have bested me if conditions hadn’t favored me. She can move incredibly fast despite wearing that red plate mail of hers. In the end many of us ran after her, but she outran us and disappeared into the forest.”

Salk continues: “The next piece of news is not good. You may have noticed that Carbuncle is not here at this meeting. That is because he is missing in action. His last report came from an orcish camp in the mountains near Sentinel about six months ago. Here is the letter he sent at that time:

I'm still in the Kalkas Peaks near Sentinel, but I'll be on the move again soon, and out of touch for a while. Rumors are flying about a major offensive planned from Hae Kalkas sometime soon, so I'm going to head east through the mountains, picking up information as I go. The orcs have holes all along the mountains. As soon as I learn anything, I'll pop out and send another note. I've heard two casual mentions by orcish warchiefs about the *Prophecies of the Orcish Crusades*, and that makes me nervous. We might end up regretting that we never got our hands on a copy. Still, the orcs are no more organized than they ever are, and it would take a miracle to get some of the tribes to fight beside one another. If I end up going all the way, it should take me about two months to reach Hae Kalkas. I'll report again by then at latest.

— Carbuncle

"And that's the last we've heard of him. In fact, orcs have returned in some force since then around Hae Kalkas and the surrounding dwarven towns."

After an uncomfortable pause, he continues, this time looking more directly at the Company again. "There's more bad news, I'm afraid. We think that your former companion Tor Bladebearer has been discovered and possibly killed. As you know, he's been acting as a spy behind the Delfirian lines, sending us information about their movements and strategies. Crunard's strategists working with the Stormknights are now convinced that Tor's information is tainted. While what he has sent us has been technically accurate, it has too often led us to focus on a lesser objective while the Delfirians have executed some greater objective. It's a very touchy game for both sides to play; we haven't wanted to let on that we have a spy in their midst, and they haven't wanted to let on that they know he's a spy by feeding him blatantly false information. But they have known, for how long we're not sure, and now we know that they know. We've sent this warning to him via a *sending* spell, but disturbingly there has been no reply."

The Company grimace at this news. Several times since Tor left them, Morningstar has tried to make contact with him in dreams but has been unsuccessful. This new turn of events is hardly cause for optimism.

At least Salk has one piece of good news. The Delfirian army tried to take the city of Hydra two months ago but were successfully repelled. Another adventuring group, led by a brother and sister team named Junaya and Jerzembeck, has been harrying the Delfirians for weeks by waging a guerrilla-type offensive. They actually did enough damage to the enemy supply lines that the siege was withdrawn.

Finally, the meeting turns to the recent quest undertaken by the Company to bring back the Crosser's Maze. Salk asks them to tell their whole tale, start to finish. With an uncomfortable glance at Rosetta, he tells the party that while they describe their adventures, they will be under the effect of truth magic.

For the next several hours the party recount the entire story: their mad dash through the gartine arch into Kivia; their travel to Djaw and the small misadventure with the addictive Powder; their encounters with the Faceless and with Shreen the Fair; their journey to the abandoned golem city of Repose; their long journey southeast to the Jungle of Dreams; their encounters with Lapis; their discovery of Zhamir, the legendary City in the Bottle; and of course their weird mental journey through the deranged mind of Solomea Pirenne to acquire the Crosser's Maze.

There are hearty congratulations from everyone, and many questions are asked about the Maze itself. Aravis doesn't have much to tell them, of course, but the Spire is still doing research, and Aravis is encouraged to keep experimenting himself. It won't be long — perhaps only another year — before Naradawk will batter down the last defenses and emerge into Charagan. If the Maze is going to stop him, the Spire or Aravis is going to have to learn how the strange artifact works.

That brings the Company to their most recent revelation — the letter from Califax, that indicates that the Black Circle has a second, more immediate plot to effect Naradawk's crossing.

And that causes Rosetta of the Silver Shell to stand up and walk slowly towards the party. "I have some rather pointed questions for you," she says. "But first, a brief review, for the benefit of everyone here. When you rescued me from my long years of torture beneath God's Thorn — for which I am still extremely grateful, let me add — you also rescued a Sharshun assassin named Inivane.

"You had many options at that point. You could have brought him back to the Spire for questioning. You could have killed him outright, for past crimes easily deserving of death or worse as punishment. You could have used him as bait. Or a bargaining chip. Or gotten him at least to give us valuable historical information about Naradawk, the Sharshun and the Black Circle. Instead, you let him go. Am I right?" There is uncomfortable silence all around.

"Why? Why did you let him go?"

Morningstar answers after another pause. "We know that the Sharshun were once bitter enemies of the Delfirians. We hoped in letting him go that he would spur the Sharshun to attack the Nifi worshippers. Setting our enemies against each other."

"I see," Rosetta says, shaking her head. "Clearly you thought that was a better idea than bringing him in for questioning, after which we still might have let him go for that same purpose."

When the party have no reply, she continues. "According to the story we just heard, one of the first things you did upon arriving in Kivia was to pay a visit to a Black Circle shrine. There – and please correct me if I misunderstood – you subjected yourself to a draining of your life essence in order to receive prophetic answers to some questions you had. Yes?"

"The Black Circle is different in Kivia," the party protest. "Many people use the shrines there for that same purpose. Carawell, who guided us out of Delfir, had done it several times in the past. The energy drain is only temporary."

"Ah. Do you have any idea to what purpose the Black Circle puts the 'life energy' that they take from people? No? I thought not. And what, precisely, are your reasons for believing anything told to you by a Black Circle priest? Even if what he tells you is the truth, don't you think the Black Circle has its own reasons for feeding you bits of knowledge? Quite frankly, I find some of your actions appalling."

By this time, some of the Company are beginning to boil over with indignation at this verbal assault. The other members of the Spire are looking uncomfortable, but none of them, not even Ozilinsh, is intervening on their behalf. Some party members snap back harshly at Rosetta. Everything they did seemed like the best thing at the time to help their quest. They learned valuable information about Grey Wolf from that Shrine.

"Ah, we'll get to that shortly," Rosetta says coolly. "First, though, I want you to verify that we heard you correctly regarding your encounter with this Shreen the Fair in Djaw. Am I right in recalling that, in order for you to get information about the Crosser's Maze, you made a promise to this monster that you'd return the Crosser's Maze to him? Without knowing at the time what it could do, or how powerful it was, or to what purpose Shreen intends to put it?"

"We felt it was a necessary bargain," the party answer hotly. "We needed information that he had, and that was the only way to get it."

"But Lapis," says Rosetta, "Lapis, whose band you later defeated, Lapis was able to get what she wanted out of Shreen by the use of force. It sounds like she made no ill-advised bargain with a priest of a God of Monsters to get what she wanted."

At this point several party members lose their cool, and they blow off some angry steam at Rosetta. "Look, if you're accusing us of working for the Black Circle or something, just come out and say it! It's intolerable to sit here listening to your half-veiled accusations after all we've been through! We put our lives at risk more times than you can imagine while you've been sitting here... sitting here doing precious little from what we can tell. We don't have to sit here and listen to this!"

Rosetta leans back and lets out a long breath. "Yes, I know. It's difficult being put to these questions. But I'm only doing it for the benefit of the Spire. The Black Circle is subtle... more subtle than you realize. You may have been compromised without even knowing it. And like it or not, my allegiance to the Spire, and my hatred of the Black Circle, is greater than my desire to spare your feelings.

"Now listen carefully to me. A Black Circle priest told Grey Wolf that he's some sort of 'axle,' some central point about which two worlds are converging. And now you claim to have corroborating evidence from Califax, a known compatriot of Mokad and a one-time self-confessed member of the Black Circle. You, Dranko, claim to have converted him back to his Deliochan faith, but he himself is in hiding, and we cannot question him directly. And while you were gone, we subjected your friend Praska to a number of... tests... all of which indicate that she is free of Black Circle influence. And yet Califax tells you not to trust her.

"If you were me, or any one of us here, what would you then believe? That the Black Circle is giving us vital information about how we can defeat them? Or that maybe, just maybe, this whole business with Grey Wolf is a distraction, or the truth is something wholly different than what you've been led to believe by Circle-tainted sources."

As Dranko begins to object, Rosetta continues. "I'm not saying Califax is a traitor, Dranko. I'm suggesting that he may be being used by the Black Circle even now, and that we hold as debatable and suspect anything that he tells you. That's all. I have had more direct dealings with the Black Circle than anyone in this room, and I know how insidious they can be, how manipulative, and how subtle. Everything we know should be considered in that light. We can make no mis-step in this."

Salk speaks up, his voice steady. “Thank you, Rosetta. We are all aware of the dangers posed by the Black Circle. For your part,” he says, addressing the Company, “the Spire does not suspect you of any sort of treachery. We know that you are trustworthy and loyal beyond reproach, and that Rosetta’s questions are only intended to make sure we have as whole a picture as possible of our situation. I’m sure that nothing more will need be said to you today on this subject.”

He gives a meaningful glance at Rosetta, who bows her head.

“The most disturbing part of your story,” Salk says, “is your contention that the person we have known heretofore only as ‘P’ is in fact Parthol Runecarver. I confess I find this difficult to believe. Parthol is one of the Spire’s great heroes, who sacrificed himself at the second Battle of Verdshane when Naloric Skewn was defeated. The notion that he’s still alive, and that he’s allied with Naradawk, is hard to accept. And we must consider that the source of this information is the insane mind of a man who cracked under the stresses of a powerful artifact. Nonetheless we will take what steps we can to confirm or refute the theory that ‘P’ is Parthol Runecarver.”

The meeting of the Spire is then adjourned. Aravis is instructed not to leave Charagan until such time as the Crosser’s Maze has been used or passed on to another host.

Tuerny: For some reason I do not trust Rosetta at all... Especially considering what the group knows about the Silver Shells... I would watch her.

Hatching Dragon: Ahh... Good to know that I’m not the only one suspicious of her. After all, wouldn’t she make a perfect spy? How would you really tell if she was who she claims to be? There’s nobody alive that can verify her identity.

That, and she’s polite while grilling the heroes! Polite = EVIL, isn’t that right?

coyote6: But she’s being rude and unfriendly to the Company, which means she must be on their side, right? Polite = Bad Guy, Rude = Good Guy?

kidcthulhu: You have the formula correct, Coyote, but I think we’re going to make a new rule for Rosetta. We call it the “Don’t care, we just hate you” rule.

Hatching Dragon: No, she’s saying things they don’t like, but being very polite about it. Re-read her speech; she goes out of her way to sugar-coat everything as she basically tells the group they’ve (probably) been misled or outright lied to. On a number of occasions she specifically points out that, despite what she’s either just said, or is about to say, that she still acknowledges the group’s heroic efforts on the side of “Good.”

I said she was in a perfect position to spread misinformation, and she is. The thing that makes her irritate the group so much is that she just gave a speech debunking nearly everything they’ve discovered about the enemy.

Then again, I could just be engaging in the classic game of double-thinking myself totally off the facts. Still, it’s fun to argue about until we have another session or three to over-analyze.

Tor Bladebearer: Dranko and... Morningstar?!? (jaw drops)

Well, congrats to the two of you... though from where it looks like Sagiro has put me now I may not be able to attend the wedding...

LightPhoenix: Well, Sagiro can always bring you back as some sort of uber-zombie...

Tor Bladebearer: Not sure what to make of Rosetta. Certainly by the rudeness logic she must be 100% correct but then again by that logic Turlus the baker would be the One True Defender of Charagan.

Also, by the “Sagiro is a contrarian” theory [I am not! – S.], if Sagiro drops just enough plausible evidence to lead you to believe fact X, fact Y must instead be true. So since Rosetta has a good argument as to why maybe those facts are in doubt, that clearly confirms their truth...

Boy, remember when we first met Meledien right after she arrived and we tried being all nice to her and stuff? What a bunch of suckers we were...

Sagiro: Actually, I recall that when you first met Meledien, you tried to read her mind without telling her, and she caught you at it. That sort of thing tends to start one off on the wrong foot...



General Windstorm Takes Command

Run #112 – Sunday, April 8, 2001

The party continue training, crafting magic items and scribing spells. Only a few days after the Council meeting, Kibi abruptly vanishes.

Dranko finishes up work on his *plate mail of silent strength* for Ernie, and proudly presents the gift at the Greenhouse. Ernie is floored; the magic armor also allows him to cast *bull's strength* on himself once per day. However, Dranko couldn’t resist adding one more special “feature” to the armor: when the little finger of the right gauntlet is pulled, it emits a loud raspberry.

Piratecat: Ernie’s armor also gives him a +10 (I believe) bonus to Move Silently, in addition to the *bull's strength* and (ahem) sound effects. If Dranko had really been crafty, he would have made pulling the finger the trigger for activating the strength spell, but I didn’t think of it at the time.

Dranko also constructed a *whip of the searing tongue*, a +1 whip that does an additional 1d6 holy damage per strike, and which can cast the spell *searing light* once per day. Nothing’s cooler than hitting an enemy with a whip and then loosing the *searing light* spell right down the whip into them. Wanna guess who’s multiclassing into Lasher next level?

(Other party-crafted magic items of note: a *wand of fireballs* and *boots of speed* from Aravis and two *wands of cure serious wounds* from Morningstar. Also, many potions and scrolls are brewed and scribed, respectively.)



Over the course of several days, Morningstar serves as the “Switchboard of Ell,” casting *sending* spells to various relatives of party members. Kay’s brother Karn *sends* back that he and his father have been fighting orcs near the city of Sentinel; Karn has killed three orcs, and though he suffered a grievous leg wound, it has been healed. Grey Wolf’s sister (who he hasn’t seen since before his parents were killed) reports that she’s busy with “guarding” jobs for the foreseeable future, but will visit Ivellios at Tal Hae when she next has a chance. She tries several *sendings* to Dranko’s ornery grandfather, but the old man refuses to believe that Dranko has made anything of himself (Morningstar then convinces Harmon to send Dranko’s grandfather a letter on Dranko’s behalf). Finally she *sends* to her father, who is delighted to hear from his daughter, and assures her that her parents have full faith in Morningstar regarding the whole “Illuminated Sisters” business.



The party are visited briefly by an old guardsman with a limp. His name is **Spence**, and he’s the party’s new liaison now that Marbury Tillerson has been sent off on assignment. He’s a nice enough man, who wonders out loud why the party aren’t off fighting for their kingdom, but is convinced when he sees the “trophies” in Tor’s trophy case. (Also, Dranko cures him of a wheezing cough, and that helps win his confidence.)



On the 27th of April, the annual Spring Tourney of Werthis takes place, but it’s woefully under-attended. With most able-bodied participants off fighting either humanoids or Delfirians, only three contests are held: sword, sword and shield, and an “open” division where participants can use any practice weapon they want. The nine-member party itself comprises a majority of the participants in each event, and Morningstar sends for many of her Illuminated Sisters, thinking this will give them good practice fighting in daylight. Although the party are worried that they’ll be jeered for not being out fighting “for real,” they are not subjected to any real mockery. The Werthians in fact think very highly of the party, especially Ernie, who is already famous as the carpet flyer who helped Faskel Giantbane slay the Ventifact Colossus.

In the straight sword competition (which pits party member against party member in several matches), Kay defeats both Grey Wolf and Makel en route to the finals, where she is paired up against the one “ringer” from the Church of Werthis. He’s a skilled fighter named **Anson**, fresh from the front, who is only taking a leave long enough to complete some every-seven-year religious observance at the church. He and Kay have an extremely close duel, and in the end Kay is victorious, 3 hits to 2.

In the sword and shield division, Anson once again reaches the finals, but this time he finds himself fighting Ernie in the championship match. Ernie fights well, but is slightly outmatched by the Stormknight, and loses in another close match.

The open competition features all the party members except Kay, Anson, several priestesses of Ell, and a handful of other random participants. In the semi-final matches, Ernie is matched up with Anson again, and this time gets the better of his opponent. Morningstar (wielding her namesake weapon rather than the unfamiliar sword) is the other finalist, besting the most proficient of her students (Previa) in the other semi-final. In another long and hard-fought battle, Ernie is victorious. There is much cheering from the small but appreciative crowd, who weren’t expecting anywhere near such an entertaining exhibition.

kidcthuilhu: The fun part of that last battle was when Morningstar twisted her ankle (bad fumble) 3-4 rounds in. She was going to concede the victory. Instead, Ernie stood on one foot to make it fair, and they finished the rest of the battle hopping on one leg. It felt awfully noble, but probably looked freakish and weird, a 6-foot tall nearly albino woman and a 3-foot tall, 3-foot wide halfling hopping around the ring swinging at each other.



A couple of days later, a messenger from the church of Ell (main branch) comes to the Greenhouse with a brief message for Morningstar. Snokas has been restored to sound mind, but has been sent away on a Quest for the church to some faraway place called “Kiva.” Kay is suspicious, thinking that it all sounds a bit too convenient, and the party wonder just how the church intends to transport Snokas across the Uncrossable Sea. Morningstar casts yet another *sending* to make sure he’s okay, to see if he’s still addicted to Powder, and to find out how he’s crossing. The 25-word response:

I'm in the midst of a Delfirian army, trying to sneak through a big arch in a building. Not addicted. I must do this on

“...my own,” the party figure he was going to say. Morningstar is satisfied.



Near the end of the training and crafting period, Ozilinh comes down the stairs of the Greenhouse one evening and tells the Company that they are going to be sent on an important mission for the Spire. In brief, they are to find out what happened to

Carbuncle, rescue him if possible, and learn whatever it was that he was investigating on his trip through the mountains of Nahalm. As Cencerra and her group are off checking on reports of another gartine arch on the dwarvish island of Karth, the Spire has decided to send Ozilinsh's Company after Carbuncle.

Since most of the orcish activity in recent months has been at the far eastern end of the mountains (near Hae Kalkas), that's a likely place to start. To expedite matters, Ozilinsh has a letter for them with the ducal seal that will give them free rein to come and go at will, even in areas with curfew or other lockdowns. They should present the letter especially to **General Burrin Rockbreath**, who is in charge of the military operation against the orcs. (Kay scoffs – she's a general too, and should get that sort of treatment anyway. Dranko immediately starts studying and forging the letter for later use.)

Lastly, Ozilinsh has a gift for Aravis: a small, cunningly crafted gold pin in the shape of a sheaf of wheat. It's a *refuge* token, and if he breaks it, it will teleport him back to the church of Pikon in Tal Hae. The Spire know how important Aravis is to the Company, but also know they can't afford to lose the Crosser's Maze he carries within his own mind...

Tor Bladbearer: I almost wonder whether Grey Wolf ought to be wearing that pin instead of Aravis, if [Califax]'s letter is to be believed...

Aravis: Personally, I would prefer that the pin be on Grey Wolf. If everyone around me is dying, I do not look forward to abandoning them.

But, to answer your question, I am guessing that the Spire is not convinced that Grey Wolf is the key that we think he is. Further, what would happen if Aravis died with the Crosser's Maze in his head is completely unknown.

Actually, it is a mystery to me why Aravis and Grey Wolf have not both been locked up in the deepest dungeon in Charagan! (Er, uh, protective custody.)

Rincewind: Well, if Grey Wolf is locked up in a dungeon, you'll find it very hard to betray him. So he has to stay with you.



Wednesday, June 11 – Saturday, June 14

And so the party set out. They take *Burning Sail* (functioning just fine in Charagan waters, thank you) from Tal Hae to Kynder Hold, and from there march overland to Hae Kalkas. The trip is uneventful, except for one alarming incident. One afternoon, Grey Wolf feels that wrenching feeling in his guts, and a strange vision occurs. A large underground smithy fades into existence around them, overlapping the dirt road and grassy fields, as if both scenes exist at once in the same place. Dozens of sweaty, shirtless smiths are pounding away at their anvils and forges, making weapons. Slowly the forge workers become aware that something is amiss, and the sound of their hammers gets softer as they stop working and look wonderingly around them. Some spot the party in their midst, and start barking in a foreign tongue. A few back away, but others start advancing menacingly upon the party, who form a defensive ring around Grey Wolf and draw weapons in response.

And then, as quickly as the scene started, it ends. The smithy and the workers fade away, leaving behind scorched marks on the ground. The party take this as a clear sign that the two worlds are closer than ever to being aligned.

Sunday, June 15

The Company arrive at the gates of Hae Kalkas in the mid-afternoon, and General Windstorm asks a skeptical guard at the gate to send for someone with military intelligence. Half an hour later another soldier arrives, but he doesn't have much news from the front. He has heard of Kay, though; apparently General Windstorm is well known in military circles as the Commander of the Yrimpa, who have made a huge difference in the war against the Delfirians on the Balani Peninsula. Kay is given a letter to expedite service at the Sages' Consortium, and the soldiers agree to have someone meet them at the Sages' in the morning, who will have more recent and relevant news.

Monday, June 16

The next morning, after spending the night at an inn called the Mountain's Foot, the Company go to the Sages' Consortium. A sage named **Serin**, who specializes in humanoid history, tells them what he knows about the book *Prophecies of the Orcish Crusades*. For one thing, a man had been by only a couple of months ago looking for the same work (the description is that of Parkitt, the apprentice to the Archmage Alykeen). And Serin tells the party the same thing that he told Parkitt – the Consortium doesn't own a copy of the book, and there are many who don't even think the book exists. Serin believes that it is a collection of fables and prophecies describing how the orcs will eventually launch a holy war and conquer the kingdom. Of course, most humanoid races have similar so-called prophetic writings, and since they can't all be right, it's hard to lend credence to any single one. Serin also knows about a legendary orcish champion called the "Chun Aggrat," or 'Red General' in the common tongue.

Outside the Sages' Consortium, the party are met by a Lieutenant named **Theodore** who has at least been at the front fairly recently. Back at the Mountain's Foot, Theodore gives the party some details about the situation. All of the actual fighting has occurred in and around the dwarven villages up in the mountains about three days' travel west – Karzadin, Eggemoggin, Marhold and Nagstone. The last serious "Orcish Surprise" was near Marhold about three weeks ago; many soldiers were killed, but civilian casualties were avoided.

"Orcish Surprise" is a term the dwarves use for a common orcish tactic, wherein orcs dig several tunnels in the same general location, but leave the last few feet of rock. Then they all complete their tunnels at once, and come pouring out into above-ground dwarvish territory.

Many soldiers are staying in Hae Kalkas in case the orcs manage to bypass the dwarven villages and break into the countryside beyond; the total soldiery up in the mountains themselves is only (he thinks) a couple of thousand. He suggests that Kay can learn more details if they travel to Eggemoggin or Marhold themselves.

With that, the party head westward and up into the mountains. En route to Karzadin they pass a slow-moving wagon carrying shields and potatoes to the front. Despite a vaguely agreed upon policy of keeping a low profile, Ernie can't resist casting *create food and water*, adding more potatoes to the wagon (which creaks ominously under the increased load). The wagon driver is suspicious, and asks that the party eat some of the new potatoes themselves, before he'll deliver them to the villages. They do, and he seems satisfied. Dranko even casts *bull's strength* on one of the mules, to help it carry the increased load of supplies.

Tuesday, June 17

After passing by Karzadin (and surreptitiously providing more food and healing), the party arrive at Eggemoggin, where General Burrin Rockbreath is rumored to be stationed. Ernie first goes to visit Kibi's family; Kibi's mom recognizes him at once and invites him in. She is disappointed that Kibi isn't with him, but Ernie assures her that her son is fine, and off on an important secret mission.

General Kay Olafsen is soon directed to Rockbreath's tent, to which the Company are admitted after detection spells are liberally applied. Rockbreath listens as Kay explains the Company's mission. He has not heard of Carbuncle, but agrees that if he's alive, he's probably still undercover deep in the orcish interior. Rockbreath lays out a large map, which shows the general layout of the underground passages and caverns that form what is the true front. About three days' journey into the caverns is what they call "no-man's land," a region unoccupied by either dwarves or orcs, but heavily trapped by both sides. On the other side of that is orcish territory. On the near side of no-man's land are four strategic bridges that cross a swift underground river; all of these are well guarded by dwarvish forces.

Dwarvish sappers and scouts are employed throughout the underground territory, watching for signs of orcish incursions, and listening (or using other dwarven senses) for new tunnels being dug by the orcs. Rockbreath takes pains to warn the party about the cunning traps employed by the orcs: pits, falling blocks, and "orcish balconies" from which squads of orcish marksmen can take shots at intruders while maintaining almost full cover for themselves. The orcs have found some way of building new, deep pits extremely quickly, but the dwarves haven't discovered how they're doing it.

He also explains what is known about the various orcish tribes:

- The Red Fang tribe is at the forefront, and their leader is a barbarian named **Okhot One-Eye**. From what the dwarves have been able to gather, Okhot draws his authority from a legendary orcish hero called the Chun Aggrat, or "Red General." While no dwarf has seen the Chun Aggrat, Okhot has been seen on several occasions, and reports are that he is a fearsome warrior. The Red Fang orcs dye their teeth red by chewing on some kind of fungus, and they wear shirts with crude blood-painted eyes on the front.
- The Bone-Breaker tribe wears black, and their symbol is a split skull (their enormous leader is called the Skull-Splitter). They used to be the dominant tribe until the Red Fang gained the upper hand.
- The Longclaw tribe are led by an orc called the Bloodseer; they paint their hands green, and are less frequently seen in battle.
- The Blackstaff tribe, of which many orcish shamans are members, occupy the rearguard position that is a mark of shame among the orcs.

There are rumors of an orc named Clagg who is agitating to stop the war, but he has never actually been seen, and Rockbreath thinks it might just be a ploy to lure the dwarves deep into orcish territory looking for him.

RangerWickett: "Oh, the orcs and goblins and gnolls and kobolds can't *all* have a holy war to conquer the world." Heh.

And I can't say that 'Red General' thing sounds good either.

LightPhoenix: Reminds me of Meledien and what's-his-name in the red armor...

Piratecat: The Chun Aggrat reminds you of Meledien and Octesian, those bastards? Well, fancy that. That's because he's really Restimar, a human in disguise and Meledien's peer. All three came across from the other Prime back when the blood gargoyle attacked Minok to distract the Archmagi. Their job is to prepare the way for Naradawk's coming.

Later, Morningstar was given a vision of Octesian and Meledien talking in a dream. They referred to Restimar drawing the short stick and "getting to play God with the Kesh (orcs)." Basically, we believe that the Chun Aggrat is Restimar in disguise, inciting the humanoids to war as an Archmage-ly distraction. And now, we get to invade his territory, searching for a missing spy. Yowsa!

Tor Bladebearer: And we came thiiis close to fighting Restimar directly back around the time of the Battle of Five-Stone Pass (I think I'm recalling the name correctly). We scouted him out and I was really really close to trying to go in and challenge him to single combat. Fortunately someone talked me out of it...

Zaruthustran: It's really cool how the world is living and changing, even when the PCs aren't around. Like Carbuncle, the other Company, and this war with orcs. So many campaigns are overly PC-focused, with nothing happening unless the PCs directly intervene. In Sagiro's world, everything is in motion and while the PCs certainly influence their world, they are not the sole influence. Good work!

There have been a few offensive maneuvers made by the orcs in recent weeks. They built a new tunnel through the no-man's land, but that was discovered and collapsed, and the orcs repelled. Another recent surge of orcs was able to temporarily capture two of the bridges, but these were also turned back after heavy fighting. And just three weeks ago a number of Orcish Surprises were opened near Marhold, and about six hundred orcs rushed out before the tunnel was blocked and collapsed. They killed many soldiers (and a few civilians) before they were defeated.

Although the dwarves (along with human allies from Hae Kalkas) typically inflict many more casualties than they suffer, it still worries Rockbreath. Altogether he has fewer than 2500 soldiers in the region, and his advisors guess that the orcs have over ten times that number.

The Company are given a pair of large, unmarked tents in which to stay, and they spend some hours talking about their strategy for infiltrating the orcish territory and finding out what happened to Carbuncle.

The Quest for Carbuncle

Run #113 – Sunday, April 29, 2001

For several hours, the party debate various strategies and approaches. Should they go in swords blazing, or try a stealthy approach? Should they try to sow dissension among the orcs, to divert attention away from themselves? And given what they suspect of the "Chun Aggrat" (that he's the red-armored Restimar), should they disguise themselves?

They carefully consider good spells and prayers to have ready for the next day, and go to sleep.

Wednesday, June 18

The next morning, they awake to the sounds of drilling soldiers and the smells of plain dwarvish breakfast gruel. Ernie tries to help out with the meal, but the ingredients they have to work with are hopeless. A young and eager human soldier reports to General Windstorm, putting himself at her disposal for anything the party need. (Dranko, always hopeful for torchbearer candidates, tosses him a torch. "See? He's perfect!" The rest of the party veto the idea as usual.) They spend an hour or so disguising themselves, so that Restimar won't know them if reports get back to him. The halflings are disguised as small dwarves, and the others are altered enough so they're not immediately recognizable as Abernathy's Company.

Two dwarven guards stand at the entrance to the primary tunnel leading into the mountains from Eggemoggin. Kay gives the new password, "Kai-Kin," and they are allowed entry.

The tunnels are tall enough for humans, and fairly easy going at first. While most of the tunnels in this part of the mountains are natural, the dwarves have smoothed out the rough bits. Torches show the shortest route, allowing the party to avoid unnecessary detours and dead ends. Still, it's not like walking on a good road. The tunnels wind about, seldom going in a straight line for long, and there are plenty of inclines and declines. Occasionally the taller party members have to duck beneath low hanging rock formations. And even with torches out, there's not so much light that they can safely hurry.

After a few hours of marching, two dwarves step out of the shadows and challenge the party, and again let them pass when the password is given. After another few hours, the party decide they've put in a good day's march, and sleep on the rocky ground.

Thursday, June 19

The next "day," after another hour of travel, the party find a small cavern seemingly set up as a underground campsite for travelers. Ah, well. (Dwarves must be used to longer marches.)

After another full day of travel, the party arrive at another underground way station, this one full of dwarves (about forty in all). The dwarf in charge of this group is called **Blackbeard**, a dour and sarcastic dwarf who isn't at all impressed with Kay's military rank. He demands to know what the party are doing down here, but Kay flatly refuses to tell him, and this doesn't improve his attitude.

Kay then requests the services of two dwarves; she asks for a good scout, and someone who knows something about the construction of dwarven traps. Blackbeard again wants to know why she wants them, but she only says that she intends to pass through the no-man's land and into orcish territory. Blackbeard reluctantly complies, and walks away into the crowd of

Number47: Is that guy from Djaw still traveling with you, One Singular Sensation?

LightPhoenix: As long as it's a good sensation... One Certain Step probably stayed behind.

Sagiro: Actually, One Certain Step returned with the Company to Charagan. Had they left him behind, it would have been in the midst of a hostile jungle (remember the shambling mounds?), with no way for him to get back across the mountains to the heartland beyond.

The party intend to get back to Kivia some day, to "rescue" an Eye of Moirel from Het Branoi. If Step is still alive, he'll go back with them then.

PlaneSailing: Was there also a desire on the Company's part to do something about the dwarf slavers (as in slavers of dwarfs, rather than dwarfs running the show)?

Wonders: Was there more to the old prophecy which led Step to the company, or have all the terms of that prophecy been comfortably met?

Aravis: Yes, the list of people that the party would like to see dead includes the Guild of Chains. We have no definite plans, but we clearly intend to take any opportunity that presents itself to free the dwarves.

Unfortunately, I do not have the prophecy regarding One Certain Step with me, but I do seem to recall that he is supposed to die helping us at Het Branoi. Or so we believe.

dwarves, pausing to have a laugh with a few of his fellows. (Dranko overhears him, and while he doesn't speak Dwarvish, Ernie does. Ernie says that the words meant something like "nice disguises.")

Friday, June 20

A few minutes later, a pair of dwarves report to Kay. **Maris** is a silent dwarf who says he's a scout, but other than that says nothing. The trap expert is a young and eager dwarf named **Tribbin**, who was responsible for some of the earlier traps laid in the no-man's land, though he hasn't been as involved recently. He's obviously excited about being assigned to escort a general.

After more sleep they set off again; the tunnels are getting more and more rough, and less and less straight. More often the party have to duck under low overhangs and step carefully to avoid snags. Torches on the walls still light the main route through, but it seems like long hours of travel before the party arrive at a large dwarven camp marked on their map. It's a tremendous cavern, almost a thousand feet in diameter, and about 200 dwarven soldiers are stationed there. It serves as both a camp and a supply depot; there are dozens of crates of food stored here, and a small freshwater lake in the center is used to fill water barrels.

This time the dwarf in charge, **Craster**, treats Kay with great respect. He tells her that there hasn't been any recent orcish activity in the immediate vicinity, though there are reports that the southernmost bridge was attacked two days ago. The attack was repelled – of course. Craster is extremely confident in the dwarves' ability to hold off the orcs. The orcs have no tactical sensibilities, and suffer hideous casualty rates with every ill-conceived foray. Meanwhile the dwarves are well trained and tough, and take no stupid or unnecessary risks. Craster makes it clear that the dwarves are fighting a purely defensive war, knowing that they don't have the numbers to cross the no-man's land in force.

Saturday, June 21

Tribbin has been telling the party what he knows about the orcish traps, but it's not much that they didn't already hear back in Eggemoggin. The orcs have been supplementing the usual pits and "orcish balconies" with falling-block traps. "Designs stolen from the dwarves," Tribbin scoffs. They still haven't discovered how the orcs are able to dig out new traps so quickly.

Craster gives the party a corner of the cavern in which to camp. He orders the other dwarves to leave them alone while they rest up for the next day, a day in which they expect to reach the no-man's land.

After another eight hours of sleep, the party set out again towards the nearest of the four bridges that cross the only significant underground river in the area. The four bridges are key points of defense for the dwarves, and when the party reach the bridge after an hour of marching, they find it extremely well guarded. The river flows through the large cavern, and only one bridge spans it. The bridge has been carved away so that at its narrowest point only one or two orcs could cross at a time.

On the near side of the bridge a number of bulwarks have been constructed, and short walls have been built so that any orcs who make it across the bridge will have to navigate a small maze, all the while being subjected to crossbow fire. About a hundred dwarves are here guarding the bridge, and there are great supplies of axes, shields, armor and crossbow bolts. The whole cavern is flooded with light from dozens of magical torches, so that no orc could sneak across unnoticed. Clearly the orcs would pay a dear price if they even thought about taking the bridge.

The party are allowed to cross the bridge, and as they head across the wide cavern towards the only exit on the far side, a dwarven voice can be heard shouting out: "Kick their sorry orcish arses!" Hoping to do just that, the party leave the dwarves behind and head towards the no man's land...



For several hours they plod slowly through the winding tunnels and rough caverns of the under-mountains. There are no longer torches to light their path. They find their own way using their map from General Rockbreath, torches of their own, and the eerie blue glow of Grey Wolf's magic sword (*Bostock*).

All at once, a small group of rats comes running out of the darkness. They scurry past the party, ignoring them, but Kay quickly casts *speak with animals* and asks one of them what they're running from. "Noises," says the rat.

"Why are you running from noises?" she asks.

"Noises always mean bad things coming," says the rat. "You should run too." And the rat flees after its fellows.

Thirty more yards down the passage they come across one of the "low-tunnels" marked on their map. These are specially constructed tunnels with ceilings only five feet high – tall enough for dwarves, but not for orcs. The sound – a scratching, digging sort of sound – seems at first like it's coming from this tunnel, but it seems empty. Tribbin and Maris stand still for a moment, and then walk over to the stone wall about ten yards past the low-tunnel. They listen intently at the wall for a moment, and then Maris whispers harshly, "Bloody hell! Get back! They're about to break through!"

The party draw weapons and cast battle-prep spells. They wait breathlessly – but nothing breaks through. Tribbin goes back to the stone wall, and guesses that the diggers must have just stopped digging, maybe two feet short of breaking through into their tunnel. It's probably an underground Orcish Surprise.

The party decide to force the issue. Ernie casts *stone shape*, and finishes the tunnel himself, molding the stone away until it reveals the recently built tunnel beyond. Aravis, expecting orcs still in there, immediately launches a *lightning bolt* down the tunnel, but there are no signs of any orcs.

The party spend a few seconds scratching their heads. The dwarves notice that the tunnel doesn't seem right somehow; there aren't the usual telltale marks of picks or other common digging equipment. And there's very little of the debris that would be expected from a tunneling operation.

But they decide that whatever was doing the digging can't have gone far. Morningstar casts *detect thoughts*, casts her mind out ahead, and the whole party take off down the new tunnel. After a short while running, Morningstar picks up someone thinking up ahead, but out of range of the party's light sources. She focuses in on that thought, just in time to get the thought: *Ready... Aim...*

"Down, everyone!" Morningstar shouts. And as the Company hit the floor, crossbow bolts come whizzing down the tunnel, clattering off stone and armor.

Aravis realizes that the orcs must be within sixty feet if Morningstar is picking up their thoughts, and so uses his newly-made *wand of fireballs* to shoot a blast down the tunnel. The red pellet steaks into the darkness, and then...

KABOOM! The party can hear the sounds of orcs shouting. Dranko, who speaks Orcish, hears one of the orcs shout: "They've got wizards! Get the Digger out of here! Get it out now!"

In answer to the *fireball*, the orcs fire more crossbow bolts, and then some javelins come flying out of the darkness as well. Some of the party are hit this time, and Maris, hit with both a bolt and a javelin, goes unconscious. Dranko heals him back up, while Kay and Oa-Lyanna put up a *wind wall* between the party and the orcs.

Aravis sends another *fireball* down towards the orcs, but there is less screaming this time after the detonation.

More crossbow bolts are fired down the passage, but they are deflected harmlessly into the ceiling by the *wind wall*.

Dranko sneaks forward, using his various stealthy abilities, and discovers that about sixty feet down, the tunnel opens up into a wide cavern, where columns of orcs (about a dozen in all) are lined up, ready to lean out, fire (or throw), and then duck back out of the *fireball* blast zone. Off to the side are a group of orcish axemen, waiting for someone to come out of the tunnel into the cavern. About nine orc bodies already lay charred in the space in front of the tunnel mouth.

Ernie decides that it's time to advance. With his *shield* spell in place, he runs down the tunnel (quietly, with his new *plate mail of silent strength*), and is greeted with a barrage of missile fire. Most of it glances off his armor and his *shield* spell, but a few bolts find their mark. The rest of the party are following close on his heels, and soon the battle is joined in earnest. Aravis toasts most of the remaining ranged-weapon orcs with another well placed *fireball*, and many of the survivors turn to flee.

As a number of the orcish soldiers are running, Dranko runs after them, hoping to subdue one with his *whip of the searing tongue*. He is successful, knocking a weak-looking orc unconscious. But the sound of his whip makes the five remaining orcs turn their heads, and they see that they are facing a half-orc. A light of rage comes into their eyes, they stop fleeing, and turn en masse to attack Dranko! One of them grunts, "What kind of pansy-ass elf weapon is *that*?"

So now Dranko is surrounded by five orcish barbarians, who start dealing gruesome damage with their greataxes. Dranko, not wanting to subject himself to five attacks of opportunity, only takes a five foot step back before dropping his whip and grabbing his mace. But on their turn, the five barbarians, white spittle flying from their frothing jaws, ignore the other threats and concentrate their attacks on the half-orc.

The others are now fully involved in the fight, and it doesn't last much longer. Kay is in her element, dealing out extra damage to the hated orcs. Aravis casts *polymorph self*, turns into a brown bear, and charges in to attack. And Morningstar casts *hold person* to disable one of the barbarian orcs. "That one's the prisoner!" she shouts.

wmuench: Okay, who else thinks the orcs have that nifty new creature the delver working for them?

RangerWickett: I figured it was just an orc sorcerer with the *move earth* spell, but hmm... yeah, a delver'd be a neat thought.

Of course, I imagine next to no one in this world has ever heard of a delver.

I gotta say, there's something about smartly played orcs that makes me happy. Plus, I just like to see Dranko in action in all his half-orc glory. Though the Dranko in my campaign uses a flaming axe.

Kay finishes off the remaining four barbarians with her Oa-Lyanna-driven *whirlwind* power, but catches both Dranko and Aravis in the blast. This is especially painful for Dranko, who has cast *shield other* on Aravis and so takes extra damage away from the wizard and onto himself. Between the orc axes, Kay's *whirlwind*, and the *shield other*, Dranko is in bad shape indeed (in fact, if not for an *endurance* cast on himself just before the fight, he'd have been unconscious and inches from death).

But in the end, twenty-five orcs lay dead, with another half dozen fled into the tunnels. Dranko is healed back up with liberal use of the new *wands of cure serious wounds* recently crafted by Morningstar.

And now the party have some prisoners to interrogate.

Gelatinous Fiasco

Run #114 – Sunday, May 6, 2001

After a few moments, the two unconscious but still living orcs start to stir. The party separate the prisoners, and get down to the business of questioning the tougher of the two. Dranko does the actual questioning (being the only one who speaks Orcish) while Morningstar casts *detect thoughts* and scans the orc's mind while he answers.

(Before the interrogations begin, the party agree that after they get what information they can, the prisoners will be killed as quickly and humanely as possible.)

The orc is frightened but surly, and spits at the “half-human” whom he clearly holds in low regard. At first he refuses to answer Dranko’s questions, but relents when threatened with death if he doesn’t talk. (Having noticed Morningstar casting a spell, he asks “What’s she doing?”) Dranko responds: “Casting a spell that will tear your soul out if you lie to us.”) Several times he tries to get Dranko to promise that he’ll be released if he answers truthfully, but Dranko is evasive (“That depends on your answers,” he finally says).

Unfortunately, the orc doesn’t know very much. He knows that the tunnels back the way he came from are trapped, but doesn’t know the details of those traps (his leaders, slain or fled, just told the others where to walk). The “Digger,” he says, is a large humanoid creature that tunnels with its claws; this matches the evidence found by Ernie and Kay of claw marks in the stone.

The orc doesn’t know the whereabouts of Okhot One-Eye, and laughs at the notion that he’d know anything about the Red General. He does reveal the name of one of his superiors – **Korfog**. He takes a dim view of the party’s chances of surviving if they press on into orcish territory. Having learned everything they can from the orc, Kay efficiently slits his throat.

The second orc knows even less than the first. He makes outrageous claims about being personal friends with both Okhot One-Eye and the Red General, but of course can’t provide any details when pressed. Kay kills him too.

During the second interrogation, Ernie suddenly hears a voice in his head; he’s the recipient of a *sending* spell! It says:

Still hiding Sand's Edge. Leave note under front left post. Sharshun closing in. Have bracelet. Dare not leave city. Sharshun watching. Cannot answer sendings. Embree.

Ernie answers: *Message received. Ernie. Far away right now.*

This sparks a brief discussion about what Embree is talking about; presumably, the Sharshun are after him, trying to get the Wilburforce bracelet away from him. But why is he in Sand’s Edge, and what is the “front left post?” Whatever the answers, there’s nothing they can do about it right now.

Kay checks the two tunnels leading out of the cavern, and discovers the one through which the Digger retreated. There are also many signs of orcs having fled that way, that she is expert in spotting: scuffs of their boots on the rocks, gobs of drying spit, coarse hairs, and of course some bloodstains from orcs that were injured.

PlaneSailing: Wrestling with the morality of dispatching prisoners is something that my gaming group have found difficult to come to terms with – probably because of our late 20th century upbringing as much as anything else! Executing a prisoner in cold blood seems quite different to killing someone in the heat of battle. Is One Certain Step with them at the moment?

I’d be interested to hear from party members what their feelings about it were – particularly since Dranko seemed more bothered about breaking a promise than the killing itself.

Piratecat: We were planning to kill the orcs anyway, but Dranko’s pretty sure that actually betraying someone is a sin. If he had promised the half-orc and then helped kill him, that would have weighed on his soul. Dranko used to be neutral, and wouldn’t have minded so much... but the Company’s influence gradually turned him to neutral good, and those sorts of things bother him nowadays.

PlaneSailing: I see, that makes sense. When I’m DM’ing I sometimes wrestle with how much of a steer I should be giving LG, NG and CG player-characters about behaviour towards captured prisoners. It is easiest when creatures are “wholly evil” and without redemption, much more difficult when facing human or certain humanoid enemies. I think I’ll have to plump for “extreme righteousness” or “situational ethics” in my understanding of the “good” alignment in place of what might be generally considered good in our society today. Hey, at least that would make Celestials usable foes...

Aravis: Yes, [One Certain Step] is with us. He is not happy with the killing of prisoners, but he does not stop us.

Aravis started out being really bothered by it, even going so far as to have a fight over it with Morningstar back in Djaw. However, his worldview has really changed to the point where he now understands the term “situational ethics.” So now, he goes back and forth on the subject.

Figuring that they might run into an encampment of orcs, Aravis *polymorphs* himself into an orc, and then Kay disguises him to look like one of the orcish prisoners. He walks ahead with Dranko and Tribbin, as if he's taken them prisoners. The rest follow about fifty feet behind, as quietly as they can. Morningstar casts *Rary's telepathic bond* on Dranko and Aravis so that the two separate groups can stay in mental communication.

After an hour or so making their way through the tunnels, occasionally stopping to make sure they're still following the orcs, Dranko and Aravis spot something a bit odd. Sticking out of the tunnel wall about thirty feet ahead of them is a smooth rocky protrusion, about a foot long. Dranko and Tribbin move slowly forward to investigate... and the floor starts to drop out from under them! A trapdoor is swinging downward beneath their feet revealing a wide (twenty feet square) pit, but with quick reflexes both have time to jump. Tribbin makes the easier leap to the side, comes up a few inches short, and is able to hang onto the lip of the pit by his fingers. Dranko, thinking he'd rather be on the far side of the pit, tries the more difficult leap forward instead... and misses the lip of the pit by about six feet. He falls.

He falls slowly, due to his *ring of feather falling*, but that will still only give him a couple of rounds before he reaches the bottom, that he can see is about forty feet below. He tries flicking his whip out at the protrusion, and succeeds in getting it wrapped around, but the protrusion is smooth enough that the whip just slides off, and he keeps falling.

Then he notices a skeleton is hovering in the pit, maybe ten feet off the bottom, looking up at him. "Oh, *crap*."

He finds himself sinking into some kind of clear jelly. It burns his skin, and starts dissolving his clothing, and even worse, his muscles seize up and he finds himself paralyzed! He sinks slowly through the slime until he is entirely submerged, and there he stops. He can see that the skeleton in there with him is wearing a silver ring, but of course he can't reach out and grab it.

Dranko frantically communicates his predicament to Morningstar over the *telepathic bond*, and the rest of the party run as fast as they can to reach the near edge of the jelly-filled pit. Aravis immediately begins to *polymorph* into a giant eagle, hoping to grab Dranko's paralyzed arm that's nearest to the surface of the slime. Kay arrives, *flying*, and moves immediately to grab Tribbin and pull him to safety. The rest of the party arrive soon after; Ernie and Makel fire arrows down into the slime, thinking that it might be a living creature, but there's no obvious effect. Flicker, over the sudden protests of the others, shoots off a zap with his *staff of shocking* at the slime. It quivers, but Dranko is still enveloped and paralyzed, holding his breath and taking a steady amount of acid damage.

Aravis, fully transformed, plunges his claws into the slime and grabs Dranko's arm. He's not paralyzed, but he's also not strong enough to pull Dranko out. He does, however, lift him up enough that his arm is just above the surface of the slime. Kay, having gotten Tribbin to safety, flies back and tries to grab the exposed arm. She misjudges, touches the slime... and becomes paralyzed. Fortunately she's still *flying*, and so doesn't plunge into the paralytic jelly herself.

Ernie gets out a rope and starts tying off a lasso, thinking he might be able to snare Dranko and pull him out. But as Aravis continues to strain and drag Dranko slowly upwards, wings flapping madly, Grey Wolf remembers he has a recently acquired scroll with *levitate* on it. He slowly pulls Dranko up out of the muck.

Ernie decides he wants to move closer to the far side of the pit, to be able to aid Dranko when he's fully up to the surface. There's a two and a half foot wide walkway on either side of the pit (between the edge of the pit and the walls), and it shouldn't be a difficult matter for him to navigate the ledge. (The smooth stone protrusion is (or was) a handhold meant to make this easier.)

He slips. Arms flailing, he falls over into the pit, and his plate-mail clad body sinks like a bowling ball to the bottom of the slime. He is soon paralyzed, and can feel the acid start to burn his flesh.

Aravis flies the *levitating* Dranko over to where most of the others are standing, and Grey Wolf starts *levitating* him up to the rocky ceiling of the tunnel. He actually bumps his floating, paralyzed friend gently into the ceiling a couple of times. ("Next time, make the easier jump, you idiot!" he admonishes.)

Kay, still paralyzed, has also flown back over to the group. Morningstar takes off her *ring of free action* and puts it on one of Kay's rigid fingers, and Kay immediately feels vigor return to her frozen muscles. She takes a deep breath, and plunges into the jelly, flying/swimming downward to where Ernie rests on the bottom. Although she takes a good deal of acid damage herself, she is able to scoop up Ernie and fly back up to the surface and safety.

Ernie has suffered horrific burns while submerged in the acidic slime, but these are soon healed. A minute later the paralysis wears off for Dranko, Kay and Ernie. Kay then flies the party members across the pit one at a time, and everyone has a chance to catch their collective breaths.

PlaneSailing: The gelatinous cube trap was a nasty one – it nearly had a greater effect on the party than the orcish ambush! I bet Ernie was cursing his bad balancing! (By the way, my current bet for the “digger” is an umber hulk.)

kidcthulhu: The worst part of it was that this was one of those Balance checks where Sagiro basically said, “Just don’t roll a 1 or a 2 and you’re fine.” I rolled a one.

Piratetcat: And they left the ring behind! Sigh... I had been feeling so damn cool. This little trap was, to say the least, humbling.

They resume their march through the orcish tunnels; they’re off the map now, presumably somewhere north of the no-man’s land, clearly in orcish territory. Aravis (still *polymorphed*) is still out in front with Tribbin and Dranko, all of them scanning the gloom ahead for any signs of traps.

Tribbin suddenly calls them to a halt; his sharp eyes have detected a pressure plate set into the ground a few feet ahead, that he guesses is set to spring some kind of falling-block trap. The rest of the party catch up, and Kay, still *flying*, ferries people across, starting with Flicker. As she carries the little halfling across, he shouts out for her to stop. She does, and just in time. Flicker has spotted a thin wire running across the tunnel above the pressure plate! There’s plenty of room for Kay to fly her friends over this wire, and they pass this latest trap without mishap.

Onward they go through more tunnels and caverns, still following the orcish trail. At one point they reach a wide cavern out of which run two different tunnels, and there are signs that orcs have recently taken both passages. One angles slightly up, the other slightly down. They choose the downward path, and it’s at this point that Kay realizes she no longer sees any sign of the Digger. Somewhere along the way it must have left the orcs, but she saw no sign of how it could have left the trail. Someone surmises that perhaps it can pass freely through stone.

About twenty minutes later the party reach a third “trap,” though it’s hardly anything to worry about. It’s a 20’x20’ unconcealed pit in the center of a wide stretch of hallway. It’s deep enough that they can’t clearly see the bottom, but it seems empty, and there are four foot wide ledges on either side that one could use to avoid the pit completely. Paranoid from the previous pit, they spend some time searching all around it, looking for some hidden mechanism or concealed trigger.

Nothing. They talk briefly about going down into the pit to see if there’s anything at the bottom, but instead they decide that time is of the essence. The Company skirt the pit without difficulty, and continue on. Immediately beyond it is a small interesting detail; there’s what was once a naturally protruding piece of rock sticking out of the left-hand wall, but which has been sharply broken off as if hit by a hammer. Tribbin and Flicker examine the rock thoroughly, but as Tribbin says, “There’s no moving parts.” They continue on, and the passage begins to gently ascend.

A couple of minutes later, they hear the rumbling. It’s the ominous noise of stone grinding on stone, and it’s getting louder at an alarming rate, as if something very large is rolling down the tunnel towards them! With only a few seconds before whatever it is reaches them, the Company act quickly. Dranko casts *stone shape* to mold the floor into a ramp, hoping to deflect whatever it is upward. Morningstar casts a *wall of stone* across the tunnel, only two inches thick, but hopefully enough to stop or slow any incoming danger (she leaves a small gap at one end, so that the party can still see up the passage). Aravis casts *rope trick*, with the extra-dimensional space placed low and easy to climb into.

Makel is peering around the *wall of stone*, and goes pale. “It’s a HUGE stone ball!” he shouts. “We have about five seconds!”

Grey Wolf, Ernie and Flicker manage to scramble up into the *rope trick* space in time. Aravis, realizing that there won’t be time for everyone to get inside before the ball arrives, grabs Kay and Tribbin and *dimension doors* back to the other side of the pit they recently passed. Leaving Dranko, Makel and One Certain Step still standing there when the huge stone ball comes smashing through the *wall of stone*.

Step leaps desperately to one side. Dranko pushes Makel ahead of him and they dive to the other side. Stone shards are flying everywhere, and the sound of roaring and splintering rock is deafening. The barriers erected by Morningstar and Dranko, while not enough to stop the ball, are enough to lessen the impact. But Dranko feels (and hears) his knees and shins snap beneath the weight of tons of stone, and they hear a scream from Step. The ball rolls past and eventually reaches the pit, where Aravis, Kay and Tribbin watch it plummet to the bottom and land with a loud thud. Then they hear it begin to roll slowly back in the direction that it came from; there is evidently a passage leading out of the bottom of the pit, and the stone ball is probably rolling back to somehow reset itself.

Dranko, wincing at the sight of his own shattered legs, fires off a couple of charges from his *wand of cure serious wounds*, and watches as his bones re-knit. Step managed to jam himself in the corner of the tunnel and avoid getting body-slammed by the ball, but his left arm is bent backwards at an impossible angle and his face is an ashen white. He calls upon the power of his goddess Kemma to heal his arm, and Makel (hurt, but not as badly as Dranko) gets healed up as well by the party clerics.

Shaken but undaunted, the party continue on in pursuit of the orcs. Grey Wolf makes Dranko invisible, just to be on the safe side. After another few minutes of hurried marching through dark corridors, Dranko, Aravis and Tribbin see that a section of passage ahead of them has been magically darkened; Dranko's keen half-orcish eyes cannot penetrate it. They stop, and the rest of the party soon catch up.

Rather than plunge blindly into the magical *darkness*, Morningstar steps forward to the edge of the impenetrable shadow. Back in Djaw, Ell imbued her shield with holy powers not yet tested, and this seems like a fine inaugural circumstance. She concentrates on the shield, willing it to blaze with *daylight*. Slowly the black shield with small white triangles changes color, becoming instead white with small black triangles, and then a bright white light flashes outward. The party instinctively flinch, and the *darkness* is obliterated by the *daylight* spell from Morningstar's shield. The Company can now see that the widening passage opens into a large cavern, and waiting there are orcs. Many orcs. At least fifteen are visible, and it looks like more are moving around back in the shadows. All of them are squinting into the bright light coming from Morningstar's shield. Some of them appear to be talking or shouting, but no sound comes from them; there is some kind of magical *silence* still between the party and the orcs.

There are three rows of well armed soldiers in front, and far behind them, barely glimpsed, a large figure points towards them, and opens his mouth to shout some unheard command...

Piratecat: And all hell breaks loose.

PlaneSailing: I feel really sorry for Dranko at the moment – I don't remember seeing the poor bloke get beaten on so much in such a short time before!

Rincewind: Dranko is not having a good day. Smashed into jelly by orc greataxes, immersed in paralytic acid and then his legs crushed by a giant ball. Has he ever considered moving into another line of work?

Piratecat: He was thinking about chef, but Ernie won't let him near the #@\$&%! pots and pans. Actually, he's mostly loving this... he still has this romanticized view of "adventure" left over from his torturous days growing up in the temple, and the abuse he gets adventuring can't be any worse than the pain the Scarbearers used to inflict on him. Well, that's not really true, but it's what he tells himself. Besides, he knows that his friends will ride to his rescue when he really needs it.

He sure did get hammered by those orcs, though, and the gelatinous cube trap was just plain humiliating. He thought he was so cool and had everything under control... and thing after thing went wrong.

Dranko has more hit points than anyone else in the party; with a 19 CON, he is over 100 with an *endurance* spell, so he can take a little abuse. But when he gets flanked and pummelled, like the orcs (or the minotaurs in the Crosser's Maze) did, it *hurts*.

The Defeat of Okhot One-Eye

Run #115 – Monday, May 14, 2001

Grey Wolf reacts first and casts *hold person* at the orc who is pointing, but it has no effect. Aravis points his *wand of fireballs*, and that certainly has some effect, as he fires off a blast into the midst of the orcish lines. Many of the weaker orcs crumple, their bodies smoking.

From somewhere out of the darkness in the back, outside the range of Morningstar's *daylight*, a red streak comes shooting towards them in answer. It's the party's turn to be engulfed in a *fireball*.

With that, the front line orcs who still stand come rushing forward to engage the party in melee. They're largely ineffectual, a good sign for the combat to come. Most of the party move up a bit as they mop up the charging orcs. Dranko, still invisible, decides to pick his way through the lines of orcs and try to find the spellcaster in the back. As he moves through the cavern, he sees that there are quite a few more orcs outside the range of Morningstar's light. Aravis activates his *boots of speed*.

The orcish leader, standing in the back, waves his hands and casts a spell at Morningstar. The world (to her) starts to go dark for a second, but she shrugs off the effect, her vision unimpaired.

On his next turn Aravis, sensing that Kay is about to run out into danger, casts *stoneskin*, and sends Pewter scampering over to her to deliver the spell. Being *hasted*, he then clears a path for her with a *lightning bolt*.

Kay, unable to contain her seething hatred of the Kesh, activates her *amulet of energy*, doing 10 points of subdual damage to herself and tripling her speed for the round. Then she charges out through the orcish ranks, shrugging off attacks of opportunity as she heads for the leader in the back. But those attacks aren't as worrying as the flurry of crossbow bolts, fired from both sides of the cavern from unseen vantage points up in the dark shadows near the ceiling. Most miss or glance off her armor, and the remainder are deflected by the *stoneskin*. Dranko looks up, but cannot see any of the orcish crossbowmen; he swears under his breath.

As Kay closes with the leader she sees that he is dressed in furs, with armor glinting beneath them. Dwarf skulls hang from ropes at his belt. He has drawn a battleaxe. And his right eye has been put out, the socket naked at the center of two crossing scars. Could this be Okhot One-Eye himself?

Behind the party, about thirty feet back down the approach tunnel, there is the sound of shattering glass. Flames leap up, blocking off retreat, and then ill-aimed crossbow bolts come flying through the flames at Tribbin and Flicker in the back rank.

Step and Makel have moved out into the cavern (though not far) to engage some of the orcs, and while most of the cannon fodder are slain, there are stronger orcs with better armor giving them a good fight. There are also some smaller but quicker orcs, wearing only leather armor, looking for good flanking opportunities. There is a fierce melee near the center of the cavern, while spells fly from both ends. Another *fireball* from Aravis is perfectly placed, using a stone pillar to just barely shield Kay while two orcs on either side of her are roasted.

On his next turn, Aravis (still under the influence of his *boots of speed*), launches two more back-to-back *fireballs* from his wand, aimed into a knot of orcs around the wizard near the back. A couple of orcs are fried by the pair of blasts, but the tougher orcs are still standing (though badly burned), and the orcish wizard looks completely unharmed. Grey Wolf mutters, "Of course, he made himself immune to fire. Those orcs we chased away must have told him we used fire."

Dranko tries to cast a *silence* spell. He hopes to become an invisible anti-spellcasting tool to incapacitate the powerful orcish wizard, but he's surrounded by orcs himself. Realizing that if they hear him cast they'll lash out with their greataxes, he tries casting defensively, but at the last minute makes a mistake in the casting. The spell fizzles.

With a great many in the Company wounded, Morningstar casts a *healing circle*. Meanwhile, Kay has been battling against the one-eyed orcish leader, while enduring the withering crossfire of the hidden orcish crossbows. Also, a pesky low-level orcish sorcerer has zapped her with a *ray of enfeeblement*, reducing the effectiveness of her blows. Her orcish foe takes a step back, drops his weapon, and casts a spell at her; she feels her muscles begin to tighten and freeze in place, but she fights off the effect of the spell. Thinking quickly, she pretends to be frozen in place (succeeding in Perform checks admirably). Because her warhammer and dagger are held out in front of her, she figures that if One-Eye is going to try a *coup de grace*, he'll move around to her side, leaving himself especially vulnerable to a surprise attack. Being badly wounded, she uses the magical healing power of her warhammer, still without moving a muscle.

Dranko, still invisible, has also moved into position to strike at the one-eyed orc. And sure enough, the orc moves into position to better attack Kay, and Dranko executes a painful subdual-damage sneak attack with his sap. One-Eye turns to face this new menace... a half-human! His eye narrows as he acquires a new primary target. He again drops his weapon, casts a spell, and touches Dranko with his hands glowing green. Dranko feels a poison start to course through his veins, but his body overcomes the poison, and the chill passes. Seeing his spell fail, and greatly weakened from various blows, One-Eye shouts at the orcish wizard (in Orcish): "Gowl! Get me the \$#!@ out of here!"

Gowl responds harshly: "If you die, it just means you were too weak to lead." Well, that's orcs for you.

A lesser orcish sorcerer casts a well placed *web* spell into the area where much of the party are generally standing, though it also entangles some of the orcs. Gowl, himself *hasted*, responds to Aravis's *fireballs* with a pair of powerful *lightning bolts*, aimed primarily at Aravis and Grey Wolf. Both of them are badly wounded by the searing electricity, though it does burn away some of the webs in their vicinity. Beset by a powerful orc himself, Grey Wolf draws *Bostock*; the glowing blue sword whispers into Grey Wolf's mind, exultant about being used.

Realizing that something must be done about the wizard, Aravis casts *wall of ice* from a scroll, and manages to trap Gowl and his two bodyguards in the hemisphere. But a few seconds later the ice vanishes, successfully dispelled by Gowl. And a large orc is now bearing down on Aravis, managing to penetrate his magical robe enough to bring him close to death. Aravis tries desperately to back away, but the webs cling to his legs, and he can hardly move at all. And then the orc gets in one more axe hit, and Aravis goes down, unconscious.

Makel and Step have both been worn slowly down by powerful orcish fighters. Makel, on the brink of death (having already been knocked unconscious and revived by a healing potion administered by Flicker), realizes he has to get back to Morningstar for more healing, but she is about fifteen feet inside the webbed area. Makel breaks off from his melee, runs, jumps at the edge of the webs, soars over Flicker, and lands in the webs at Morningstar's feet. "Healing, please?" he croaks. Morningstar obliges. He stands back up and keeps fighting, and again starts taking damage from orcish axes, but finishes off his nearest attacker. Morningstar, unhindered by the *web* due to her *ring of freedom of movement*, strides over to Step and heals him too. The clerics are working overtime in this one!

At this point, Gowl sees that Ernie, Grey Wolf, Morningstar, Makel and Step are all in close proximity, without many of his own allies nearby. He strides forward, waves his arms about... and casts a devastating *cone of cold*. It freezes the webs, and while most of the targets manage to avert some of the blast, Makel is caught full on, and is frozen solid. Flicker runs over to

him, and then sadly shakes his head at Morningstar. Makel is dead. Step is unconscious, and probably would be dead as well if Morningstar hadn't just healed him.

Grey Wolf, seeing that things are getting desperate, pulls out the *Mordenkainen's cube*, and activates its *Mordenkainen's sword* power. It starts slashing away at the orc bearing down on him.

Just as it seems that Aravis is going to be finished off by his orcish foe, Tribbin comes running out of the tunnel (where he had been told to hole up and take cover), and staggers the orc with a vicious axe blow. The orc wobbles, slashes feebly with his own weapon, and keels over.

Flicker has emerged into the melee by now and, still *blinking*, manages to seriously wound several orcs with vicious sneak attacks. Morningstar blasts Gowl with a *searing darkness*, and Gowl responds by finally taking the time to cast *mirror image* on himself. Six duplicate wizards appear.

At Grey Wolf's request, Edghar retrieves Aravis's *wand of magic missiles*, and Grey Wolf uses it to pop three of the images while Flicker pops another with a sling stone. Ernie heals Aravis back up, and Aravis *polymorphs* into an ox so that he can charge the powerful orcish fighters who are about to kill Dranko.

Dranko, between the damage he's taken from various orcs, and from having cast *shield other* on Aravis, is nearly killed by One-Eye's allies. He falls over, pretending to be dead, and sure enough, the orcs turn their attention to Kay and the charging ox (Kay starts hurling what Orcish insults she knows at One-Eye, making sure he doesn't notice that Dranko is still alive). Nearly blacking out, Dranko gives himself a dose of his *wand of cure serious wounds*.

The pesky weak sorcerer has been peppering the party with more *magic missiles*, but finally Flicker comes running up and plants a shortsword in its chest, ending that menace.

And at last, Kay delivers the knockout blow to One-Eye. She spits as her foe crumples to the ground, unconscious. She shouts out into the raging fight that Okhot One-Eye is dead, but Gowl just smiles. "Then finally I am the leader, as I always should have been," he growls. But leader or no, he sees that almost all of his allies have fallen (save for the crossbow shooters, still peppering the party from above), and that his *mirror images* are almost all gone. "You'll see me again," he mocks. "And the Chun Aggrat should have no trouble with you." Then he steps back, casts *dimension door*, and vanishes.

The party finish off the remaining orcs who have not by this time fled from the cavern. Bloody, bruised, with some of their number barely conscious, the party still have to deal with the crossbow shooters, hidden and protected in two "orcish balconies." And Makel's frozen eyes stare up lifelessly.

Alex White: Poor old Makel. Didn't he join them as a half-drunken sailor all those months ago? He managed to grow into a respectable ally, and now lies dead, passing as a hero. (*takes hat off*)

LightPhoenix: Well, Morningstar can always try for another miracle... "Just throw him on the couch... I'm too tired for a ritual."

Number47: For those of us getting old and senile, who in the group is currently an NPC?

LightPhoenix: One Certain Step, Makel, and Flicker.

Number47: Isn't there a dwarf NPC, too? Tribbic, I think. Or is he being played by a player?

Dr. Rictus: Tribbin. Yeah, he's an NPC too. He's new.

A Magnificent Mansion

Run #116 – Friday, June 29, 2001

Since there's no sign of the orcs that had been firing bows from the rear, the party start a hasty retreat back the way they had come, just enough to get out of range of the orcish balconies. Morningstar and Kay carry the unconscious body of Okhot One-Eye, while Ernie and Step drag Makel's frozen corpse with them. Crossbow bolts continue to rain down, and the party are forced to do some emergency healing as they flee.

Grey Wolf uses *fly* and *haste* scrolls, and borrows Aravis's *wand of fireballs*. Flying high up into the battle cavern, he sees that the orcish marksmen are sheltered by stone bunkers with narrow grooves serving as arrow slits. **KABOOM!** One *fireball* pellet from the wand streaks through the groove, and the *fireball* blossoms behind. There are screams of roasting orcs, followed by silence. **KABOOM!** He turns and delivers a second *fireball* into the second bunker, with the same results. Always thorough, Grey Wolf checks the bodies to make sure they're dead, and it turns out that one of them, while badly burned, is playing possum. It pleads for its life in Orcish, but Grey Wolf lops off its head with the sword *Bostock*. The magical sword's blue glow intensifies, and Grey Wolf hears its exultant whispers in his ear. *Bostock* is pleased to be used! So pleased, in fact, that its magic intensifies, and it goes from being a +1 sword to a +2 sword.

Needing a safe place to rest, Grey Wolf uses his *Mordenkainen's cube* to cast *Mordenkainen's magnificent mansion* up in one of the balconies. A blue-black metal door frame appears in front of him, and a moment later an iron-banded wooden door appears with a large brass knocker. In they go.

The door leads to a large but simple foyer, that opens onto a grand library. There are shelves with hundreds of books, comfortable chairs and sofas, and three fireplaces. The books are written in an unfamiliar language, though Kay discovers one book with arcane diagrams, and another with pictures of some exotic beasts.

The smell of good food is wafting through one of the doors out of the library, so the party investigate. They find a large dining room, dark but comfortable, with low wooden rafters and a large banquet table in the center. Platters of food are being brought from an adjacent kitchen by *unseen servants* and set on the table. It's a huge feast, with more food than the party could hope to eat, but they do their best.

There's a small shrine off one hallway of the mansion, to a strange god whose holy symbol is an open book. The party take Makel's body there and lay it gently on the floor. Kay draws the holy symbol of Brechen on some parchment and sets it by Makel's head.

Okhot One-Eye, bound and gagged, is placed in an empty interrogation room (specifically asked for by Grey Wolf when he was using the *cube*). One Certain Step keeps an eye on him overnight. The rest of the party spend the night in comfortable feather beds, except for Morningstar. She prays all night over Makel's body, and when Ell grants her spells, Morningstar casts *gentle repose* on the corpse.



Sunday, June 22

The next morning, the party immediately get down to the business of interrogating Okhot One-Eye. The orcish barbarian/priest is bound up tight, and his gag is removed so that he can talk. Morningstar casts *detect thoughts* (though it takes several tries before Okhot fails his save), but Okhot guesses correctly what's going on. Gruff and defiant, he refuses to answer questions, and hums an orcish war chant to keep his thoughts as useless as possible. The party try threatening him with mental domination; if he doesn't cooperate, they'll make him do their bidding and disgrace him in the eyes of his fellow orcs. Okhot doesn't buy it.

They ask him if he's seen an orc named Lagzik, and this he deigns to answer. Unfortunately, his answer is, "Which one?" Evidently Lagzik is a common Orcish name, and he knows several. The last one he remembers was a strategist back with the main force whom he met briefly a couple of weeks earlier.

So Morningstar casts *memory read*, looking for the memory of the last time Okhot saw Lagzik. Both she and the orc are suddenly thrust into the memory of a huge cavern lit by numerous torches and filled with innumerable orcs. In the foreground a dozen or so orcs are standing around a map, pointing and arguing about something. Okhot is not part of the group, but in the relevant part of the memory he looks them over, and Morningstar gets a good look at Lagzik's face.

The spell ends. Okhot's eyes are wide open in horror. He's no longer so sure that the party were bluffing about dominating him and making him commit treachery. Shaken, he offers the party a deal: they agree not to scan his mind through any magical means, and he'll do his best to answer any questions they have. More importantly, when the interrogation is over, he wants the party to kill him immediately and quickly (Okhot is under no illusions that the party will spare his life).

The party tell Okhot that the Chun Aggrat is a fake, a human named Restimar who's using the orcs to further his own ends. Okhot finds this extremely amusing, and doesn't believe it for a moment ("Suuuuuure, the Chun Aggrat is really a human. Go on. Tell me another one"). It doesn't take long for the party to realize that they have no hope of convincing him of that.

When asked about the *Prophecies of the Orcish Crusades*, Okhot says he hasn't seen the inside of it. That is a privilege for the Chun Aggrat alone. Okhot understands that it talks mainly of the War of Righteous Conquest that will be launched sometime soon (he doesn't know exactly when).

The Red Fang are the most powerful tribe, and Okhot suspects that another barbarian/priest named **Shorrig** will be made leader in his absence. Gowl will probably make a power play, but he is not pious enough to serve the Chun Aggrat directly.

Dranko asks Okhot about the other tribes. The Bone-Breakers he thinks of as a club used to beat on enemies. They have some powerful fighters among them, but are disorganized and lack both brains and priests. The Blackstaff tribe is smaller and consists largely of sorcerers. Somehow they have offended the Chun Aggrat and been placed in the position of shame in the back ranks.

Kosh: Did One Certain Step's horse Thunder go to Charagan with the party? If so, did Thunder accompany them into the dwarf/orc tunnels? If not, where is Thunder being kept?

Sagiro: One Certain Step and Thunder parted ways back in Kivia, once Step realized they were going through the mountains to reach the jungle. He sent his horse back to the church of Kemma in Djaw, and (hopefully) she is waiting there for her master's return.

Step's been kind of depressed about it, but there's nothing to be done.

The Longclaw tribe were once allied with the Red Fang, but there has been a falling out and much hostility between them. This stems from the fact that the leader of the Longclaw, called the Bloodseer, believes that he should be at the right hand of the Chun Aggrat.

Finally, Okhot reaffirms his belief that the party would have no chance if they ended up fighting against the Chun Aggrat. Seeing that there's nothing more to be learned from Okhot, the Company honor their promise. They allow their orcish prisoner a few minutes to make his peace with Gruumsh, and then Kay dispatches him quickly.

Ernie then goes up to the chapel where Makel's body is resting. He casts *speak with dead*, and learns (after a strangely long pause) that their navigator does in fact want to be brought back to life if possible. "Not finished yet," says his lifeless head.

The Company then exit the *Mordenkainen's mansion*. There's no sign of any movement, but it does look like someone has come through the area and picked over the bodies while the party were inside. The corpses have been left to rot, and the insects are feasting. After some discussion as to their next course of action, Dranko is made invisible and sent off to scout out the area to the west.

After a few minutes of exploring the tunnels and caverns, he finds that a westward-leading corridor is blocked by a small guard post. A wooden doorframe has been wedged into a narrow section of tunnel and two orcs are standing guard there. Dranko tries another route, but finds another such guarded tunnel a hundred yards to the north. But when he decides to go as far north as possible before being forced to turn west, he finds a third section that has merely been collapsed as (probably) a precautionary measure. Dranko sends word via Pewter back to Aravis, that they should start moving forward.

The Bloodseer's Bargain

Run #117 – Monday, July 16, 2001

Dranko has taken up a position at a tunnel intersection that's within sight of an orcish guard. By staying in communication with the party via Pewter, he plans on making sure the party stop before they get within sight of the guard.

Kay is made the recipient of both *endurance* and *bull's strength* spells, and hoists Makel's body over her shoulder. The Company leave the cavern in which they fought and killed Okhot and head out after Dranko.

While they're en route, Dranko hears the sounds of battle coming from somewhere behind the orcish guard. He (Dranko) is invisible, so he pokes his head around the corner to see the guard's reaction. The orc keeps turning his head around to look in the direction of the combat, and is clearly struggling between maintaining his guard and going off to join the fray. Finally he succumbs; Dranko peeks around the corner again just a few seconds later and the orc is gone.

Dranko sneaks forward, still invisible (but expecting it to run out any time), and discovers there's another orc just on the other side of the wooden frame. This second orc has his back to Dranko, causing a brief struggle between the half-orc and his conscience. His conscience loses. Dranko creeps forward silently, and even though his *invisibility* drops en route, he caves in the guard's skull with his mace.

He relays this new turn of events to the party via Pewter. The party roll their collective eyes, and hurry along. Dranko considers dragging the body away (a Longclaw, judging by its green painted hands and nails), but there's too much blood, so he just leaves it, with its own shortsword stuck into its head.

Meanwhile, the party have reached a wide cavern when they hear the sound of footsteps approaching from an adjoining tunnel. They hide behind boulders and large stalagmites as two furtive orcs emerge. The orcs look around quickly before hustling down the tunnel that leads back the way the party have just come (fortunately not noticing that Grey Wolf's leg is sticking out conspicuously from behind his stalagmite). After they're out of sight, Morningstar casts *thought capture* on a spot where the orcs had paused. She gets the thought: *If we get there first, there's gotta be some really good stuff!* Looters.

The Company continue following Dranko's chalk marks. "Great," says Flicker, when the party arrive. "It looks like he committed suicide by crushing his own skull with a shortsword."

The sounds of the battle have ceased, and Dranko creeps forward again on point, scouting. After a minute or two he comes across an orcish corpse lying on the floor of the tunnel. Its clothes identify it as a Longclaw. A bit further on are two more corpses, one Longclaw, and the other with the black skull insignia of the Bone-Breakers. "Looks like orc-against-orc fighting," Dranko relays via Pewter.

He continues on, and the tunnel he's sneaking down widens until it opens into another large cavern. He sees that there are about a dozen corpses near the center of the cavern – and one orc who is not a corpse. The lone living orc is going from body to body, searching them for loot.

Dranko decides he wants a prisoner, and casts *command*: “Sleep!”

The orc doesn’t fall asleep. He does look up in surprise, and immediately bolts for a tunnel exit on the far side of the cavern. Dranko (seeing that the orc has the black skull of the Bone-Breaker tribe) follows the *command* with *hold person*, but this doesn’t work either, and after a minute of pursuit, Dranko realizes that the orc has escaped.

Eventually the rest of the party catch up to him, and they meet in the cavern with all the dead orcs. The bodies are a pretty even mix of Bone-Breakers and Longclaws. A *thought capture* from Morningstar reveals that the orc that fled thought that Dranko was a surviving Longclaw, and that puts their minds a bit more at ease. But it still doesn’t answer the question of what to do next. They debate a short while, and decide that they still have no better plan than to make their way slowly west, looking for signs of Carbuncle.

Grey Wolf hears more footsteps approaching, and quickly warns the rest of the party to silence. They quickly seek cover, but the only real option is to lie down and pretend to be more bodies in the pile. Dranko takes up a position near to the tunnel from where the footsteps are coming.

Two orcs emerge tentatively into the cavern. At first they look to be armed, but they’re actually carrying sticks with white pieces of cloth tied around the ends. One of the orcs looks around, and says, “Hello? Anyone here?”

Dranko detached himself from the wall. “What do you want?” he says menacingly.

The two orcs immediately start waving their white flags, as if they’re trying to ward off a demon. One of them starts babbling in Orcish, “We don’t want to fight! We don’t want to fight! Don’t hurt us!” And aside to the other orc: “I hope this works!”

The party rise up from their positions and surrounds the two orcs.

“You... you are humans? From the surface?” the orc asks.

“You can see that for yourself,” they reply.

“You are the ones who... who killed Okhot One-Eye?”

“We are.” Morningstar starts casting *detect thoughts*, which makes the orc jump back in terror, but the party assure him that the spell is harmless.

The orc continues tentatively: “And... and is the... the orc-killer with you?”

“She is.”

“Then you’re the ones I’m looking for,” he says, his voice trembling. “I... I have a message for you. We were sent by... the most holy leader of the Longclaw tribe, the Great Bloodseer. He wishes an audience with the... the... er... the tourists from the sunlit lands. He has sent out many to find you, and it seems we are... the lucky ones.”

Morningstar detects that he is generally telling the truth. He’s also scared nearly witless, and does *not* consider himself lucky to have stumbled across the party. “Indeed,” says Dranko. “This is indeed your lucky day. What does the Bloodseer want to talk about?”

“I... I don’t know. He didn’t tell me. He just sent me to... to find you. Will you come with me?”

“What’s your name?” Dranko asks.

“It’s **Skorg**. This is **Skrap**.”

“Why doesn’t he talk?”

“He’s... he’s taken a vow of silence.” Kay rolls her eyes. What kind of orcs *are* these, anyway?

After conferring with the rest of the party for a few minutes, while Skorg and Skrap stand there in terror, Dranko turns back to them. An idea has been suggested that Dranko *has* to try out.

“Here, hold this.” Dranko hands him a torch. He reaches out a trembling hand and takes it. He looks quite the torchbearer.

“How’d you like to be a hero someday?” Dranko asks.

“Me? A hero? I... I don’t think that I...”

“Never mind. We’ll follow you,” Dranko says. “But first, we just want to take a bit of a precaution.”

Aravis casts the *prestidigitation* cantrip, causing glowing lights to circle around Skorg and then seem to sink into his skin and vanish. “Now,” says Dranko, “if anything happens to us, or you lead us into a trap, something very very nasty will happen to you.” Morningstar detects a fresh torrent of fear in Skorg’s mind.

“Oh, no! We would not betray you, and the most holy Bloodseer! But... the Bloodseer thought you might not trust him. He said you would have the ability to do... um, to do something called an *oggry*. He said you can do *oggries* every half an hour to make sure everything’s OK.”

“Lead on then. Let’s just be sure that anything that might happen to us, happens to you first.”

Skorg and Skrap lead the party for several hours through many twisting stone passages and wide caverns. Skorg continues to mumble about how this sure is his “lucky day.” All at once the two orcs pull up short, and motion the party to silence. Skorg sniffs the air, and shouts out: “Oh, shi...”

About fifteen Bone-Breakers, waiting in ambush, come flooding out of a pair of side tunnels, forming an encroaching hemisphere. But before they can close, Grey Wolf obliterates half of their ranks with a *fireball*. Dranko knocks one flat on his back with his whip. Kay fells one with an arrow, and staggers a second. Morningstar bashes one with her weapon.

And that’s enough for the six remaining orcs. Six seconds after charging out, they flee for their sorry orcish lives. Morningstar kills another as they flee, and Kay shoots one more just before it vanishes out of sight. The remaining four scamper away into the tunnels.

Skorg, who had just barely started to draw his weapon, stares at the party with his mouth hanging open. He’s clearly never seen a display of such awesome efficiency. His green painted hands are shaking.

Nonetheless, he continues to lead the party towards their meeting with the Bloodseer. After a while, there are clear signs of habitation: barrels and boxes stacked here and there, crude weapon racks, some caverns with rough sleeping pallets – even the distant sounds of orc voices. But there is no sign of any orcs. Skorg finds this curious, but the party realize that the Bloodseer must have ordered them away. “We’re only a few minutes from the Bloodseer,” Skorg says.

“Wait then,” says Dranko. He casts an *oggry* – er, *augury* – asking if following Skorg to their meeting with the Bloodseer will bring weal or woe. The answer is:

Weal, if you make no missteps.

Some in the party think this might be an indication that there are physical traps they’ll have to avoid. But Dranko insists that Delioch means that they should make no *diplomatic* missteps, and that everything should be fine if they all behave themselves.

At last Skorg and Skrap lead them into a room that is entirely orc-made. Its shape is that of an eye. At one corner is an opening into another room, covered with a curtain made of leather strips. Light is spilling out between the strips.

“Wait here please,” Skorg says. He walks through the curtain, and comes out a minute later. “The Bloodseer says you may see him now. You are welcome to keep your weapons on you... he knows that you won’t use them.”

Rincewind: Did Dranko ask who it would bring weal for?

Kidcthulhu: Dranko always clarifies that ‘weal’ be for us. And Delioch, his god, is pretty good about being clear on that. Really, it’s not in his best interests to have his disciple smeared by 50,000 orcs.

Nail: (Anyone remember exactly why the heroes are down here orc-squishing, again? ‘Cause I sure don’t.)

Piratecat: We’re down here orc-squishing because we need to find a guy named Carbuncle. He’s a spy for the Spire, an expert in humanoids who impersonates and infiltrates. He disappeared into the orcish caverns months ago, and the Spire wanted to find out if he is alive or dead, and wanted us to get him out if he was alive.

To do so, we were pretty sure that we’d have to somehow play politics with one of the four warring orcish tribes. They’re only held together by the personality of the Chun Aggrat (a.k.a. Restimar, evil lackey and peer of Meledien, a guy who utterly outclasses us), so playing one tribe against the other for information was always an option. We really had three choices: fight, sneak or use diplomacy, and to a certain extent we have used all three. You’ll soon see what the Bloodseer wants to talk to us about... Maybe it’s a new torchbearer for Dranko?

General Windstorm goes in first.

The Bloodseer’s room is practically opulent compared to the rest of the orcish caverns. The floor is covered with furs and bearskins. There are wooden tables, chairs piled with blankets, and a large bed in one corner. Incense burns in a dwarf skull on a table, filling the room with a vaguely sweet scent. In the back of the room sits the Bloodseer himself, on a large stone chair covered with furs. He is flanked by four orcs in robes, whose faces are downcast and hidden. These four do not look up when the party enter.

The Bloodseer is large, almost fat, his body straining against banded mail. On a table within easy reach is a large orcish double-axe. He wears a strange headpiece that is covered with hairy patches; Kay sees right away that they are dwarf scalps. His left eye socket is bare and empty, but painted around the socket is a reddish eye shape, giving his face an almost alien look.

“Come in,” says the Bloodseer, gesturing. “Sit.” His voice is slow and deep.

The party enter the cave and arrange themselves on the blankets. At the snap of his fingers, two of the Bloodseer’s acolytes bring bread and pungent wine for them.

“It hardly needs to be said,” the Bloodseer says, “as the bones have augured that you will show wisdom. But understand that treachery will not avail you. I have taken precautions, and though I don’t doubt your prowess, you could not wade through the sea of my soldiers that would surround you.”

“We understand,” Kay answers. “Why have you brought us here?”

The Bloodseer pauses before answering. “I wish to enlist your aid in defeating an enemy of mine,” he says.

Dranko speaks up: “You know, we think your Chun Aggrat is a human imposter. He’s really a human named Restimar, using the orcish armies for his own ends.”

The Bloodseer’s mouth quirks at the mention of the Chun Aggrat. “We may wish to return to that subject later,” he says. “But I find your presence here more interesting. Tell me... what are you doing down here in the first place?”

There is an uncomfortable silence, before Kay answers. “We’re looking for an orc,” she says.

“Does this orc have a name?”

“Lagzik.”

“A common name. Do you know the tribe to which he belongs?”

“No, we don’t.”

“So,” says the Bloodseer, leaning back. “You have come down here looking for a lone orc, not even knowing his tribe. And how exactly did you expect to find him?” This of course sets Morningstar to muttering that this is exactly what she’s been wondering.

The party ask the Bloodseer if he would be offended if they talk among themselves in a language he doesn’t understand. He answers that he certainly understands that they might wish to discuss what they’re willing to divulge. He’d want to do the same in their place.

He leans back while they have a hurried discussion in the Kivian common tongue. Ernie wonders if they should admit what “Lagzik” really is, and what danger that might put him in. After he speaks, the Bloodseer looks at him amusedly and smiles. Ernie smiles back.

The party finally decide that they’re not willing to tell anything specific about Carbuncle until the Bloodseer is more forthcoming about what he wants. But the Bloodseer’s answer pre-empts them. “You wish me to be forthcoming. But you yourselves are deceivers.”

“Listen to me,” Kay says sternly. “My personal main reason for being here is to kill orcs. As many as I possibly can. But my group has been charged with finding Lagzik, and that is our highest priority. If you want us to help you, you’ll have to help us.”

The Bloodseer takes this with great equanimity. He turns to Ernie again. “So. This Lagzik is not an orc. What is he, then?” And the party realize that somehow the Bloodseer understood all of their private discussion. That causes them to decide that they’d be best served being more forthcoming. At least none of them has explicitly mentioned the name ‘Carbuncle.’

“Lagzik is a human,” admits Kay.

“A human. I see more clearly now. You are here to find a human who is... undercover among the orcish army. That makes more sense. Listen to me. If I am to enlist your aid, I will have to help you find this person, yes? And for me to have success in this task, I will need to know as much as possible about him, so that I can learn of his whereabouts. Yes?”

The party agree. “Good. Now, let us return to a subject you brought up earlier. You made the claim that the Chun Aggrat – the great savior of our race, who will lead us to conquest – that the Chun Aggrat is a fake? On what basis do you make such an outrageous claim?”

"His name is Restimar," Dranko says. "He's trying to use your orcish armies as a distraction."

"A distraction?"

"Yeah. Restimar's got his own armies that are going to invade, while your orcs tie up his enemies. He's just using you."

"So. The Chun Aggrat is not really who he claims? Who all of the orcs believe he is?"

The party tense, fearing that they've just lost all their credibility. But the Bloodseer leans back and a wide smile spreads across his face. "I know it is so," he says. "The Chun Aggrat is a fraud, I am certain. But it is good to hear it from another's lips. I told you I needed your aid in defeating an enemy of mine. It is the fake Chun Aggrat, this... Restimar... whom I wish you to kill."

The party are astonished. "But... why do you need our help?" they ask. "You have enough orcs to defeat us, and you expect us to defeat Restimar. Why don't you do it yourself?"

"You do not understand," says the Bloodseer. "The Chun Aggrat is as a god to the orcs. He is the legendary hero who will lead us in the Great War of Conquest. They revere him absolutely, and would do for him whatever he asks. Even the orcs most loyal to me would balk at the thought of betraying the Chun Aggrat. I can raise no hand against him. It would be suicide."

The party motion to the orcish servants who stand silent in the room. "Do not worry about them. They... are as one mind with me, and will not betray us."

"No," he continues, "I need you to eliminate Restimar. Which means we will need to draw him out where he is vulnerable."

"What makes you think we are capable of defeating him?" they ask.

"I am well aware of the strength that Okhot One-Eye surrounded himself with. You were able to defeat him and his retinue, and drive away the mage Gowl. I believe you will succeed against the false Chun Aggrat."

Kay is skeptical. "Restimar isn't stupid," she says. "He's surrounded by loyal soldiers. He knows who we are, and will have heard about us from Gowl by now. What possibly makes you think he'll allow himself to be put in a vulnerable position?"

"The bones tell me that you have some... connection with Restimar. I was hoping that perhaps *you* would have some ideas as to what might lure Restimar away from his army."

That's a stumper, all right. Most of the party confer, while Kay keeps speaking to the Bloodseer. "Tell me about the Chun Aggrat. The real one, I mean," she says.

"The true Chun Aggrat is as a god. He is a powerful hero of my people, who will lead the orcs to great victory. But it is not yet time. I know this."

"From reading the *Prophecies of the Orcish Crusades*?"

"Yes. I know well the *Prophecies*. I owned them once. Before the Chun Aggrat took them from me." Kay has clearly touched a nerve.

"I have studied the stories," the Bloodseer continues. "I among all the orcs know the meaning of the parables, the hidden secrets among the histories, and the translations of the dreams of the ancient prophets. I know only too well that the time has not yet come for the war that Restimar is driving us towards."

"But the other orcs believe him," Kay says.

"Yes. Restimar is very, very good. He knows the prayers. He knows the histories and rituals in great detail. He plays the part to perfection, but he does *not* serve as a channel for the holy power of Gruumsh."

"Maybe he's getting his power from some other god," Aravis suggests.

"Possibly," admits the Bloodseer.

"We will need to discuss this among ourselves," Kay says. "Just as you have things you don't want us to know, we will need to talk about things we wish to keep to ourselves, while we decide how to deal with Restimar."

"Very well. I will provide a secure cave for you, and make sure your privacy is maintained." The party insist on being allowed to cast a *Leomund's secure shelter*, and the Bloodseer reluctantly agrees.

The party extract two more promises from the Bloodseer before they depart. He agrees to take no action regarding Lagzik before the party next speak with him. And he agrees not to kill Skorg and Skrap, which he had intended to do as they were

now potential liabilities. Kay promises that if they are given even the slightest reason to believe the pair of messengers pose a danger, she'll kill them herself.

The party and the Bloodseer agree to meet again the next day, sixteen hours hence. One of the Bloodseer's acolytes leads them a short way to a small empty cavern with no other exits, motions them in, turns, and leaves them alone.

Zaruthustran: Cool encounter. Very scary guy, this Bloodseer. I get the impression of someone very much like the Caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland* – an opium-enlightened, fat, powerful being. Cool! So, what to do?

1. Discredit Restimar. Either truly reveal him as an imposter, cast illusions that "reveal" him as an imposter, or (with the Bloodseer's help) set up an even better imposter (maybe Dranko?) who arrives on the scene with righteous anger and demands the false god (Restimar) be killed.
2. Get in an all-out brawl with Restimar. This is absolutely NOT the m.o. of Sagiro or the Company, so this probably won't happen. Plus, the party barely survived an encounter with a lesser orc leader – Restimar would waste them (Sagiro has provided plenty of hints that a straight fight is a BAD idea).
3. Pretend to go along with the Bloodseer's plan, but really spend time and effort seeking Carbuncle. Flee once Carbuncle is found, leaving the Bloodseer high and dry. Only problem is, they don't have a convenient mass-teleport escape option, so they'll probably need the help of the Bloodseer to escape the tunnels.
4. Blackmail the Bloodseer. Somehow get proof that he's conspiring to kill Restimar, then threaten to reveal this proof unless Carbuncle is found and handed over. This idea is complicated and very dangerous: once Carbuncle is found, the Bloodseer could counter-blackmail, using Carbuncle. But hey, it's an option.

5-999 (all the other options in this cool encounter).

I'd go with option 1. Get the dirty orc masses to turn on Restimar and handle all the fighting (and risk). I'd shadow Restimar, and find little ways to make him seem fallible. Use cantrips to untie his shoelaces, make him stumble or drop things. Use illusions so that his shadow is that of a human, or something. A wary orc might notice such small details, and it'll talk, and doubt and rumors will spread. Listen in as Restimar makes some prediction or proclamation ("We'll fight the dwarves here, at this tunnel, and kill them all!"), and then make sure that whatever it is doesn't happen (warn the dwarves, so that the tunnel is totally empty when the orcs attack).

Gowl's words to his doomed leader show that the orc masses don't have much tolerance for weakness. If the Company could cause Restimar to make many small mistakes, the orcs will start to question their leader. Most likely, the first orc to take a stand against Restimar will be killed. But won't Restimar be surprised when that orc comes back the next day (raised by Morningstar)?

Yeah, I'd try to discredit Restimar, and let the orcs tear him down.

But the Company has to find Carbuncle before Restimar goes, because once he's out of the picture things will get very ugly, very quickly.

Nail: Hmm... nice ideas, Zar, all of 'em.

But (you knew that was coming, eh?), I'm pretty sure none of 'em would "get it done" successfully. To discredit Res-boy, the group would need lots of up-close and personal info and luck, and would likely (accidentally, of course; right, Sagiro?) step on the odd stick lying about the caverns and blow it. Then they'd be forced t' fight 'im on the spot. Which leads them into the same nasty stuff as yer idea #2, stand-and-deliver. That is, they'd get dead a lot. All th' other options are fun to think about, but useless; they need th' info the Blood-guy can give 'em to have any chance of success, an' his seernes makes duplicity hard. My concern now is that th' Blood-fatso is gonna scry/spy on the party like it was goin' outta style. If he's not... well, he should be.

... I'll ignore my previous divining failures an' say that they do *try* to trick Resti-whatsisname, but end up fighting 'im instead in straight-up combat. Hopefully minus some minions.

After all, as great as Dranko et al are, they're still adventurers. That is, most problems are solved with piles of dead bad guys.



The Sting

Run #118 – Monday, July 30, 2001

There is a great deal of discussion about how to lure Restimar away from his army and into a trap, without him bringing hundreds of orcs with him. All sorts of options are considered. They talk about plans involving cryptic *sending* spells. They seriously consider the possibilities of using *Ava Dormo*, possibly even drawing Restimar into the Dreaming and fighting him where he won't have allies, but the logistics of such a plan don't hold much promise. (Even if Restimar is capable of entering *Ava Dormo*, what if he proves too much for Morningstar? The other party members aren't proficient enough in the Dreaming to have much effect in a combat there.)

The talk about *Ava Dormo* does prompt Morningstar to drop into a trance and scout out the local dreamscape. What she finds is some local underground tunnels and caverns, but many fewer constructed tunnels than exist in the real world. The same phenomenon that months ago obliterated the above-ground buildings in *Ava Dormo*, also seems to have wiped out constructed tunnels.

Hmm. That must mean that the tunnels that are there have been built more recently, and might provide a crude map of potential Orcish Surprises. Morningstar spends a couple of hours scouting around, and considers going back later for a longer look around.

Grey Wolf has been feeling a mild background pull at his innards since before the meeting with the Bloodseer. It's not as sharp and immediate as the feeling that precedes nearby planar travel. It's not going away, either. But suddenly it gets extremely painful, as if Kibi is about to reappear.

Aravis quickly casts his thought into the Crosser's Maze, hoping to see what happens when their dwarven companion is drawn back from his other Prime Material plane. He is immediately surrounded by the indescribable image of the multiverse, and easily visible are their own plane, and the overlapping smaller Prime that is presumably where Naradawk is imprisoned. As he saw before, there are hundreds of energy streams pulsing back and forth between the two Primes.

When Kibi appears, its visual manifestation (to Aravis) doesn't involve either of the two interpenetrating Primes. Instead it's as if a flashbulb has gone off somewhere behind his head. Kibi is lying on the ground amid a pile of his gear, snoring away loudly. Aravis has a bit of difficulty returning his consciousness to the real world; as he leaves the Crosser's Maze, he blacks out. (He comes to as usual in only a few seconds, with a headache.)

From Kibi's point of view, it has only been a few minutes since he last saw the party. They quickly fill him in on the current predicament. "I can't believe it!" he cries. "You've made an alliance with an orcish leader. You're talking about sparing these two orcish servants. And Kay is talking about redeeming them? That they're just a product of bad upbringing? How could you all have had such a change of heart in only ten minutes?!"

Ernie sends word back to the Bloodseer, warning him about Kibi. (Showing up with a surprise dwarven guest might cause an undesirable reaction...)

The Company decide to cast a *sending* spell to General Rockbreath with the following message:

At least 50,000 orcs. Some very powerful. Spells. Creature called 'digger' makes tunnels quickly. We killed Okhot. Orcs preparing major offensive. Orc wizard Gowl dangerous.

Morningstar gets the reply:

Do you know tactical details about their offensive? Where they're coming out? Or more details about digger? You killed Okhot? Hot damn!

In reply, Morningstar casts another *sending* to Rockbreath a few minutes later:

Don't know where or when yet. Orcs massing. Digger creates new tunnels probably as fast as walking. Orcish Surprises? Bloodseer is shaman powerful as Okhot.

From Rockbreath in response:

Thanks. Report more as you learn more. Morale raised with news about Okhot. Haven't mentioned 50,000 orcs yet. Time and place for everything.

Kay also has Morningstar cast one more *sending* to her brother Karn, who's fighting orcs with their father at the other end of the mountains, hundreds of miles to the west. She says:

Hope you and Papa are well. If you hear of orc leader Okhot One-Eye, tell them he is dead – your sister killed him.

The reply from Karn comes back:

We're fine and recovered. No fighting recently. No orc leader is a match for my sister. Stay safe.

Then the party go back to discussing what to do about Restimar.

In the end, most of their plans revolve around the one thing they have that might be enough to pique Restimar's interest: the Crosser's Maze. There's much talk about whether Restimar knows about the Maze already, and if he understands its import. All they really know about Restimar is that he's allied with Meledien and Octesian, and that he's probably working for "P" and/or Naradawk.

The plan they hit upon is crafty in the extreme. First, Dranko writes out a letter, ostensibly to Ozilinsh from "P" himself! He uses his innate Forgery skill, along with his new magical *forgery kit* and an actual letter from "P" to his old agent Manzanill to get the style just right. Dranko signs the letter with the same stylized "P" as appears on the letter to Manzanill.

Ozilinsh,

I have been following your agents' progress with great interest, and I congratulate them for successfully retrieving the Crosser's Maze. It will be extremely useful when the time comes, and that time is drawing nearer every day.

It is time for them to run a new errand. The Chun Aggrat, the spiritual leader of Charagan's orcish tribes, is the most convenient person to take delivery of the Crosser's Maze before Salk can properly analyze it. However, this needs to be done in such a way that no suspicion falls upon you.

You'll need to send your Company with the Maze on a "search and destroy" mission into the orcish caverns. They should kick up enough fuss to get the Chun Aggrat's attention. Once they do, they should arrange a private meeting with him to deliver the relic. Have the Sailor contact him magically once they are nearby. After the exchange it should be easy enough for them to fake their own capture. Later, after the orcish advance when you'll have your "hands full," your friends can conveniently escape and return to your service without the Maze.

Timing is critical. I need the Chun Aggrat to receive the Maze before he advances. Your Company has done admirably since we've reached an agreement. With your help, Naradawk's day will be sooner than we had hoped.

P.

The plan is to fabricate a fight wherein the Company battled with orcs, and in which Makel was killed while the other party members fled. In this concocted scenario, the orcs looted Makel's body and found this letter on him. They brought it to the Bloodseer, who will then send other orcs (who will believe the fight really occurred) to Restimar with Makel's pack. (To make it seem more authentic, they are including some magic items in the pack – a *potion of cure light wounds*, Makel's *wand of wonder*, and Ernie's *buckler +1*, along with some food, spare clothing, a dagger, and other mundane possessions.)

The hope is that Restimar will read the letter and come to the following conclusions:

- That Ozilinsh is actually an agent working for “P.”
- That Ozilinsh’s agents (the Company) have secured some powerful relic called the Crosser’s Maze.
- That “P” wishes this relic to be delivered to the “Chun Aggrat” before Salk (leader of the Spire) can analyze said relic.
- That the Company have been sent with the Maze into the orcish caverns, where they have been told to get Restimar’s attention by going on a killing spree.
- That the Company had intended to contact Restimar magically, but now can’t, since “the Sailor” has been killed.
- That the Company are now wandering around the orcish caverns with a powerful artifact, and no good way to contact Restimar and make the delivery.

If Restimar does come to those conclusions, he will hopefully come looking for the party. And since he won’t want his true nature revealed to other orcs, he might leave his bodyguards behind.

On the other hand, what if the letter makes Restimar suspicious enough that he contacts “P” to verify the exchange? Or what if he sends minions to find the Crosser’s Maze and bring it back to him? It’s a risky plan, but it’s the best they’ve got.

The only other matter for discussion is what to do with Skorg and Skrap. Some party members want to spare the cowardly Skorg, though they don’t much care what happens to Skrap. “But that wouldn’t be fair,” others complain.

“Yeah, we should be fair,” Kibi agrees. “Let’s kill them both.”

“Look, we’ll just have to level with Skorg,” Kay says flatly.

“We should level *them!*” Kibi protests. He still can’t believe that the discussion is still about finding ways to spare an orc’s life.

Monday, June 23

The next morning the party return to visit the Bloodseer. Kibi immediately takes note of the dwarf-skull candle holders, and the dwarven scalps hanging from the orc shaman’s headpiece. But the Bloodseer is not at all discomfited by the arrival of the dwarf. In fact, he says solemnly: “I see you have brought the Opener of Ways with you. The bones said you would appear, and that you would be alone. The bones do not lie.”

The Company get right down to business, outlining their plan for luring Restimar away from the safety of his armies. The Bloodseer listens as they outline their basic plan, and then asks to read Dranko’s letter. He frowns as he reads, and questions each assumption. “Will Restimar know what the ‘Crosser’s Maze’ is? Does he know who Ozilinsh is? Salk? What if he tries to contact this ‘P’ to make sure this letter is on the level? How good is the forgery? Who is Naradawk?”

After he hands back the letter, he shares some news with the party. He has had scouts and spies out all night while the party slept, gathering information. “I have gathered reports. Restimar is concocting some ceremony to indoctrinate the Skull-Splitter, leader of the Bone-Breakers, as his new Right Hand. Shorrig, second only to Okhot among the Red Fang, is furious. He expected with Okhot gone, he would be made the Right Hand. Perhaps Restimar, being who he is, is uneasy with true holy men at his side. But Restimar has also made Gowl the chief of his bodyguards. So if you’re dealing with Restimar, you’ll have to deal with Gowl as well.

“This forms a strange alliance of sorts between the Bone-Breakers and the Red Fang. I’m not sure what will come of it.

“Five days hence he will begin a tour of the digging teams, reviewing his plans for the eventual assault on the surface dwellers. It is unlikely that you will be able to sway him from that once he has begun. Your window is narrow.”

The Bloodseer repeats his position that, while he’s willing to help the party execute their plan, he will do nothing that might implicate him should they fail to eliminate Restimar. That said, he’s willing to loan the party a number of orcish stonemasons to help rig a trap somewhere (he strongly implies that he’ll have them all killed afterwards to cover his own ass). And he’ll find some orcs to carry the bait to Restimar.



THE STORY SO FAR...

I have, as I promised some time ago, written up the “short version” of what is currently happening in the campaign.

Note that this is not a synopsis of the history of the campaign. It doesn’t mention anything about events that are no longer “dangling,” such as Kay’s quest to free the Yrimpa, or the party’s misadventures while two members were addicted to a magical powder. Perhaps I’ll find the time to write a short version of the whole story, but that’s not what this is. This is intended more as a snapshot of the current state of the world and the party’s place in it. Here goes...

The PCs are all members of Abernathy’s Company, a band of adventurers serving the Forces of Good (a.k.a. the Spire), and the welfare of the Kingdom of Charagan. The Spire has an overarching goal, which is to prevent a powerful enemy (named Naradawk) from forcing open a planar *gate* and invading from his own Prime Material plane. Long ago, Naradawk’s father (Naloric) was the Evil Overlord™ of Charagan, but was banished to another plane by the Spire. Now Naradawk is hammering away at the *gate* that separates the two Primes, hoping to break through and regain his father’s kingdom. Meanwhile, the most powerful of Charagan’s wizards are spending almost all of their effort keeping the *gate* closed.

Arrayed against the Company and the Spire are a variety of foes:

- Three powerful servants of Naradawk were squeezed across the planar boundary a couple of years ago and have been stirring up trouble. These three red-armored villains are named Restimar, Meledien and Octesian, and each is presenting a threat in his or her own way.
- The religion practiced by Naradawk – a cult of necromancy and divination called the Black Circle – has recently become active again. Among their leaders is Mokad, a defector from the Church of Delioch (God of Healing), who is up to no good, and may have a plan to accelerate Naradawk’s schedule of arriving in Charagan.
- The Sharshun are an evil sect of a mostly extinct race of bald, dark-skinned elves. Long ago they chose to serve Naloric rather than resist, and the survivors of their group are still at cross-purposes with the Spire. Specifically, they are seeking seven wild-magic artifacts called the Eyes of Moirel, with which they hope to “free their lost Emperor” – whatever that means.
- Worst of all is the mysterious “P,” now suspected to be Parthol Runecarver, a powerful archmage of the Spire long thought dead. “P” has been helping Naradawk via an organization of underlings and henchmen, including two evil mages (Lapis and Manzanill), both of whom are now (thankfully) deceased.

There are numerous related plots and sub-threads going on in the background, some (but not all) of which are having a direct effect on the struggle between Naradawk and the Spire:

- The Company have recently completed a long quest to acquire a legendary artifact known as the Crosser’s Maze, which purportedly can be used to stop planar travel. Ironically, the Spire’s attention was drawn to the existence of the Maze by “P,” who was seeking it for himself. It is not known exactly *how* one uses the Maze...
- One of the PCs, a cleric named Morningstar, has been organizing the training of many of her sister clerics to fight in the *Ava Dormo* (a dreaming-plane that mirrors the real world). Morningstar fears that Naradawk might be staging an invasion via the *Ava Dormo*, and that her sisters may be all that will stand in his way.
- The Company have so far obtained two of the seven Eyes of Moirel mentioned above. They are occasionally sentient, and have communicated with the Company that they can be used to “travel nowhere.” No one knows what this means, but in regards to actually doing it, the Eyes said: “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.” The party are pretty certain that “the Focus” is Ernie, a halfling PC, and that “the Opener” is Kibi, a dwarven PC.
- Related to the above, the Eyes told the Company that they still need a third Eye that is willing to “travel nowhere.” This third Eye is trapped in a place called Het Branoi, which the Company believe to be in northeastern Kivia somewhere (see below on Kivia).
- Califax was a member of the church of Delioch, and for a while seemed to have defected to the Black Circle along with Mokad. But Dranko (a PC and cleric of Delioch) thinks he has redeemed Califax’s soul. And recently, Califax sent the Company a letter in which he warns of Mokad’s evil master plan. Mokad is trying to enact a ritual that would bring Naradawk’s Prime Material plane into some kind of concordance with this one – a sort of “end run” around the tedious process of breaking open the planar *gate* itself. The only way to stop Mokad’s ritual, says Califax, is for another party member – Grey Wolf – to be killed at a specific time and place. (If Grey Wolf is killed too soon, Mokad has a way to resurrect him against his will, and have Grey Wolf under his power.)
- Something odd has clearly been going on with Grey Wolf. He has an extreme reaction to nearby planar travel. This, combined with a bit of prophecy that Grey Wolf is the “axle” and the “place in common,” lends credence to Califax’s claim that Grey Wolf is vital to the plans of Mokad.
- As if the Spire didn’t have enough to worry about these days, an army of Fire God worshippers from the continent of Kivia – the land across the Uncrossable Sea – is invading Charagan through a huge magical archway.
- Also, Restimar – one of the red-armored servants of Naradawk – is pretending to be various humanoid heroes and demigods, stirring orcs and goblins and gnolls and bugbears to war against Charagan. Presumably this is to distract the archmagi of the Spire from the more important task of keeping the planar *gate* sealed shut.

- In an early adventure, the party discovered a statue of a halfling who looks just like Ernie buried beneath Ernie's home town. The statue was wearing a belt-sized armband that was then stolen by a pair of wizards named Larkin and Embree. Much later, in a recent adventure, Ernie received this *sending spell*: *Still hiding Sand's Edge. Leave note under front left post. Sharshun closing in. Have bracelet. Dare not leave city. Sharshun watching. Cannot answer sendings. Embree.*
- The Company's quest for the Crosser's Maze took place on the foreign continent of Kivia, accessible only via a magical gateway that is currently clogged with an invading army. During that time the PC Morningstar freed a huge winged ogre from his petrified state. Upon awakening, the ogre pronounced that Morningstar was "the Slayer," and that she would be summoned back there some day to slay again. Morningstar has an indelible tattoo on the back of her hand in the shape of the ogrish holy symbol.
- It seems that felines everywhere, including Aravis's cat familiar Pewter, think that Aravis has some indefinable cat-like quality himself. No one, least of all the cats, knows the significance of this.
- During their quest for the Crosser's Maze, the Company were forced to make a deal with a hideous evil cleric named Shreen the Fair. Specifically, they promised to bring Shreen the Crosser's Maze when they were done with it. It remains to be seen if the Company will keep that promise.
- The Company discovered that the dwarves of Kivia were under the thrall of a slaver organization called the Guild of Chains. When they're done with the current crisis, they have vowed to go back to Kivia and kick some serious slaver butt.
- There's probably a vast army of skeletons and weird skeletal constructs marching across the plains of western Kivia, but the Company didn't have any time to investigate that before they headed back to Charagan (having found the Crosser's Maze).

The Company, having recently completed their Quest for the Crosser's Maze, are currently on a mission to find out what happened to a deep cover spy (working for the Spire) in the midst of an underground orcish army.

That's the short version, and I'm probably leaving out something important...



Enter the Chun Aggrat

Run #119 – Monday, August 13, 2001

The Company return to their cave to plan the actual ambush. There follows a great deal of discussion on the physical nature of the ambush.

They talk about digging concealed pits, hoping to ensnare Restimar and any orcs he brings with him. They realize the importance of Morningstar nailing Restimar with a *dimensional anchor* as soon as possible, to prevent him from *teleporting* or *dimension dooring* away. They consider using illusions to help craft an ambush location, and especially possible uses of the *snow globe of mirage arcana*. They agree that *spike stones* may be a good way to cut off escape should Restimar and his retinue try to flee. They worry that Restimar might have magical glasses that let him pierce illusions, as did his red-armored cohort Meledien. They talk about rigging deadfalls to cut off escape. They figure that an orcish balcony would be a good thing to have in staging an ambush. There are some brief digressions about what they'll do with Restimar's body if they're allowed to take it. Bringing it back as a gift for Rosetta is a popular idea. And that gets them all grumbling about Rosetta. "I wish there was a way to trade in Rosetta for Sagiro," Kay grumbles.

They return to the Bloodseer with their plans. They explain what kind of space they want, and he knows of something that should come close to suiting their needs. About a day's march to the northeast is a cavern that was once going to be used as an ambush location against the dwarves. It even has a partially built orcish balcony that could be completed in a couple of days. The cavern is large (almost as large as the party wanted), and has four tunnels leading into it (more than they wanted), but is the best place available for the party to stage their set-up.

The Bloodseer sends them off with nine orcish diggers instructed to follow whatever instructions the party give them. (Afterwards, the Bloodseer confides to the party, the orcs will be killed to prevent loose tongues from wagging.) Skorg, whose life has been spared at the behest of Kay, is sent with them as a guide. And the Bloodseer assures them that their planted letter will be delivered to Restimar, along with word of the party's last known location. If the Red General takes the bait and heads out immediately, the party should have about three days before he reaches their area of the caverns. Off they go.

Tuesday, June 24 – Wednesday, June 25

The party arrive at the cavern and immediately start making preparations. First, the team of orcish diggers is assigned to the task of completing work on the orcish balcony.

There are four entrance tunnels to this cavern, two facing generally west (which is the direction from which Restimar will most likely approach). Morningstar puts up *walls of stone* to block off the two that enter from the east. Then they *stone shape* U-shaped tunnels underneath the walls, so that they could be used as emergency escape routes. And the tunnels themselves are the targets of *glyphs of warding* keyed to orcs, in case of pursuit.

When the orcs complete the balcony, there is time for them to work on one more project. Under Kibi's instruction, they build a deadfall above the southernmost of the two western approaches, rigged so as to be triggered with a rope whose end pokes out in the cavern proper. Pull on the rope, and a huge pile of rubble will fall, blocking the escape route.

When the orcs have completed their tasks, they ask Kay if there's anything more she wishes them to do. "Go back and report to the Bloodseer immediately," she orders. She smiles inwardly, knowing that the Bloodseer is going to have them executed.

The crowning piece of the ambush is an elaborate illusion, created with the party's *snow globe of mirage arcana*. Step uses it to create the illusion that the two western approach tunnels continue for another thirty feet into the cavern, and then join before opening into the eastern half of the cavern. This way, Restimar and any orcs that are with him will think they are in a ten foot wide tunnel, when in fact they are in a large cavern surrounded by the party and beneath the orcish balcony (the illusion also includes a second, fake orcish balcony farther into the cavern). More *glyphs of warding* are then placed right at the exit from the illusionary tunnels, such that any orcs exiting those tunnels will of necessity walk into the traps.

Kay and Flicker are the "bait" of the trap. They are positioned as the two "on watch" by a campfire set in the far eastern half of the cavern. Near them is an old magic item they have – Manzanill's *smoke frame*, which looks mysterious and magical but isn't very useful. Part of the *mirage arcana* is a weird spiraling visual effect near the *frame*, making it look like it's probably the Crosser's Maze. Around Kay and Flicker are bedrolls stuffed with all the extra clothing and blankets from the *bag of holding*, making it look like the rest of the party are sleeping.

Pewter is sent down one of the approach passages, to warn Aravis when orcs approach. *Alarm* spells are also set on both approaches. The party have numerous protective spells ready to cast before the orcs arrive. With everything in place, the party hunker down to wait.

Thursday, June 26

Several hours go by, past the time Restimar would have arrived if he had set out immediately upon having the letter delivered to him. One Certain Step continues to concentrate on the *snow globe*. Except for Kay and Flicker, all of the party are positioned behind the illusionary walls, ready to strike. Skorg is crouched down in the back of the orcish balcony, guarding Makel's body.

Hey, boss! Aravis hears in his head. Pewter is raising the alarm. *A couple of orcs are comin' your way!*

Aravis gives the signal, and there is a flurry of spells cast – mostly various protection spells – including some from potions and scrolls. Aravis uses the last spell from the Book of Infinity, which is *true seeing*. Kibi casts *see invisibility*. Soon after that, the *alarm* spell goes off (in Aravis's head), and then a couple of minutes later two orcs come walking into the cavern.

They don't seem like anything special as orcs go, and Aravis and Kibi see nothing unusual about them. They hold sticks with scraps of white cloth bound to the ends. The orcs are fooled by the illusion, staying within the bounds of the false tunnels. Just as they reach the area where the closest *glyphs of warding* are, Kay stands up from her position at the campfire and says in a commanding voice: "Stop! Stay where you are."

The two orcs pull up sharply, but one of them, peering forwards toward Kay, takes one more ill-advised step. He steps squarely into one of Morningstar's *glyphs*, and a bolt of *searing darkness* fires from the air and strikes him squarely in the chest. The orc is blown backwards a few feet and falls dead, a smoking hole in his torso.

The second orc looks down at his fallen friend, and then back at Kay, a worried expression on his face. Kay repeats her directive that he shouldn't come any closer, a plan of action which the orc seems to wholly endorse. The orc starts to call out in halting Common. "Are... you... the... humans... from... the... surface?" he asks, struggling with each word.

Kay affirms that they are.

"You... wish... to... speak... with... the... Chun Aggrat, ... yes?"

Kay nods again.

"I will... get... him. He... will... be... here... soon." And with that, the orc scurries back down the passageway after taking one last glance at his blasted fellow; he's eager to be gone.

A few minutes later Pewter reports again. *Boss, there's three orcs this time, and one of them's wearing red armor. He's huge!* The *alarm* spell goes off again, and moments later three orcs come walking down the tunnel. Like the first two, these three are following the illusionary tunnel.

Two of the orcs are especially large and strong-looking, wearing metal armor and wielding large axes. But the third – oh, the third. He's immense, over seven feet tall and broad, and he walks behind the other two. He wears polished red plate armor. In one hand is a large red shield with the device of the Eye of Gruumsh. In the other is a wicked-looking black battleaxe, its dark metal blade glowing darkly, as black spots like shifting ink blots coruscate across its surface. They march forward toward the mouth of the faux tunnel, and the remaining *glyphs of warding*.

But as they walk slowly forward, Aravis realizes that he doesn't see any huge red-armored orc leader; unlike everyone else, he just sees the two "normal" orcish warriors.

And Kibi, whose position allows him to see the second of the two approach tunnels, sees another group of orcs moving slowly into the cavern. The second group also includes a massive red-armored orcish chieftain, along with at least four or five other large orcs behind him. Aravis is up on the orcish balcony, and cannot see this second group. And Kibi realizes that Morningstar, standing only ten feet from him, cannot see them either. They must be *invisible*, but if he shouts to alert anyone else, his position behind the illusionary wall will be given away, perhaps alerting the orcs to the ruse of the *mirage arcana*.

But one way or another, it looks like hell may be about to break loose.

Rincewind: Hell is *always* about to break loose (at least in your Story Hour)... Some of the lines are priceless: "Morale high. Haven't told them about 50,000 orcs yet."

RangerWickett: Hot damn, your players rock! Mine would never think of this kind of stuff. They might summon three dozen earth elementals to bury the Chun Aggrat, but they wouldn't ambush him.

Of course, finesse is much more easily disrupted, whereas brute force almost always works.

wolff96: If brute force doesn't work, you aren't using enough.

Sic Transit Restimar

Run #120 – Friday, August 24, 2001

Dranko decides that the jig is up; from his hidden position behind the illusionary walls he casts *dispel magic* directly on what he thinks is the Chun Aggrat only a few feet away from him. To everyone's surprise (except for Aravis) the red-armored warrior vanishes. But the orcs hear the sounds of Dranko's spellcasting, even though they cannot see him.

Still, the two large orcish warriors walking ahead of the now dispelled illusionary Restimar keep walking, not realizing that their "leader" is gone. One of them speaks: "The Chun Aggrat has come to claim his prize. Stand forth and deliver it... to..." He trails off, as the other orc is frantically tapping him on the shoulder and pointing to where Restimar isn't. They look at each other in confusion. This wasn't how their plan was supposed to go.

The invisible orcs, also led by a Chun Aggrat, move further into the cavern. When they come within Aravis's field of view, he sees with *true seeing* that, while all of the orcs are really there, the red-armored orc is actually just another normal warrior. It seems that *neither* of the apparent Chun Aggrats is the real one!

Aravis, in communication over *Rary's telepathic bond*, tells Morningstar and Kay about this new development. He also has realized that Morningstar won't be close enough for his *haste* spell, and that she should move a bit closer in. Then he dashes down the stairs of the orcish balcony and waits.

Kay, trying to stick with the plan to lure Restimar out from wherever he is, announces loudly that she cannot move the Crosser's Maze and he must come to her to get it. As far as the party know, the orcs have only seen her and Flicker, alone by the campfire surrounded by what look like sleeping comrades.

Morningstar, seeing that the plan is falling apart for both sides, and hearing that Dranko at least has decided to cast loud spells from behind the illusionary walls, casts a spell herself. Specifically, she moves forward a bit and casts a *dispel magic* on the invisible orcs across the way. They all become visible, and the one that looks like the Chun Aggrat suddenly becomes just another orcish soldier.

Kibi is also sticking to his part of the plan. First he tells Tribbin that when the others start fighting, that's when he should start attacking the orcs with his magical axe (Kibi has lent their dwarven companion his magical dwarven axe that returns when thrown). Then Kibi drops a wide field of *spike stones* to block off the retreat of the orcs.

Grey Wolf casts *haste* on himself, Flicker activates his *ring of blinking*, and Ernie scans from the orcish balcony, hoping that the real Chun Aggrat will show up. Step sees that one of the orcs nearest him is running his hand over the illusionary wall, looking perplexed. He readies his greatsword in case any orcs realize the walls are fake and come charging through. Kay is now shouting that she needs help, because she is *all alone* guarding the Maze.

She gets her wish, though a little more directly than she expected. A *third* Chun Aggrat appears right next to her, along with a lesser orcish shaman. Aravis confirms over the telepathic link that he's the real deal. And to Kay's expert eye, **Restimar** really *is* an orc. His disguise is nearly perfect. He smells like an orc. He moves like an orc. He bleeds orcish blood. He exhibits all the little tendencies and gestures that are indicative of orcs. So much so, in fact, that Kay gets to use half of her species enemy bonus against him, even though she *knows* deep down that he's a human in disguise.

Restimar laughs. "Not all alone," he says, "but doomed nonetheless." He readies his black coruscating battleaxe to swing, and then, after taking a quick look around the cavern, shouts: "The tunnel walls are illusions! The enemy is hiding behind them!"

Still, it's one thing to be told you can run through a solid stone wall, and another thing to *do* it. Some of the orcish soldiers, arms out in front of them, come through the illusions, while others aren't convinced and stick to the illusionary tunnels. Step, waiting for his opportunity, chops at and hits one that emerges in front of him. The orc is wounded but does not drop.

Tribbin decides it's time to get involved. He throws his axe at the nearest orc, but misses. (From the orc's point of view, an axe emerges from a solid wall, arcs around behind his head, and vanishes into the wall again!)

Dranko activates Thriss, a python *figurine of wondrous power*, and instructs it to go attack any orcs it can find. Then he tries to leap over the *spike stones* but slips, doesn't make it far enough, and lands hard on the spikes. Ouch! He makes another jump to clear the *spike stones*, and again doesn't quite make it; he slices himself up some more as he finally stumbles out of their area, cursing Kibi.

Ernie has spotted Restimar out in the cavern near Kay. He points and fires off a *searing light* spell that strikes Restimar square in the chest – but it fizzles away harmlessly! That's no good.

Aravis casts *haste* on Morningstar, and then instructs Pewter to climb onto Dranko's back. Kibi realizes that he's got a great line for a *lightning bolt*, the problem being that he might also get Kay in the blast. He casts it anyway, catching Restimar, the shaman who appeared with him, and a third orc who has come through the walls swinging an axe. Thanks to the *potion of improved casting* that he imbibed before the fight, Kibi's spell gets through Restimar's spell resistance, and it also sears the lesser shaman. The third orc is badly wounded. Unfortunately, Kay does get caught in the blast, fails her save, and is badly wounded herself. Restimar appears less damaged than Kay, and he grins evilly at her.

Morningstar now drops another *dispel magic* directly on Restimar. The *incense of meditation* burned the night previously is of a special make that even affects *dispel* attempts, and a number of spells are (hopefully) removed from Restimar. Since she's *hasted*, Morningstar then enacts one of the most important parts of the original plan: she pegs Restimar directly with a *dimensional anchor*.

One of the orcish soldiers now holds up a familiar item – it's the *wand of wonder* that they sent off to Restimar as part of their subterfuge. The orc points it at Kay, and speaks the command word. Kay is struck by a bolt of energy – and starts to grow! She gets taller and taller until she is face to face with her seven-foot-plus opponent. It's her turn to grin now, and Restimar shouts out "Not good!" to his supposed ally. The orc with the wand looks horrified.

Kay and Restimar exchange blows and taunts. Fortunately for Kay, Aravis's *stoneskin* absorbs much of the damage from Restimar's evil battleaxe, but the damage that's getting through is still tremendous. After the damage from Kibi's *lightning bolt*, Kay will probably die if Restimar gets in a second round of attacks.

Other orcs are now emerging in greater numbers through the illusionary walls. Step and Tribbin are both engaged by powerful orcish warriors. Grey Wolf casts a *lightning bolt* of his own at Restimar and the shaman, and while Restimar resists the spell, the shaman is blown to pieces.

Something strange is happening to Flicker. He is *blinking* in and out, looking for sneak attack opportunities, when suddenly he starts talking rapidly between *blinks*. "Hey, there's something... not sure what... all over the place... think they're coming toward... Aaaaaahhhhhh!"

Flicker *blinks* back in, and is covered with round black leeches, each about a foot in diameter. He runs screaming off in a random direction, his scream *blinking* in and out along with the rest of him. Each time he appears, there are more of the black leeches on him, and his screaming becomes muffled as one affixes itself to his face. Finally he *blinks* out and does not reappear. The rest of the Company are mightily disturbed by this.

At about this time, Gowl appears. The party had been wondering when Restimar's sorcerous bodyguard would show up. His opening salvo is an *ice storm* that pounds down around the party (also catching an orc soldier or two). Kibi is badly wounded, and Tribbin drops to the ground, unconscious or worse.

Dranko quickly scans the battlefield. Kibi is wounded and has a large orc bearing down on him. Tribbin is down and may be bleeding to death. Kay will probably die if she doesn't get healing in the next few seconds. He wants to help them all, but can only attend to one. He decides to leave Kibi to fend for himself, to chalk up Tribbin as a casualty of war, and to cast one of his distance healing spells at Kay. Axe wounds and burn marks on her body start to close and heal. That done, he charges across the battlefield to get in the face of the wizard Gowl (he remembers well the *cone of cold* cast by Gowl that killed Makel).

The *hasted* Morningstar then steps up and delivers an utterly devastating pair of Maximized *flame strikes*. Restimar's magic resistance fails him, though he makes his saves and avoids some of the *120 points* of incoming damage.

Ancalagon: How did Morningstar maximize her flame strikes?

Sagiro: They burned a block of *incense of meditation* the night before the fight. Every cleric spell cast by the party was Maximized!

Step is still trading blows with a huge orcish soldier, and getting the better of the fight. Ernie fires off another *searing light* at Restimar, but like the first one, it doesn't penetrate the enemy's spell resistance. Aravis casts *haste* on himself.

The orcs continue to press the attack, but the party are largely fending them off. Step is getting worn down, though, and Kibi is nearly dead. The orc with the *wand of wonder* again fires it at Kay, but she saves against its potentially devastating effect – a *slow* spell.

Restimar again launches a savage series of blows against Kay, but the combination of the *stoneskin* and Dranko's healing keep her alive. If she's lucky, she could survive one more round of attacks, but no more. She keeps up a steady stream of damage on Restimar with her own weapons, and the Chun Aggrat isn't looking too good either.

Kibi, realizing that the orcish warrior is going to kill him at this rate, steps back and casts *mirror image*. Eight images appear around him, and the orc's eager expression changes to one of confusion and fear.

Grey Wolf decides to deal with the wizard Gowl; he casts *coldfire* and Gowl is enveloped in flames. He's hurt badly, but not killed. Dranko, standing nearby, makes his save and evades the entire blast.

Gowl, with Dranko breathing down his neck, takes a step back and fires off an *enervation* spell into Dranko's face. Dranko feels life energy draining out of him and his legs get wobbly, but he still swings his mace at the orcish wizard. Gowl does not fall.

Step, assisted by Thriss, finally finishes off his orcish foe, though he's gravely wounded. Aravis, *hasted*, casts a *fireball* that nails a couple of the remaining orcs, and a *lightning bolt* at the orc in front of the crowd of Kibi-and-*images*.

Ernie clanks down the stairs in his plate mail, intending to come to Kay's defense if he can make it in time.

Restimar decides that it's not worth dying in this battle. He activates a ring on his finger, and flickers out... and then flickers back in again! Morningstar's *dimensional anchor* has prevented his escape. He snarls in frustration.

The orc facing down Kibi launches a series of attacks; three of the *images* are popped, but Kibi, down to his last few hit points, is unharmed.

Kay slashes at her red-armored foe, hoping to bring him down, but he's still standing. Then the orc with the *wand of wonder* fires once more at Kay. Again Kay changes size, but this time it's in the other direction. She shrinks down until she is only a few inches high, looking up at Restimar towering above her. Her first thought is that now Restimar will have trouble hitting her with his evil axe. Then Restimar raises his foot, clearly intending to crush her beneath his iron-shod boot.

Kibi has been wanting to cast *coldfire* at Restimar, but was concerned about catching Kay in the blast. That's not a problem any more! He targets the blast high above Restimar's head, and it explodes in a ball of flames. The wounded Restimar is charred, battered, slashed... and he goes unconscious. The party cheer. Then Restimar's body slumps forward and he falls – onto Kay, who can't get out of the way in time. His massive body pins her legs to the ground, crushing them. Kay also goes unconscious.

Grey Wolf, still *hasted*, uses his *Mordenkainen's cube* to cast *Mordenkainen's lucubration*, and gets back his *lightning bolt*. He uses it immediately to finish off Gowl, not concerned that the electricity-immune Dranko is also caught in the blast. Gowl's body flies apart. The party cheer again.

Only the orc with the *wand of wonder* is left standing. He fires off one more charge, and is pleased to launch a *fireball* at a couple of party members. But his smile is short-lived, as all of his targets are protected enough from fire to take no damage. He is quickly dispatched.

Ernie arrives and helps to heave Restimar's body off Kay's tiny form. Aravis heads off to see if he can find some sign of Flicker. Morningstar and Dranko start casting healing spells. Tribbin, sadly, has bled to death, but he has earned a place of honor among the rolls of dwarvish heroes, fighting in the battle that saw the end of his people's chief foe.

And then Restimar gets back to his feet. He has been regenerating, and he still grips his axe. In a gurgling voice he asks: "Why did you even come down here? Just to kill me?"

"No," Ernie replies. "Killing you was just an extra benefit. A dessert, if you will." Then he sticks his short sword *Beryn Sur* into Restimar's gut, and the false Chun Aggrat falls down again. Dranko, hoping to keep him down this time, strikes Restimar several times in the face with his mace, and then One Certain Step beheads him with his *flaming greatsword*. The head, upon leaving the body, changes form. It's no longer a hideous orc head; it's a black-bearded human, its features devastated by Dranko's mace. The body in its suit of red armor has not changed.

Dranko tries to take the red armor off the body, but receives a massive jolt of magical damage, and he falls back, cursing.

Ernie casts a couple of Maximized *cure serious wounds* spells on Kay, who soon after grows again to her normal size. The concern of the party now turns entirely to Flicker, of whom there is still no sign. Aravis finally spots him with his *true seeing*; Flicker is lying on the ground, unconscious – on the border of the Ethereal plane. Out of *dispel magics*, the party are uncertain what to do about him.

It's about that time that they hear the voice of the Bloodseer, off in the tunnels approaching the battle cavern. "Hello? It is I, the Bloodseer. You have finished your task, yes?"

"We have," they answer. "We've killed Restimar for you – the false Chun Aggrat. Now what about your part of the bargain?"

"I wish to approach," says the Bloodseer. "Please dismiss your spell of *spike stones*. I will give you news of your friend, but first I wish to see the body."

Kibi reluctantly dismisses the *spike stones* spell, and the Bloodseer enters the cavern, alone. He carries a large cloth sack. He looks down on the body and head of Restimar. "This is he?"

"Yes. Now, what about Carbuncle?"

"I will need to take the body, with the armor, and the head. Otherwise I will be unable to prove my claim about him."

Dranko protests, but the others remind him that they had agreed to give the Bloodseer what proof he required about the imposter Chun Aggrat. They do, however, ask for a favor before they hand over the head and body. "Are you able to *dispel magic*?" they ask. "We have a friend who is trapped in the Ethereal plane, right over there."

The Bloodseer agrees, and casts his spell on the spot where Aravis can see Flicker. Flicker appears, and clerics descend upon him with healing spells. He's shaken up, and even starts shrieking when he comes around, but he's generally unharmed.

"I don't know what they were," he babbles, "but they were everywhere, in that place I go when I'm *blinking*. I had seen them last time I used the ring, at a distance, but I didn't know they were interested in me. They were... horrible!"

With Restimar's body and head in his possession (the red armor does not damage him as it damaged Dranko), the Bloodseer opens his sack, and pulls out a grim object – the head of Carbuncle. "It was stuck on a pike outside Restimar's tent," the Bloodseer explains. "I learned that it has been there for some weeks. Restimar must have discovered he was a spy, and he took no chances."

"Now, I will take my leave. I'm afraid I have come to a conclusion about what I must do now, in order to make my story as convincing as it needs to be. I will give you a short window of opportunity to escape – I suggest you take it."

He gestures meaningfully towards the exiting tunnels on the opposite side of the cavern, and the party realize that he's going to have to claim that the intruders who killed the Chun Aggrat are still at large. The Company nod, and as soon as the Bloodseer is out of sight, they start making plans to flee. They figure they only have a few minutes before the orcish hordes are upon them.

They're wrong. Less than twenty *seconds* after the Bloodseer vanishes into the gloom, they hear his voice booming back through the tunnels: "The surface dwellers have killed the most holy Chun Aggrat! We must take our revenge! Kill them! Kill them all!" And the sound of roaring orc voices, hundreds strong, comes thundering down the tunnels. Even as the members of the Company look at each other in horror, the sound grows louder. They have maybe thirty seconds before a host of orcs will be upon them...

Ancalagon: Caught up again, and what a great battle! I surely hope the group has some kind of wall or illusion or SOMETHING spell... I don't think facing the orcish horde is an option now.

nemmerle: Yo! That shiznits was off da hook! I need to pour some out for our homie Tribbin – but ya'll needs ta keep ya heads up and fight the good fight. I have faith in ya'll. Ain't no horde of punk-ass orcs gonna stop you.

Rel: Wow. Very intense battle there, Sagiro. Nice work as usual. I also love the orcish horde there at the end. While fodder creatures tend to just die by the score when a party is well rested and prepared, they make a great challenge when the party has just burnt most of their resources fighting a major battle. Sweet.

Sparrowhawk: Fantastic battle there, what with the illusions and illusory illusions and the random element added by the *wand of wonder* and spells flying... Have I mentioned yet how exciting 3E combat is? Well, I'm mentioning it now.

The Bloodseer will probably be a bigger problem than Restimar was. It seems like he just snatched their victory right out from under them; taking Restimar's body, presenting them with Carbuncle's head (a head for a head, hehe) and turning an army upon them. It's a shame that they didn't even have a chance of rescuing poor Carbuncle. At least they can say that they killed Restimar. I'm sure that Meledien and Octesian will be thrilled by that. And Gowl, too. He was one annoying bastard.

Pretty soon (if they don't die first) the Company will get back to the surface. Knowing Sagiro, that's when a nasty surprise or two or three will be revealed. Then the real fun will begin.

Rincewind: Anyone have any *teleport* spells about their person? Failing that, I suppose *Mordenkainen's mansion* will provide a brief respite.

Pretty lethal ambush on all sides, though I'm surprised they didn't try to loot Restimar more thoroughly (sure his armour is unholy, but he had some other useful stuff). Resolved the *blink/sneak* attack broken-ness in a fairly elegant fashion in my opinion.

Now a test for the Company: Are you more interested in simply escaping, or trying to kill the Bloodseer on your way out?

Metus: After reading this last battle, I have to wonder. Sagiro, do you ever fudge die rolls? I'm just curious.

Sagiro: Only on the rarest occasions do I fudge a die roll; I've done it maybe three times during the whole of this campaign, and I didn't adjust any rolls during this last fight. That said, I do sometimes "fudge" when I realize early on in a fight that I've grossly misjudged the strength of a foe. If I've made the monsters far too strong, and haven't left the PCs any reasonable means of escape, I'll take measures, but it's usually an on-the-fly adjustment of the bad guy's HP/AC/magic abilities etc.

There have also been occasions when I overestimated the difficulty of an encounter, and adjusted monster difficulty upward in the middle of a fight. Both cases are pretty rare, though. I don't like to fudge if I can help it.

Piratetacat: If Sagiro did fudge die rolls when we were lower level, I sincerely doubt he does so nowadays. I think he expected at least one PC to die, maybe more. I think what made the difference in this fight was decent prep on our parts and having all of our divine spells Maximized from the *incense*; the *dispel magic* that stripped Restimar of his *haste* spell was key, as were the two Maximized *flame strikes*. Mmm, *flame strikes*. Dranko is marrying Morningstar for a reason: being able to toss about pillars of holy fire is just plain sexy.

This was an awful time for those leeches to strike Flicker. We really needed him. It'll be a long time before he uses that ring again.

We stripped a few other things (like that ring, and his unholy axe) off Restimar, but not much. He probably had most of his goodies on under that armor. And trust me, we didn't want to touch the armor again, not after it burned Dranko so badly the first time. I'm really worried about the Bloodseer possessing it; I have no doubt that he'll rise up as the Chun Aggrat in a few years, and we'll have to deal with this again.

And now, the running for our lives. We have neither *teleport* spells nor a *Mordenkainen's magnificent mansion*. We do have a *wall of stone* and *Evard's black tentacles* left, which may have to serve. Unfortunately, we're carrying Makel's and Tribbin's bodies, which are going to slow us down.

Rincewind: Can't *Mordenkainen's cube* cast it?

Sagiro: The *Mordenkainen's cube* can only cast *Mordenkainen's magnificent mansion* once a month, and they just used it five days ago. Good idea, though!

Twinswords: About getting away from the horde, why don't you use the *rope of return*? Maybe with a *wall of stone* to slow them.

nemmerle: I think it is kind of not cool to offer suggestions and ideas on what to do now that the Story Hour has caught up to the campaign as it might unduly influence what happens.

Blackjack: Gotta agree. I also note that we, the readers, should get used to questions like "What was the deal with such-and-such item?" or "What are the stats for ____?" going unanswered. Since Sagiro's caught up now, he can't answer those questions without also giving relevant info to his players!

Piratetacat: So, if we use the *rope of return*, we'll find ourselves in Kivia... in a jungle... with no guarantee that it will work again to get us back... with a head in a bag and two dead bodies that we need a consecrated altar to raise! Not the best method of escape.

cntxt: And please, people... when you get a Really Evil Idea that Sagiro can spring on his players, email it to him privately!

Piratetacat: Bite me.

The Better Part of Valor

Run #121 - Thursday, October 4, 2001

The Company do not waste any time. With One Certain Step carrying Makel's body and Skorg carrying Tribbin, they head immediately to one of the two exit tunnels on the other side of the cavern. It's blocked off by a *wall of stone*, but a one-person-wide tunnel has been dug under it, specifically for this eventuality. As quickly as they can, they crawl one at a time through the tunnel, dragging and pushing the bodies of Makel and Tribbin. No one remembers until it's too late that the tunnel was trapped by a *glyph of warding*, set to be triggered by a full-blooded orc. Skorg sets it off as he starts through the tunnel, and finds himself face to face with a celestial badger. Fortunately, he's not an enemy, so the badger runs off in the general direction of the increasingly loud orc voices.

Once they're all on the other side of the tunnel beneath the wall, the party take off into the darkness, *continual flame* torches lighting the way. Only a few seconds later they hear the sound of the orcish hordes (at least a couple of hundred, it sounds like to Kay and Kibi) as they pile into the cavern where the battle with Restimar took place. Then there are the satisfying sounds of the five or six other *glyphs of warding* going off; some of them *summon* more celestial badgers, and the others fire off *searing*

darkness spells. There are many shouts of dismay from the orcs, and sounds of combat. But the party don't stay to enjoy the sounds; they're tearing off down the tunnel, as fast as they can while carrying two corpses.

Ernie in his plate mail is still the slowest party member, so they pause briefly while Kibi casts *fly* on him. A hundred feet farther on, the tunnel forks, and Kibi makes a quick guess as to which way will take them more directly back to dwarven territory. They continue fleeing. Behind them they can hear the dimly echoing sounds of orc voices, indicating that while the pursuit may be greatly slowed by the *wall of stone*, it has not ceased.

Grey Wolf notices that the churning in his stomach, a feeling that's been steady for some days now, has not abated – if anything, it has grown stronger. But there's nothing to be done about it now; on they all go. After another few minutes and several turnings and branchings of tunnels and caverns, the party hear the sound of running water ahead of them. They emerge into a large cavern that's bisected by a wide and swift underground river. Over the sound of the water the Company can hear the sound of orcs from several directions. The net is closing.

Aravis suddenly feels something strange in his head. It feels like something in the Crosser's Maze is trying to tell him something... or maybe it's his own subconscious playing tricks on him. It almost sounds like his own voice – his own thoughts. He concentrates on it, but senses nothing more, and ignores it for the moment. There are more immediate concerns!

Grey Wolf uses a *fly* scroll on One Certain Step, and Kay uses the *fly* ability of Oa-Lyanna. Together, they ferry the rest of the party across the river. While the others are being so transported, Morningstar casts a *sending* spell to General Rockbreath:

Good news: killed Chun Aggrat. Bad news: orcs pissed. 200 chasing us. We're heading out through uncharted territory to north. Anything we need to know?

Yes!!! Okhot & Chun Aggrat! North area's old contested ground, lots of traps. Will send scouts to find you and bring you in. Anything else?

They continue to flee through the darkness. Kibi, with a bit more time to sense his surroundings, realizes that he was off in his initial guess about direction. The party have come too far north, and now need to head both south and east to reach safety.

A few minutes beyond the river, the party find themselves in a large cluster of interconnected natural caverns, with no obvious exit to the south or east. Kibi guesses they could find a good escape tunnel with a few minutes of searching, but the sounds of approaching orcs are getting louder and louder. All the party are tired, and it seems that they won't be able to flee much longer before hundreds of orcs are upon them. So Aravis casts a pair of *rope trick* spells, enough for all of the party to climb up into them. With the orcs only minutes away, they clamber up into the extradimensional spaces, but not before Dranko scatters his *dust of tracelessness* all over the cavern floor. The ropes are pulled up after them, and less than a minute later the group in one of the *rope trick* "rooms" can see orcs moving around in the cavern below (Skorg, Kibi and Dranko are the only party members with true darkvision, and all of them are in the same space).

Aravis, panting in the other *rope trick* space, suddenly becomes aware that the Crosser's Maze – or something in it – is trying to contact him again, using his own voice and thoughts. He concentrates, and this time he clearly hears a message:

A POWERFUL WIZARD IS COMING...

Huh. What the heck does that mean? An evil wizard? A good wizard? They think that the dwarven Archmage Cranchus lives in the mountains in this general area. But it might mean Octesian, the red-armored compatriot of the recently departed Restimar. Worst of all (but highly unlikely) it could mean "P" himself – Parthol Runecarver. Whichever it is, Aravis goes to sleep.

Back in the other "room," Dranko, Kibi and Skorg watch the orcs mill around in the cavern beneath them. They recognize that the uniforms are of the Red Fang tribe – not orcs under the control of the Bloodseer. It seems that the manhunt has spread to other tribes! Then Dranko and Kibi see something else move into view beneath the *rope trick*. It's not an orc, and it's not human. It's generally humanoid, and very tall – perhaps seven feet, but bent over such that it would probably be closer to nine or ten feet tall if it stood up straight. Its skin is of a stone-like color and texture, and its whole body seems to be vibrating, making it hard to focus upon. The top of its head is long and flat, and its feet are large and also flat. Stranger, it has many long arms. Two seem to be its primary arms, long and thick with sharp claws on the ends. Below each main arm are a half dozen smaller arms, each with its own complement of claws.

The watchers guess what they're seeing – the Digger, the creature that the orcs have been using to dig pits and tunnels so quickly. It looks dangerous, but fortunately is confounded by the *dust of tracelessness*. After a few seconds, the Digger moves out of sight, and after a few more minutes, there ceases to be any sign of orcs.

For a few minutes after that, Kay engages Skorg in a conversation about orcish morality and Skorg's way of life. Skorg himself, while a bit on the cowardly side, doesn't seem like that bad a fellow, a fact which Kay finds fascinating. Kibi rolls his eyes continuously; it's not bad enough that they've taken this orc under their protection, but now Kay, who's supposed to *hate* orcs, seems to be sympathizing with one. Oa-Lyanna is also frustrated with Kay's acceptance of this *Kesh*, but Kay forces herself to keep an open mind, and seems to regard herself as responsible for Skorg.

The party sleep uncomfortably in the small extradimensional pockets.



Friday, June 27

The next "morning," with spells and muscles refreshed, the party head out again. There is no sign of orcs or the Digger, though they can still hear dim voices of orcs coming from many directions. With some time to search, they find a tunnel leading out of the cave cluster in the general direction they want to go. They are no longer slowed by the corpses of Tribbin and Makel – Kibi has cast *shrink item* on both of them.

Morningstar and Dranko are out in front, keeping both eyes open for traps as best they can while still maintaining a good pace. But they miss a slender tripwire, and suddenly there is a roaring noise as the ceiling caves in! Everyone jumps back, but the two in front are partially buried under several tons of rubble. Dranko's leg is broken, and Morningstar can feel a splinter of stone sticking through her shoulder. Kibi casts *soften earth and stone* to help with moving the heavy stone blocks off the pile, and the two injured party members are soon healed.

And about this time, the party become aware of a strange sound. It sounds like the faint grinding of stone on stone, and it's coming not from the tunnel itself, but from off to the side, on the other side of the stone tunnel wall. Not wanting to wait around, and having to get past the collapse (which has choked the entire passage), Aravis expends a charge from his *staff of earth and stone* and casts *passwall*. He casts it to create a clear passage across the top of the rubble where the length of the blockage is shorter, and the party crawl up and over the pile.

As they clamber down the other side of the debris, they hear a horrible sound, the sound of stone being torn like bread crust. And behind that sound can now be heard the voices of dozens, perhaps hundreds of orcs! The Digger has found them, and carved out a tunnel straight to their current location. Aravis drops the *passwall* spell, effectively resealing the passage, and the party retreat thirty feet down the corridor before turning to set against the oncoming foe. Ernie and Kay ready bows, set to fire at the first thing that shows itself.

That would be the Digger. It comes straight through the pile of debris, and the party can see it scooping the last of the rubble into a large black mouth. Behind it almost the entire pile of broken stone is... gone. And the party realize with horror that the Digger doesn't just clear away stone – it *consumes* it. They watch as it uses its array of arms to scoop the last of the stone into a black maw like a void.

Ernie and Kay fire their bows, but the arrows shatter against its stony hide. Behind it the orcs cheer, waiting for the Digger to lay waste to these hapless and outnumbered surface dwellers. The Digger starts forward – and Morningstar nails it in the face with a *searing darkness*.

Make that a critical hit with *searing darkness*. In fact, make that a Maximized critical hit, since this particular spell was still in Morningstar's head from two nights ago when they burned their block of *incense of meditation*. And it gets past the Digger's spell resistance. With a sizzling hiss, the 80-point *searing darkness* spell hits the black maw of the Digger.

There is a brief pause, just long enough for me to roll a 2 on the massive damage Fortitude save.

And then... the Digger shatters, spraying shards of rock-like hide into the walls, the orcs, and Ernie. In the moment of silence that follows, in which the orcs aren't cheering so much as gaping, Dranko says in Orcish: "Who's next?"

Piratecat: I wish you guys could have seen the look on Sagiro's face when Morningstar rolled a 20 with her *searing darkness* spell, then rolled a 16 to confirm, then rolled a 15 to overcome spell resistance... and then the massive damage save failed. Thank you for not fudging the save, Sagiro! It was a triumphant conclusion to a successful campaign, and really, we're pretty humble already. Hence all the running.

To the orcs' credit, they charge down the passage and engage the front line fighters in the ten foot wide passage. But these are run-of-the-mill orcish soldiers, and not the elite troops of Okhot One-Eye or the Chun Aggrat. They don't stand a chance. After the front few are dispatched, Grey Wolf and Aravis lob *lightning bolts* and *fireballs* back into the tunnel, which has filled with onrushing orcs. Soon the air is filled with the smell of roasted orc flesh, and the orcs are no longer so eager to rush forward. Dranko calls out again: "The Bloodseer hired us to kill the Chun Aggrat, and we did. Why do you think we'd have any problem with you?"

From somewhere in the back, a voice calls out: "He's lying! We must avenge the Chun Aggrat! Attack!"

Without much enthusiasm, more orcs start slowly forward, but Kibi stops them by casting *spike stones* far down the tunnel where the orcs are lined up. For a few seconds there are dozens of screams as the orcs try moving through the area and impale themselves. After a hapless round or two of this, an orc in the back shouts "Don't move! We have to wait for the spikes to vanish." "Are you \$#@! nuts?" comes another voice. "What about the %\$#@ lightning bolts?" There's more milling around, more screaming, and soon the orcs are all engaging in a slow, bloody retreat. Satisfied, the Company turn and continue to head in the direction of the dwarf-controlled territory.

Before they make it that far, they encounter a couple more traps. The first misfires; a hinged trapdoor partially opens beneath Morningstar's feet, but gets stuck before it can tip her in. The party pass it safely.

The second trap is more insidious, but also avoided. The tunnel by this time has gone from being rough natural stone to a straight, well made corridor decorated with orcish carvings. Kibi suddenly senses that something is wrong with the patterns of the stone on the floor ahead, and the party pull up short. Careful searching reveals that there are holes in some of the carved faces that go deep into the walls. More examination shows that some of the stones in the floor ahead of them are very slightly raised. The party back down the hallway, and Aravis presses down one of the stones with a *mage hand*.

Immediately, the stretch of hallway ahead of them is filled with a storm of small metal needles. The clinking of metal on stone continues for almost ten seconds before stopping. Dranko starts hopping from stone to stone, but Kay does it the easy way, casting *fly*, and shuttling the party across the trapped stretch of hallway without incident.

After a couple of uneventful hours, the hallway ends in a blockage, but off to the side it opens into another natural cavern. There are still sounds of orcs, but they are far off and well behind them now. And after another hour or two of navigating more natural tunnels and caves, the party are stopped by a voice from the darkness in front of them. "Stop and declare yourself!" it shouts. It's a dwarvish voice!

"We're General Windstorm's Company," Dranko says. "Do you have the password?"

"Good. I was hoping it was you," says the dwarf. "The password is 'Kai-Kin.'" A second dwarf steps out of the darkness as well, where he was perfectly hidden in the shadows. "My name is **Zarim**," says the first dwarf. "General Rockbreath sent messages yesterday that scouts should be sent out northward to look for you. There are fifty teams of dwarves searching; it's an honor to be the one to find you."

Kay has taken Tribbin's tiny body out of sight of these dwarves, and Kibi removes the *shrink item* spell (they don't want to dishonor the dead by having other dwarves see him in his shrunken state). They tell Zarim that Tribbin is a hero, who died in the battle in which the Chun Aggrat was killed. "We should get him back to Eggemoggin for a proper burial, then," Zarim says. "And we need to get you back for a proper debriefing... and celebration. Come on!" The Company head back, following the dwarf Zarim and bearing the body of Tribbin.

Only one thing interferes with the great relief they all feel at finally heading out to the surface. Aravis feels another stirring in the Crosser's Maze, and the message is again spoken to him from within his own mind. But this time it's a bit more urgent, and there's an additional piece of information that comes with it.

A POWERFUL WIZARD IS COMING... TO KILL YOU ALL.

Sparrowhawk: How's that for a prophecy? Gawd! If I was one of your players, my reaction would be to scream, like this:

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!!!!!

Great Story Hour, as always. I'm hanging on your every word!

Rincewind: So Aravis has used the Crosser's Maze to send a message back in time to warn himself. Now he has to make sure he survives long enough to do so.

Piratecat: In the future, I'm going to slap him and ask him what he thought he was doing. "A powerful wizard"? What kind of a crappy prophecy/warning is that? What he *should* have said was, "Blahblah the wizard is coming," or "Blahblah the wizard will ambush you Tuesday," or even "Blahblah the wizard will ambush you in Turlus's bakery shop while you are buying a muffin that is too dry anyway." Just saying "a powerful wizard" is a *lousy* warning.

KidC points out that saying "A powerful wizard who is CR 14" would be even more useful, but it seems to get its jollies with obscure hints.

Unless... unless... Aravis isn't stupid. If it *is* Aravis and not the Crosser's Maze itself (which is a possibility), it must be someone whose name Aravis and the Crosser's Maze don't know. Interesting.

Rincewind: Obviously you *didn't* slap him round, because the vague message is what got sent. So if you intend to correct the message, than obviously you died before you could. But if you don't intend to, then maybe you survived but didn't say anything to Aravis. Time paradoxes are fun.

Milo Windby: Constant lurker, first time comment. I must say that I'm impressed, Sagiro. I've been reading your story for weeks now and I find myself opening up the boards first thing in the morning when I get to work. Masterfully done. I know you like to play details loose until you get to that point, but it doesn't show. That ominous warning (as vague as it is, poor players) is an excellent hook. Keep 'em coming!

Rincewind: Is it just me, or do the Company always seem to be running away from something?

kidcthulhu: No, it's not just you. We are usually running from something, or several somethings. This is because Sagiro is a rat bastard.

And yes, we did scream. Most particularly we screamed at Aravis, for not telling us about the first message, and for not having a more informative Crosser's Maze. Stupid artifact. Be more helpful.

Aravis: But I did tell you! Right before I went to sleep in the *rope trick*. I just did not answer any other questions. Not my fault you did not ask more in the morning.

My guess is that I sent a message back into the past to myself. However, to avoid risking screwing with time too much, I made it really cryptic. But not too cryptic. I figure we will figure out what it means right about the time we get attacked. Pretty clever, eh?

Piratecat: Well, let's see, what powerful mages might be wanting to kill us? I sincerely doubt it's Parthol Runecarver; he's Mr. Low Profile, and anyway he surely has minions to do that sort of thing for him. In fact, it very well may be one of his minions, since my other best guess is Restimar's friend Octesian... and I'm not sure how he would know about Restimar's death so soon.

This makes me nervous. Getting caught in an ambush and being on the defensive is *not* Dranko's favorite state of being. It's enough to make me consider making my next level Rogue instead of Lasher, like I had intended.

RangerWickett: I know! Aravis is P himself!! He was trying to warn himself that a powerful wizard (that would be Abernathy, his spirit channeled into the body of Dranko) will be coming to kill him. So now Aravis has to kill Dranko. MWAHAHAHAHAHAA!



Heroes of the Kalkas Peaks

Run #122 – Sunday, October 28, 2001

All players have earned enough experience at this point to go up one level. Because they are pressed for time, I waived the usual training period, and just gave them all the leveling-up bennies at the start of the session. Heck, they've earned it. The highest-level characters (Dranko, Morningstar, Kay and Flicker) are now 11th level! Furthermore, Grey Wolf has made a slight conversion, going from Wiz5/Ftr4 to Wiz5/Ftr3/Spellsword2.

Despite the dire warning, the Company are in good spirits as they follow Zarim and **Fulgin**, the two dwarves, back towards Eggemoggin. An hour into this march, Zarim instructs the party to hug the right-hand wall, to avoid a pit in the center of the tunnel. Against the better judgment of the rest of the group, Flicker decides to show off using his *ring of jumping*, and leaps across. Zarim (jokingly) shouts across to Flicker that he shouldn't move; he's still in the middle of a heavily trapped stretch of tunnel. Flicker stands stock still while the others cross.

Dranko (who wanted to try Flicker's jumping trick himself) slips on the ledge, but catches himself on the lip as he falls, and Kay (who's flying beside the group in case of this sort of emergency), grabs his arm and helps him up. They all make it across without further incident, and Flicker grumbles when everyone else unconcernedly walks past him.

Zarim finally leads them into a large dry cavern where they should be able to sleep undisturbed. But as the party get out the bedrolls and prepare to rest, they start to notice an unexpected smell in the cavern. It's the scent of a pine forest! Grey Wolf's guts, which have now been churning for almost a week straight, are even more agitated than usual.

Kibi feels something tap him on the shoulder from behind, and finds himself leaning against a pine tree. Pine needles and cones crunch beneath the Company's feet. Fearing that this may be a prelude to an attack, the party form up around Grey Wolf. But the only living creature to appear is a chipmunk, who fades in among the pine trees, scurries around, fades out, and fades back in again. Kay casts *speak with animals* and learns that there are no humans in the forest near where the chipmunk lives.

Eventually the trees and the chipmunk fade away, leaving only the spicy pine aroma of the forest, and an acorn that had fallen into Dranko's boot.

Aravis takes this opportunity to examine the Crosser's Maze again. He has been spending much of his free time mentally testing and observing the Crosser's Maze, hoping to learn more about what it really is, and how it works. It is mentally draining work, but he keeps at it doggedly. He has come to the conclusion that there are definitely minds – or souls – still trapped in the Maze. He sees that while the Maze itself projects outward through the multiverse, it also projects inward, containing depths itself that are like a second multiverse. Lapis is still in there, somewhere, as is Byrmyn, the big fighter left in the pit back in Zhamir. And there is at least one other, both familiar and unfamiliar to Aravis. How one might communicate with them, let alone help them, is still unknown.

Aravis also takes a closer look at the Maze's "visual" translation of the two converging Prime Material planes. For the first time he sees that there are two pulsing lights in the center of the energies passing between the two worlds. One is in the dead center, and the other is slightly off from the center. What they are, or represent, he cannot figure out.

Zarim and Skorg are both mightily disturbed by the whole pine forest scene, but there's nothing to be done about it, and all are soon sleeping. That night, Morningstar has a dream in which Previa appears; she wants to meet with Morningstar the next evening in *Ava Dormo*.

Saturday, June 28

After a happily uneventful day of marching through the tunnels, the Company arrive at the northernmost of the four guarded bridges in the dwarven territory. After Zarim gives the passwords, the party walk out into the large, well guarded cavern, cross the narrow bridge, and are greeted enthusiastically by some two hundred dwarves cheering those who slew both the Chun Aggrat and Okhot One-Eye.

There's congratulations all around, and good dwarven ale for everyone. Kibi especially is the object of great attention and admiration. It was general knowledge that no dwarves had set out with the team, and the party explain that he was a "special agent," which only increases the regard in which Kibi is held. Many dwarves cast ugly looks towards the orc Skorg, but General Windstorm has the word spread that Skorg is her own personal prisoner and is absolutely not to be harmed. Kibi spends the rest of the evening drawing maps for the dwarves, of the orcish tunnels he's recently been through.

That night, Morningstar meets Previa in *Ava Dormo*, at the temple of Ell in Tal Hae. Previa gives Morningstar a status report. There are now almost seventy Ellish "dream-warriors" whom she believes could hold their own in a Dreamscape battle, even in bright light. June, the talented but aggressive Dreamwalker, has made remarkable strides, directing her energy into training the troops. All told there are about fifteen Ellish Dreamwalkers who are the leader types, led by June, Previa, Swan, Opaline, and of course Morningstar herself. They train at different times and at different places; Swan fears that large congregations of Ellish Dreamwalkers will draw unwanted attention from enemy spies.

Amber, leader of the Illuminated Sisters of Ell, has taken the high ground in the recent contention with the Mother Church. She has issued an official edict to comply with the Mother Church's prohibition against spellcasting on Ellish holy ground. Meanwhile there are now about 130 Illuminated Sisters in Tal Hae, and at least as many elsewhere around the kingdom.

Previa has one last interesting bit of news, and which is the main reason she wanted to speak with Morningstar. A Dreamwalker named **Maltha**, exploring the Kingdom of Charagan in the Dreamscape, found a large stone tower in the dream-equivalent of Oasis. She brought half a dozen Ellish Dreamwalkers to help investigate, but could not penetrate the tower or divine anything about it. The very next day Amber issued an order that no Dreamwalker should come within fifty miles of the *Ava Dormo* Oasis without explicit instructions from her or the High Priestess Rhiavonne; no explanation was given.

Morningstar warns Previa that any further exploration should be done in groups, since Octesian may be looking for revenge following the death of Restimar. Also, she requests that some Dreamwalkers be sent to help explore the tunnels in the mountains near the dwarven villages (since only the recently excavated tunnels exist in *Ava Dormo* following the strange "cleansing" of the Dreamscape, it should be a fast way to identify where all the tunnels are that were created by the orcs' 'Digger').

Lastly, Morningstar dictates a letter for Previa to deliver to Ozilinsh via Eddings:

We're two days from Eggemoggan. Bad news: 'C' had been dead for weeks. We have his head; it was nailed to the Chun Aggrat's tent. We had to kill the Chun Aggrat to get it. Ernie got a *sending* from Embree. He wants us to go to Sand's Edge to get the Wilburforce bracelet. The Sharshun are closing in.

The Maze spoke(?) to Aravis two days ago, and says, "A powerful wizard is coming to kill us all."

Makel is dead.

We had a pine forest phase in with us. Aravis says the two Primes are close together.

Sunday, June 29 – Monday, June 30

The Company travel back to Eggemoggan. They emerge into the failing sunlight of late afternoon. Kibi is amazed at the change that has come over Eggemoggan since he last visited; the small village has become a major base of military operations for the dwarves. The party are immediately escorted to the tent of General Rockbreath for a debriefing, though even during that short walk various dwarves are looking at them, waving and shouting.

Rockbreath is extremely pleased at the party's successful return, though saddened by the deaths of Tribbin and Makel. Tribbin is taken away to be prepared for a proper burial ceremony that evening. Rockbreath reports that while there have been no serious incursions by orcish forces in the past two weeks, there have been constant reports of orcish troop movements through the mountains, and the dwarvish forces are on high alert. Rockbreath is slightly disappointed that the party were unable to bring back proof of the death of the Chun Aggrat, and suggests that perhaps Skorg's head can be used in lieu of the real thing. But General Windstorm refuses, again claiming Skorg as a personal prisoner. There is a brief general-à-general flare-up at this, which Kay wins by dint of having been made a general by King Crunard himself. But Rockbreath doesn't press the matter, and simply warns the party to keep Skorg as low-profile as possible.

As the debriefing comes to an end, the party notice that a guard at the tent door has been keeping a constant watch outside. He turns towards Rockbreath, nods, and smiles. Rockbreath then declares the interview to be over. The party's tents at the edge of the camp have been kept vacant, and are still at the party's disposal. The Company exit... to find a crowd of almost seven hundred dwarves standing on the gentle hill below the command tent!

A huge cheer erupts from the crowd, accompanied by some dwarven fireworks shot into the air. Some dwarves start up joyous war chants, and someone shouts out "The Heroes of the Kalkas Peaks!" which is immediately picked up and repeated loudly and often. Kegs of good dwarvish ale are cracked, and soon almost the whole encampment is engaged in enthusiastic (if generally cautious) celebration. Kibi is especially lionized, and when pressed gives a halting and awkward speech that is extremely well received. An old friend of his named **Glower** comes up and pats Kibi on the back – the two worked together as stonemasons in Eggemoggin years ago, and Glower constantly teased his friend about an interest in magic "that was only getting in the way of his real work." Hah!

Kibi's next priority is to visit his parents. There is a crowd outside his home, and his parents are standing in the doorway. Kibi's mom is trying to deflect the attention and shoo away the mob, but his dad is drinking in the second-hand fame of being the father of one of the Heroes of the Kalkas Peaks. Kibi's parents are glad to see their son, and obviously very proud of him. When asked by Kay, they also agree to keep Skorg in their house, out of sight and out of trouble. Kibi's father is skeptical and unhappy with the arrangement, but when Skorg offers to let them tie him up and lock him in a room of their choice, he agrees (Kibi's mom assures Kay that Skorg will not be mistreated).

Morningstar receives a *sending* from Ozilinsh:

Got your message. No news about powerful wizard. Am concerned about Mokad and converging Primes – don't delay too long! Good luck.

That evening, after the sun has set, there is a long procession out of the village to a nearby hill where the honored dead of Eggemoggin are buried. There, Tribbin's body is laid to rest in the presence of two hundred dwarven soldiers, while a priest of Moradin reads off the names of Tribbin's family from many generations back. Following more formal ceremony, the priest finishes the service, saying: "Tribbin, son of Tarbin, has died in a battle with one of our people's greatest foes. Indeed, it was in this battle that the tide was turned in one of the great struggles of our time. In the face of a powerful enemy he did not shirk his duty as a defender of his people, and we will not forget him. We commend the soul of this warrior to the arms of Moradin; may he take up arms again in the vanguard of the Hammer, and guard forever the gates of the Heavenly Forge."

PlaneSailing: ...I'm particularly pleased with the whole way that the death of comrades was treated.

So often in my own games the adventurers think little of the deaths of their friends – one player in particular is usually just ready to strip the body. Still, I can hope that they will change...

Sagiro: I was particularly impressed with how Kay's player handled it. Kay was the one making sure that: (a) the dwarves never saw Tribbin's body in its post-shrink item state; and even (b) whenever she was carrying the body in the sight of dwarves, she held it out in front of her with arms extended, rather than slung over her shoulder like a sack of meal.

I guess generals have to think of these things.

Tuesday, July 1

Just after midnight, while all the party sleep, Aravis is woken suddenly by the voice in his head, his own voice, again conveying a warning from somewhere inside the Crosser's Maze. It says:

HE IS ON HIS WAY, AND HE KNOWS WHERE TO LOOK FOR YOU.

(This at least answers the question of the "powerful wizard's" gender.)

Rincewind: New theory: The messages are from one of the people still trapped in the Crosser's Maze.

Next morning, there is a brief discussion of how best to fight a powerful wizard. Kibi, however, decides that he wants to call a familiar, from the very earth of his home village. He wanders off to a cave that he often explored as a child, sits down, and begins the ritual. Around him the cave becomes one with his bones. He can feel the power inherent in his home soil, suffusing his being with elemental energy.

A small rock cracks away from a wall of the cavern, drops to the ground, and rolls its way to Kibi's feet before coming to rest. A few minutes later another piece of rock snaps off from the top of a small stalagmite and rolls over to join the first rock. As the minutes and hours pass, more and more bits of rock break away from walls, ceiling and floor of the cave, and meander to a growing pile in front of Kibi. A blue light forms deep in the pile of stone, and one fist-sized stone suddenly becomes a bright sapphire. An hour and several stones later, a second sapphire forms beside the first. The pile is now clearly a humanoid shape, and the sapphires are in the place of eyes. But the pile does not move.

Finally, with the sun setting behind the mountains to the west, Kibi sees a brief glint somewhere in the town below. He catches several glimpses of movement as something approaches up the hill, and eventually he realizes that one final rock is rolling its way up from the town to his cave. It hops up onto the forehead of the small stone figure, and the figure's sapphire eyes blaze. It shifts its body around, moves its arms, and address Kibi in a deep voice that comes from its stony head. *Hello, Kibi. It's nice to be here.*

Kibi is overjoyed, having succeeded in calling to himself a small earth elemental as a familiar. *Hello*, he says back. *Do you have a name?*

I have no name, the elemental replies. *You should give me one.*

Then I'll call you Scree, Kibi says. *And Scree, I'd like to take you to meet my friends.* Kibi walks out of the cave, and Scree falls apart, becoming a loose pile of stones on the ground. But all is well – Scree travels as a rolling pile of stones, bumping and skipping along behind Kibi in a loose jumble.

Back in Eggemogglin, the others are astonished at Kibi's new familiar. Edghar and Pewter are both suspicious of this new "unnatural" addition to the party, but are satisfied with their masters' reassurances. Skorg has been kept comfortable (but locked up) at the Bimson residence, though Kibi's mom has a strange tale. "Kibi," she says, "about an hour ago a piece of rock broke away from the wall above your bed while I was dusting. It landed on the floor, rolled out the door, down the hall, and out the front door! I suppose this is part of your wizarding business?"

And Kibi realizes that as long as Scree is with him, a piece of his home will be with him as well.

Ziggy: Absolutely brilliant. It's the small details that are the mark of the master.

Zaruthustran: It's just so beautiful! All the details, all the atmosphere! In the campaign I play in, the DM would have said:

"You go back to the dwarf town. They celebrate your return, and throw a huge party. They also bury the dead dwarf. Kibi, you call your familiar successfully."

Alas, alas. But thank you, Sagiro, for this story. You consistently amaze and astound me by improving on perfection.

Ancalagon: Excellent! That familiar is so RIGHT! Although I suppose the player chose it, the way it was done is brilliant.

Evil Josef: The elemental familiar is great, and so is the familiar envy with Edghar and Pewter. That's all right, though. Pewter is still my favorite! I don't believe I've ever heard much about Edghar, though.

Sagiro: Thanks everyone for all the kind words; I had a blast with that last session. Keep in mind that I had a month of real time to think about the calling of Scree, which meant I had the leisure to think about small details.

As for Edghar – he and Pewter spend a lot of time tossing verbal jabs at each other (of course, it's all mental communication with their masters, and Grey Wolf and Aravis are usually diplomatic about conveying – or not – their familiars' opinions). Edghar is bit more low-profile than Pewter, being more out of his natural element. But he's always willing to help, and is carrying around the party's *horn of fog* to use on Grey Wolf's orders.

[Now for] the second part of the last session's summary, where it turns out a powerful wizard really *was* coming to kill them all..



Wednesday, July 2 – Thursday, July 3

The Heroes of the Kalkas Peaks descend from the mountains to the city of Hae Kalkas. They have decided that the next order of business will be to investigate the *sending* from Embree that Ernie received two weeks earlier. Fortunately the city of Sand's Edge (where Embree is presumably hiding from the Sharshun) is only a hundred miles south of Hae Kalkas, on the southern shore of Nahalm. The river that flows between the two cities is too small and rapid for boat travel, but there is a road that runs beside the river for its whole length, passing to the east of the great desert, the Mouth of Nahalm.

In Hae Kalkas, the party buy horses (ponies for the dwarf and halfling) – two for each person, in order to get to Sand's Edge as fast as possible. They also stock up on diamond dust, spending the 4,000gp necessary for 16 castings of the *stoneskin* spell.

Friday, July 4

With the extra mounts, they estimate it will take them about two and a half days to reach Sand's Edge, the city where the Ventifact Colossus was slain by Faskel Giantbane, Stormknight of Werthis. Several hours into the journey, Grey Wolf's constant gut-churning picks up again, and the party begin to hear sounds around them. They are the noises of many men performing combat drills. Soon the sounds are all around them, but the men themselves are only misty shadows, and none of them become solid.

After only a minute, the scene fades away, but on the dirt ground there are dozens of booted footprints.

At this point, I (as DM) inform Grey Wolf's player that due to the churning in Grey Wolf's viscera, all Concentration checks he makes will now be at -1 until further notice.

Saturday, July 5

Early in the afternoon of the second day, Aravis gets another urgent-feeling message from the Crosser's Maze:

HE IS ONLY A DAY AWAY, AND HE WILL BE WELL PREPARED. YOU MUST PROTECT YOURSELVES!

(This answers the question of whether the “powerful wizard” was coming only for Aravis, or for the whole party.) For the rest of the day, the Company discuss battle tactics and spell selection for fighting against a single powerful arcane spellcaster.

Later in the afternoon, Aravis gets a flash in his head – no words, but the image of a face. It’s an old face, with a forked grey beard and a receding hairline. He has a prominent scar above his right eye that cuts down across the bridge of his nose and his left cheek.

Aravis has seen that face before. It was drawn in portrait, in a large frame, on a wall in the Spire’s Meeting Tree before it (the Tree) was destroyed by unknown assailants. But why would a painting of an evil wizard have been displayed in the former Spire headquarters...?

Ye gods! It must be Parthol Runecarver himself! The Company fly into a panic at the very thought. Parthol was a powerful Archmage of the Spire a thousand years ago. How can they possibly defeat him? Aaaaaahhhhhh!!!!

Morningstar conveys a frantic message to Ozilinsh via Previa and Eddings, asking for advice and help if possible. But hours pass and night has fallen before the following unhelpful *sending* comes back from Ozilinsh:

Can’t be Parthol. We’ve been watching, and will know if he emerges. Someone tricking you? Am quite busy at present. Must go.

Some party members have less than kind words for Ozilinsh at this point.

Sunday, July 6

The Company wake, expecting an attack sometime in the late morning or early afternoon (they hope that the message from the Crosser’s Maze the day before was literal when it said “only a day away”). There is no cover to be found anywhere in the vicinity, as they are traveling through grasslands devoid of trees. They find some smallish boulders, and decide to make their stand near them, for want of a better place. They hand the snake figurine Thriss to Skorg, with orders to activate it and then tell it to attack any likely enemies.

“And then, how about I just run away?” Skorg asks. “This wizard won’t be after me, so it’s probably my only chance.”

The party agree. Morningstar casts *dark seeds* (the Ellish version of *fire seeds*, featuring cold damage and dark flames) and gives the acorn to Flicker to use as a missile weapon. After casting a number of protection spells all around, the party arrange themselves in a wide circle, far apart from each other to avoid presenting obvious group targets for area-effect spells. They keep a constant watch all around, waiting for the enemy wizard to arrive and (presumably) attack.

Time passes. The party stand ready. It’s a grey, overcast day with a slight breeze stirring the grass. Nothing happens. Nothing...

Something appears to the north, and begins charging towards the party! It doesn’t look like a wizard, though. It’s a huge bear, several times larger than a normal bear, and wreathed in dark red flames. With its long strides, it is upon the party in a matter of seconds. There is no sign of its summoner.

Flicker lobs his *fire seed* acorn at the bear, despite his skepticism that fire can hurt it. The fiery beast is injured, but not as much as he would have liked. Dranko casts *divine raiment*, hoping that the bear will ignore him, and moves in to attack with his whip.

A more effective tactic than you might think – he has a magic whip, and his latest level was in Lasher.

Aravis activates his *boots of speed*, while Kibi and Grey Wolf both cast *haste* on themselves.

Kay fires an arrow at the bear, but it bounces harmlessly off the creature’s hide. Ernie calls upon the Strength of Yondalla, and Step casts *resist fire* on himself, but both of them do not charge. The party have decided not to fall for the trap of clustering around the bear, and thus getting into “*fireball* formation.”

Morningstar, who still has two Maximized *searing darkness* spells remaining from the *incense of meditation*, decides to use one on the infernal beast; flesh is torn from its bones by the dark ray of energy, but it doesn’t stop its advance. It slams Morningstar with a huge fiery paw, pulls her in, and savages her in its slavering jaws. The party cringe.

Flicker tumbles up to the bear, dexterously enough to avoid attacks, and zaps it with his low-damage *staff of shocking*. Dranko moves in to flank, and cracks his whip – the well aimed sneak attack damage is enough to penetrate the creature’s natural resistance to damage, and it roars in further pain.

Kibi, *hasted*, casts *fly* on Ernie and *enlarge* (via Scree) on Kay. Ernie moves over to Kibi, and then fires his bow at the bear, but the evil creature ignores the arrow.

Morningstar manages a prodigious burst of strength, and breaks free of the grappling dire bear. Aravis casts *stoneskin* on Kay (via Pewter, to avoid clumping), and *haste* on the now free Morningstar. Kay launches another arrow – one of her *arrows of slowness*, but this one too is foiled by the tough hide of the bear.

And then the *chain lightning* strikes from somewhere high above. Because the party have stayed scattered, it only gets four party members – Morningstar at the center, and Flicker, Dranko and Aravis around her. But while Morningstar is badly seared, Aravis manages to partially avoid the crackling energy, and Flicker and Dranko both evade the damage entirely. Everyone quickly scans the sky, but there is no sign of the attacker, and the party realize that the wizard is both *flying* and *invisible*.

And *hasted* himself – immediately following the *chain lightning*, Ernie suddenly feels his muscles tightening, and realizes that he has been magically *held*. There is still no sign of the wizard.

Meanwhile, the dire bear has turned on Dranko, and it’s his turn to be clawed and bitten and grappled. Step casts *protection from evil* on himself and starts to move towards the bear to save Dranko.

Grey Wolf fires his crossbow at the bear, and his shaft actually pierces the hide of the beast. At last! Flicker zaps it again with his *staff*. And Morningstar finishes it off with a second *searing darkness* (not Maximized – she has one more of those left, and she’s saving it in case she gets a shot at the wizard). She also casts *cure serious wounds* on herself, to heal some of the lightning and bear damage.

Kibi, wanting to deny targets to their unseen assailant, casts his newly learned *improved invisibility* on Aravis, and a normal *invisibility* (via Scree) on Flicker.

Dranko, with no enemy to target, uses his *protective ward* ability to give Aravis a better chance to resist the next spell that affects him. Kay, in a similar situation, has an idea. She runs over to the *held* Ernie and starts rummaging through the *bag of holding*, looking for the halfling cook’s sacks of flour.

That puts Ernie, Kay and Kibi in a direct line for an out-of-nowhere Empowered *lightning bolt*. **Kazzam!** All three are badly wounded, and Kibi is near death. Step immediately runs over and heals Kibi with a *wand of cure light wounds*. Kibi casts one more Scree-delivered *invisibility* on Dranko, and then casts *see invisibility*. Aha!

Grey Wolf also finally gets around to casting *see invisibility*, and spots the enemy wizard, some forty feet in the air, not far from where the *lightning bolt* was cast. He then casts *ice knife* at the floating wizard, but the shard flies wide.

Aravis sees where Grey Wolf is targeting, and casts a *fireball*, but the blast falls just short of the flying foe. “Right height, but short!” cries Grey Wolf. Morningstar then drops a *flame strike* a bit beyond where the *fireball* went off, and to Grey Wolf it looks like a hit. Still, the wizard (who does look like Aravis’s description of the face shown by the Maze) does not look too badly off.

Dranko uses one of his distance healing spells on Kibi, who is still in dire need of it. Kay has finally found and pulled two large sacks of flour out of the *bag of holding*. She and Oa-Lyanna cast *control winds* to generate a strong wind headed from her to where Grey Wolf is pointing, and then she rips open the bags of flour. A cloud of fine white powder is swept into the air, and a few party members think they can just spot the faint outline of flour on a humanoid form hovering in the air.

Piratecat: Last night we met the powerful wizard. Oh my goodness, we are in *such* trouble...

On the plus side, it appears that we’ve finally learned something about tactics from all those orc battles. It’s quite interesting to see experience demonstrated in real-time, actual strategic play. No question about it, it saved maybe half the PCs’ lives.

Galfridus: So, does that mean everyone survived... or that you were fortunate to escape with 50% casualties?

kidcthuuhu: Everyone survived. As PC said, we learned a lesson from the day we fought the evil ‘usses.’

The good news is that we’re very famous, and we’re putting a significant crimp in the enemy’s plans.

The bad news is that we’re very famous, and we’re putting a significant crimp in the enemy’s plans.

Oy.

Piratecat: It was a near thing, though. *Chain lightning* and Empowered *lightning bolts* from a powerful wizard suck. We used a combat formation that minimized clumps of people, making his many area-effect spells harder to use optimally.

Nevertheless, Ernie and Kibi were either at negative or single-digit hit points, and Dranko lost 52 hit points in one round while trying to be heroic and save Morningstar from a *summoned infernal dire bear* (instead, he got turned into a dire bear snacky-cake. He now has a new rule: Don’t taunt the dire bear.)

When Sagiro told us that we had last seen the powerful wizard’s face on a painting in the Spire’s old headquarters, you can be assured that we all pretty much wet ourselves.

Rincewind: Time to fake your own deaths.

coyote6: Probably the sanest option. The insane option is to go the other way – pile the corpses of your enemies up so high around you that your other would-be foes will think thrice and thrice again before they come after you directly.

That, however, is damned hard to do with a rat-bastard GM.

Piratecat: The comment about faking our own deaths is an interesting one, but we have too much stuff to do to lie low. That might actually help the enemy more than staying active and visible would.

That dusty form then sweeps down and casts *cone of cold*. The Company have stayed spread out enough that the wizard can only catch three of them in the freezing blast – Step, Ernie and Grey Wolf. Ernie is damaged enough that he should be unconscious, but his *headband of ferocity* is keeping him alert (albeit still *held*). Step, though hurt, *lays on hands* to heal Ernie.

Kibi casts a *coldfire* at the enemy wizard, and then *fly* on himself. Grey Wolf casts two more *ice knives* at the wizard, hitting with both spells.

Morningstar decides that the time has come to use her last Maximized *searing darkness*. She can just make out the flour-dusted form of the attacking wizard, hovering in the air, getting ready to cast more spells. She takes careful aim, and the bolt of darkness springs from her fingertips. It flies true, and the wizard is struck in the stomach by the powerful spell. Kibi and Grey Wolf watch as the wizard's body becomes rigid – and then turns into a mannequin of dirty snow which quickly melts away into vapors. Victory!

But Kibi has read about that odd melting snow effect. It means that the wizard was only a *simulacrum* – a powerful but artificial servant of an even more powerful wizard who must have created it. In fact, in order to produce a *simulacrum* so potent, the creating wizard must be...

(*gulp*)

Kesh: Ahem. Allow me to say, on behalf of all readers... *Oh, crap!*

All that work, just to off a *simulacrum*? And I'll bet the wizard himself is hiding invisibly behind them or something.

Ancalagon: Uh-oh... I see a few possibilities:

- The enemy has underestimated them, and only sent a *simulacrum* thinking it would be amply sufficient.
- The enemy has NOT underestimated them. The *simulacrum* was a long shot, and the whole fight was probably observed... The enemy now knows how the party fights.
- The enemy used the *simulacrum* as a decoy. He will now attack the party who has used a lot of their spells... Eeeeek! If a *simulacrum* can use *chain lighting*, the original is fearsome indeed.

nemmerle: Great friggin' cliff-hanger! Man, you da master blaster drinking up the Shasta!

Kaodi: I don't think that Sagiro will have them fight Parthol Runecarver yet. After all, "P" is one of the main villains. My guess is that this encounter was more of a "Muahahahaha! Worried yet?" kind of encounter.

kidcthulhu: I suspect, rather, that "P" cannot move openly against us for a number of reasons: (1) As Ozilish said, he's being watched by the Spire. If he came out in the open, he'd be running a lot of risk; (2) To act directly against us would be an admission that he is the "P" we think he is. In fact, to have sent a *simulacrum* is a pretty good tip of his hand anyway.

Having seen his half-level evil twin, I have no urge to meet the real thing, thank you very much.

Victim: Is there anything that would prevent someone from creating a *simulacrum* and then disguising it to look like someone else? Since the thing returns to snow and ice once it dies, how could one tell the difference?

coyote6: That's just what I was thinking. Either it was a powerful wizard's *simulacrum*, disguised to look like P, in order to engender fear, uncertainty and doubt; or it was a *simulacrum* of P, and he no longer cares if the Spire knows their enemy or not, thus implying that he thinks that they couldn't stop him now. Since Sagiro is an Evil GM/Rat Bastard, I think either is possible. Which makes it even more evil.

(In GURPS, this is what Intuition was made for. In D&D, this is what *commune* was made for. Time to ask some god, "Was that Parthol Runecarver's *simulacrum*?)

Kaodi: They'd better hope it is the real Parthol Runecarver's sim, because if it isn't, there is another super-powerful wizard out there that they haven't heard of yet.

Piratecat: Which leads me to ponder... who says a *simulacrum* can't cast *change self*?

That being said, we all think it was Parthol Runecarver's *simulacrum*, sent out to swat a potential annoyance before it got really dangerous. I suspect Parthol was overconfident enough not to bother with a disguise. After all, we already knew he existed, and had mostly convinced the Spire of that fact.

For a change, I don't think "P" underestimated us by much, although his *simulacrum* was not as tactically brilliant as it could have been. Poor thing, it was probably out of practice after a thousand years. That *simulacrum* had a whole lot more damage dealing spells, I'm thinking, but Kay's quick thinking and the Maximized *searing darkness* made the real difference.

We know a couple of things as a result of this encounter.

- (a) Parthol knows we exist, and he knows that we know he exists.

Corollary: That means either he has a spy on the council, or his divination is superb. If he has a spy on the council, that's a really bad thing. Dranko still thinks that Grawly and Thewana (the archmage and apprentice killed when the Spire's Tree was burned) faked their own deaths in order to hide from a council spy; no one agrees with him, though.

- (b) Parthol has some way of finding us.

Corollary: We are so *totally* screwed. But maybe he'll slip up and there will be a way of finding him. That fear may slow him down.

- (c) Either the Maze has an instinct for self-preservation, or one of the souls still trapped inside it is on our side.

Rincwind: Just because it's Parthol's *simulacrum* doesn't mean it had to have been made by Parthol. The wizard who made it just needs one of his toenail clippings.

RangerWickett: I wonder about the party's fascination with cold and darkness spells. Almost no one uses the classic fire or light spells. Hmm.

Aravis: Ahem! What do you think Aravis plays with? *Fireballs* and *lightning bolts*! Fascination with cold and darkness my foot... (Okay, after seeing what *cone of cold* did to us, I did take it as one of my new spells.)

kidcthulhu: Most of the cold and darkness stuff comes from Morningstar. Sagiro has customized some of the standard clerical spells like *searing light* and turned the fire and light into darkness and cold for her. As a priestess of the goddess of night, it makes complete sense. Light and heat aren't really night-time things.

It works out well for us tactically, as the most common elemental resistances, by spell or natural, are fire and lightning. We try to spread our damage types out, just to get around that.

Aravis: We don't actually know for sure that the *simulacrum* even looks like Parthol; we just think it is probably a *simulacrum* of him. We have yet to actually check the description with the Spire.

Kid Charlemagne: There are all kinds of reasons for the *simulacrum* to not look like Parthol Runecarver. He could be using *change self*, as PC mentioned; he could be *polymorphed*; the *simulacrum* could be an old model he made while he was still young (we didn't get a description, so it's unclear HOW the *simulacrum* didn't look like Parthol).

He could be using *potions of longevity* (or something similar) to maintain his youth (he's very old, right?). He could be *magic jar-ing* into the bodies of others and THEN casting *simulacrum*. Maybe even losing their XP's for it in the process.

And last but not least, he could have totally blown (or intentionally blown) his Disguise check whilst casting *simulacrum*, thus making a *simulacrum* that doesn't look like him at all.

Return to Sand's Edge

Run #123 – Saturday, November 17, 2001

Somewhat shaken, the clerics make sure that everyone in the party is healed up. Ernie, still flying, carries Morningstar up to where the *simulacrum* was last seen, and she casts a pair of *thought captures*.

The first thought is from Ernie: *I mustn't think, I mustn't think, it will mess up Morningstar's spell.* The second one is more useful, and more disturbing. It's from a calm, calculating mind, analyzing the recent battle: *Able to hold the small fighting man. Cleric cast flame strike, and wizards cast fireballs. Some were able to see invisibility. Short woman can control the winds... and so on.*

Grey Wolf's stomach is still churning away like crazy. Ernie mixes a potent herbal remedy for him, but it does no good. This is no ordinary ailment.

As they prepare to continue their journey to Sand's Edge, they realize that there is no sign of their horses, or of Skorg. But a few minutes later Skorg appears in the distance, leading the small herd of horses back to where the party await. They are all very pleased, both at having the horses back, and at the responsibility of Skorg, who fled from danger as instructed. Ernie does a quick flying recon of the immediate surroundings, and sees that no one is approaching from any direction.

Dranko makes a flippant remark about Scree, which prompts Grey Wolf, in the name of sticking up for familiars, to tell Edghar to go – um – make a mess on Dranko's head. Which he does, much to Dranko's disgust. Once that is cleared up – and cleaned up – the Company spend a few minutes reviewing their long to-do list. Happily they can finally cross "Kill Restimar" off the list, but there are many items still to be done. Among them are:

- Get the third Eye of Moirel in Het Branoi.
- Free the dwarves of Kivia from the Guild of Chains.
- Kick Farazil's butt.
- Learn the truth about the Oasis Mages' Guild.
- Kill Meledien, Octesian, Shreen the Fair, the notorious "P," Hasek, Mokad, the Council of Nine Rats, and Qalonno (Lapis, Gowl and Restimar are now crossed off this last list).

The most immediate list item, however, is their current mission, to find Embree in Sand's Edge and receive the Wilburforce bracelet/ring/belt before the Sharshun. The last thing the Company do before continuing is to cast *detect evil* on Grey Wolf's magic sword *Bostock*. *Bostock* has been whispering more and more often to Grey Wolf that it wants to be used, which is making everyone else nervous. But much to their surprise, it doesn't detect as evil in the slightest.

Enough dawdling. The party spend the rest of the day riding south along the river road to Sand's Edge.



Monday, July 7

Before the party set out again the next day, they divide into two groups that will arrive at the city gates a few minutes apart. The first consists of Kibi, Aravis, Step, Grey Wolf and Skorg. Aravis, Grey Wolf and Step have never been in the city before, and so won't be recognized. Kibi *polymorphs* himself into a human as a disguise, and Aravis does likewise to Skorg, who fears for his safety in a human city. Aravis *polymorphs* himself to create a disguise, but his new form still has the same tracery of silver filigree along his skin, and eyes that are windows into star-filled space. In other words, not much of a disguise.

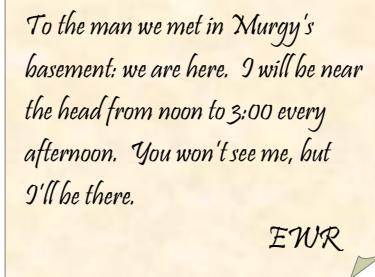
The first group arrives at the gated wall of Sand's Edge in mid-morning. The guards at the gate are either conspicuously young or past retirement age. Conscription and the attack of the Ventifact Colossus two years earlier have combined to rob the city of most young adult and middle-aged males. The party are not searched, and are asked only token questions about their business in the city. They are not told to hide or even peace-bond their weapons, but are merely instructed by the fifteen-year-old guard not to get into any trouble. Then the kid goes back to playing cards.

There are other city guards to be seen; one stands just inside the gate, watching the well-armed party as they head to the Rusty Mug. Some party members realize that a couple of guards are always shadowing them, and these guards are older. So it seems that at least someone in the city is being responsible.

The walk to the inn (the same one they stayed at two years ago when the Turtle attacked) takes them through the recently completed Turtle Market. After eighteen months, all of the rotting turtle carcass has been hauled away, but the shell, head, and four great legs were left intact. Somehow the enormous shell, ninety yards across, has been lifted up onto the massive leg bones which are themselves over five yards in diameter. Beneath this canopy is a large open-air market, full of stalls and small shops. Holes have been cut into the shell to make skylights, and shafts of sunlight strike down into the market, giving it some needed illumination. The legs are anchored in huge cut piles of stone, and the head and neck are supported by a large stone arch that forms a formal entrance into the marketplace.

Still, for all the magnificence of the new market, there's no hiding the smell. Although the locals no longer notice it, there is a lingering odor of rotting turtle flesh that permeates the city.

The two groups of the divided party meet up at the Rusty Mug, and after securing rooms for the night and a good meal, they discuss their strategy. Embree's *sending* instructed them to leave a note under the "front left post," which was a mystery at the time, but now seems to clearly indicate the front left leg of the giant turtle. Ernie writes on a scrap of parchment:



Invisible and flying, Dranko takes the note over to the marketplace. A close examination of the stone base around the front left turtle leg shows a small, carved out divot near the bottom, and Dranko slides the folded note into it.

Back at the Rusty Mug, the party are deep in conversation when a female Stormknight of Werthis comes striding in. Although Ernie tries to be unobtrusive, the woman spots him and walks right up to the table.

"Ernest Roundhill! I thought it was you! Welcome back to Sand's Edge. It's an honor to see you again..." She continues on like this for a few more seconds before Ernie can stop her. The Stormknights of Sand's Edge hold the party – and especially Ernie – in high esteem after their invaluable aid in the slaying of the Colossus.

After Ernie conveys to the woman (named **Taria**) that they're trying to keep a low profile, she invites the lot of them to dinner at the Church of Werthis later that evening. It will be a small, informal affair, since most of the Stormknights are off on the Balani Peninsula fighting the Delfirians. The party agree, and Taria leaves to make the arrangements.

When Dranko returns from his outing, he sees that a city guardsman has taken up watch across the street from the Rusty Mug. He takes a beer out to the man, and strikes up a conversation about how he understands why he needs to keep the party under careful eye. "Just doing my job, sir," says the bemused guard. But he takes the beer.

When dinner time rolls around, the party leave the Rusty Mug and head over to the Church of Werthis. It's only a short walk, but someone shows up during a routine *see invisibility* check. (This is when a party wizard casts *see invisibility* while connected via *Rary's telepathic bond* to someone else. They compare notes about who the wizard can see, and if he sees someone that Morningstar cannot, voilà!) But when Morningstar starts to cast *detect thoughts*, the man disappears into an abandoned building. The *detect thoughts* doesn't pick up anything, so the party (extra careful now) continue to their dinner appointment.

As they reach the steps of the church, and Taria comes out to meet them, they spot the invisible man again, loitering in the doorway of another abandoned building. Again he slips inside when the party move to investigate, but this time the Company pursue him inside. There is a tense few minutes when they think they might have the man trapped inside the house, but even Pewter can't find him, and they figure he must have bolted out the back door before they could surround the building. Eventually they give up the search, and join Taria and a small handful of Stormknights for dinner.

The conversation is light and pleasant. Taria tells them about what's happened in Sand's Edge since the Colossus was slain a little over two years earlier. Many people fled the city in the months following the attack. Some, whose homes had been in

the Sand Turtle's path, had lost everything. Others feared that more Turtles would attack. And then there was the terrible Turtle Sickness, spread as the huge carcass had started to rot. Hundreds died of disease, and yet more people fled, fearing that they too would sicken and die. Still, those who remained worked long and hard to carve up the corpse and dump the pieces into either the desert or the ocean. The beaches have become vile and shark-infested, and to this day citizens of the city no longer frequent them. Dumping in the desert proved more sanitary, as the chunks were often consumed by flatworms. With dozens, and sometimes hundreds of workers dismantling the turtle 24 hours a day, along with a few powerful wizards casting *disintegrate* a few times, the last chunk of turtle flesh was dumped almost a full year and a half after the beast had expired.

Since then the population of the city has slowly risen, though nowhere near to pre-Turtle levels. With the city guard consisting of young and unqualified recruits (with most able-bodied men off fighting in the war), there has been increased crime in the city, and even some of the guards themselves are untrustworthy.

The only other note of interest is the new "Cult of the Turtle" that sprang up following the death of the Colossus. Members of this new cult meet at the edge of the desert every night, worshipping the turtles in the hope of keeping them from marauding through the city. They are even encouraged to make sacrifices to help appease the great Turtle Gods. Taria expects that it's all a big con job, but no one's doing anything about it, and for the most part it's all harmless.

Not trusting the security of the Rusty Mug, the party take up the Stormknights' offer to let them stay in the church overnight (there are plenty of unused beds). Ernie spends some time sparring with the children who run errands, teaching them "how little folk can fight." Dranko and Flicker spend the evening gathering information about what power groups are at work in the city. They learn that, back when the Turtle was still being dismantled, a pair of powerful wizards named Fulton and Imperia offered to help – for a price. When it was clear that they were going to be indispensable in the cleanup effort, they started gouging Mayor Correy more and more for their services, and finally got the Mayor to allow them to be semi-official "ministers of magic" in the city. Now they can pretty much do as they please in the city, and have turned an old house into a new unlicensed Wizards' Guild.

Aravis spends the evening focusing his mind inward, experimenting with the Crosser's Maze. The two pulsing lights near the convergence of the two Primes are more clear to him. The one at the center has grown brighter, and the off-center light has itself moved closer to the center. Aravis is also able to understand more clearly what's going on at the point of convergence, which he's pretty sure is a representation of the planar *gate* at Verdshane. Except... it's not really a conventional *gate*. It's more that the place is a weak – stretched? – spot in the fabric of the multiverse. The energies coming from the other Prime are trying to further weaken and disrupt that point, while the energies from the Spire are trying to strengthen it. But Aravis can see that it's a losing proposition, and that ultimately, the very stress of the conflict is going to tear the weakness open. When that happens, nothing will prevent Naradawk and his forces from coming through the gap. No, Aravis sees that something more permanent needs to be done – probably a "patch" for that whole section of space-time fabric that separates the two Primes. How that might be done, though, is still a mystery.



Tuesday, July 8

The party wake early the next morning. A surreptitious check of the "front left post" reveals that the note is gone. Hopefully it was removed by Embree!

By noon, most of the party have congregated in the general area of the giant turtle head, just outside the market. Dranko is in the market, buying three large crates of turtle jerky from an overstocked merchant. Ernie is invisible, and standing near the turtle head, dodging townsfolk in his *plate mail of silent strength* and looking out for Embree.

A few minutes after noon, a small man – who doesn't look like Embree – shows up in front of the head. Instead of going into the market, he just stands there casually, looking around. Eventually he makes an unobtrusive gesture with his hands around his waist like a belt. Ernie sidles up to him, and says, "Pssst. I'm here. Do you have it?"

The man doesn't startle, but nods his head slowly. Ernie says: "How do I know it's you?"

The man pretends to cough, and utters the word "Murgy."

That's good enough for Ernie. He says quietly to the man: "Leave here, head down the street across from the head, and take your first left. I'll meet you in the first alley on the right." The man nods again, and then heads into the market. The party get ready to move, and Ernie heads over to the alley.

A few minutes later the man emerges from the market and heads towards the rendezvous. A city guardsman leaves his post by the market and follows, which prompts Dranko to speed ahead and take up a position in the alleyway. He uses the *change self* power of his *robe of blending*, takes a swig of alcohol, and lies in the alleyway, looking like a drunk.

Embree shows up and slips into the alleyway. The rest of the party are reaching the end of the street. Ernie speaks again. “I’m here,” he says.

“Good,” the man says. “I can finally give this to you. It’s important for you to have it, and I’ve managed to keep it out of the hands of the Sharshun. Please... take it!” He reaches into the folds of his shirt and pulls out the Wilburforce Ring, taken years ago from the Wilburforce statue buried beneath Ernie’s home town of Dingman’s Ferry. Ernie takes it.

And then two arrows blossom from Embree, one sticking into his neck. Two city guardsmen standing opposite the alleyway have fired shortbows at him with deadly accuracy!

Well, not quite deadly. Ernie quickly heals him before he can bleed to death, while Dranko stands up quickly and lashes out with his whip. Morningstar, seeing the attack from the end of the street, roasts the two of them with a *flame strike*. Two charred skeletons are all that remain.

With his next action, Dranko pumps more healing into Embree. Then four more city guards approach from the opposite street, and Kibi stops them with an *Evard’s black tentacles*. Two guards are caught and pummeled by the suddenly sprouting tentacles, and the other two flee. Realizing that these guards aren’t posing much of a threat, Morningstar reluctantly *dispels* the tentacles so that the last guard doesn’t get slammed to death.

At this point the party decide that they should simply get out of town as soon as possible. They race back to the Rusty Mug to get their horses (and the turtle jerky, which has hopefully been delivered by now). Kibi flies high above the buildings (no longer disguised or invisible) to act as a scout, and sees that a city guardsman is running at top speed ahead of the group, back to the inn. In addition, two more guards are running after them, from the direction of the Turtle Market. Kibi relays this info to Dranko and Morningstar via *Rary’s telepathic bond*, but they’re all already running as fast as they can.

Dranko, Aravis and Kibi arrive first; Dranko runs into the crowded inn to see a panting guardsman talking with the innkeeper, while Kibi does a fly-around before swooping down into the doorway to join Aravis. Dranko wastes no time – he casts *hold person* on the guard, who immediately goes rigid. Then he runs up and pushes the guard’s body over, and says to the astonished innkeeper: “We need to check out immediately – how much do we owe you?”

The innkeeper doesn’t get the chance to answer. A man disguised as a city guardsman rises from his chair, holding a large curved blade. He rushes at Dranko and attacks! A second man near the back of the common room rises, produces a short bow from beneath his table, and fires wide at Aravis.

More guardsmen have been converging on the outside street from two directions; Kay, Ernie and Flicker move to engage them on one side, while Morningstar, Grey Wolf and Step set against the enemies coming from the other. Grey Wolf’s attention is grabbed by the sound of Aravis’s head striking the wall; a third assailant from among the ranks of the inn patrons has leaped up, somersaulted over the table, and knocked Aravis’s head back with a blow from his nunchaku.

Kibi flies through the inn to Dranko and casts *improved invisibility* on the half-orc. But the next person to enter the fray – seemingly an enemy cleric – comes down the main stairs, spots Dranko anyway, and strikes him with *searing light*. Morningstar, with no immediate enemies on her part of the street, uses her *diamond of recall* to fill an empty spell slot with the *wall of stone* spell.

Aravis shakes his head and casts *lightning bolt*, zapping the enemy with the falchion and blasting a hole through the back wall into the kitchen. Grey Wolf follows with another *lightning bolt*, catching both the monk attacking Aravis and the cleric who had attacked Dranko. It narrowly misses the innkeeper, but shatters dozens of glass bottles behind the bar. The innkeeper finally has the presence of mind to bolt for an exit. Other patrons of the Rusty Mug are cowering behind their tables. A few have even turned over a large table in the back and are using it like a shield.

Dranko: Why is it whenever we’re in Sand’s Edge, we always end up in a fight?

Kibi: I just have this terrible feeling it’s all going to end up in a Ride check...

And then Morningstar is hit. Hard. An invisible attacker is revealed as he strikes Morningstar with a longsword crackling with electricity. Three times the blade strikes, doing tremendous damage. Morningstar realizes that this man is as skilled with his weapon as anyone she has ever fought. She doesn’t recognize him, but he knows her. “Hello, Morningstar,” he says in a low, menacing voice.

To make things worse, an invisible enemy spellcaster strikes Morningstar, Step and Grey Wolf with a *lightning bolt*; Morningstar has gone from perfect health to near death in a single round. One Certain Step rushes to Morningstar’s defense, swinging his greatsword at her assailant.

Kay, Ernie and Flicker have had an easier time polishing off the attacking guardsmen on the other side of the street. Ernie turns and casts *searing light* across the battlefield and hits the swordsman menacing Morningstar, before moving towards the main knot of the battle. Kibi, connected via *Rary's telepathic bond*, flies back out of the inn and positions himself directly above Morningstar's attacker. He fires a *lightning bolt* straight down, scorching his target.

Aravis has been trying to get another spell off, but the enemy monk is making that impossible, raining stunning blows down on him with his nunchaku. Dranko, seeing that Aravis is being badly injured, casts one of his *distance healing* spells. Immediately after, the enemy cleric steps up and casts *poison* on Dranko. His body shudders, but the *pin of protection from poison* that the Werthians gave him so long ago makes the difference, and he fights off the spell's effect.

Morningstar takes a step back from her attacker and casts *heal* on herself. Her gruesome wounds vanish. The man says, "Ah, you have grown, Morningstar. But so have I." He swings his sword and again starts the process of whittling Morningstar down.

Rincewind: Very nice use of *telepathic bond* there. Do the Company always fight in such a coordinated fashion?

Piratecat: Recently we have been, ever since our bad tactics got Makel killed during the assault on the orcish caverns. It's one of the advantages of relatively slow advancement (5-year-old campaign, 11th-level PCs); we know each other's strengths and weaknesses, and we're doing a better job of adapting in combat.

Grey Wolf casts his newly learned *iron storm* spell into the common room, catching the enemy cleric, monk and falchion-wielding fighter as well as a few innocent patrons hiding beneath tables. Morningstar then uses her *Rary's telepathic bond* to relay a message to Aravis via Dranko that he should fire another *lightning bolt* into the room (a *lightning bolt* fired into the area of the *iron storm* will affect everyone within the latter). Unfortunately, Aravis is stunned and can't do anything but vaguely defend himself.

Kibi, who still has *see invisibility* up from before the fight, spots the invisible spellcaster hiding at the back of the common room. He casts *glitterdust*, and now everyone can see the sparkling outline of their enemy. The falchion wielder comes charging out of the *iron storm* into the street, engaging Grey Wolf. Grey Wolf was hoping to cast *lightning bolt* into the *iron storm*, but decides to deal with the new immediate threat instead.

Luckily, the enemy wizard has never seen an *iron storm*. Seeing an angle to zap Grey Wolf and Kibi, he fires off a *lightning bolt* – which gets sucked into the swirling mass of metal filings. The center of the common room becomes a raging electrical storm, that damages the enemy cleric, crisps the innocent patrons who were already unconscious, and shatters numerous tables and chairs.

Ernie breaks a window near Aravis, hoping to climb up and help the wizard. Grey Wolf tries to use his new Channel Spell ability, but to the frustration of both himself and *Bostock*, the sword misses and the *burning hands* fizzles.

Then, as she did in the fight against the Digger, Ell smiles down on her servant Morningstar. Morningstar takes another step back and lobs a *dark seed* acorn at her foe. A critical hit and 22d8 points of no-save damage later, her enemy is staring down in horror at a huge hole burned straight through his stomach.

As he dies, the illusion upon him shimmers and fades – revealing that he's their longtime Sharshun nemesis, Hasek! Then the rest of his body is consumed in flames, leaving only a pile of ash, a ring, and his sword. Morningstar is also startled by the power of the spell, but still looks down at the ash and says (in response to Hasek's previous statement), "Not that much." And another name can be crossed off the party's "to-do" list.

The glittering mage, moving unnaturally fast, bolts across the common room and up the stairs. The archer in the back, who has been ineffective launching arrows, also bolts out the back kitchen door. Kay has mopped up the last remaining fighter outside and moved closer to the inn, whereupon Kibi *dimension doors* Kay and Morningstar (along with himself) up into the upstairs hallway. They are immediately struck by another *lightning bolt*; none of them go down, but Kibi is close to death – only an *endurance* spell cast earlier keeps him up.

The fighter with the falchion takes a vicious hack at Grey Wolf, sending him reeling. Dranko, getting constant sneak attacks with his whip while invisible, finishes off the monk. Ernie heals Aravis, who in turn fires a *magic missile* from his wand at the fighter outside. (Flash! He goes completely bald.)

Ernie jumps down from the window ledge and swings at the enemy fighter who has nearly killed Grey Wolf. Finally the pesky falchion-swinging fighter falls!

Dranko: I'm right underneath the window, and I have a weapon with a 15-foot reach.

Kibi: Do you use that line with all the women?

sling, but the band snaps. Aravis fires a long range *lightning bolt* that strikes the bird but doesn't bring it down. And then Morningstar leans out the window and tries a last ditch *hold person*.

And the bird, whose mind is still very much a person, fails his save and drops onto a rooftop a few buildings down.

thatdarncat: Mmm, I sense a delightful evening of interrogation and questions answered ahead. All of which will of course leave the party with a new list of people to kill and things to do.

Swack-Iron: I can't wait to hear your players' comments on this installment.

kidcthulhu: Well, I'll bite. My comment is OUCH! Followed by *#@\$\$@#\$*. That combat took us totally by surprise, and it probably shouldn't have. We knew the Sharshun were in the city. We knew they were watching Embree. We knew we'd been recognised.

I've got to say I'm proud of us for coming through this battle alive. We were packing mostly information/sneaking spells, and were not combat-optimized. It is yet to be seen, however, whether we'll successfully get out of town.

Piratecat: All I know is, Dranko isn't leaving until he picks up his crates of turtle jerky. You can't buy that back home, no sir!

Kid Charlemagne: I have this image of Sand's Edge having a bit of a *Monty Python* Spam Sketch feel. Turtle coats, turtle stew, turtle armor, linen tunics (decorated with polished turtle shell), turtle skin vellum, fine faux rattan furniture made of polished turtle bones and adorned with pillows made of the finest turtle leather... the list goes on and on.

nemmerle: Man, I get the same feeling reading your updates as I did reading those titanic tales of terror and justice from the old days of Marvel Comics' *Avengers*. Woo-woo!

I have to say I am glad some bystanders got roasted in this session because with all the crazy spells people throw around in your game, Sagiro, I was wondering when something like that would happen... But somehow I can't imagine these guys shedding too many tears over bystanders – while my group would spend an entire session debating the moral responsibility for such consequences.

kidcthulhu: You'd better believe we felt pretty bad about it at the time, and will be having some moral recrimination sessions as soon as we get our asses out of here. I imagine that we'll at least try to find out who they were and get some guilt money to their families.

The Eyes Have It

Run #124 – Saturday, December 8, 2001

Kibi flies over the rooftops of the buildings where the sparrow fell, and when he fails to spot the mage-turned-bird after a couple of rounds of searching, he just casts *detect magic*. As he does this, Grey Wolf out on the street sees a dozen more city guards come running down the street, headed towards them. Dranko casts *detect magic* on them from the roof, and determines that none of them are disguised Sharshun. He asks Morningstar over the *Rary's telepathic bond* if she'll go to his room and rescue his precious turtle jerky.

Some of the party run to the stables to prepare the horses for an emergency getaway. Grey Wolf, seeing that these guards have no ranged weapons, flies straight up into the air. Flicker has been rifling the bodies for valuables, and whispers to Dranko that at least some of the armor the Sharshun were wearing is magical. These new city guards are mostly fresh-faced teenagers, but their captain is a take-charge middle-aged man, who gives brisk orders to his troop to secure the exits to the inn (some of them shout at Grey Wolf to come down at once, but he declines).

The captain (whose name is **Stowmire**) asks Aravis and Morningstar what's going on, but before they can get far, two of the younger guards come out of the inn, green-faced. One of them leans against the wall and vomits. "Sir, there are three dead bodies in there, badly burned."

At that, Stowmire orders that the party hand over their weapons and assemble inside the inn; most of the party comply with the second part of the order, but not the first. Stowmire demands an explanation, and Aravis explains that they were attacked by a group of dark elves (disguised as city guards or common humans) and actual city guards. During the fighting, spells were launched and some innocent bystanders were killed, despite the party's efforts to minimize civilian casualties. He and Morningstar show obvious remorse, and offer to pay whatever damages are deemed appropriate. Stowmire agrees that some damages will be assessed, but as part of whatever official punishment is meted out to them by the courts or the Mayor. He is unfazed by the party's obvious might, and by the fact that they were heroes when last in the city. He's polite and evenhanded and all business. Morningstar tells him that they will not go with him to the city guard headquarters – since the guard has been compromised, they don't feel that it's prudent or safe.

Meanwhile, Kibi finds the *held* bird with *detect magic*, picks it up, and hands it over to Dranko, who knocks its head with the handle of his whip. He wants it to be unconscious when the *hold person* wears off. Then he puts the cold-cocked bird into a sack for later interrogation.

Kibi joins the others in the inn, as does Grey Wolf. Only Dranko stays hidden (and invisible), though Skorg also is nowhere to be seen. One of the horses is gone from the stable.

The party come to an agreement with Stowmire. If the Church of Werthis agrees, the party will be detained and questioned there. Soon they are marching along the streets to the church, surrounded by kids in guard uniforms, and accompanied by some

Werthians sent as an escort. When the young guards hear that these are the heroes who helped kill the Ventifact Colossus and start whispering among themselves, Stowmire snaps at them: "It doesn't matter what these people have done in the past, no matter how heroic. And it doesn't matter to us whether they have the favor of the Church of Werthis, however highly regarded. All that matters today is assessing their role in an incident that took the lives of three innocent townsfolk, several city guards, and a number of... dark elves. Got it?" The younger guards look sheepish.

Once the party have been escorted to an empty chamber within the church of Werthis, Stowmire leaves for an hour before coming back and requesting that they "take it from the top." Figuring that Stowmire has a way to detect lies, they're forthcoming about the whole affair, though as evasive as they can be concerning Dranko's whereabouts.

For all his gruff and straightforward nature, Stowmire clearly realizes that the Company were the wronged parties, and is as sympathetic to their cause as he can be considering the circumstances. After hearing the party's story, he orders them to stay on the church grounds until he returns the next day. In the meantime, he will be off investigating the details of the battle at the Rusty Mug. He departs.



Dranko, wanting to get his hands on the magic armor worn by the Sharshun, heads for the city morgue. He doesn't know where that is, so he heads invisibly back to the Turtle Market, and the stall of the poor merchant who sold him his turtle jerky. "Pssst," he says. "Yeah, you. Don't turn around. I'm the guy who bought those three crates of jerky yesterday."

The merchant goes into a panic. "They're not poisoned, I swear! They might have gone bad... a bit... maybe... but it's quality jerky. Or it was when I made it! It's just old! I swear it's not poisoned!"

"I just want to know where the city morgue is," Dranko hisses.

"Why do you want to know that?"

"Do you really want to know the answer to that question?"

"No! No, no, no. No." The frazzled merchant gives Dranko directions to the morgue.

It's a large one-storey building, with ventilation holes in the roof but no windows. There are two guards standing at the back entrance, but no good cover in the area. Dranko finds a trio of street urchins playing nearby, and (still invisible) says: "Hey, you kids." The kids freeze, looking around. "Want to make some money, and have fun with the guards over there?"

The kids scream and run from the disembodied voice. But one of the three comes back a half minute later. "You still there?" the kid asks.

"Yeah. Look. All I want you to do is get those two guards away from the door to that building. Can you do that? I'll give you a gold piece. Heck, do a good job and I'll leave you two gold pieces over by that rain barrel tomorrow."

"Tell you what, mister," the kid says. "Make it three, and you give me one now, and it's a deal."

"Great," says Dranko. He hands over a gold coin.

The kid immediately walks right up to the guards, gets their attention, and talks to them for a moment. They take the gold piece and saunter away. Dranko is so impressed that he pays the kid the other two gold pieces right then. And then he sneaks into the morgue.

He discovers one worker examining the bodies of the Sharshun. The man has discovered the poison sac in the Sharshun's mouth and is poking it with a stick. Dranko sneaks around until he finds the room where the recently deceased's possessions are stored; there are the two sets of magical armor (plate mail and scale mail) in a pile of more mundane articles. Realizing that he has no chance of sneaking out dragging almost a hundred pounds of armor, he puts on the plate mail. But while he's clanking around, he hears footsteps coming, and just as he gets the armor put on, a man comes into the room. "Franklin, is that you? I... Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!"

The man sees a suit of plate mail with no one in it. Dranko waves his arms and makes scary noises. The man flees in terror. On his way out, Dranko clanks back to the room with the first man, points at the Sharshun's mouth, and says (in a creepy, ghost-like voice) "Pooooiiiissssssooonnn." Then he bolts for the exit.

One of the two men eventually figures out what's really going on, and gives chase. Slowed by plate mail (not to mention the 45-pound scale mail he's carrying), Dranko gets caught by the morgue worker, who tries to slow him with a sliding tackle. After a five-second scuffle, Dranko knocks him out, becoming visible.

With his unconscious bird prisoner in a sack at his belt, Dranko clanks around to the back of a nearby building and struggles himself and his armor up to a rooftop. As evening falls, there's a tearing sound, and Dranko is shoved sideways as the bird turns back into a Sharshun. Dranko thumps him on the head to make sure he stays out.

Eventually he decides to head back to the Church of Werthis. He lowers his prisoner and the armor to the ground, and then spends a few minutes getting the Sharshun into the scale mail. He gets into the plate mail himself, and then staggers along with his captive, keeping him upright as if both are drunk, until a guard becomes suspicious and comes over to investigate. Dranko finally gives up the game, admits who he is to the guard, and gets an armed escort back to the church of Werthis where he joins the others.

Morningstar (to Dranko, after his little invisible adventure): You feel dumb NOW?

After divesting their prisoner of his standard Sharshun issue mind shielding pendant, Morningstar casts *memory read* on him. She chooses to read the hour during which the Sharshun was sent to look for Embree and the Wilburforce Ring. Suddenly, she is sharing the memory with him. He is alone in a small room, scribbling notes into a book. Then there is a knock on the door, and a voice saying: "Eyol, come. The time has come. She wants to talk to you."

The Sharshun, **Eyol**, gets up and walks down a long and drafty stone hallway. He comes to a large set of doors, which are opened for him by servants, both of whom are also dark elves. As he steps into the throne room beyond, he closes his eyes. A female voice, loud and commanding, speaks to him. "Eyol, it is time for you to go. We have discovered that Embree has fled to Hae Charagan. You will go with Hasek and a few others, you will find Embree, and you will return the Talisman to me. Understood?"

"Yes, Darkeye," he answers. His eyes are still closed.

"Then you are dismissed. Do not fail me." Only when the doors have been closed behind him does he open his eyes. Then he returns to his room to pack for the journey.

The spell ends, and Morningstar relays what she has learned to the others. "Darkeye" is a name they have heard before in association with the Sharshun.

All night, someone stays up with Eyol, knocking him out whenever he regains consciousness. They also have a sock stuffed in his mouth to prevent him from tonguing his poison sac and committing suicide.

drnuncheon: Are the Sharshun poison sacs somehow immune to *neutralize poison*? You can cast that on a poison, not just on a poisoned person... and you certainly have enough clerics who should be capable of casting it. I kept wondering why nobody ever did it to the prisoner(s). And what about *speak with dead*?

And how do those guys eat anyway? Man, it'd be embarrassing to be at a family reunion, munching on a piece of salmon, and then have one of those bones go through your poison sac and next thing you know, wham! You're face down in your entrée. I guess they stick to soft foods.

Sagiro: The poison sacs are both poison and magical. The party has tried *neutralize poison*, and it didn't work. The Sharshun have clearly taken steps to avoid the obvious ways of circumventing or disabling the suicide device. I don't think the party has tried *speak with dead* on them.

kidcthulhu: We have yet to try simultaneous *dispel magic* and *neutralize poison*. We haven't tried *speak with dead* yet, but we're planning on doing so soon.



Wednesday, July 9

The next morning, Morningstar tries a couple more *memory read* spells on Eyol, but the Sharshun resists both of them. Soon after, there is a knock on the door, but it's not Stowmire (whom they expect). It's a tall woman who introduces herself as **Imperia**. The party have heard that name: she's one of the wizards who helped *disintegrate* the Ventifact Colossus, and who subsequently used their power to gain much influence with Mayor Correy. Morningstar tries a Silent, Still *detect thoughts* on her, but doesn't get through. Imperia claims just to be visiting on behalf of the mayoral office, to see in person the group who caused all the commotion the previous day. She also graciously informs them that she has "greased the skids" to ensure that they will not be detained in the city any longer than necessary. And then she leaves.

A few minutes later Stowmire shows up, looking like he had swallowed some sour milk. His investigations turned up nothing surprising, or that conflicted with the party's version of events. Also, they have made a good start rounding up city guards who had accepted bribes from the Sharshun. But he was unable to find or apprehend the missing Sharshun attacker, and he also learned that one of the slain townsfolk in the Rusty Mug had been the son of a wealthy and influential merchant, a merchant who is now yammering for justice.

But to Stowmire's great disgruntlement, the mayor's office has officially decreed that the Company are to be released that very afternoon and escorted to the city gates. Plus, they will pay a hefty fine: 250gp for repairs to the Rusty Mug, 1000gp for

compensation to the families of the slain, and another 1000gp for what Stowmire disgustedly refers to as “administrative fees.”

It doesn’t take a diviner to realize that this latter sum of gold is likely going to go directly into the pockets of Imperia and her fellow wizard Fulton. The party pay all the fines, and then, off the record, give 1000gp more to the astonished and grateful Stowmire, to help better recruit and train the guard, and to help roust out the corrupted elements.

As they prepare to leave the church grounds, Ernie comes to the slow realization that he’s having trouble breathing. A few seconds later the others start to notice it as well; they can still breathe, but they all feel short of breath. And the air is growing unusually humid.

Alarmed, and thinking someone is targeting them with a spell, they run out into the center courtyard of the church and spread out. But they all still find it hard to breathe, and it’s getting worse. They can hear various priests and workers coughing and hacking in other parts of the church. What’s going on? Has Imperia come back to kill them? Grey Wolf grabs the hilt of *Bostock* (which obviates his need for breathing), but that doesn’t help anyone else.

Droplets of water start to form on their skins, and shadowy forms appear and vanish in front of them. A strange flock of shadowy birds flies by in slow motion, then darts away and vanishes. What the – ?

No, they realize. Not birds. Fish. Grey Wolf’s stomach is at it again, and this time they’re going to end up in the middle of an ocean! Morningstar uses her *diamond of recall* to fill an empty spell slot with the *water breathing* spell, and casts it on the party. Immediately they can breathe easily again. “Up!” Kibi shouts at Grey Wolf. “Fly up! Away from us!”

Grey Wolf casts *fly* on himself and flies straight up. The feeling of dampness fades from around the others, but Grey Wolf still finds himself in a large area of soaking humidity. Down below, it starts to rain. Huge droplets are falling onto the church and the streets around it. Then fish begin to fall, landing with wet smacks, then flopping around crazily. After almost a minute of this, the rain has become a torrent, and fish are everywhere.

And then it stops, as suddenly as it started. There is one last deluge as a great block of water comes crashing down, and then the air around Grey Wolf becomes clear and dry again.

They collect their horses (who fortunately lived through the ordeal) and make a hasty exit from the city, via streets full of people looking down in wonder at the fish lying on the cobblestones. Grey Wolf doesn’t ride – he flies, high above the city, scouting ahead. He sees a lone horseman standing in the road a few hundred yards north of the city wall. As he flies closer, the horse throws its rider, who has trouble getting back on. It’s Skorg!

When the rest of the party catch up, Skorg says simply that when the fighting started he fled, just like he’s been told to do. He grabbed one of the horses from the stable and rode straight out of town (the Company feared that he had taken the opportunity to escape from them). Dranko is quite pleased with Skorg’s cowardi... er, initiative.



That night, they make camp by the side of the road, and Embree tells them his tale. Back when he first arrived in Oasis with the Wilburforce Ring taken from Dingman’s Ferry, Embree learned that it was an incredibly potent magic device. At the behest of his group – the Order of Preservation – he fled with the Ring to keep it safe. And a good thing too. A week after the first Sharshun attack, they came back in greater force and destroyed the Order. Larkin and Beltray were killed, and Embree assumes the rest were too. Then the Sharshun set themselves up in the Order’s headquarters, and styled themselves the “Oasis Mages’ Guild,” hoping to learn the whereabouts of the Ring.

Embree fled at first by ship to Hae Charagan, hoping to lose himself there, and find a way to analyze the Ring. He had no luck in the Vaults, and eventually Sharshun agents found him; he killed one and escaped again, stowing away on another ship bound

kidcthulhu: We've just finished playing. The group agrees. We are so amazingly f#\$*-ed. There are not words for how much trouble we're in.

Several runs ago, Sagiro told us that much of the story until now has been the big, long upward climb of the rollercoaster. Well, children, it's time to put your hands in the air and scream, because we've just crested the top, and seen the long, long down.

Piratecat: Oh, such badness... such infinite badness. Well, we now know why Grey Wolf is “the axle around which everything turns.” We know what we have to do next. But how we got the information is really pretty hideous – and time is going to run out for us very soon.

Urkl. KidC got it right – we are so amazingly f#\$*-ed.

nemmerle: Wow. I can't even imagine what is going on...

Ancalagen: Man... that isn't good to hear. Then again, parties that screw up badly usually manage to get out of it... usually.

Piratecat: We haven't screwed up badly, though. We've been remarkably successful. So successful that Parthol Runecarver wants to take us out of the equation. But our success isn't enough to stop the maneuvering of some really scary enemies... at least, not yet.

I feel like a monkey with a slide rule trying to stop an avalanche: a powerful tool, no idea how to use it, a hideous sense of impending doom, and no time to figure things out.

PlaneSailing: Gosh, considering everything from the canyon full of giant skeletal behemoths, to the Crosser's Maze, Restimar and Parthol's *simulacrum*... and NOW there are no words for how much trouble you are in!!

kidcthulhu: PC and I actually figured out a way out of our predicament last night. We're going to tell Flicker, Step, Scree, Edgar and Pewter to figure it out, and get back to us when they have an answer. NPC powers, activate! Form of a clue, shape of a plan!

for Feslin. Since then he has stayed one step ahead of his pursuers, spending time in Minok, Sentinel and Forquelle before arriving in Sand's Edge.

Soon after he arrived there, Embree purchased a rare spell scroll of *improved analyze dweomer*, and used it on the Wilburforce Ring. He learned that the Ring is called a *talisman of stability*, and that it belongs by right to the Wilburforce line of halflings, and that the kingdom itself is in danger if it is not in the possession of the rightful owner. The main power of the *talisman* is to "preserve stability of mind during unusual travel." He thought he was going to learn more, but the *talisman* itself prevented it.

That's when he decided to take the risk and buy a magic item that allowed him to cast a *sending* to the party. The Sharshun, he says, have strange powers of divination, and he feared they might have been able to pinpoint his location should he try to communicate magically outside the city. But by moving constantly within the confines of Sand's Edge, he had been able to stay hidden from the Sharshun. He is weary from being on the run for so long, but is eager to join in the fight against the Sharshun and whatever other evils are plaguing the kingdom. And he wants revenge for the slain members of his Order.



Thursday, July 10

Aravis has prepared a *teleport* spell, and among the three wizards they have enough *reduce* spells for everyone. But they realize that the horses cannot be reduced to a small enough size to allow Aravis to teleport them as well. So the party walk down the road to the nearest farm, and the whole troupe – eleven humanoids and eighteen horses – march out to talk to an old farmer in his fields.

The farmer swings his hoe around as the armed group approaches. "What in heck are you all supposed to be? And what are you doing on my farm?"

"We want to give you these horses," says Dranko. "Well, most of them."

"I don't need that many horses," says the farmer, "and I can't pay for steeds like this no-how."

"You don't have to buy them," says Dranko. "We're giving them to you. If you don't want to keep them, you can sell them in the city."

"You didn't steal 'em, did ya? I don't want to get in no trouble when their owners come lookin' for them."

Eventually the party manage to give away hundreds of gold pieces in equestrian stock to the poor farmer. Then the wizards cast *reduce* on all party members and a few horses, bringing their total weight within the limits of a single *teleport* spell. Aravis casts the spell, and transports all of them to the stairs of the Greenhouse...

...except that something goes slightly awry, and they end up deep in a forest instead. Well, Aravis says cheerily, it beats the ocean! Then he casts a second *teleport* and everyone arrives outside the Greenhouse, short but safe.

The first thing Ernie does is run upstairs to contact Ozilish via the crystal ball. But no one answers for almost ten minutes, after which Mrs. Horn's face appears in the ball. She is sweating heavily and gulping for air, as if something is taxing her physically. "Is it an emergency?" she gasps.

"Er... no," Ernie replies.

"Only use the ball if it is," says Mrs. Horn, and then the ball goes black. Huh.

Kidcthulhu: Either they're really busy up there, or Mrs. Horn is boinking Ozilish...

Skorg is looking around the Greenhouse in general awe, but the Icebox – a nearly endless source of food – is a true miracle to him.

Morningstar goes to the Temple of Ell, to make arrangements for bringing Makel back from the dead the very next day. Not wanting a circus like last time (when she *raised* Snokas), she asks Amber to be discreet. Amber tells Morningstar that the political climate has grown more chilly in the past few weeks. Even though she and the Illuminated Sisters of Ell have been following the rules and honoring the ban, the Mother Church in Kallor has been growing more and more hostile and impatient with the new sect (the ban is that Illuminated Sisters may not cast spells on Ellish holy ground). Amber doesn't know what to do, but refuses to cave in to pressures to disband and recant.

That night, while Morningstar sleeps and prays for the miracle of *raise dead*, she has this dream, spoken by her old instructor, Clariel:

"Morningstar, Makel died in battle, and he might have rested happily on the Endless Shore, content in the manner of his passing. His body, you may recall, protested that he wasn't finished yet; Makel wanted to see things through to the end, with Restimar, and ultimately with Naradawk. His perspective has changed since his arrival in the Outer Planes. He does still want to come back, but not for the reasons he had before he died. He has a different role now; he will not rejoin you and your Company. He will become one of six who will change the world forever, sundering a truth that has held since the Travelers arrived with their flocks millennia ago."

And then she, along with the rest of the Company sleeping in their beds (and Embree, sleeping in Makel's bed), are woken up by a blood-curdling shriek coming from the kitchen. They race downstairs to find a horrible but familiar sight. Skorg is there, his hands held to his face. He lowers his arms to reveal that his eye sockets, like Eddings's before him, have been filled with the two Eyes of Moirel. They have escaped their locked chest in the basement and inhabited the head of the poor orc.

The Eyes alternately glow, and speak slowly to the Company in Skorg's voice.

SUCH A COLLECTION OF FOCI IS WITHOUT PRECEDENT. ABERNATHY PLAYED A DANGEROUS GAME, BRINGING SO MANY TOGETHER. AND NOW THE LIGHT IS WITH YOU. KEEP HIM SAFE, OR SUCCESS SOONER WILL TURN TO ASH LATER.

YOU ARE NEARLY READY TO MAKE THE GREAT JOURNEY, TO QUIET THE OSCILLATING THREADS OF FATE. INTO THIS PLACE OF REFUGE YOU HAVE BROUGHT WHAT YOU WILL NEED. YOU HAVE THE FOCUS, SON OF HE WHO STOOD AT THE HEART OF NOWHERE IN AGES PAST. YOU HAVE THE OPENER, WITHOUT WHOM THE LIGHT WILL TEAR YOUR BODIES FREE OF ALL MOORINGS. YOU HAVE THE TALISMAN, FORGED IN DAYS FORGOTTEN BY THE EARTH MAGE, WITHOUT WHICH THE LIGHT WILL TEAR YOUR MINDS FREE OF ALL MOORINGS. YOU HAVE NOW A SOURCE OF POWER, TO MAKE UP FOR THE LACK OF FOUR OF OUR BROTHERS. ALL WE NOW LACK IS THE THIRD. HE MUST ACCOMPANY US.

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. 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.**

BUT ALL PLANS AND PLOTS FIND THEIR WAY INTO THE GREAT TAPESTRY. WE SEVEN REACHED OUT INTO THE MULTIVERSE DURING THAT FIRST JOURNEY, CLUTCHING FOR LIFE, FOR ABERNIA WAS INACCESSIBLE WHILE WE TRAVELED. VOLPOS WAS THE CLOSEST, AND FROM THERE COMES OUR SENTIENCE. WE BOUND VOLPOS TO ABERNIA, AND MOIREL ABSORBED THE ESSENCE OF BOTH. TWO PLANES OF BEING LOCKED TOGETHER, MOIREL AT THEIR CENTER. NOW, HER LAST DESCENDANT... HE IS THE CENTER.

BEWARE, SON OF MOIREL! WHEN ABERNIA AND VOLPOS EMBRACE, THE CENTER WILL BE BURNED AWAY, TO FUSE THE TWO TOGETHER FOR A TIME. ENOUGH TIME. HEED THE WORDS OF THE KYASHA. HEED THE WORDS OF THE NUMISMATIST. HEED THE WORDS OF THE TRAITOR. STAND IN SHADOW. STAND 'TWIXT THE SHADOWS. WHEN THE SKY IS REVEALED AND THE ARCS TOUCH YOUR FRAME, THE WINDOW WILL OPEN. YOUR FLAME MUST BE EXTINGUISHED BEFORE THE CORES CONVERGE ON YOUR SOUL.

Then Skorg screams, the Eyes drop from his head onto the floor, and he goes unconscious.

Soon after, he comes to, shakes his head, and asks everyone what they're looking at. Evidently he can still see, doesn't remember anything after coming downstairs to sneak some black lizard pie out of the Icebox, and doesn't realize that his eyes are now missing. The party put him to bed.

Pendragon: You know, I have to admit that when I first began reading Sagiro's Story Hour, the whole concept of the PCs being brought together by an archmage seemed hokey to me. Shows what I know.

I got the shivers when I read that. It's all coming together now, and it's *been* coming together since session 1, way back when.

Somehow Sagiro manages to create a tight, *tight* plotline, and still allow the players the freedom to determine their own actions...

My hat is off to all of you. I can't wait to see how this all turns out.

Geoff Watson: I agree. It seemed horribly clichéd, even worse than the usual 'you meet in a tavern.' Some of my players would react badly to that sort of railroading (once, under a different DM, the same sort of thing happened, and most of the group decided that we'd destroy the plot device rather than hand it over to the archmage who enslaved us).

kidcthuuhu: There was a perfectly good metagame reason for the Archmagi schtick. The players are all busy people, and Sagiro needed a feasible mechanic for putting a character back into the group if a player had to be out for several sessions. If you have an archmage behind you, a PC who teleports into the middle of the group isn't all that unreasonable.

Clichés are not always bad. They are like a path through the forest of language and expression. People travel that way because it's easier. And taking the path already traveled doesn't have to be boring. It all depends on the scenery around you. Players only feel railroaded by convention if they are actually railroaded... it's what you do with the tools.

Pendragon: As for me, I was just mentioning how it seemed at first. But after reading the whole Story Hour, I'm entirely of a different mind. Instead of using the "archmage calls everyone together" as a quick and easy means of bringing everyone in, Sagiro's made it into much more than that.

In fact, because the party were brought together by Abernathy, Sagiro's been able to develop everyone's role in the plot into something epic in scope, and thus avoided an even bigger silliness, a scenario such as: "all the PCs are monumentally important figures, featuring prominently in prophecy – and just happened to meet at this bar..." The fact that you all met and joined forces *wasn't* chance, it was a carefully executed plan to bring several key figures together, which makes the fact that you are all special in one way or another (the Opener, the Light, the Center, etc.) perfectly sensible.

That's why I liked this last particular installment so much. It drew back to the very beginnings of your campaign, showing that even the (possibly hokey at the time) manner in which you came together has been part of the Grand Design.

nemmerle: Also, don't forget that the PCs would have been more than welcome to try to "destroy" the plot device that brought them together – that does not mean they would have succeeded – and ended up doing what Abernathy wanted anyway – or helping the bad guys win unknowingly... Any way you look at it, with Sagiro as DM, it would been hella fun.

Eldon Blackleaf: The campaign I'm currently playing in is somewhat similar to the very beginning of Sagiro's game in the sense that the PCs have been wandering around completing quests without having any idea of what's going on. Unlike Sagiro's game, however, we lack the guiding force of an archmage. And frankly I would kill to have that kind of avuncular figure around to give us a specific idea of what in the Nine Hells we're supposed to be doing, and to pat us on the back when we do something right. The only confirmation that we've had so far that we're on the right track, is that our enemies (whom we know next to nothing about) have been trying harder to kill us.

I for one love the archmage idea. Great game, Sagiro.

Sagiro: As always, I'm glad people are enjoying reading about my campaign.

But I'd be remiss in taking the credit some of you are giving me for fantastic powers of foresight. While I had some vague notion that Abernathy's choice of PCs could give me latitude in how important I made them in the Grand Design, that wasn't my prime motivation for my choice of starting point. Remember, this is the first long campaign I've DM-ed, and the first time I've DM-ed multiple PCs in *any* capacity since I was 12 years old. I wanted to give myself a "safe" setup, where I could structure the game easily while I learned the craft. To put it more bluntly, I knew Abernathy would let me "railroad" the PCs if I ever needed that to fall back on. If you look closely, I've used that "crutch" many times throughout the game, even as recently as a couple of months ago. I set up the campaign so that I could have the "bosses" tell the party: "Go into those orc tunnels and find our spy." Voilà! Instant "module" that I knew my players (and thus my PCs) would likely go for.

Fortunately for me, my players are friends who I know will be willing to go along with me, who see my adventures as adventures and not chores. (And, admittedly, they know that if they ever choose to do something wacky, I won't stop them.) I guess the moral is, if the adventures and story are fun and engaging, it doesn't matter so much if things are linear, free-form, or somewhere in between.

A last comment on building an "epic campaign": at this point, I could (if I chose) cut the party entirely loose from the "agents of a higher authority" structure and move into full free-form mode. I've bought myself this freedom by scattering plot hooks behind me like confetti as I've gone. If tomorrow I told my PCs that Naradawk and "P" and everyone in the Spire had all spontaneously combusted, they could still follow up any number of leads on their own. They could go try to free the enslaved dwarves of Kivia. They could investigate the gartine arch that spews forest demons deep in the woods of the Gahantropalas. They could go back to Verdshane and open some monster-boxes. They could go off exploring the extent of the Lowroads, or looking for more Black Circle bestiaries. They could join Jerzembeck and Junaya in harrying the armies of the Delfirians, or find out what the huge army of undead is doing over in Kivia. Or (I'm sure) stuff it wouldn't even occur to me that they'd want to explore and do.

But yeah, I started them in a Wizard's Tower and forced them to work for the Man. If your players trust you, you'll have plenty of time to work your way up from A Meeting In A Tavern, to a huge sprawling mess...



Friday, July 11

In a small ceremony at the Illuminated Sisters' temple, Morningstar brings Makel back from the dead. As she casts the spell, the building is filled with the scent of salt sea air, and the cry of gulls can be heard clearly as they wheel about overhead. Makel takes his first breath and sits up.

"I need a ship," are his first words. His manner is serene, and he is both confused and focused. He knows he needs to go on a journey, alone, but to what end he cannot see. He is tended by the priestesses at the temple while he recovers from the ordeal of being raised.

Back at the Greenhouse, Aravis is suddenly stunned by a pulse from the Crosser's Maze. He plunges his mind into it for a closer examination, and sees that the off-center glow representing Grey Wolf is now accelerating towards the central glow where the two Primes overlap. After a few minutes of scrutiny and calculation, he reaches the conclusion that the Primes will overlap completely in two weeks. Maybe three.

There is stunned silence.

Someone utters: "We're *so* screwed."



The Twilight Zone

coyote6: So, players in Sagiro's game – how are you interpreting the cryptic words of the Eyes and others? Who is the Light, who are "the six who will change the world forever," who is the Focus, is the Focus the "descendant of Moirel, who is the Opener," who or what is the "source of power," where is "the third," is the similarity between "Abernia" and "Abernathy" just a coincidence, are you living in Abernia or Volpos, who or what is a "kyasha," who is the numismatist, who is the traitor, what did the traitor betray, and what is the Evil Baker's role in all of this?

kidcthulhu: The Light is One Certain Step. We know this from the dream/prophecy he got just before he joined us.

We don't know who "the six" are. We're just glad someone else is going to tackle that problem and it's not going on our list.

The Focus is Ernie. See the first prophecy of the Eyes, and all that stuff about the blood of Santo [see summary after session 118 above].

The Opener is Kibi. See above.

The "source of power" is the Crosser's Maze. The Eyes looked right at Aravis as they said their bit about power.

The "third" is another Eye of Moriel, currently living in the Tower of Het Branoi, back in Kivia. We were going to get it while we were there, but getting back with the Crosser's Maze was too important to delay. See the party's Kivian adventures for more information.

We're living on Volpos, I think, as the Eyes could not reach Abernia while they were traveling. No connection to Abernathy.

The numismatist is the minor Black Circle priest (and coin collector) we met when we first got to Kivia. We don't know who or what the "kyasha" is. We suspect the traitor might be Parthol, but we don't know what his words are.

So far as we know, the Evil Baker is really behind all of this, plotting to bring his evil hordes through the skysteel arch in order to expand his market for his stale baked goods. Bwa-ha-ha.

Fajitas: Why is it that the party thinks Ernie is the Focus and Kibi is the Opener?

kidcthulhu: When the Eyes of Moirel borrowed our butler and spewed prophecy at us, they referred to the Focus as having "the blood of Santo." Ernie's suspicions and some research revealed that Santo is a common halfling name. That, combined with the old statue of the guy who looked just like Ernie, was enough to confirm our guess.

Kibi is referred to as the Opener by the folks who used to *summon* him occasionally. So far he's no good with tin cans...

Swack-Iron: Wait, did I miss something? I'd started to figure that Grey Wolf was the Focus, the axis around which both Primes swung, and that it was he who the party must betray to help forestall the disaster.

drnuncheon: I think Grey Wolf is the center, the last descendant of Moirel, who is going to be burned away when the two worlds meet?

Sparrowhawk: If I recall correctly, Kibi is played by Sagiro's fiancée, who had moved elsewhere and could only play with the group intermittently. Now she has moved back to Boston and will be a regular member of the group... Now, does this mean that Kibi has somehow gotten over his planar problems and will be a constant presence in the party? What was Kibi's problem in the first place, and what caused it to end?

Kibi's "problem" was that he was *summoned* to another Prime Material plane. For some reason the *summoning* proved unstable, and Kibi has been bouncing back and forth between this new Prime and his own home Prime. The passage of time is wonky; sometimes only minutes will have passed for Kibi, while weeks go by at home. Fortunately for all involved, Grey Wolf's strange stomach-churning planar nature has caused him to serve as an "anchor" for Kibi whenever he returns to the Charagan Prime.

As a Story Hour bonus, here's part of the description I gave to Kibi's player of what happened:

...you are standing on a white marble floor, and specifically within a wide grey circle drawn on that floor. Nine candles burn at various points around its perimeter. Around you is a wide chamber with a high ceiling; the walls are marked with glyphs and patterns, written in a grey, swirling hand. The room is lit by hanging lanterns, and through a round glass window at the highest point in the ceiling you can see, in a black night sky, a full, red moon. In front of you are two people: a tall, imperious-looking woman in a brown and white robe, and a small man with spectacles, holding a large book.

The woman speaks: "Something must have gone wrong. This is a dwarf!"

The man frantically looks through the book. "No, we did this right. I made sure of it."

The woman answers, "Dolt! The Opener is a mage. It has to be! And dwarves are incapable of imagery. We must have made a mistake."

"Perhaps this one isn't. Maybe he's... oh, I don't know. And besides, this one has to be the Opener. The *summoning* wouldn't have worked on anyone else."

He flips to a page near the back of the book. "I'll read it again, milady, in case you've forgotten. 'When the smoke of nine is set beneath the Sigil of the Sky, and four of Tirat's children align themselves behind the moon, the Opener will be brought from an echoing world. He is the wizard who will move the World Stone. He will bridge the Earth and the light, and force the gates of yesterday.'"

"I told you," says the woman frowning. "It says 'wizard.'"

"Hm," says the man. He looks at you. "Well? Are you a wizard?"

You feel as though you couldn't lie, even if you wanted to. "Of course," you say.

"Ah," he says. "Well then. Good. What is your name?"

"Kibilhathur Bimson."

"Well, Kibilhathur Bimson, know this. You have been *summoned* by the **Lady Serpicore**, Mistress of the Wizards' College, and by her humble apprentice, **Maudrin**. You are under our control for as long as the task takes. When your task is done, you will be released to your home. We will not mistreat you, but if you resist us, we will compel you, and that might cause you discomfort. Your task is dangerous, and though we will give you assistance, and protect your life however we might, there is no guarantee that you will survive. Understand that the fate of Cafille, our world, hangs in the balance, and that if you fail, you will perish with the rest of us.

"Will you assist us willingly, or will we be obliged to compel you?"

For the record, Kibi agreed to help willingly. He embarked on a quest with some other adventuring types to find something called the World Stone, which only he (they told him) could move. That quest is still ongoing, though it's not clear how it can be finished without Kibi, who is now back "full time" with Abernathy's Company.

The words in that book describing Kibi are especially interesting in light of these words of prophecy from the Eyes of Moirel, which you might recall from an earlier Story Hour installment: **YOU HAVE THE OPENER, WHO BRIDGES THE LIGHT AND THE EARTH.**

Where is all of this leading? I know, but I ain't tellin'.



The Words of Ell

Run #125 – Thursday, December 13, 2001

The Company spend the rest of the day in long discussions about what to make of this new info, and what to do about it. They make guesses, some educated and some less so. They consider the consequences of going off after the third Eye in Het Branoi right then. They consider the consequences of waiting until the matter of the converging planes is resolved. They wonder about Grey Wolf, and whether they'll really have to kill him to stop Mokad's plan to merge the Primes. And they wonder about the "shadows" that Grey Wolf will have to stand between, or in, or betwixt, or what-have-you.

After hours of review, Morningstar sighs. "You remember those days when we weren't allowed to know things because it was too dangerous? I want those days back."

My players really did spend the first 2+ hours of the game with printouts of the campaign diaries, poring over them for clues.

Morningstar prays that night for the cleric prayer of *commune*, thinking that Ell will perhaps be able to shed some light on the party's questions.

Saturday, July 12

The next day, the Company haggle over many possible questions to ask, and settle on a good set. Morningstar goes to her darkened room to cast the spell. After ten minutes of casting, she feels that a strong divine presence is with her in the room, and more, she can feel its anticipation of her questions. She asks:

"Must we kill Grey Wolf at the time of Mokad's ritual in order to prevent Naradawk's army from crossing?"
YES. THIS TIME.

"Will our location at the time of Mokad's ritual affect the outcome of that ritual?"
YES, FOR YOUR DESIRED GOAL.

"Will Mokad try to kidnap Grey Wolf?"
I DON'T KNOW.

"Is the shadow that the Eyes say Grey Wolf should stand in the best location for us to be in order to reach our desired goal?"
YES.

"Is the shadow that the Eyes say Grey Wolf should stand 'twixt the best place for us to be in order to reach our desired goal?"
NO, NOT ALL OF YOU.

"Is the shadow that the Eyes say Grey Wolf should stand in, in Kallor?"
YES.

"Is the shadow that the Eyes say Grey Wolf should stand in, in Ava Dormo?"
NO.

"Are Octesian and Meledien allied with 'P'?"
YES, TO A POINT.

"Is the kyasha alive?"

NO.

"Is 'P' the traitor mentioned in the Eyes' prophecy?"

NO.

"Is the shadow that the Eyes say Grey Wolf should stand in located in another place in this plane other than Kallor?"

NO.

And the divine presence fades from the room, leaving Morningstar exhausted. Once she has recovered, there is a lively discussion about what it all means. The news is (obviously) not encouraging for Grey Wolf; the answer to their first question makes it seem clear that he's going to have to die to stop Mokad and Naradawk. And going to Het Branoi now seems to be a dicey strategy, if they need to be in Kallor within the next two or three weeks. They wonder who "the traitor" is, if not Parthol Runecarver.

Morningstar goes to the temple and asks Previa to do some research on the word "kyasha." Several hours later, the Chronicler comes back with a report: a "kyasha" is either an uncommon name for "kobold," or an unusual subspecies of kobold. She's not sure which, but Morningstar is still very pleased with the information – the kyasha must have been the small kobold-like creature that gave up its own life to give Grey Wolf a poison pellet and instructions to swallow it. And *that* revelation leads to another – that "the traitor" must mean Califax, who had recently contacted the party with intelligence indicating that Mokad can only be stopped by Grey Wolf's death. No, it really doesn't look good for Grey Wolf.

Aravis, hearing that the party will be heading soon to Kallor, decides to try using the Crosser's Maze to scout Kallor from a distance. He is able to focus his vision on the City of Twilight, but can only observe from a great height, so high in fact that all he can really make out are clouds and the slight curve of the world. Determined, he tries to draw his sight closer in – and suddenly he is there, in Kallor. The streets are dark, and he moves as if in a dream. Nothing here seems real...

Back in the Greenhouse, the rest of the party watch as Aravis's eyes roll back in his head and he drops to the ground, unconscious. Aravis spends a few minutes wandering the insubstantial streets of Kallor before he realizes that no, in fact, his scouting mission was *not* a success. Instead of observing Kallor, he has been drawn into the Maze, and is wandering a version of Kallor drawn partly from his own thoughts. With a great effort of will, he returns his mind to the reality of the Greenhouse. The others help him up. "I can see how this thing can make you go insane," he says woozily.

Ernie goes in search of Makel, and finds him praying at the church of Brechen down by the bay. Makel is unusually, even disturbingly, calm and contemplative. Ernie tells him about their intent to travel to Kallor, and asks if Makel can recommend any other good navigators. Makel says he'll make some inquiries. The clerics of Brechen are preparing a ship for him; he is going to leave soon, on a solo voyage to he knows not where. Ernie promises to send word before the party leave town.



Sunday, July 13

The party decide that they'll need to avoid the problem of being so conspicuous, as a group of well-armed able-bodied citizens of Charagan who aren't (to a typical observer) doing their part in the war. Their solution is to procure uniforms. General Kay marches down to the ducal palace and asks to speak with "someone important." After the baffled guards at the gate confirm that she's not some crazy townswoman, they escort her to **Margol**, the Duke's chamberlain. He arranges an appointment with the palace tailor the next afternoon. Given a choice of uniforms – city guard, ducal guard, or even the king's Royals – Kay chooses uniforms of the king's guard. Although this is somewhat irregular, Kay's rank allows her that privilege.

Morningstar casts *wind walk* on herself, Aravis and Ernie, and the three of them speed over land and sea at 60 miles per hour towards Kallor. They land a bit outside the city walls, and find a clearing in a nearby wood. Aravis spends a couple of hours studying every detail of the clearing, making it a relatively safe spot to cast *teleport* later. As he starts to cast *teleport* to take them back to the Greenhouse, Morningstar casts *water breathing*. "Just in case," she smirks.

Aravis brings them back to Tal Hae without incident.

Monday, July 14

The party march down to the tailor, where a kindly old woman shows them the materials and measures everyone in numerous dimensions. It will take a few days, but she promises that well-cut uniforms of the king's Royals will be delivered to the Greenhouse as soon as possible. And the party go back home, to start counting the days before their trip to Kallor and (perhaps) the culmination of a grand evil design.

The churning in Grey Wolf's innards does not abate.

PlaneSailing: Oooh! I get that sort of "thar's a big thunderstorm brewin'" kind of feeling!

kidcthulhu: Yeah, only we're the ones standing in a brass bathtub shouting "The gods are bastards" (thank you, Mr. Pratchett).

PlaneSailing: By the way, is the romance between Morningstar and Dranko still going on?

kidcthulhu: Yep. It's a quiet, sweet little romance. Morningstar rains dark, fiery death down on our enemies and Dranko drools at her holy might. Dranko launches madcap, crazy plans, and Morningstar rolls her eyes. It's like they're married already.



Makel's Farewell

Run #126 – Tuesday, January 8, 2002

Dranko spends the rest of the day plying his underworld contacts in Tal Hae, hoping to find information about or contacts within the city of Kallor. Near the end of the day he hits the jackpot; an old rogue named **Stockard** meets him over a table in a seedy tavern. Stockard is a close friend of Keertine Smith, the party's primary contact within the guild of the Undermen. And Stockard himself has a friend who operates solo out of Kallor. There is no Thieves' Guild in the City of Twilight; the Church of Ell would not tolerate it. But a few men of the streets still operate there, and one of the best is a man named **Ruland** who typically works out of a tavern called the Tallowhouse. "Tell him Stockard sent you, and he'll be able to help you out," Stockard says to Dranko.

Grey Wolf arranges with Morningstar to cast *sending* spells to his two younger siblings; if he's really going to die in less than two weeks, he wants to see them one last time.

Am home at Greenhouse in Tal Hae. Will be leaving soon. Would love to see you. Need to see you. Ivellios.

Morningstar does not hear back from his brother Garreth, but does get a reply from his sister Jaina:

I can be there in a week; is everything okay? Ivellios sounds worried. I'm on a job that I shouldn't leave, but I can if

Morningstar sends one more *sending* to Jaina:

Please come.

OK. Tell Ivellios I'll do what I can to get there.

Aravis, Dranko and Kay *teleport* to the clearing outside the walls of Kallor. They approach the city gate with Aravis posing as "Lord Turlus," and with Dranko and Kay posing as his bodyguard. The sun is shining high in the sky above the city, and there is no sign of the "eternal twilight" under which the city always rests. At the long, enclosed gatehouse, the guards (astonished by the sight of Aravis's eyes and the metal tracings on his skin) demand that all weapons be peace-bonded while inside the city walls.

When the three of them emerge from the inner doors of the gatehouse, it is twilight. The sun is visible in the sky, a muted gray disc casting a faint light into the city. They ask for directions to the Tallowhouse, and head that way. Once out of sight of the guards, Kay starts tampering with the peace-bonding on her warhammer, in case she needs to use it in a hurry.

The citizens on the streets of Kallor seem less talkative, less cheerful than they did the last time the party were there (about two years earlier). People are walking quickly with their heads down, and seem ill at ease. Aravis feels it, too – an unnatural sense of foreboding or worry with no obvious cause. Dranko and Kay feel nothing.

At the Tallowhouse, Dranko goes in and asks for Ruland, and is pointed to a tall man drinking at the back of the tavern. He walks over. "You Ruland?" he asks.

"Maybe."

"Stockard sent me."

"Have a seat."

From his conversation with Ruland, Dranko gets the latest local gossip. The major news is the recent gruesome murder of a local wizard named **Alstott**. Alstott used to be an advisor to the city government, but retired many years ago. He has always been well liked by the populace, and in his retirement years he spent much of his time making small charms for nobles and delighting children with cantrips. A couple of weeks ago, Alstott's body was found on the street right outside of his home. It was horribly blackened, but from what Ruland could gather, not burned. The house was searched, evidence was gathered, and all of it has been locked up in the constabulary on orders of the Church. Ruland promises to do what he can to learn more about what's going on, and Dranko departs.

On the way back, Kay pokes her head into other taverns, until she spots what she's looking for. There's a large man with one leg sitting at a table, a crutch leaning up against the wall. She goes in, introduces herself to the man (named **Sam**) as "Elhen," and strikes up a conversation about what's going on in town. Sam also knows about the murder of Alstott, though not anything more than did Ruland. Much to Kay's satisfaction, Sam mentions that there are many reports that the orcs in the region have all fled back into the mountains, withdrawing from both Hae Kalkas and Sentinel. Some troops have returned home, while others have been sent directly to the Balani Peninsula to fight the Delfirians. But despite this good news, which should be boosting local morale, everyone seems in a funk. Interestingly, the city-wide malaise predates the death of Alstott by a good month or two.

Before they leave Kallor, the three of them rent rooms in advance for a whole week, at an expensive inn called the Moonspell. Then they *teleport* back to the Greenhouse.

Morningstar uses another *sending* spell to contact **Vera**, an Illuminated Sisters member who serves (discreetly) on Rhiavonne's high council in Kallor. Eventually she arranges an in-person meeting for the following afternoon, once she realizes that Vera is not herself a Dreamwalker. Morningstar warns Vera that she is *persona non grata* with the mother church these days, that their meeting should be kept secret, and that Morningstar herself might be invisible, in gaseous form, or both.

Kibi and Grey Wolf spend the hours closed in their rooms, busily transcribing spells from some of their captured spellbooks. Kibi is trying to ink the spell of *confusion*, which itself is a confusing and daunting task. Ernie brings them food every so often, keeping up their strength while they study.



Tuesday, July 15

The next morning, there is a knock on the door. The man is given the standard "Farazil light test" before he leaves his message: that Makel is going to be leaving the next morning at sunrise, and that he'd like the party to be there for his send-off.

At two o'clock, Aravis (with Dranko and Morningstar) are all made invisible before *teleporting* back to their near-Kallor arrival spot. A few minutes later the diminutive Vera stumbles into the clearing. "Morningstar? Are you there?"

Vera confirms much of what the party have already learned about what's going on in Kallor. While she herself doesn't feel the uneasiness as much as some, High Priestess Rhiavonne feels it most acutely. She does have some additional tidbits that the party have not learned. For one, the body of Alstott, as well as the evidence taken from his home, is being held in the constabulary. This was on the orders of **Stersa**, one of Rhiavonne's inner circle. Stersa had found evidence among Alstott's possessions that he had been planning an assault on the Church of Ell itself! Vera doesn't think that the Black Circle has infiltrated the Ellish temple, but she promises to keep alert and report anything interesting or suspicious back to Morningstar.

That evening there is another knock at the door, and Eddings lets an old white-haired man into the Greenhouse. He's well-weathered and liberally scarred, and introduces himself as **Sutton**, a retired sailor who heard from Makel that the occupants of the Greenhouse were looking to hire a navigator for their ship. He is friendly, garrulous, willing to cross verbal swords with Dranko, and although astonished by things like Aravis's eyes, Kibi's familiar, and the odd monster bits in the trophy case, he takes it all in stride. He says that although Makel withheld details, he fully prepared Sutton for some strange things. Sutton has been comfortably retired for a few years, since he sold his ship, the *Speeding Scallop*, but the sea has been calling him, and he's been looking for a unique opportunity to get back in the water.

The party (possibly excepting Dranko) love him and his attitude, and agree to hire him on the spot. He says he'll be waiting at home for when they need him.



Wednesday, July 16

At sunrise the party head down to the Temple of Brechen, perched on the edge of the harbor. There is a small crowd of priests and priestesses gathered, as Makel's ship *Harbinger* is being readied for a long voyage. Makel sees them and waves them over to the edge of the water and meets them there. "I'm glad you came," he says. "I'd hate to have missed you before I go."

Ernie has brought him – of all things – some fish to eat on his journey. "I know you'll probably be sick of it," he says, "but this is better cooked than what you'll have on your trip."

Makel's expression betrays many conflicting emotions: sorrow and happiness, excitement and fear. He still doesn't know where his voyage will end. In a choking voice he thanks the party for everything they've done for him; for rescuing him from the bottle, for giving him a purpose in life, and for bringing him back from the dead, which will allow him to pursue this mission for Brechen. "And... I don't know this for certain, but... I don't... I don't think I'll be seeing you again."

"Oh, c'mon, sure you will," says Dranko encouragingly.

But an uncomfortable silence hangs in the air before Makel speaks again. "If I don't leave now, I'm liable to start crying in front of all these people. Take care of yourselves."

kidcthulhu: We never get the people we raise back.
It's like recycling, only we don't get our nickel back.

And he walks back up the gangplank and onto the deck of the *Harbinger*. At once a sweet wind picks up and blows around the harbor. It fills the ship's sails, and sweeps Makel away towards the horizon and out of sight.

RangerWickett: Ah, I love this story. He... he asked to see his family before the end. I wonder, when the story is over, will Sagiro bow out gracefully and let the curtain fall, or is there yet more story to tell?

Grim: Ah... I'm hoping for more stories... these are soooo good. And when this campaign is over, and you start a new one, it will be even better because it's new, and we haven't seen it yet. But keep the same players. Just make them try new things.

One question: How do you keep track of what happened in a given session? Do you keep notes? Or write it from memory? Or what?

KidCthulhu: I can't speak for Sagiro's intentions, but I can tell you that the Company has a HUGE "to do" list of things to tackle once they've fixed the Emperor's wagon. No rest for the weary.

Sagiro: The answer to your second question is: I jot down little notes in the margins of my "run sheet" as things happen, to help jog my memory later when I write the summary. It also helps that one of my players is also my fiancée, and she reads them over to catch things I've forgotten. She has a great memory for details!

As for ending the story soon... no worries about that! One particular arc *may* be wrapping up in the near future, but there are plenty of other threads still dangling. In addition to other ongoing plans of the primary enemy, there's also:

- The Eyes of Moirel/Het Branoï/"Traveling Nowhere" plot.
- The party's strong desire to return to Kivia to free the imprisoned Dwarves of Gurund...
- ...which may end up being related to Morningstar's designation as "the Slayer" by a huge winged blue-skinned ogre.
- Ernie's promise to return with the party and help the halflings of Appleseed once their current labors are finished.
- And what's up with Aravis being "like a cat," anyway?
- And there may be grander designs in the offing than anyone has yet guessed (insert evil laugh here).

No, I think there's enough material to go on right now to take the party well into the mid to upper teens, level-wise, before I finish up just the threads that are dangling as of now. And I'm sure more loose ends will be created in the future.

A few hours later, when most of the group are back in the Greenhouse, Skorg comes in the door. He's been out visiting various taverns and getting a feel for the city, and heard an interesting bit of news. It seems that the city of Calnis, which had been practically encased in crystal for many months (and presumably taken over by an Eye of Moirel inhabiting the body of a gnoll), has become open again. The crystal has vanished, and forces are being sent in to investigate, and see what is left of the place.

The party's first assumption is that this is directly due to the death of Restimar and the general withdrawal of humanoid forces in recent weeks. The other explanation, of course, is that someone managed to enter the city and defeat the Eye-gnoll. There is no further information to advance either of these possibilities.



"Ew ew ew ew ew ew ew!"

Run #127 – Sunday, January 27, 2002

Now, talk turns more seriously to planning an investigative excursion to Kallor. There has been no word from Ozilinsh or the Archmagi in some time now, so it appears that the Company are on their own. (Ernie sums things up nicely: "The Archmagi are keeping the front door locked while the Black Circle are sawing off the back half of the house!")

After some hours discussing things, it becomes clear that the best and safest plan is going to involve (gulp) splitting the party. Eventually at least part of the plan takes shape: Morningstar is going to go, by herself, to the High Temple of Ell in Kallor, the seat of all the Ellish church in Charagan. There she will tell everything to the High Priestess Rhiavonne, both as plea for help, and as a warning that there might be Black Circle spies within the church. This plan has some very obvious risks. Morningstar will be separated from the group, and if there is a Black Circle agent or agents in the church, they could attempt some mischief. And Rhiavonne is no friend to the Illuminated Sisters of Ell, with whom Morningstar is strongly connected. And what if Rhiavonne herself is a Black Circle agent? Morningstar might walk into the temple and simply vanish. But it's a risk with upside, and she's willing to take it.

To cheer her up, Dranko presents Morningstar with an actual engagement ring, which he had custom-made from gartine. "It's so... light!" Morningstar exclaims.

Once that is decided, the rest of the group make a plan out of earshot of Morningstar; if she *does* end up captured and interrogated, she shouldn't know what everyone else is up to. Her only request is that, if the rest of the party go and do investigating on their own, they keep an extremely low profile and not get into *any* trouble.

After some more debate, the Company decide that Grey Wolf will be safest staying in the Greenhouse – the safest place in the kingdom, as far as they know – and that Kibi and Skorg will stay with him, along with Eddings. Both of the wizards can use the time to continue scribing spells into their books.

For most of this run, Kibi's player ran Flicker, and Grey Wolf's player ran One Certain Step.

The rest of the party will *teleport* back to their inn room (paid for the next two weeks) in Kallor. Dranko and Kay both wear spiral pendants recently captured from the Sharshun, that protect the wearer from mind-affecting spells. Knowing that they usually burn out after a while, Dranko puts his on and asks Morningstar if she can read his thoughts with a *detect thoughts* spell. "Feel free not to tell us what they are," Kay adds. Morningstar casts her spell, and it seems that the pendants are still working.

Aravis comes to the realisation that the weight limit on *teleport* isn't so much of an issue when some of the people he's taking along have had *wind walk* cast upon them. Morningstar casts *wind walk* on herself, Kay, One Certain Step and Dranko, while Kibi adds *invisibility* to Kay and Dranko. The rest of the group assure Morningstar that they have the plan all set, and then she takes off on the seven hour *wind walk* journey to Kallor.

Before the rest of them *teleport*, Aravis spends some more time examining the Crosser's Maze, to get a better sense of how long they have before the planes align. He has an epiphany of sorts; for the first time he feels truly at ease, and in control, while he examines the multiverse through the Maze. By observing the overlapping Primes for a few minutes and gauging cosmic distances, Aravis guesses that the planes will converge in between nine and twelve days. If he looks again in a few days, he is confident that he'll be able to make a more accurate guess. He also notices in a vague way that the Maze is drawing energy from some outer-planar source, but before he can discover any more, the strain of observing the Maze finally catches up with him, and he is forced to return to reality.

A few minutes later, he *teleports* the rest of them into his spacious, expensive room at the Moonspell in Kallor. Aravis is immediately struck by a feeling of unease, a nervousness with no clear cause. None of the others feel particularly affected by it. Then the party split up even more: Ernie and Flicker go across town and reserve rooms at a number of seedy inns, so that any potential spies will have a hard time figuring out where they're actually staying. They play cards in the common room of one of the inns, and try to gain some information from some of the locals. They comment that the people here seem less affected by the general ill-feeling that permeates the city, and while they lose some silver at cards, they gain the interesting opinion that the weird malaise "affects them rich people more than it does us! I think it must be that rich food them wealthy folks are always eatin'!"



Meanwhile, Kay and Dranko, invisible and *wind walking*, decide to investigate the constabulary and get a look at the body of the murdered wizard Alstott, leaving Aravis and Step behind in their room at the inn. It's not exactly the kind of subtlety Morningstar had hoped for – in fact, she had expressly forbidden such shenanigans – but it seems like a safe enough plan. They have no problem breezing into the constabulary through a chimney, and doing a quick investigation of the upper floors. They hear a loud, angry voice coming from an office down one of the halls, saying "...stay locked up for a while longer... damned priestesses." Those words were uttered by the guard captain, who sits behind a desk scribbling notes and scowling.

They follow a second man (to whom he was presumably speaking), but when that man only goes out to relieve one of the guards at the outer doors, Kay and Dranko waft back inside and continue to search the place. Eventually they head down to the basement level, where a guard sits in a chair at the bottom of the stair, keeping an eye on two hallways that branch away. Down one hallway is a row of cells, with only one uninteresting prisoner. At the end of the other hallway is a barred iron door; this must be it, they think.

Well, that's true, if "it" is "trapped by an *alarm* spell." The bell goes off as they glide through the thin gap at the foot of the door and into the small room beyond. At least it's the room that they're looking for, an evidence room with books, papers and potions laid out on a table. There is another door on the opposite wall, and as they head through that one, the first door opens and the guard pokes his head in, shining a lantern out in front of him. Invisible though Kay and Dranko might be, the guard spots them as they stream through the cracks around other door and shouts: "Hey! You, stop!" They don't stop. They hear the footsteps recede, and the guard calling for help.

Dranko and Kay head down a flight of stairs and through another doorway, into a small, cold room containing a wooden table atop which is a horribly blackened body. With a few seconds of quiet, Kay examines the corpse. At first glance it looks like terrible burns, but on second glance it's not that at all. It looks as if most of his skin has been smeared with some kind of black tar, except that it's dry and flaky, not moist. Many of his features have been... smeared... or... sanded away, as if by a heavy tar-covered rag. The right side of his mouth, his right eye, most of the nose, are just... gone, wiped away by something. Kay has great experience examining bodies of creatures and figuring out how they died, but this is like nothing she has ever seen.

There is the sound of returning footsteps descending the stairs outside the room. Dranko tries to hide in a small crack through which a trickle of chilly water is flowing, but there's not enough room for his vaporous body. Instead he hides up near the ceiling,

directly above the doorway, where someone entering the room might not think to look (in case he is discovered, Dranko uses the *change self* power of the *robe of blending* to look as much like Alstott as possible, recreating some of the facial distortion). But there's only enough room above the door for one of them, and no place for Kay to hide... except...

With no time to think, and strong misgivings nonetheless, Kay flows into what remains of Alstott's mouth and spreads herself in the hollow spaces of the dead body. Fortunately Alstott was a much bigger person than Kay, and there's just room enough for her. The door opens, and the guard with the lantern thrusts it forward and into the room. Not caught in the direct rays of the light, Dranko slips quietly above their heads, and takes up the equivalent position on the other side of the door, not knowing if Kay will be discovered.

There are three guards there altogether, and they peer around the room. "Nothin' here," says one.

"I tell you I saw something," says the one holding the lantern. "Like a misty ghost, flying under the door. It had to of come down here."

"It's not here now. Just the body. And hey, we shouldn't even be in here without Cobb... we could get in trouble. I suppose we should go fetch him."

The two other guards leave and head back up the stairs. The guard with the lantern takes one last look around, shrugs, and follows the others. Dranko tries to duck back over his head, but this time the guard catches a bit of the movement within the light of the lantern, and shines it directly up at Dranko. "Damn!" he cries. "What th' hell? Whatever you are, stop right there!"

Dranko does his best impersonation of the Ghost of Alstott: "Woooooooooooooo..." The guard starts shouting for help again. With nothing left to gain by staying, Dranko goes flying past him, up the stairs at top speed. Kay comes pouring out of the body, further terrifying the poor guard. As the two of them go flying back up the main stairs beyond the evidence room, other guards are coming down. Kay asks Oa-Lyanna to fly separately, so that it will look like three different apparitions to anyone who can see them. They all go flying past the other guards (who don't seem to see them), back down the main hall of the constabulary, and out the door. Dranko whispers to Kay on their way back to meet the others at the Moonspell: "Morningstar is going to kill me. If I'm lucky."



And while the halflings are off bar-hopping, and Kay and Dranko are busy keeping a (ahem) low profile, Aravis stays in his inn room with Step and engages in further examination of the Crosser's Maze. He slides his mind back into the Maze and its presentation of the multiverse. He feels more comfortable than ever fixing his attention on various aspects, observing the interactions of the Primes, as well as other more exotic planes of existence. And for the first time he notices a fine beam of reddish energy, spilling into the nearby cosmic space as if someone had poked a pinhole through the fabric of the Astral and Ethereal planes. This energy is pouring in and striking his own Prime, extremely near to where he himself is. It's power, he realizes... it's drawn to the Crosser's Maze, and must be the energy that fuels it! But when the energy reaches the Prime, it also becomes diffuse, spreading itself out across the great expanse. In that form it is unfocused, and useless.

This is as much as Aravis has ever been able to glean about the Maze, but he still feels comfortable and in control of his faculties, and so he concentrates further on this energy. His perception sharpens. He sees that the energy is diffuse because it is drawn to all living things upon the Prime. Aravis applies all of his mental energies toward the analysis of that energy... there's a secret that he can almost grasp, a fact about the Maze that could...

Aha! Yes! That's how the Maze works! He can draw that power, that mysterious energy, through the living creatures nearest himself on the Prime. Living beings will serve as foci for its power, concentrating the energy into a potent magical force. He can draw the power through the vital essences of living creatures, and then use it to directly affect anyone or anything attempting to pass from any one plane to another. That is what the Maze is for, and how it can be used... its true secret, Aravis realizes. The only thing he cannot guess is what happens to those creatures who are used to focus the power of the Crosser's Maze. Perhaps if he takes a closer...

The stress finally becomes too much for his mind; he collapses onto the floor, barely conscious. Step rushes over and *lays on hands*, turning Aravis's crushing headache into something more manageable. Aravis smiles through the pain. "Step, I have it..."

Fade: Hmm, I wonder what the effect of focusing power through Grey Wolf would be...

Sammell: Given how planar travel has treated Grey Wolf before, I'm guessing not well...

Plane Sailing: Great story! Great to see some plot threads drawing together! I have to wonder though – don't the Company remember that there is a mad archmage out to nail them?!? Splitting up, indeed!

Aravis: Yeah, got a great evil laugh out of Sagiro. He said he would not rest until he had gotten us to split up into nine subgroups.

Plane Sailing: Another thought has just occurred to me – Crosser’s Maze able to use life energy to affect interplanar travel... Black Circle trying to bring the two primes into convergence... Black Circle over in Kivia with their oracle shrines – giving answers to people for... some of their life energy?!?

I wonder if there is a connection. Pretty wicked if the price for answered questions was unwittingly drawing you towards the destruction of your own Prime Material plane!

KidCthulhu: Holy Firking Snit! I think you’re on to something there, Plane. Wow. You’re a smartie (not the chocolate variety) every day. Any chance you want to move to Boston and come play with us? We could use someone else to help us figure out this stuff. There’s no more room around Sagiro’s table, but we’d find someplace for you!



Thursday, July 17

Traveling by night in a dark sky illuminated only by stars and a sliver of moon, Morningstar spends nine long hours of *wind walking* to reach the city of Kallor. A bit after three o’clock in the morning she wafts silently over the walls of the City of Twilight and reforms herself into a solid shape. She heads quickly towards the Temple of Ell, and as it’s the middle of the night, it’s busy and full of active sisters.

She is met politely at the door, but the door-guards become a bit cool when Morningstar introduces herself. They are taken aback by her immediate desire to speak with High Priestess Rhiavonne immediately on an urgent matter, but Morningstar’s name carries some weight, even if it’s in an adversarial fashion. She is escorted inside the darkened halls of the Temple of Ell. No lights burn anywhere inside, but the sisters move about with a comfortable lack of concern. The walls are all intricately carved, and the sisters occasionally allow their hands to trail along the walls, experiencing them as tactile art.

A priestess is sent away into the upper floors of the building, and comes back soon after with an announcement that Rhiavonne will be able to see her in half an hour. In the meantime, Morningstar is seated and kept comfortable. After she has waited a few minutes, a young novice comes up and sits nervously down next to her. “Hello,” she stammers. Morningstar nods politely in greeting.

“Can I ask you a question?” asks the novice. “What’s... what’s she like? Amber, I mean.”

Morningstar smiles, thinks for a moment. “She’s extremely devoted,” she says. “Amber serves the Church as well as any sister I’ve met.”

“I hear... I hear she doesn’t approve of us at all. That you... that she thinks we’re not following Ell in the right way. That she thinks her way is better.”

“That’s putting it much too strongly,” answers Morningstar. The novice starts to ask another question, but Morningstar is spared the onus of answering as a priestess approaches and announces that Rhiavonne will see her now, and could she please follow up the stairs.

Rhiavonne’s office is small, not like the grand and ornate quarters of Priestess Milanwy back in Tal Hae. And **Rhiavonne** herself is small, not any higher than five feet. She is old and wrinkled – at least seventy years lie on her – and motions Morningstar to sit in a chair before her desk. Morningstar sits nervously, here in the presence of one who she knows looks on her with disapproval. She fears what Rhiavonne will say or do.

“It is good to meet you,” Rhiavonne says. “I’ve looked forward to this moment. I have much to say to you. But you have saved me the trouble of sending for you. Your news must be extremely urgent, so tell me, what has brought you to me?”

Morningstar takes a deep breath. And then she tells Rhiavonne everything. That is, all about the Black Circle plans to merge two Primes and bring forth an army. All about her *commune* spell during which Ell told her the Black Circle ritual was happening here in Kallor. All about Grey Wolf’s role in the cosmic events. And all about her suspicions that Black Circle agents have possibly infiltrated the Ellish church here in the city.

Rhiavonne interrupts her at various points. She knows what the Black Circle is, and how they operate. She even mentions that Morningstar’s own party may have been compromised, specifically Dranko, whose own church of Delioch is known to have been infiltrated by the Circle. And she wonders aloud that the Archmagi must certainly be aware of the problem, and isn’t Morningstar and her “team” supposed to be dealing with these sorts of crises? Also, in the middle of their discussion there is a knock on the door, and a tall, nervous priestess enters. “Yes?” Rhiavonne snaps, annoyed at the intrusion.

“I’m sorry, your Holiness,” she stammers, looking nervously at Morningstar. “I just wanted to make sure you were... all right... and that you didn’t need any assistance... or anything.” She keeps looking at Morningstar, as if she expects that an Illuminated Sister might try anything at any moment.

Rhiavonne looks at the newcomer sternly. "They don't bite, **Stersa**," she says, and the woman blushes. "We're fine. If I require anything, I will send for it. Now please excuse us."

Rhiavonne apologizes, and Morningstar finishes her story. "My chief concerns," she concludes, "are that there may be Black Circle agents here, and that if an army does invade, the city itself will be in great danger."

Rhiavonne is quite attentive, and takes all of Morningstar's story seriously. There is no sign of her dislike or mistrust of the Illuminated Sisters, and she offers that the sisters of the temple will search for signs of the Black Circle, and start preparing against possible physical consequences of two planes converging with Kallor as a focal point. She doubts that the Ellish church has been compromised, but accepts the possibility.

She also addresses Morningstar's suspicion that the Black Circle plot is related to the general feeling of unease among the people of the town. "I have investigated that," says Rhiavonne. "We still don't know the cause or the source, but we know this: that it affects practitioners of the arcane more than any. People with strong ties to the divine are affected somewhat less, and those with no magic in them are only slightly troubled. But with time, all people start to feel it, even the plainest beggar in town. And it has been months now since the first breath of gloom was felt in Kallor."

Morningstar lastly brings up the matter of Alstott's death, and the possible connection with the Black Circle. Specifically, she is worried about its connection with the Church, insofar as the wizard was planning an attack on the temple, and that the evidence has been locked up on orders of the church.

"Ah, I have named Stersa to head up the investigation... that was her who came in to check on us. She is a trusted member of my inner council, and I'm sure she's doing a thorough job."

Morningstar asks to speak with Stersa, and the priestess is summoned before the two of them. Stersa says that, yes, she has done extensive investigation into the death of Alstott. Although she is still unsure of the cause of death, she thinks that the man must have been mad. "After all, he was planning a single-person attack on the entire temple! He had sketches of the buildings, and lists of spells he was going to cast. It never would have worked. Alstott must have suffered the mental degradation that sometimes happens to the very old. Anyway, it's a sensitive subject, and I have the evidence safely kept down at the constabulary. We continue to study it, hoping for clues."

Morningstar asks if she can see the body and the evidence. Stersa is reluctant, and balks, but Rhiavonne insists. Stersa is discomfited, but agrees. "But we won't be allowed in until I consult with the guard captain, Cobb, and he's probably asleep. Give me an hour to make the arrangements, and then I'll come back to escort you."

An hour passes, and Stersa does not come back. A second hour passes, and then a third. Somewhere outside the walls of Kallor the sun starts to rise, and a faint blue-gray light starts to filter into the city. There is no sign of Stersa. Morningstar fears that someone has waylaid her en route, knowing her plans. She could have been followed from the temple itself. Once more she asks to speak with Rhiavonne, and again is granted an audience. When Rhiavonne learns that Stersa has not come back, she writes and signs a letter to be shown to Cobb, giving Morningstar full rights to examine all materials relating to Alstott's death. "No need to tell you to be careful," she tells Morningstar. And then she adds: "There still much I wish to discuss, concerning... other matters. But all of that can wait until this current business is taken care of. Good luck, and let me know if we can help you further."

Before she leaves, Morningstar decides to cast a *sending* to Dranko, but realizes that he's probably still asleep. She drops into a trance, finds his dream, and starts to alter it. Suddenly Dranko is dreaming that he really must wake up at once, and with a great effort of will, wrenches himself awake. "Huh? Wh...? Who...?" Then he gets the *sending*, that Morningstar is about to head to the constabulary for a look at the murder evidence, and that the rest of the party should join her there.

Morningstar sets out into the dark gray early dawn. She keeps an eye out for signs of Stersa (or of a recent struggle), but sees nothing out of the ordinary (there are very few people out on the streets at all, at that hour). When she arrives a few minutes later at the constabulary, there are no guards posted outside, and no sign that anyone has been here recently. Instead of knocking or going in, she decides to wait for the others, and melts into the shadows on the opposite side of the street.

And that's when the creatures attack. For one brief instant she feels a terrible feeling of foreboding, and then three black shapes emerge from the shadows around her. 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. Wounded, she takes a step back, calls loudly for help, and attempts to cast a *flame strike* that will envelop all three of these strange attackers. But their wildly flailing limbs cause her arm motions to go awry in mid-casting, and the spell fails her. They

launch another assault, their black arms ignoring her armor and leaving more painful black smears. Enough is enough. Morningstar turns and runs in the direction she expects the rest of the party to be coming from, shouting loudly for help the whole time.

The black shadow creatures keep pace. She can feel waves of horror rolling off them, like a nausea of the mind. After a minute, huffing and panting, she becomes aware that there are pursuing footsteps behind the creatures, and a human voice cries, “Stop at once!” But the creatures do not stop, and so neither does Morningstar.

Back at the Moonspell, Dranko has woken the rest of the party. Aravis still needs another hour of sleep before he’ll be able to prepare spells, so he stays behind, and Kay stays with him. The rest of them get hastily dressed and head out into the cool morning air to meet Morningstar at the constabulary. After a few minutes walking the streets of Kallor, they see her up ahead... fleeing in horror from something behind her! “Help!” she gasps.

Flicker is first to react. He launches a sling stone at one of the creatures, and where it strikes there is a puff of foul black smoke. Dranko then unwinds his *whip of the searing tongue* and uses it to fire a *searing light* directly at one of the creatures. The beam flies true, hits the black monster – and passes harmlessly out through the other side of its body. Dranko utters a disappointed oath. Ernie and Step run forward, clanking in their armor, to engage the things and get them away from Morningstar.

Morningstar herself stops running, takes one step away from them, and tries Turning them, hoping that they are undead. No such luck; holy power fills her Ellish symbol, and she flings it outward toward the creatures, but they do not flinch. Step runs forward and takes a mighty swing with his *flaming greatsword* “Firebrand,” and executes a perfect swing right through the neck of one of the attackers. But the sword passes harmlessly through the creature, and Step can feel the sword become awkward and unbalanced as it passes through the thing’s body.

Ernie tries casting *dispel magic* on the creatures, but to no avail. Morningstar continues to be pummeled by the creatures, and now much of her body is covered with painful black smudges. She tries swinging her own weapon, but with no more success than Step. And a guard from the constabulary, who heard Morningstar’s cries and has been running in pursuit, finally arrives and takes a wildly errant swing. “What in Ell’s name...?” he cries.

But Flicker fires another pair of sling bullets, and again when they strike there is a tangible reaction. Black puffs of vapor fly from the points of impact. But why is the sling working, when all spells and better weapons aren’t having any... ah! The creatures must be immune to all magic, even magic weapons! Once they make that realization, the battle turns quickly. Dranko produces a non-magical mace from his magical haversack, and Ernie (after healing Morningstar) uses his gartine sword. Although the creatures have an easy time hitting (their attacks are all touch attacks), and Dranko and Morningstar both end up badly pummeled, the foul beasts are also easy to hit with the right weapons, and don’t last long. As each is dispatched, it dissipates in a cloud of black smoke, leaving no trace save a lingering feeling of doubt and anxiety. But the wounds they caused have turned the skin of their victims the color of tar. As the party heal up, the blackness fades, but they purposely don’t heal fully, in order to leave patches of skin that can be positively matched with that of Alstott.

The guard escorts the party back to the constabulary, where they demand to be let in to see the evidence of Alstott’s murder. When the guard balks, they show him the letter sealed with Rhiavonne’s insignia.

“Look, I’d better go get Cobb, then. He’s asleep, but he’ll get up for this.” The guard goes inside to grab a traveling buddy (what with weird creatures roaming the streets) and leaves the party hanging around outside for a few minutes. The pair of guards comes back a short while later with a third man – Dranko recognizes him as the captain he saw the day before, but doesn’t betray the fact.

“What’s all this then, and who are you people?” demands **Cobb**. He’s a serious, no-nonsense man, and a Still, Silent *detect thoughts* from Morningstar shows him to be on the level. But while he’s mildly upset at the commotion and being woken up, he gets downright mad when he reads the letter from Rhiavonne. For a moment he looks fit to burst, but then he takes a deep breath, and grumbles: “OK, I’ll let you inside. But I’m going to be right there with you. I want to get a good look at the evidence too.”

There is some momentary confusion. Hasn’t he seen it already? “Not such that I’ve gotten a good look,” he says. “That woman from the Ellish temple in charge of the investigation, that Stersa, she ordered everything locked up tight. Heck, she wanted to destroy it all, something about it being a security risk. I told her that just isn’t how things are done, and that Ellish priestess or no, she’s not about to get me to destroy the evidence before a proper investigation. In the end we reached a compromise; that I’d keep it locked away and no one would touch it, for just a couple o’ weeks. She said the security risk wouldn’t be a problem after that.” All of which now strongly points to Stersa being a traitor, and probably a Black Circle agent.

RangerWickett: I could feel Morningstar’s fear as she had to turn and run from the null shadows. I doubt she has had to outright flee from anything for a while.

Kid Charlemagne: I love the null shadows! I’ll have to use them on my own group at some point!

Dawn: Creatures that only be attacked by non-magical items. Very cool! Definitely a twist for the PCs.

The party are led in and allowed to examine the evidence. There is a pile of papers, most of them burned and illegible, but one sheet of parchment on top is conspicuously unblemished. On it is a rough sketch of the Ellish temple buildings, and notes scrawled in the margins, planning an assault. The handwriting does match that found in a large book on the table, partially burned but still readable. The book is packed with tiny writing and detailed diagrams, harmless notes on spell theory and research. Behind the book on the evidence table rests a rack of potions, each labeled. They correspond with notes made on the attack plans: *invisibility*, *darkvision*, *nondetection*, *spider climb* and *gaseous form*.

By this time they figure that Aravis has gotten enough sleep, and they send for him and Kay to join them at the constabulary. Soon, all are assembled there.

Morningstar goes first into the room with Alstott's blackened corpse, and casts *thought capture*. The thought she picks up is of someone experiencing something very unpleasant: *Ew ew ew ew ew ew ew!* And the mind is familiar. Oh, no... She turns to look at Kay, who looks sheepish, and then at Dranko, who looks even more so.

"Ew ew ew ew ew ew?" says Morningstar, eyebrows raised, and starting already to become angry. "I thought you were going to be discreet! What happened to just asking to be let in? What happened to asking subtle questions? What happened to our hours of planning just to avoid this sort of thing? Don't you realize the jeopardy you put me in, put my whole church in, by risking raising an alarm too soon? Yes, things worked out OK, but that was just luck! I'm very disappointed in you."

Dranko starts to mutter excuses, about how it all would have worked so smoothly if not for the *alarm* spell and the lantern that detected invisible things. But in the end he straightens himself up, and says "Morningstar, I'm all about honesty. And honestly, I was a bonehead." Morningstar is quick to agree.

Dranko: I was a bonehead in a good cause, and I think I did it in a smart way.

Dranko tries to *speak with dead*, but to his surprise and dismay it doesn't work. Perhaps the anti-magic nature of the black creatures is such that even things killed by them are immune to spells. But that proves not to be the case, since the next spell he casts does work: *dead man's eyes*. This lets him see the last five minutes of Alstott's life, through the eyes of the wizard himself.

Dranko's eyes roll up into his head, and suddenly he is in a small but cluttered study, just closing a large book in front of him. Dranko doesn't catch what he had just written, but does remember the page. Alstott shakes his head, puts down his quill, stands slowly, then walks over to a shelf full of knick-knacks and baubles. He takes one down, gives it a shake, and watches as it lights up. He does the same with a few more, and then puts them all into a bag. With a lighter step he walks down stairs, grabs a quick bite of bread and a mug of water, and then steps outside into the gloomy shadows of Kallor. Suddenly a black shadow fills his field of vision, and he is knocked back. He holds his arm up to his eyes and sees a sickly black smear across it. Quickly he takes a step back, and sees over half a dozen black featureless figures advancing toward him. He waves his arms, casts a spell, and the black creatures are engulfed in flames. But the flames quickly clear, and the creatures are left unharmed. They rush him, surround him, arms flailing...

...and Dranko breaks off the spell, not wishing to share the actual moment of death. Grimly he relays the details to the others. Ernie sniffs. "Didn't someone say that Alstott used to hand out trinkets to children in his retirement? I'll bet that's what he was on his way to do. And then... oh, that's horrible!"

Dranko goes back to the evidence room, and flips through the book. It's all notes and sketches, but Dranko turns to the page Alstott had just been writing before his death. Down near the bottom, in writing that would typically go unnoticed but which is a tad larger than the rest, is the following note:

*Divination Sink in the Silent Quarter, protects itself. Almost certainly connected with cultist activity.
Unease caused by null shadows?*

And that makes even more things clear. The Silent Quarter is a large neighborhood in Kallor occupied mostly by wealthy retirees. There are city ordinances prohibiting loud noises, and the streets are well patrolled. If the source of the unease is centered there, it would explain why it seems to be more of a "rich folks" problem. What "null shadows" are seems obvious. Now the Company have a decent lead to follow. But what is a "Divination Sink"?

There is one last place to investigate, and that is Alstott's home. As they walk over there together, Cobb explains that when he arrived with a team of guards after word of the murder had spread, Stersa had just arrived herself. She was walking down from the upper floor of the house "having been doing some investigation herself." Since the day that the evidence was removed, Cobb has had guards stationed at the door to make sure no one got in. But when the party arrive, they find that although the guards

have seen no one enter or leave, the upstairs study has been entirely emptied out. Damn! Morningstar blankets the room with *thought captures*, and receives an assortment of uninteresting thoughts of Alstott and Cobb, along with one from Stersa that thinks: *It's going to be tough getting this stuff entirely disposed of, but I'll bet I can get it locked away for a couple of weeks.*

Finally, Morningstar goes back to the Temple of Ell to give Rhiavonne the news about Stersa. By this time it is getting on to be mid-morning, and so the High Priestess is asleep. The duty clerics are loathe to wake her, but Morningstar insists. "It's on your head then," they say, and they instruct Morningstar to wait in the foyer. A few minutes later Rhiavonne comes clumping down the stairs in a black robe, rubbing sleep out of her eyes.

Morningstar tells her all that she has learned, particularly the apparent treachery of Stersa. Rhiavonne is obviously concerned; Stersa was deep in many of her counsels. And now it makes sense that Stersa was eager to volunteer to investigate the murder on behalf of the Church. Rhiavonne thanks Morningstar for all of her help, and reiterates her offer of assistance should Morningstar desire it. Then she goes back to sleep, leaving the Company to continue their plans for finding and stopping the Black Circle.



Null Shadow Boxing

Run #128 – Sunday, February 10, 2002

KidCthulhu: We played yesterday. The run went like this:

- Get butts kicked;
- Deadly surprise peril;
- Get butts kicked;
- Condescending servants and house guards.

Oy. That Sagiro is a bad, bad man.

Piratecat: KidCthulhu is being purposefully vague, but here are a few highlights of the evening:

- Dranko running full out, most of his body obscured by the null shadows' taint, pursued by shadowy shapes that he just can't lose;
- Grey Wolf, Kibi, Eddings and Skorg make a very unwanted side trip;
- Aravis sending his familiar Pewter in to fight a null shadow, and making the horrible discovery that Pewter is an inherently magical cat...;
- Ernie gets job offers from the only cook he's met who doesn't gossip;
- Morningstar practices the fine art of throwing her weight around;
- Surrounded by fourteen enemies and virtually defenseless, the Company becomes convinced that we're all going to die; Aravis, unable to climb a rope and being attacked by five null shadows a round, comes within inches of proving us correct.

It was quite a game!

The Company head back to the Moonspell. Morningstar desperately needs sleep, but before she hits the sack, she sends a *sending* to Grey Wolf back in the Greenhouse, giving him a brief recap, and asking him to see if he can learn anything about a "Divination Sink." Grey Wolf reports back that things have been quiet in the Greenhouse, and that his studies continue apace.



A few minutes after the *sending*, there is a knock on Grey Wolf's door. Skorg is there with a big grin on his face. "Lunchtime!" he says brightly. Grey Wolf can detect an unpleasant odor coming from the kitchen. Skorg rouses Kibi as well. "Come on! You wizardly types need to eat sometime, to keep up your strength."

In the dining room, the table is set with plates containing some sort of black oozy substance. A questionable smell wafts from the plates. Eddings is already seated, trying not to look disgusted.

"Black lizard pie!" announces Skorg proudly. "I made it from scratch myself. I had the Icebox deliver a brace of fresh black lizards, and used some of Ernie's spices to give the pie extra flavor."

"I suggest the spices," Eddings offers helpfully. "Lots of spices."

Kibi and Grey Wolf sit, their noses wrinkling uncontrollably. Skorg starts wolfing down forkfuls of pie. Eddings pushes his food around with his fork without enthusiasm.

And then the Greenhouse vanishes. Grey Wolf feels a lurching in his stomach, and the constant feeling of churning semi-nausea is replaced by a different sort of discomfort. Now it feels like a deep vibration, like a buzzer is going off in his innards. After a second of disorientation, the four of them look around and see that they are in deep, deep trouble.

It is night. They are outdoors, on a vast plain, in the midst of an army. All around them are tents, campfires, and the sounds of an army camp at night. They can hear grunts, clangs, voices, horses, the crackling of torches. The air is filled with the aromas of sweat, urine and gruel that follow large armies wherever they go.

They are all still in their chairs, forks in hand. Eddings looks around slowly. “I, uh, trust this isn’t something you have done on purpose?” he whispers.

None of them move. Fortunately they have appeared in a small pocket of empty space, out of the direct light of any fires, and a good forty feet from the nearest tent. But they are clearly in the midst of the camp, and not at its edge, and there are several patrols of soldiers with torches. One of these is moving in their general direction. Kibi and Grey Wolf are unarmed, and have none of their magical items. But both of the wizards wear their component pouches as a matter of course, and their heads are full of spells that have gone unused for the last few days.

Aravis: I thought you said everything was fine!

Grey Wolf: I did. About ten minutes before everything stopped being fine.

They have a quick, whispered debate about what to do. If they cast spells, they’ll be heard. If they try to sneak away, they’ll probably be spotted. If they stay where they are, they’ll be found by the roving guards in under thirty seconds. Skorg whispers, “Oh god, we’re going to die, we’re going to die, we’re going to...” but he is shut up by the others.

Finally they decide they have to risk spells if they are going to escape. Kibi and Grey Wolf start casting spells – *haste*, *fly* and *invisibility*. Nearby guards immediately hear the sounds of spellcasting, and move quickly to investigate, barking in an unfamiliar tongue. Just as they get close enough to see those of the four who aren’t yet invisible, Kibi and Grey Wolf fly straight up. Eddings is clinging to Kibi’s back, while Skorg clutches Grey Wolf.

The guards shout, point upward, and that section of the camp erupts with activity. Arrows whistle upwards, but none of them find their mark, and soon they aren’t making it up as high as the flying wizards. Eddings is taking all of this in his stride, but Skorg is terrified, squirming and clutching at Grey Wolf in an effort not to fall. “I’m scared of heights!” he whimpers.

“Then don’t look down,” Grey Wolf advises. Of course, Skorg instinctively looks down and becomes even more terrified. Kibi thinks that it’s a good thing it’s not him carrying Skorg, or there would likely be a “terrible accident” involving a plummeting orc.

As they hang there in the air, pondering what to do next, three *magic missiles* come streaking out of the night sky below them and strike true... upon Eddings! (Kibi is invisible, but Eddings is not.) Eddings lets out a groan of pain, and they realize that a flying wizard must be pursuing them.

They fly away at top speed; Kibi, *hasted*, tries to cast *fly* on Eddings as well, but it proves too hard for him to cast with someone holding on to him for dear life. Another set of *magic missiles* shoots out of the darkness, again striking Eddings. The butler goes unconscious, and Kibi just manages to grab hold of him before he falls down into the army camp.

Grey Wolf finally spots their attacker, tells Skorg to hold on, and manages to concentrate well enough to launch a *lightning bolt* at the enemy mage. The stroke of electricity strikes true, and its target falls out of the sky, trailing a line of smoke. “We’ve got to heal Eddings!” Kibi cries. “Or he’s going to die!”

And then the army disappears, and it’s late morning, and they are flying out over the bay above Tal Hae. The buzzing in Grey Wolf’s gut is replaced by the more familiar churning.

They fly down to the nearest dock, and Grey Wolf manages to stop Eddings’s bleeding before the butler dies. The *magic missiles* have left horrible open wounds upon his skin, and his breathing is still shallow, his face pale. They fly him slowly over the city to the temple of Yondalla, where the clerics there tend to his wounds. Soon he is walking out under his own power, and the four of them go back to the Greenhouse, which is now out four very nice dining room chairs.

KidCthulhu: I hadn’t even thought about the chairs. Drat. They were a matched set, too. Better to get Grey Wolf, Kibi and Eddings back than the chairs, though.

Krellic: Matched chairs are hard to come by easily but a good butler is irreplaceable!



Back in the Moonspell, the party have just heard that all is quiet at the Greenhouse, so Morningstar goes to sleep. Aravis decides to try using the Crosser’s Maze again, to observe the city of Kallor from an “outside perspective.” His mind slides easily back into the Maze, and he spends a few seconds observing the two Primes: Abernia, on which they dwell, and Volpos, on which Naradawk’s army waits for the merging. Energies are flying fast and furious between the two, though the center of these is not precisely at Kallor. Through some hard calculations and intense concentration, Aravis is able to swivel his viewpoint around and then zoom it in towards Abernia, zeroing in on the city of Kallor.

It becomes more and more difficult as his perspective gets closer, but he is able to bring his point of observation to a point high above the city walls. Although there is nothing explicitly strange-looking about any of the city, he finds that one general section of the city is difficult to look at through the Maze. Uncomfortable to look at. It's the northern section of the city – around the Silent Quarter. Aravis tries to focus closer, but his mind tires, and he loses his grip on the Maze. His consciousness returns to his body, and he tells the others what he has seen.

Some of the Company then decide that they really want to know what a Divination Sink is, and badly. There are two repositories of knowledge in Charagan that stand above all others in scope: the Vault in Hae Charagan, capital of the kingdom, and the Sages' Consortium in Hae Kalkas. Aravis has never been to Hae Charagan, but the party were in Hae Kalkas fairly recently, so that's where Aravis decides to *teleport*. But since the only place with which he really became familiar was his room in the inn where they stayed, that's where he decides to go, taking Dranko and Ernie along. Fortunately, the room is empty (it being late morning), though made up for new guests. Not wanting to be discovered, Aravis looks out the window and *dimension doors* the three of them to a discreet alleyway across the street. From there they walk quickly to the Sages' Consortium.

The Consortium is running with a dearth of personnel; many of the sages have gone to help the war effort on the peninsula, as advisors, healers and scribes. But their old friend Richter is there, looking cheerful and busy. "Ah, friends!" he says. "Come back for more questions about the flora of our fine kingdom?" There is little sign of the insanity that the party unwittingly brought on him, by asking him too many questions about the Sharshun and other Masked topics. Ernie and Dranko greet him warmly.

The sage who is most expert in divination magic is not there, and much to Dranko's dismay, the Consortium clerk refuses to give out his name. So Dranko says, "I've got a letter from the king's advisor that this is a matter of kingdom security. I didn't think we'd need it, but it's back in my inn room." And he leaves. In the meantime, Aravis and Ernie meet with another sage named **Farning**, but he has little of value to offer.

A few minutes later Dranko comes back, bearing a letter, cleverly forged (using his magical forgery kit found in Zhamir), from Yale, advisor to King Crunard IV. The clerk looks at it suspiciously, but there's the royal seal and everything. So he gives them the name of the divination expert: **Elijah Sand**. Soon thereafter they *teleport* back to Kallor, and Dranko quickly composes a note of apology, to send to Yale as a "preemptive strike" should she discover the forgery on her own.

Flunk: Hero of the Kalkas Peaks? You're one of *those* people?

Dranko: There's no way you could have known.

kidcthulhu: Yeah, we haven't gotten the T-shirts made yet.



When Morningstar wakes up later in the afternoon, she has indistinct memories of a dream. All she remembers is that, in the dream, she had a feeling of urgency, that she should go to Amber's Illuminated Temple in Tal Hae in *Ava Dormo*, the night after the following day. Curious, she goes into trance right then, and dreams her way directly to Tal Hae and the Illuminated Temple. There, on the plains of *Ava Dormo* outside the temple, is June, one of Morningstar's protégés. June has always been hot-tempered and eager, but her energies have been well directed by Previa into training the growing dream-army. Here in Tal Hae, she has over fifty Ellish priestesses doing combat training exercises. And though *Ava Dormo* is not typically a brightly lit place (not as dark as Kallor, mind – more like a cloudy day near sunset), there are light sources shining all around the perimeter of the training field. The fifty soldiers are showing few signs of discomfort in the bright lights.

June sees Morningstar watching and runs over. She is eager to impress Morningstar with her troops' progress, and orders them into a snappy succession of drills and maneuvers. The soldiers themselves are clearly impressed that Morningstar herself has come for an inspection, and do their best to demonstrate their prowess. It all embarrasses Morningstar; they clearly think of her like a general, but she herself feels more like a mascot. But while June does make a good impression, she has no ideas or information about Morningstar's recent dream.

Morningstar returns to her body in Kallor, and then goes into *Ava Dormo* locally, hoping to see some sign of the Black Circle there (in Hae Charagan, Mokad's base of operations was shielded in the Dream by a strong magical ward, visible as an opaque black shroud). But here, except for the Temple of Ell itself, the *Ava Dormo* version is still empty, having been wiped clean of buildings (along with the rest of the Dreaming) some months back. And there is no sign of the Black Circle where any part of the city would have been, including the Silent Quarter.

The party have another meeting to discuss their next move. They decide that some personal investigation of the Silent Quarter is in order, so they march over to the constabulary to get the go-ahead from Cobb. He agrees to write them a letter giving them

the authority to go armed into the Silent Quarter, on official business of city security. But while some of the party go in under those pretenses, showing the note to the guards at the gate into the walled Silent Quarter, others follow after in peasant garb. They have learned from Cobb that there is a tavern near to the gate called The Quiet Man, where the servant types generally gather in the evenings before curfew. Kay, Dranko, and Ernie go to the crowded Quiet Man posing as servants themselves, and strike up as many conversations as they can, hoping to learn about anything unusual going on in that part of the city. They try to steer the conversation toward any recent influxes of “new money,” nobles or merchants, who have come into the city recently. Ernie talks to the cook, figuring she’ll have her finger on the pulse of the area, but instead she shanghai’s the halfling into a long discussion on cookery, culminating in an offer of employment.

Dranko and Kay have more luck, and Aravis, hanging around outside, listens in via a *Rary’s telepathic bond* cast by Morningstar on him and Dranko. Dranko asks particularly about any newcomers with an unusual number of scars, and while he doesn’t get any affirmatives, Kay gets some information about a newcomer who “must have been an old campaigner, the way he looked.” Aravis puts the pieces together, as possible evidence of a Scarbearer recently arrived.

The party members in the tavern decide to leave; Dranko in particular wants to do some more scouting in the neighborhood. Flicker watches as they depart, and a minute later watches another man, a local servant type, walk out and look in the direction the party were headed. Then the stranger follows in that direction, and so Flicker follows *him*. The man tails the party for a few short blocks before stopping at the door to another local tavern – The Storied Hall (this one is quite posh, though closed for the evening). He quickly unlocks (or picks open?) the door, and slips inside. Flicker runs forward to warn Morningstar and the others, then runs back to hide in the shadows and wait for the man. A few minutes later the man emerges, and heads nonchalantly back toward Flicker’s hiding place. But before Flicker has a chance to do anything, he sees the rest of the party (down at the end of the street) suddenly break into a run, away from him!

Dranko has been prowling the rooftops of the Silent Quarter, heading generally northwards. He is occasionally communicating via the *telepathic bond*, when suddenly it shuts off completely! Startled, he waits for a moment, and then takes a few steps back. The link reestablishes itself. Dranko reports what just happened. *I think I found the Divination Sink*, he says. He does some more experimenting, stepping back and forth across some invisible line, and slowly sidling along the roof, testing the boundary where the *telepathic bond* becomes disabled. He goes far enough to realize that the curve is quite wide, but not enough to determine the full extent, when he feels a sudden sensation of dread. Alarmed, he descends the rooftop, preparing to return to the others – and that’s when four null shadows attack.

He calls for his non-magical mace from his magical bag at his belt, and it leaps into his hand. He takes some wild swings as the black creatures swarm him, landing stinging blows that leave burning black smudges on his mace. It is not long before he realizes that the creatures will overpower him, so he runs as fast as he can, thinking loudly for help over the *telepathic bond*. As they did when Morningstar was attacked, the party regroup and move to intercept. This time they are better prepared, and knowing not to waste time with magic, they quickly dispatch the four black monsters.

Flicker catches up to the combat in time for its tail end, and then informs them about the trailing servant and The Storied Hall. There is a brief interlude, wherein the party investigate, thinking the tavern might be a Black Circle base of operations. But some *thought captures* reveal that the man is just a petty criminal, interested in the party only because they sure were asking a lot of strange questions, and interested in The Storied Hall because he often filches coppers from the moneybox there.

Not wanting to split up again now that they know null shadows are on the prowl in the area, the Company go as a group deeper into the Silent Quarter, towards where Dranko discovered the boundary that cut off the *telepathic bond*. They move slowly along, with Dranko moving back and forth, and they eventually get enough of the curve established to realize that this boundary must be extremely large – maybe a quarter mile in diameter. They are in a park, away from any buildings, when the null shadows emerge from the shadows of the trees around them. All of the party are filled with an ill feeling of dismay, but to Aravis it is nearly sickening, a mixture of fear and disgust that rolls off the creatures in vile waves of evil magic.

There are many more of them than they’ve encountered thus far; over a dozen, though it’s hard to count them in the twilight. Worse, they are a deeper shade of black than those previously fought, and slightly larger. Everyone draws non-magical weapons. The creatures move in, and launch a vicious attack.

Aravis immediately accesses the Maze, hoping to learn something to help them fight these monsters. But the null shadows go straight for Aravis, pummeling him, delivering gruesome damage, and breaking his concentration, knocking him from the Maze. Worse, he feels that one of his most potent prepared spells – a *stoneskin* – has been stripped from his mind by the horrid touch of his attackers.

Pewter launches himself at one of the creatures, hoping to damage it with his claws, but being an inherently magical creature he passes right through it, and takes burning damage just by coming in contact with the black vaporous body.

There follows some furious melee fighting, with Flicker looking for opportunities with his sling. Aravis casts *rope trick* and tries to climb up to safety, but his hands, sweaty with fear, slip off the ropes, and many of the null shadows pounce. Aravis is left covered with black smears, nearly unconscious. One more round of attacks will surely finish him. He commands Pewter to flee while he can into the *rope trick*.

The others continue to batter at the monsters, but they are also taking a beating. All of the spellcasting members of the party feel spells being forced from their heads when the creatures strike them. Aravis realizes that he has no choice left; he takes from his pocket a small jeweled pin shaped like a sheaf of wheat, given to him by the Spire in case of this sort of emergency. The Crosser's Maze is too valuable to risk; Aravis breaks the pin, activating the *refuge* spell. He vanishes, taken straight to the temple of Pikon in Tal Hae. He calls for clerics, and soon is getting healed up. But he is out of *teleports*, and cannot return to help his comrades.

Back in Kallor, the battle is tense, and seems like it could go either way. The null shadows focus their attacks on spellcasters when possible – Ernie is nearly killed, but Flicker is essentially ignored. But finally the Company turn the corner and finish off the last few null shadows, without suffering any casualties. They are covered with black wounds. A minute later a voice sounds from a few yards away: ‘Halt! Declare yourselves, and put down your weapons!’

Soon the party realize that there are six guardsmen around them, brandishing weapons. They are not dressed in the uniforms of city guardsmen, but are more likely the personal guardsmen of a wealthy nobleman or merchant of the Silent Quarter. The guards demand to know why the party are making such a racket, and heavily armed, and out after curfew. Morningstar explains that they were attacked, but the guard is nasty and rude, showing no sympathy. He continues to demand that the party drop their weapons. Which they don’t.

Eventually the standoff is broken when they show him their letter from Captain Cobb. The guard looks it over, and unhappily concedes that he shouldn’t arrest them on the spot. But he vows to go straight to Cobb, clearly expecting to learn that the party aren’t legit. If he catches them after that, he’ll be less merciful next time. As he leaves, Morningstar casts *detect thoughts*, suspecting that this guard might be a Black Circle agent. He’s not. He’s just a puffed-up, obnoxious guard of a wealthy household, who likes being a bully. He’s also thinking to himself: *What a bunch of liars! They claim they were just in a fight, but then where are the bodies of their attackers?*

Morningstar is thinking to herself: *Jerk*. She casts *sendings* back to the Temple of Ell, tersely explaining what happened, and requesting an escort to bring them back from the Silent Quarter. They wait huddled in Aravis’s *rope trick*. Pewter meows pitifully, and when Kay casts *speak with animals*, the cat is beside himself with worry over Aravis.

Eventually a group of twenty-four Ellish soldiers come into the park; the Company descend from the pocket dimension and follow the group out of the Silent Quarter and back to the temple.

And now they have the best information so far; given the curve of the boundary that was cutting off the *telepathic bond*, they can make a pretty good guess as to where its center lies...

Zaruthstran: Oh, good grief. This story is almost TOO good.

Ancalagon: Excellent game as always! I am really impressed... the nasty guards were a nice touch.

Kosh: Did you create the null shadows? They were a real surprise... I’d love to use them in my game, and tell fellow DMs (evil or not) about them. Are the stats available to the public?

Tuerny: My PCs are nowhere near powerful enough to fight a null shadow...

KidCthulhu: Actually, null shadows would make a very interesting enemy to follow a group of adventurers through a campaign. One or two of them would make a nice challenge for a low-level group. And they have features that will cause them to be trouble for groups up to the level of the Company and higher.

Think about this. Their attacks are always touch attacks. When you are low-level, this isn’t a big deal, as your AC isn’t great to start with. But as you get buff and armored, this becomes a great way to make players feel very vulnerable.

They don’t have lots of hit points, and their AC isn’t high. They can be hit and damaged by low-level groups with normal weapons. But as your party gets higher level, null shadows would be a refreshing way to remind them that *fireball* doesn’t solve everything.

I like them (from a design standpoint. As a player I loathe and despise them). They’re a great recurring enemy. Vary the number encountered, and the type, and you’ve got a challenge every time.

Tuerny: Hmm... Good point. Do you think five level-two PCs could take one? It would be an interesting thing to insert in my campaign opener...

KidCthulhu: You might want to tone down the damage they do, but sure, I think so. They’re uber-creepy, and would link so well to a recurring storyline.

Here's the [details for] the null shadows. Enjoy!

GREATER NULL SHADOW

Medium-Size Aberration

Hit Dice: 3d8+3 (16 hp)

Initiative: +3 (Dex)

Speed: 30 ft.

AC: 16 (+3 Dex, +3 natural)

Attacks: touch +5 melee

Damage: special; see below

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

Special Attacks: Spell removal, magic disruption

Special Qualities: Absolute immunity to magic, shadow travel, unease, arcane attraction

Saving Throws: Fort +1, Reflex +1, Will +3

Abilities: Str 11, Dex 16, Con 10, Int 7, Wis 10, Cha 11

Skills and Feats: Weapon Finesse (arms)

Greater null shadows are humanoid-shaped masses of thick black vapors, created by foul magics and unholy rituals. They will attack anyone designated by their creators, or follow simple instructions.

COMBAT

Greater null shadows have only melee touch attacks, so they seek to swarm around their foes, delivering damaging touch attacks with their flailing arms. The damage they deal depends on the character class of the target. Arcane spellcasters take 2d8 points of damage. Divine spellcasters take 1d10. Non-spellcasters take 1d6.

Spell Removal (Su): In any round in which an arcane or divine spellcaster takes damage from a greater null shadow, he must make a Fortitude save (DC 15). Failure means the target loses one prepared spell of the highest level remaining (if there is more than one spell, choose randomly among them).

Magic Disruption (Su): Any magic item that comes into contact with a greater null shadow may (DM's discretion) become unstable thereafter. Any time a character uses a magic item touched by a null shadow, they must roll a d20 (the attack

roll for magic weapons counts as this roll). A result of 1 causes some disastrous result at the discretion of the DM (a flaming weapon may set its wielder on fire; a *ring of invisibility* may cause the user to glow bright orange for an hour; a *wand of fireballs* may use up five charges in one use, etc.). The DM may decide to make a permanent change to a magic item as a result of contact with a null shadow.

Magic Immunity (Su): A greater null shadow is unaffected by magic in any way, form, or application. This means they will even ignore magical deflection bonuses to a target's AC (generally, a foe will get only their Dex bonus and cover bonuses to AC against them). They are unaffected by all spells and spell-like effects, and cannot be harmed by magic weapons. As such, only physical non-magic weapons can harm them. They can pass through any magical barrier (even a *wall of force*).

Shadow Travel (Su): A greater null shadow typically walks the demiplane of Shadow, hovering on the edge of the Prime Material plane. They can emerge into the Prime through any shadow as a free action.

Arcane Attraction (Su): Greater null shadows will typically fight to the death, attacking every round if possible. If there is a choice of targets, they will always target arcane spellcasters if possible. If none are available, they will target divine spellcasters. Only if there are no spellcasters present will they attack non-casters.

Unease (Su): The mere presence of null shadows in the surrounding area causes a great unease in normal people, to a range of over a mile. Arcane casters will notice this the most strongly, divine spellcasters less so, and non-casters hardly at all. Only after prolonged proximity (weeks or months) will non-casters start to feel the unease.

Note: "Normal" null shadows have an AC of 15, 15 hit points, do not have the Spell Removal ability, and do 2d6 damage to arcane casters.

Dawn: Thanks for the stats on the null shadows! Those things will now be used in my world. As always, excellent story Sagiro! Kudos to the PCs for good roleplaying and patience to endure such a campaign.

Nail: My advice? Run, Grey Wolf, run... By the way, what is the CR for this nasty boy? It's not in the description.

hobbes: Boy, Sagiro! Those null shadows are gnarly. I can't wait to spring them on my unsuspecting players. Unfortunately, they have to level up a bit first. Wouldn't want to wipe them out all at once... How do you come up with stuff like this? Was there some inspiration that got the ball rolling?

Also, if you had to assign a DC to one of these bad boys, do you know where it might fall?

Little Buddha: DC is difficulty class, used to establish how difficult a save or skill check is. You're probably after the challenge rating of the creature. That's more "feel" than calculation, though. There was that *Dragon* magazine article (#276?) that laid out some guidelines, but there's no hard-and-fast rules. The CR "guesstimator" in *Dragon* #282 has them coming out at around CR 4 (!) because it doesn't much allow for special abilities ("add one or two to its effective hit dice for each special ability" doesn't really cover abilities that should be worth five or six effective hit dice).

To be honest, because of the way D&D works, the null shadows don't really work into a CR. Their abilities present an immense challenge to high-level parties (with their heavy reliance on spellcasting and magic). Low-level parties (with non-magical weapons and one *sleep* spell) should find them on par with most of their opponents, since they manage to circumvent most of the monster's abilities simply by being crap! (For example, my current party (all 3rd level) would vastly prefer fighting null shadows to fighting ghouls.)

Tony Vargas: The stats of the null shadows were interesting, but I have to wonder about the 'why' of them. Why are seemingly incorporeal shadow-creatures vulnerable to normal weapons, but immune to magical ones? I mean, there must be some reasoning beyond "stick it to the PC party that's all spellcasters."

By the way, if they had even one pure warrior type in their ranks, they wouldn't find the null shadows nearly so fearsome.

KidCthulhu: Ah, but you see, battle with the null shadows isn't about just hunkering down and doing damage. They collectively attack the highest magic source in the party. Many parties are good at laying down the smack. The problem is protecting one single member when all attacks are focused on that person. Especially as that person will be the low-HP mage.

They have great potential to kill a PC because of this. We, who cannot afford to lose our mages (Maze and Stomach), are compromised in our ability to work because of this. One third of our fighting power isn't hitting, they are pouring healing into the mage. More fighters aren't going to help with that.

Tony Vargas: I'd look into how 'highest magic source' is defined... Predictable enemies can be more easily set up for AoOs, for instance. Defending the mage is often a problem, regardless of the attackers. The null shadows don't seem that tough, individually, and attack in numbers. A Great-Cleaving barbarian or Whirlwinding fighter could clean up a dozen or so pretty quickly and a reach-oriented fighter with Combat Reflexes could protect the target of their attacks pretty effectively.

A really frightening potential of null shadows, though, is as forward troops for mages. Imagine an enemy raining *fireballs* down on your party while null shadows keep you busy...

Atticus of Amber: A clear violation of Rule #1 – never give the DM nasty ideas.

RangerWickett: Well, to make up for the evil DM idea, may I ask why the spellcasters don't all just have *levitate* spells handy? Null shadows can't fly, can they?

Sagiro: Who knows? In fighting the Company thus far, they haven't had to.

KidCthulhu: Hmm. Damn good idea, RW. In two cases, a single cleric got ambushed by a body of nullies, and ran like heck back to the rest of the group. Our task then was to get the pesky things off them. Also, in those first two encounters we had no mages with us. In the third encounter, (a) we just didn't think of it, and (b) we had only one mage with us, and he was taking so much damage every round that he couldn't have made the Concentration check.

That said, it's a really good idea, and I'm going to suggest to the group that we add it to the tactical menu. Thanks.

Aravis: I realised immediately after I had used the brooch to take me away that I should have used the *wand of levitate* to get me up the rope instead of risking climbing. But then, it seemed an easy climb. Basically, it represented really well the possibility that Aravis might have been a bit flustered and not thinking entirely clearly. I was certainly flustered and not thinking entirely clearly.

However, I immediately added *levitate* to my daily spell prep list, just in case.



Whang!

Run #129 – Sunday, February 24, 2002

KidCthulhu: We played Sunday, and what a run it was. Featuring:

- xorn;
- clever familiars;
- family reunions;
- inconveniently large glass cylinders;
- taking of Ell's name in vain;
- property damage;
- and kicking of a tiny portion of tush.

Stay tuned!

After the Company have been escorted back to the Temple of Ell, Morningstar sends word that she wishes to brief High Priestess Rhiavonne on their recent discoveries. This time, though, the High Priestess is indisposed, and sends a trusted advisor to speak and act on her behalf. That's not much comfort to the party, since Stersa, recently revealed traitor, was also a "trusted advisor," and look how that turned out. But the priestess, named **Corshani**, understands their reservations, and amiably agrees to a battery of magical tests. They go outside to the street (since Morningstar, as an Illuminated Sister, is not allowed to cast divine spells inside Ellish temples), and she starts with a *detect magic*, to make sure Corshani isn't wearing anything magical that could mask her alignment or motives (in fact, Corshani herself suggested this). Then she casts *detect evil*, and Step follows up with a *gaze of truth* (this last spell confirms that Corshani is not currently charmed or under some other enchantment). Finally, Morningstar casts a *memory read*, looking for the memory of when Corshani first came in contact with the Black Circle or their agents. As hoped, the spell reveals no such memory.

When Corshani has checked out, they all go back into the Temple, to a private meeting room, where Morningstar fills her in. Corshani also sends for healing for Morningstar, still not fully recovered from the attack by the null shadows. An older priestess comes in with healing potions, and also casts a curing spell that eases Morningstar's hurts.

Part way through this meeting, Captain Cobb arrives as scheduled and joins the meeting. He agrees to set a discreet watch around the section of the Silent Quarter that the party believe to be at the center of the Divination Sink. More guards will be sent to patrol the wider area, watching especially for any signs that the Black Circle is packing up and moving their operation. Lastly, he promises to send someone to check the records at the town hall, to find out who owns the large estates in the northern end of the Silent Quarter, and if there are any unusual recent changes of ownership.

Lastly, Morningstar casts a *sending* to Aravis:

We're fine. Will investigate more after resting. Staying night at Temple. Pewter is fine. Step caring for him.

Aravis, having debriefed with the ranking priest at the Temple of Pikon in Tal Hae, goes back to the Greenhouse. Kibi and Grey Wolf are, of course, both surprised and alarmed to see him. He begs out of eating the leftover black lizard pie pressed on him by Skorg, and then decides it's time for another look at the Crosser's Maze. His thought slides back into the expanse of the multiverse, and he brings his point of focus closer in towards the two merging Primes. He is able to get a closer view than he has before, and in doing so notices something extremely alarming. There has been a clear increase in the rate at which the

planes are accelerating toward congruence! He spends the necessary time for a thorough examination, establishing that at least the second derivative of the velocity is a constant. But given the change... uh-oh!

He slides out of the Maze, exhausted, and starts to mutter: "cellar... cellar..." Kibi and Grey Wolf think that something terrible must be happening in the basement, until Aravis follows with: "accelerating... the Primes are accelerating." Ah. When Aravis becomes coherent, he shares his bad news with the others, and then stumbles off to bed. As he's falling asleep, his head pounding, Morningstar's *sending* arrives. He replies:

Planes aligning sooner than thought. Two to three days! Will teleport Wolf and Kibi tomorrow to Moonspell. Tell Pewter I'm fine too.

Back in Kallor, Corshani arranges for rooms for the whole party under the temple roof, since the temple is a safer haven than the Moonspell. They sleep.

Fade: Oh dear.

Dawn: "Breaking news! Planar collision in two days!" That ought to make for a messy morning. How does one prepare for such an event?

coyote6: Now that's a message! "End of world rescheduled for day after tomorrow. Something should probably be done. Please advise."

PC, KC, et al. – what did y'all do when you got that little missive?

Piratecat: Quietly panicked.

KidCthulhu: Ernie said, "Oh dear." I said something that would offend Eric's grandmother.



Friday, July 18

The next morning, as the three wizards prepare to leave the Greenhouse, there is a loud knock on the door. Grey Wolf, up in his room, hears the expected sound of Eddings greeting a guest at the door, followed by a loud female voice saying, "What are you doing? Get that damned light out of my eyes! Ivellios? Ivellios, are you here?"

Grey Wolf hurries down the stairs, and there is his sister, **Jaina**, whom he has not seen since before the death of their parents. She is tall for a half-elf, with short blonde hair. Her human features are more prominent. Kibi and Aravis note that she moves with a fluidity and grace that remind them of Flicker, but that she's also wiry and well muscled. And oddly, there is no obvious family resemblance to Grey Wolf.

Jaina embraces her brother in a bear hug, claims a lizard allergy to ward off Skorg and his pie, and then the two siblings spend some time catching up. Jaina has been making a good living guarding merchant wagons on the Lan Hae-Hydra route; with so many men conscripted, there is better opportunity for women like her. Just recently she finished a route guarding a wagon-load of arms sent to Hydra, the city closest to the front lines in the war against the Delfirians. "In fact," she says, "I'm under contract to be guarding the warehouse for another two days before they haul it off to the war. But the others are covering for me, and I paid for a ship passage to get here as quick as I could. I shouldn't stay, but I had to see if you were OK, after that magical message you had sent to me."

Grey Wolf hems and haws, not sure how to break the news to his sister, but eventually he conveys the fact that he is probably going to die in two days' time. He goes on to tell her all the details surrounding his current predicament, as well as what he learned about their parents while in the Crosser's Maze.

Jaina is speechless at first, before launching into babble about how surely there's something that can be done to prevent his sacrifice, and how it must be a mistake, and hasn't she heard that some of the powerful churches can bring someone back to life, and of course they'll bring Grey Wolf back to life for doing something so noble. She even offers to abandon her contract and her employers to go with him, to help, but Grey Wolf tells her no. They have things as under control as they can, and no, there's nothing they can do to prevent his death, one way or another.

There's not much more Jaina can say to her brother after that, except that he shouldn't just give up his life if there's any possible alternative, and that she's sure he'll be alive in a week one way or another, and that she'll come find him at her next opportunity. And then she leaves, off to catch the next ship back to Lan Hae.



Aravis checks the Maze again, and confirms that yes, it looks like two days is his best guess as to when the planes will converge. Then he collects Kibi and Grey Wolf (Skorg volunteers to stay home and guard the Icebox), and the three of them *teleport* to Kallor. Aravis notes right away that the feeling of dread is much less than it was the last time he was in this part of the city.

The rest of the party have already risen early, and are there to meet him. With no time to lose they head off to the constabulary, to see if Cobb has anything interesting to report. He hasn't, unless a lack of anything interesting is interesting. According to town records, all the houses in that area have been owned by respectable "old money" families for generations. There have been no unusual sales of any kind in the last decade or more.

When the party point out the evidence that a Scarbearer has moved into the neighborhood recently, Cobb replies: "There's no law that says guests have to register with the city. And if the Black Circle has been doing anything underhanded, they'll hardly have bothered to provide records themselves. There's a census every few years, but there's not due to be another one for another year or more. And there was nothing odd about the last one, according to the man I sent." There is some brief, half-joking discussion about scouting out the Silent Quarter disguised as census takers.

The next stop is the Tallowhouse, where Dranko checks in with Ruland. The rogue and information gatherer has learned nothing new, but Dranko decides to do him a favor. "Ruland," he says. "I think you ought to get out of the city for a few days. If you haven't heard about anything unusual, it'll be safe to come back."

Ruland is immediately suspicious, and voices his opinion that perhaps Dranko has found out where he lives, and is planning a robbery. Dranko rolls his eyes and pulls a jeweled crown worth a couple thousand gold pieces out of his magic pack. "Does it look like I need to rob you?" he asks. "No, I'm telling you this for your own good, and for the help you've provided us so far. If we fail in our mission, thousands of enemy soldiers are going to appear in the city, and you'll be safer somewhere else." Ruland looks Dranko dead in the eye, sees that the half-orc isn't bluffing, and nods his head.

When Dranko comes out and tells about his encounter, it gives Morningstar pause. "I don't understand," she says, "why Rhiavonne isn't making preparations in case we fail. She knows what could happen, and it sure seems like she believes us. But why hasn't she mustered more soldiers, and why isn't she stockpiling healing potions? It took them ten minutes just to get two healing potions for me! What happens when an invading army is suddenly *inside the walls*?" There's no good answer.

So the Company are now ready to go investigate the Silent Quarter (and specifically the neighborhood near the center of the Divination Sink) first-hand. Dranko forges another letter, which authorises him to find a person meeting the description of the scarred fellow they heard about at The Quiet Man. The ruse involves a pouch of coins to be delivered to that man; in that way, Dranko hopes to ask questions looking for him, without seeming suspicious. The rest of the party will go on under official auspices, showing the letter from Cobb to anyone who challenges their authority. They cast a number of long-duration spells that improve various physical attributes, and head into the Silent Quarter.

Dranko shows the letter to several passers-by with no luck, but that changes when he revisits The Quiet Man. A garrulous local remembers the scarred man – "an old campaigner, by all accounts. Not seen 'im m'self, but he's stayin' with Master **Cosnor** up on Pearl Street. No, don't know the address, but it's th' 'ouse with the two big lions out front. Can't miss it."

Morningstar has been listening in via *Rary's telepathic bond*, and they all meet up outside before heading northwards into the heart of the Silent Quarter. As expected, the *telepathic bond* soon cuts out, blocked (presumably) by the Divination Sink. A city guardsman passes them en route, but he has been warned of the party's business by Cobb, and so stops to ask if there's anything he can do to help. When they tell him they're on their way to visit a Master Cosnor, the guard says, "Oh, Lord Cosnor! Nice old chap. Don't see him much, but he always has a kind word if I pass him in the street."

Before they reach the "house with the lions out front," the party cast a number of spells, including *invisibility* on Dranko and (most importantly) Grey Wolf. Someone points out that the Divination Sink may help them here, since spells that would detect invisible things are presumably being universally blocked. Then Dranko heads down the street, looking for the house.

All of the houses have large iron fences around them, with outward-curving spiky tops that make it very difficult to scale them. Furthermore, the fencing is continuous for several blocks, effectively blocking access to a number of sprawling estates. Dranko tries climbing the fence in front of Cosnor's house, but can't quite get over the spikes.

Meanwhile, down the street, a household guard has come from a nearby mansion and demanded to know what the party are doing, loitering in front of his master's house, and fully armed. They apologize for the intrusion (even though they're on the street), and move a block or so away to avoid a fuss.

Dranko comes back to the group to request a *fly* spell, and Kibi obliges. Flying and invisible, Dranko soars over the fence and above the grounds of the wealthy denizens of the Silent Quarter. The area is a tangle of stone walls, little fenced in, well tended gardens, courtyards, trees, narrow lanes, and of course the mansions themselves, which are mostly one storey but large and sprawling. It's hard to tell where one property begins and another one ends.

He flies back and forth over the estates, spotting many gardeners and patrolling guardsmen, but nothing out of the ordinary – unless you count plants that can grow and thrive in the never ending twilight of Kallor. But on a third sweep, something catches his eye. It is a quick flash of blue light, gone almost before he is aware of it. When he looks back to where he thought he saw it, it is gone. Nevertheless, he flies slowly down, toward a tiny walled garden adjacent to a large house. There is a door opening out of the house into the enclosure, but the space is empty, save for (of all things) a stone sundial set upon a three-foot-high stone pillar. He drifts lower, and while the presence of a sundial in a city of twilight is unusual, what's more unusual is the faint blue glow coming from beneath the pedestal.

Lowering himself so that his nose almost touches the ground, Dranko sees that while most of the ground in the enclosure is grass or flagstones, the pedestal is sitting atop (and covering) a disc of glowing blue glass. A faint blue light emanates from beneath, around the edges of the pedestal. This, he realizes, could be the source of the Divination Sink! Rather than immediately getting into trouble, Dranko flies back to the others to report what he has found.

They briefly talk it over, and decide that what they really want to do is smash that disc. The plan they form is that Kibi will use a scroll of *invisibility* on Ernie, and then Dranko will fly Ernie over to the garden, where he'll call upon the *Strength of Yondalla* before pushing over the sundial and its pillar and smashing the glass disc. Ernie is also wearing a magic ring that casts *dimension door* in case he needs to make a speedy exit. Grey Wolf, also flying and invisible, hovers high over the area, watching for trouble.

It goes just as planned – up to a point. A few minutes later Dranko and Ernie are standing invisibly together in the garden. Ernie has imbued himself with great strength, and together they push over the pedestal. It tips, and the stone sundial slides off, smashing onto the flagstones beneath with a tremendous crash and breaking in two. The glass looks solid, and the blue glow does not increase nor decrease. Ernie hefts one of the two broken pieces, and with great effort brings it down hard upon the blue glass disc. There is a dull “clank,” a small piece of the stone breaks off, and a fragment of glass chips away. Emie looks disappointed.

Dranko hands him his mace, and Ernie starts whaling away at the glass. Each swing chips another small piece of the glass with a loud ***Whang!*** but the progress is disappointingly slow. Looking closely, Ernie can see fine cracks going downwards, and he realizes that it's not just a thin disc sitting on the surface – it goes down at least a good six to eight inches.

That's when an old gardener comes tottering out to see what all the racket is. The servant, a stooped old man, sees that the sundial and its pedestal have been pushed over and smashed. He also sees a mace, wielding itself, pounding away at a blue glowing disc set in the ground. “Eeee. Aaah. Aaaaaah. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” The gardener goes scurrying back into the house.

Ernie has managed to create a divot in the glass about the size of an orange, but the disc is thicker than that. Dranko produces a chisel, and wedges it into one of the glass seams, and the next swing of Ernie's mace drives a large chunk of glass out of the ground. More cracks appear, some of them going down. The disc flares again, and when it's filled with blue light, Ernie now sees that the disc is really more of a cylinder, and it goes down at least another foot or more. Argh!

After another two swings the chisel shatters. Dranko replaces it with a crowbar. Since the *Strength of Yondalla* has run out, Ernie activates the *bull's strength* inherent in his magical armor. As he does so, a loud raspberry noise comes out of the breastplate. Dranko, who had made the armor for Ernie himself, had added a small enchantment so that pulling the little finger of the left gauntlet would make that sound. But the *bull's strength* function shouldn't have emitted any sort of flatulent noise. They chalk it up to the effects of the glowing glass, and Ernie keeps swinging.

Whang!

Whang!

Whang!

The servant returns with two armed guards, who are less easily fazed. “Whoever you are, or whatever you are,” one of them says, “stop swinging that weapon, drop it at once, and explain your presence here!”

Ernie does neither. But when the guards step out into the garden, Dranko (still invisible) booms out: “I am a servant of the most holy and blessed Church of Ell, and we do her bidding! We are destroying an Unholy Abomination of Evil, in the name of the Goddess! Stand back and let us do our work!”

Whang!

The guards look at each other. One says, “Look, I don't know what this is all about, but this is private property. We're going to have to fetch the master.”

“Good!” says Dranko. “He should explain what this foul relic is doing on his grounds.”

Whang!

Ernie continues to chip away at the disc, but it's slow going. The glass is solid straight through, and each swing is only chipping away small pieces. The crowbar is a bit too unwieldy for this sort of work. Eventually the guards return, along with a tall man with a black beard. "I am the master of this house," he says from behind his guards, "and whoever you are, you are trespassing on my property. I demand that you leave at once."

Whang!

Dranko repeats his shtick. "I am a holy servant of Ell, sent to destroy this evil artifact buried on your land. Hinder us at your own peril... we do the Goddess's work!"

"If you are, then why have you come here in secret? Why was I not informed? And what is that glowing thing in my garden?"

"Don't you know?" booms Dranko.

"No! I've never seen that before in my life!"

Whang!

"Then why were you hiding it beneath your sundial?" Dranko demands. "And why do you even have a sundial in this place?" He's stalling, big-time, giving Ernie as much time as he can.

The master of the house splutters. "That glowing thing wasn't there when I put this sundial here... and it was a gift! Not that it is any business of yours. I think you are a petty criminal up to some mischief, and are making up some crazy story now that you've been caught. Guards, if there is still any sign of them five seconds from now, I want you to take care of them."

"Yes, sir. But... you know... they're invisible."

"Just swing your swords around! You're bound to hit them eventually! And you," he says to the gardener, "go fetch more of my guards!"

There is some commotion as the guards push their way into the garden and start flailing around with their swords. A minute later more come out, and two of them even manage to score light hits on Dranko...

KidCthulhu: The most fun thing about this little interlude was counting six seconds quietly to myself, and then yelling "*Whang!*" all through Dranko's attempt to bluff the servant, noble and guards. It was one of those things that started funny, got annoying, and then became funny again.

Whang!

Although PC points out that Ernie has two attacks per round, and so it should have been "*Whang, Whang!*" Rules lawyer.

Nail: Ach... this is good stuff! You can tell a good campaign by how prominently they portray its gardeners... and bakers!

Can the party tell if the buried blue glass column is in the center of the Divination Sink area? After all, how else can they possibly determine if it is the source of the dampening magic? A *commune* spell outside the area?

KidCthulhu: "And if I take the blue pill?" "Then you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."

The *#*&%* rabbit hole goes really farking deep. Grumble.

Nail: Another thought occurred to me: Surely, in a world with magic, rich people would have quite a bit of it protecting their houses, and quite a bit of that magic would be divination magic, right? So... why didn't they notice (and then report it) when the Divination Sink went up? It's either a flaw or a clue... an' given it's Sagiro's campaign, it's gotta be the latter...

Sagiro: Regarding the glass column: at this point it's just an assumption on their part; it's some weird magic-looking thing that's very close to where their "triangulation" indicated the center of the Divination Sink should be.

Regarding the rich people not noticing the Divination Sink: almost all protection spells of that sort are abjurations, not divinations. The main ones would be *alarm* and *arcane lock*, both of which (presumably) still work. *Glyphs of warding*, too. And if you did have a magic gizmo above your door that detected evil or something, you'd probably never realize it had stopped working. And even if you did, you'd probably just assume its own magic had failed, and not that there was some giant powerful magical depressant at work nearby. So I'd say neither flaw nor clue.

Grey Wolf has been flying invisibly and watching the proceedings. Although he cannot see Dranko or Ernie, he can tell that one of the guards has just hit something with his sword. He uses the *mirror of whispers* to communicate the state of affairs to the others. There is much shaking of heads.

Kibi casts *fly* and *invisibility* on himself and flies over to the garden himself, intending to cast his newly learned *confusion* on the guards. He decides against it in the end, since that might end up making the guards kill each other. Instead, he realizes that Scree could easily do some underground scouting of the glass cylinder. The earth elemental familiar goes underground at Kibi's behest, and starts reporting back what he sees: *Hmm. There's a glass tube under the ground, just like you said. And it goes down very far. I'm not sure how far, though. I'll see. Hmm. More than twenty feet, I'd say. Maybe thirty. Ah! Fascinating! There's a chamber of air under here. I'll just poke my eye a tiny bit through the ceiling to see what's in there. Hmm. The*

glass tube ends at the ceiling of the room. There are people in the room, wearing chain clothing and with weapons. Three of them. They are looking up at where the glass tube pokes out of the ceiling and pointing at it. They must be sensing the vibrations from Ernie pounding on the other end of the tube. Oh, but they're people, so they probably are just hearing the noise. Oh, and there's something sticking out of the ground, directly below the glass tube. It's a big glowing sapphire on a stone pedestal. It's creating a cone of light that's shining upwards and hitting the bottom of the long glass tube. It's all quite interesting.

Kibi relays this to Ernie, who stops swinging and smacks his forehead. Thirty feet! Argh! So much for smashing it. But that gem... that seems to be the target. All three of them fly back to the street to tell the others about what Scree has discovered. Hearing the news, they devise a new plan. Grey Wolf flies Morningstar over to the garden, where there are still guards standing. They gape as Morningstar casts a pair of *summon monster* spells, creating one small xorn and one medium-sized one.

The guards ready their weapons, but Morningstar warns them that the xorn will not attack unless provoked. Then she addresses the xorn (who fortunately speak Common): "Forty feet below here is an open room with a large blue gem in it. I want you to burrow down to the chamber, come up from the bottom, and eat that gem. Defend yourselves if you have to, but that gem is your priority. Now go."

The big xorn tells the smaller xorn: "It's mine," and they vanish into the earth. Scree follows, giving Kibi a play-by-play: *The xorn are moving easily through the earth. Now they're going around the room to come up from below. I'll just poke my eye a bit through the wall again. They should be arriving... ah! There they are. There are a bunch of people with the chain clothing in the room now. They see the xorn! There's some commotion. The big xorn has the gem in its mouth. It... hmm... the gem seems to be rooted to the pillar. The xorn cannot bite it off. The people are attacking the xorn with their weapons, but aren't having much luck. The xorn is trying to envelop the gem in its mouth. It's trying to pull the gem free, but can't.*

Oh, one of the people seems to have made a gash in the smaller xorn's body. It's fighting back. It... ooh, that was painful. One of the people has fallen over. The people are crowding around the small xorn. Another one of the people has fallen. Oops! The smaller xorn has been killed. I think the larger one has given up on the gem. Now it's fighting the people. It just tore one of them apart! They're attacking it, but it's much stronger. It... it just bit the head off someone. My, you people are filled with lots of fluid! There's a lot of shouting.

More people are arriving and swinging swords at the xorn. One of them has shouted: 'Shouldn't we get the masters?' Another has answered, 'No, they can't break off at this point.' Oh, another person has fallen. There are many bodies on the ground now. Six or seven. Wait! Oh, the xorn has vanished.

Thinking that they have caught their enemies with their pants down, the Company decide to move in for the kill. A combination of *flying* and *dimension dooring* gets the whole lot of them into the garden, where the guards have seemingly given up and gone back inside. Aravis uses two charges from his *staff of earth and stone* to create two steep ramp passages, intending that a third such passage will allow entrance to that underground room from the side, rather than the top. The party slide down the ramps, and cast a bunch of *haste* spells before Aravis fires off the third *passwall*. Then they go charging down into the room.

Fade: You'd better hope this really is the Black Circle, and not something totally unconnected and innocent.

Samnell: I think it's a meeting of the Evil Blue Shiny Things Appreciation Society. I predict they attack with metal smurf statues if/when the Company charges them. They couldn't be interrupted because they're in the middle of a very important debate on whether or not metallic objects painted navy blue are sufficiently shiny and blue to be appreciated under their by-laws.

It would be an open-and-shut case, but one of the more prominent members is partially color blind and he's been throwing his weight around. You see, he's old and they've got him worked up enough they're hoping he'll drop from a heart attack.

MavrickWeirdo: Now all we need is for the blue gem to be one of the Eyes of Moirel (just keep it away from Eddings).

Piratecat: Believe me, we considered that – but the Eyes of Moirel are all diamonds. Thank God. No, I'm sure the Eyes are somewhere much, much worse...

There are seven armed guards in the small room, taken mostly by surprise by the emerging party. It's a slaughter; the guards would be plenty tough to take on normal folk, but are no match for the Company. There is a brief moment of worry when a black-robed figure comes through an open doorway at one end of the room. He shouts "Two!" and the few armed guards still standing close their eyes, just as the mage casts a *color spray*. Kay and Flicker are briefly stunned, but the rest of the party are unaffected. The caster, along with the remaining fighters, is hacked down with ease.

Morningstar goes over to the glowing gem on the pedestal; it is throwing a cone of light up towards the ceiling, where they can see the bottom end of the long glass cylinder. The gem still doesn't budge, but Morningstar casts *dispel evil* on it. There is a popping sound, and though the gem continues to glow, Morningstar is now able to lift it free of the pedestal!

RangerWickett: He shouted "Two," then cast *color spray*? Heh. Nice maneuver.

Dawn: Ha! The enemy has maneuver numbers. A little cross-campaigning going on from the Defenders.

And now the Company face a choice. Do they take the gem and flee back up the ramps? Or do they press on, hoping that the important Black Circle figures who “can’t break off at this point” won’t be able to put up much defense? They still have several more rounds of *haste*... what will they do?



The Lair of the Circle

Run #130 – Sunday, March 10, 2002

KidCthulhu: Just got home from the game. Sagiro is a rat bastard of unprecedeted illegitimate rodentyness. We kicked some tush, only to find that we're facing major bad news in the form of Mokad, a few of his friends, and a whole lot of arcane sigiled badness.

Oh, we are well and truly up the creek now, and no one even thought to buy a paddle.

thatdarncat: I'm sorry to say, that's the kind of thing we like to hear...

wolff96: As my grandfather used to put it when he didn't want to swear in front of us kids, "Up an unsanitary tributary without a means of motivation."

Then again, if it was easy, it wouldn't be worthy of your campaign.

Piratecat: I don't think KidC really emphasised how much trouble we're all in. After clearing most of the complex, we're at about 60% normal effectiveness; Dranko and Ernie are virtually out of spells, and Morningstar and Aravis have used probably half of theirs. We used more than ten charges on our *wands of cure serious wounds* after some extremely deadly and devious magical traps. We're healthy, but lacking the firepower we're about to oh-so-desperately need.

You see, we just opened the huge iron door that made "whuum... whuum" noises. And we found out what was making the noises.

shudder Who, us? Scared? Nah!

Aravis: The thought that came to my mind is that just as we ended we got to see the excrement that was heading towards the fan... and we were in it.

The funny thing (to me) is that right before the last run a bunch of folks were saying that they were scared of the upcoming run. I thought, "Gee, I'm not scared... we could still run away." Now I am scared. We did not run away.

As to our current resource situation, we do have one wildcard with us that might help... the Maze. Hey, Sagiro, do those snakes have silver lines all over them? Oh, I was not going to give away any spoilers...

KidCthulhu: I'm pretty much counting on the Maze. Ernie's going to cover Aravis while he uses the Maze to throw a spanner into the works of the Black Circle. Do wish we had about a dozen *summon monster* spells, though.

Swack-Iron: Enough with the teasing hints, already!

The Company decide to strike while the iron is *hasted*, as it were. They leave the room with the gem they think is the source of the Divination Sink (taking the gem with them), and head into the underground complex. Scree is generally scouting ahead, occasionally poking his eye-gems out into rooms and hallways and reporting what he sees back to Kibi. Morningstar casts a *sending* to Captain Cobb, that he should send some soldiers to the area (at street level) and wait for further reports. He answers that troops will be sent immediately.

Because of *shield other* spells cast, Dranko and Grey Wolf make sure to move as a team, staying within spell range. Morningstar and Aravis have a similar relationship. It makes maneuvering and scouting tricky, but they manage.

MavrickWeirdo: I'm glad Scree is able to see at all, inside the Divination Sink. This means his vision is "mundane" enough to see null shadows - wouldn't it be terrible if your scout couldn't see them because his vision is magical...

A short stretch of stone corridor ends at another door, on the other side of which is a large storeroom. There are crates and barrels smelling of onions and fruit, but nothing of real interest. There are three doors leading out of the storeroom. Scree reports that one of the doors leads into a long hallway, and a second door leads to a parallel hallway that soon bends away from the first. Aravis casts *arcane lock* on the second door, to keep guards from arriving while they investigate the first door. Speaking of which, when Ernie heads down that way, someone down at the end of it fires off a crossbow bolt. It misses Ernie and skips harmlessly down the stone hall. Kibi, using Aravis's *wand of fireballs*, follows up behind Ernie and shoots off a *fireball* down the hallway and into the room beyond. **KABOOM!** Scree reports general unhappiness in the room, and a number of smouldering people. Dranko heads down to deal with any survivors, and ends up killing the only one with a nasty whip-shot to the eye.

While Scree is still off scouting behind the *arcane locked* door, he pokes his eye into a small guard alcove, and sets off a clangy *alarm* spell. There are three guards there – two armed with swords, one wearing robes – and these become even more alert than they already were. Morningstar opens the third door, and is greeted by both another *alarm* spell and a *color spray* from a second guard-alcove. She shrugs off the latter, and the party move in to make quick work of the three guards.

Aravis drops into the Crosser's Maze for a moment, thinking that perhaps these guards are from the other Prime, and as such might be drawing power from the power sources he has noticed coursing through the cosmos. But he sees nothing unusual, unless you count the impending complete overlap of the two Primes.

The stone hall continues on the other side of the small guardroom, and empties into a small library. There are several hundred books and scrolls there, crammed into freestanding shelves. There is an alcove with a desk and chair, and a stack of paper on the desk. The party take them for future reading, since they, like the books, are written in an unfamiliar script. (Kibi has *comprehend languages* prepared, but the Divination Sink still seems to be affecting them.)

One door leads from the library to a long flight of stairs going up. Flicker stays behind to carefully search it for traps, while the others leave by a second exit. It leads to another small guard post, where another clanging *alarm* goes off when they open the door. The guards in this one actually manage a couple of lucky shots on Step before he butchers them; Morningstar keeps him well healed. Each guard post is the same – a small room containing two or three fighters and a mage. Clearly they are readying actions so that when anyone comes through the door, the mage fires off a *color spray* and then the fighters attack. They are obviously disciplined, staying at their posts even when alarms elsewhere are sounding. The Company have them easily out-powered, but this only makes them worried. It all seems too easy.

The only really alarming thing to come from the battles at the guard posts is Aravis's hair. Twice he uses a charge from his *wand of magic missiles* to pop the enemy mages. The first time turns his hair a purplish-blonde color. But the second time turns his hair into a very medusa-like (though non-petrifying) tangle of snakes! There is a sudden thrashing from within Aravis's pack, and Pewter's frantic voice sounds in the wizard's head. *Aaaaahh! Boss! Your pack is full of snakes! They're all over me! Boss, help, help!* It calms him a bit to learn that the snakes are actually a part of his own fur. Ick!

Lord Pendragon: So now Aravis has bizarre silver arcane-looking lines covering his flesh, eyes that contain the universe... and snakes for hair. Hel-looooo... negative circumstance modifier to Diplomacy...

Aravis: Actually, during the session when Morningstar *wind walked* to Kallor with Dranko and Aravis, the combination of stars in his eyes, fine silver lines over his flesh, and somewhat cryptic comments on his part convinced the guards at the gate that he was a visiting archmage. Negative modifier, eh?

Also, the player behind Morningstar decided at the last session that Aravis would go over REALLY BIG at an SF convention.

Lord Pendragon: LOL! You have a point!

Further exploration (preceded by advanced scouting from Scree, relayed via Kibi) reveals two more storerooms and another guard post. Kay is actually stunned briefly by a *color spray*, but the others come up quickly and finish off the guards. Although they look like any other human guards, and although they use numbers spoken in Common to announce their maneuvers, they don't seem to understand when the party briefly talk at them. Strange.

One of the storerooms is long, and contains stacked metal beams, some over twenty feet long. A few of them have notches cut out of them every eight inches or so. There are also stacks of wooden planks, and Kay spends some time slicing these up with her magical Woodcutter sword. The second storeroom is smaller, and holds stacks of dozens of obsidian bricks. There are also several large metal gears leaning against the walls. On a table are a variety of hand tools – chisels, a hammer, some spikes, an awl. Dranko takes a chisel (to replace the one that broke when Ernie smashed it with a mace) and several party members take souvenir obsidian bricks.

Quartermoon: LOL! I love these guys.

One of the two doors from this last storeroom leads to a small prison. There is a disturbing room with manacles bolted into two of the walls, and a wooden chair in the center surrounded by a black circle set in the floor. There are four small five-by-five feet cells adjacent to this room, and all are empty, though Scree sees a large dried bloodstain on the floor of one. Dranko tries focusing holy energy on the black circle on the floor, but it has no effect.

By this time the *haste* spells have run out, but the party continue in the only unexplored direction other than the stairs up (the hallways eventually formed a loop back to the other side of Aravis's *arcane locked* door). As they head down this last hallway, a familiar feeling of unease starts to grow stronger in the minds of the wizards – null shadows nearby! Scree very carefully pokes his eye into the room beyond the door at the end of the hall. He sees no null shadows, but instead reports that the room looks like an alchemy lab, full of bottles, beakers, tubes and flasks. Strange liquids are bubbling and dripping through some of them. Most disturbing is a black half-circle set into the floor along one wall, and a closed cabinet bolted to the wall above that half-circle.

Cautiously, about half the party enter the lab, while the others (Dranko, Morningstar, Grey Wolf and Aravis) hang back in the nearer storeroom. Kibi takes a few minutes to study the lab equipment, and finds it very strange. Certain chemicals appear to be being used in unusual or even dangerous combinations, without resulting in the disasters he would expect. He does figure out enough to guess that the final product of all this alchemy is meant to be consumed by a living creature. The party have a sudden thought that maybe they are brewing something which, when fed to people, turns them into null shadows. Certainly the feeling of unease has become even greater, especially among the mages.

The Company really want to see what's in the cabinet guarded by the black half-circle. Kay takes a deep breath, and while the rest of the party stand far back, she waves her arm through the air above the circle. Immediately, horrible wounds open on the skin of her hand, and spread quickly over her entire body! Blood is spilling out all over the floor, and she cries out in terrible pain, reduced near to death!

The others rush forward, and with spells and uses of healing wands, Kay is quickly healed back to near full strength. And with the trap – er – disarmed, they open the cabinet to find almost twenty small glass vials full of a light green liquid. Dranko takes them, wraps them in cloth, and puts them in his magical haversack.

Piratecat: I felt horrible; I was subbing in as Kay for the evening, and damn near got her killed by triggering the *harm* spell. Yikes!

Plane Sailing: I guess "Kay" is just lucky she didn't end up licking anything...

This lab seems to be a dead end, and there have been no other avenues besides the upward-leading staircase. But Scree rumbles, and says to Kibi: *There's something wrong with this room. It's not... solid, like it should be.* Aha! A secret door! Scree's sense of something amiss isn't sharp enough to detect the door's location, and Kibi is hesitant to send him out to scout after what happened to Kay. The party search the room, and eventually discover the seams of a secret door, as well as a small button hidden in the cabinet. They all line up, mages at the back, ready to face null shadows if they come out. Morningstar presses the button...

The door swings open, revealing an empty ten feet of hallway, ending at a blank stone wall. Hmm. Morningstar presses the button again, and a second door swings open. Dranko looks into the space beyond; it's a small room, with what looks like a pit in the floor. He casts *light*, steps into the short hallway, and sees that the pit is really a very narrow spiral staircase leading down into darkness. Still no sign of null shadows, but the feeling of unease is palpable, even for him.

Morningstar starts to send another *sending* to Cobb, when Dranko steps into the small room. He is immediately beset, but not by null shadows. Instead, two large gargoyles, one just on either side of the door, step forward and attack! And once that happens, *then* the null shadows come boiling up from the spiral staircase, attacking Dranko where the gargoyles have left space.

Dranko tumbles backwards into the alchemy lab. The others line up in formation, wizards protected at the back, fighter types up front. In a display of excellent tactics, the party make short work of both the gargoyles and the null shadows, despite the problem that one can only be damaged by magical weapons, and the other only by non-magical weapons. The wizards at the back are able to cast spells that damage the gargoyles – Kibi and Grey Wolf launch *fireballs* over people's heads into the room beyond, so that only the gargoyles are in the blast area. Aravis, having reactivated his *boots of speed*, casts *rope trick*, and then shoots a *sonic bolt* over Ernie's head. When the gargoyles are killed but some null shadows still remain, the three wizards – Kibi, Aravis and Grey Wolf – go up into the extradimensional *rope trick* space, out of harm's way.

The null shadows are eventually killed, though both Kay and Dranko lose a spell out of their heads from the creatures' touch before the last one is dispatched. Grey Wolf realizes that with the Divination Sink technically in another plane, perhaps divination spells will function outside of it. It works! A *detect magic* spell reveals that some of the alchemical apparatus is magical, as is the green liquid in the vials from the cabinet.

Morningstar also finishes her *sending* during the battle, telling Cobb it's time to move him and his troops down to this underground complex. Then the Company spend fifteen minutes filling up empty spell slots, and Kibi takes a closer look at the notes he took from the desk, finally able to use *comprehend languages* to read them. The notes are on the subject of a spell called *forbiddance*, and more specifically about how that spell will interact with, and possibly interfere with, some other large area-effect spell. What that other spell is is hard for Kibi to puzzle out, but it's some vast, customised large-volume spell the like of which he's never seen before.

Plane Sailing: This is an interesting 3E element that I've never seen anyone take advantage of before – was this just "refilling" after Dranko and Kay lost a spell to the null shadows, or did some of them deliberately leave a few slots empty so that they could prepare some particular spells in the light of what they found? I think the latter is quite a cool idea for priests and wizards.

KidCthulhu: The empty spell slots are slots deliberately left open during spell prep in the morning. This is a very handy trick for those times when you wish you had taken *stone shape*. Just take 15 minutes, pray for the spell, and voilà. Very good for those spells with limited utility, but great power within that limited sphere. That said, it does mean one less spell available to you on a round-by-round basis. If the day is going to be combat-heavy, leaving slots empty may not be a good choice, because when you need healing, you need it now, not 15 minutes from now. Great for exploration days, not for combat days. 3E clerics rock.

Plane Sailing: Thought that was the case. Of course, 3E wizards rock too, if they want to carry their spell books with them! I've not yet played a wizard or cleric in 3E, so I've not had the opportunity to do this yet – but when I read it, it seemed like a really cool idea. It works especially well for clerics, though – I can imagine them spending 15 minutes "praying up a storm" for that vital spell!

madriel: Who had the idea to leave clerical slots open? That's brilliant. Now I just have to convince my DM to let me do it too.

Sagiro: I don't think your DM should need much convincing. On page 155 of the PHB, it says that a wizard can leave some spell slots open, and ...can repeat the preparation process as often as she likes, time and circumstance permitting. During these extra sessions of preparation, a wizard can fill these unused spell slots.

Then, on page 156, you can find the following quotes:

Divine spellcasters prepare their spells in largely the same manner as wizards, but with a few differences...

A divine spellcaster does not have to prepare all his spells at once.

Note that neither wizards nor clerics can use these "later in the day" prep sessions to fill up slots that are empty because they've already cast the spell that was in that slot. Also note that clerics cannot spontaneously turn an empty slot into a *cure* or *inflict* spell.

Rel: I don't want to send this Story Hour off on too much of a "rules" tangent, but I was wondering something.

How do you reconcile the "leave slots open for later preparation" clause with the "divine spellcasters have a specific time of day to prep spells" rule? I've been pondering how to handle this with my players and I figured I'd ask the members of one of the gaming groups I respect the most.

Sagiro: After reading that section of the PHB last night, I believe they mean that there's a specific time of day when you can fill empty slots which are empty because you cast the spell that used to be in that slot...

For example, assume I prepare *neutralise poison* (along with the rest of my spells) at dawn, and also keep an open slot. Then I cast NP in the mid-afternoon. It is only at a "specific time of day" (in this case, the following dawn) that I can refill the slot occupied by NP. But I can fill the empty slot at any time, since I can "leave slots open for later preparation." At least, that's how I read it.

Dawn: It should also be noted that (I think I'm correct in this) there is still the 24-hour rule in place for spells.

If a spellcaster leaves a slot open in the morning and later fills it – that slot can not be filled again the following morning – you have to wait for 24 hours. I could be interpreting this totally wrong, but that's what we got out of it. I'm sure someone will quickly correct me if I'm missing the mark.

Sagiro: Dawn, I can't find any mention of a "24-hour rule" in the PHB. The only similar thing I see is that any spells cast in the eight hours immediately previous to the "fresh daily preparation" count against your allowable totals. The example they give (p.154) is that if a wizard had to cast *magic missile* during the night, she'd get to prepare one fewer 1st-level spell the next morning.

Dawn: Thanks for the correction, Sagiro. I didn't have my book in front of me, but knew there was some time limit involved. Eight hours – still something to consider if you're deeply involved in a running battle.

Artoomis: The basic rule is: clerics get their spells at the same time each day, or as soon after that as they are able to pray.

Other spell casters get their spells *per day*. You have to decide for yourself what that means – I wouldn't use 24 hours from the last time, myself. I'd use once per day, at nearly any time, but no spell cast within the last 8 hours can be prepared. Of course, most of them need to have their spell books handy to prepare spells – it's one of the balancing factors between wizards and some other classes.

Additionally, *any* spell caster may leave spell slots "open" for preparation later in the day (using the 15-minute prep time rule).

Sorry for interrupting. I now return you to your regularly scheduled Story Hour...



Fifteen minutes later, as Cobb and his guards still haven't found their way down, the party decide it's time to head down the spiral staircase; Morningstar leaves a note with instructions for Cobb tacked to the door to the alchemy lab.

Kay, in the front, takes the first step down, and sets off another magical trap. It's not as gruesome as the last one, but she still takes a great deal of damage from spontaneous wounds opening up on her hands and arms. Again she is healed up, and Flicker is sent to the front of the line to search for traps. Slowly he inches forwards, step by step, eyes sharp, looking for any clue to where the next trap might be. He finds it, about halfway down the stairs, but only because he steps into its area of effect. Soon Flicker is writhing on the stairs in pain, near death, trailing blood from a dozen horrible wounds. Yet more healing from one of the *wands of cure serious wounds* is administered.

And it's around now that someone mentions that, with the Divination Sink still up in the *rope trick*, they can probably find these magical traps with a simple *detect magic* spell. There is the sound of nine hands slapping against nine foreheads, and Ernie casts *detect magic*. He goes down with Flicker to the bottom of the stairs, and does detect a strong source of abjuration magic at the very bottom.

Gingerly, he draws a chalk outline for Flicker, showing where the magic of the trap is. And while Flicker is decent at searching for traps, he's *very* good at disabling them. A little scratching at *just* the right places along the edge of the spell, causing slight disruptions, and soon Ernie sees the magic fade and vanish. Flicker is ecstatic; he's never tried to disarm such a dangerous, purely magical trap before, and wasn't sure it would work.

The stairway empties out into a long, narrow hallway that recedes into the darkness, and from that darkness comes an ominous sound. It's a low, steadily pulsing thrum of power. Ernie, still concentrating on the *detect magic*, moves forwards with Flicker. The others trail behind, spaced ten feet apart in case some area-effect spell goes off.

The thrumming gets louder as they proceed, and eventually a huge iron door comes into view. The thrumming is coming from that door, or something beyond it. When Ernie gets within range, he sees that the door is covered with abjuration magic.

Realizing that something extremely dangerous is likely beyond the door, they decide to escort Grey Wolf back up to the alchemy lab and away from the danger. As they ascend the staircase, they can hear voices above; Cobb and his soldiers have found them, and are methodically performing their own search.

Cobb reports that when they tried to come down here via **Lord Southinghorn**'s estate, they were unexpectedly attacked by his personal house guard when they found the walled garden with the sundial. One of his men was killed, and two others – one of his own guard, and an Ellish priestess – were wounded. Some of his forces escorted the wounded back to the Temple of Ell, and others have apprehended Lord Southinghorn. Still, about twenty soldiers are now at their disposal.

The party instruct that they should concentrate on securing the two ways out – the *passwall* ramps and the stairs leading up out of the complex. Also, they tell Cobb about the Divination Sink, hidden in the *rope trick*. Lastly, they soberly inform Cobb that if there's still no sign of the party in about half an hour, he should take the Divination Sink and get the hell out of there.

The Company, minus Grey Wolf, head back down the stairs, and then down the hallway to the abjured door. Flicker again tries to disable the magic around the door, but isn't so lucky this time. He sets off at least two wards. One is an alarm bell that starts ringing loudly, and which Ernie quickly casts a *silence* on. The other is yet another *greater glyph of warding* dispensing a *harm* spell. Flicker is again brought near to death, and is again healed back to near full health. Flicker's starting to look a bit shaky from being such a health yo-yo, but he takes a deep breath and tries the door. It's locked.

Dranko casts another *detect magic*, and sees that there's still abjuration magic there. Aravis, guessing what it is, casts *knock* on the iron door. It swings open, and Ernie, flying up near the ceiling, floats through just enough to see what's beyond.

What he sees is vast, puzzling, and terrifying.

It's a huge chamber, over a hundred feet on a side, with a ceiling nearly forty feet high. The iron door is at one corner, and what immediately holds Ernie's attention is at the opposite corner. There are two huge translucent spheres, each forty feet in diameter, slowly moving towards a convergence in the corner, above a huge, magically pulsing black obsidian circle set in the floor. The spheres look like planets viewed from space, but muted in color – grey, brown and dark blue, rather than bright blue, green and white. In the center of each sphere, maybe ten feet in diameter, is a solid black core.

There is more, much more in the room. In the center of the room is a circular, three foot high stone wall, also about forty feet in diameter. (Only the fact that Ernie is flying allows him to see over that wall to the far corner beyond.)

The floor of the rest of the room is covered with smaller black circles, ranging in size from five to twenty feet in diameter. These are connected with lines, some drawn, some made with obsidian bricks set in the floor. Weird glyphs are scrawled all over the floor around these circles, along with symbols and figures depicting geometric forms and angles, wide arcs and tangents.

There is more. Between some of the obsidian floor circles, blue energy plays across the ground in straight lines. The air above these lines shimmers faintly, like curtains of warbling air.

There is more. Three figures stand within three of the circles. About ninety feet across from the door is a human woman, heavily armed, with a breastplate emblazoned with a lightning bolt. She stands within a large circle. To Ernie's right, equally far away, is a halfling woman, wearing a black robe, standing in a small circle. Just beyond the halfling is a tall, pinched man with a goatee, also wearing a black robe and standing in a small circle.

From all three of these inhabited circles, black energy is spilling along the floor and up a short, wide stair, where it flows into the large pulsing black circle. But this energy is tailing off, as if from a faucet that has been shut off but is still dripping a last few drops of water. Ernie can also see black energy coming from another source, that is probably the base of the other side of the large circular wall. That energy is also emptying into the pulsing black circle beneath where the two huge world-spheres are converging, but that energy is not abating.

The thrumming noise is coming from all around the room, and is timed with spikes in the pulses of black energy spilling into the circle beneath the spheres. With each thrum, the two huge spheres inch closer towards each other.

Ernie squints across the dizzying space at the man with the goatee. He has seen that man once before, across a dining room table in a poison-filled hall, in the city of Hae Charagan.

It's Mokad.

Ancalagon: Wow, that was eerie... I sense: (a) some kind of big eeeeeiiiiii spell; and (b) a big fight coming!

Fade: I think there's only one thing left to do... PANIC!

Zaruthustran: Yikes. Sounds like a very scary, James-Bond-finding-the-secret-lair kind of thing. Very impressive! You players must be quaking in your boots. These guys are obviously very powerful, and y'all are, as you say, almost out of juice.

Plus, what happens when you attack the Bad Guys and disrupt the über-spell? Wouldn't that be kind of like, I don't know, like launching an assault on a group of guys holed up in the nuclear missile room of a submarine?

Wow. Time to be afraid – to be very afraid. Did anyone consider sending to the Spire and letting them know what you've discovered? I think they might be a little interested in this "when worlds collide" room.



Piratecat: Oh, my. We promised not to give away many spoilers, but there's an astonishing amount of blood on the battlefield. A lot of XP drained entirely away. A red-armored warrior we *really* weren't ready for. A lot of bad luck. A lot of surprises. Ohhhhhh, my...

wolf96: Aragh! Planes colliding! Death and destruction! The penultimate (or ultimate, depending on what happened) session! Come on! Hook us up!

Aravis: I don't think Sagiro intended this one as even the penultimate session. I think he just meant it to be another hill to crest in this long and twisted rollercoaster ride of his.

KidCthulhu: C'mon, Sagiro. Type faster. I can't keep a secret much longer!

Zaruthustran: Do not resist. Give in to your urge. We are defenseless. Take up your keyboard and strike us down with the terrible secret.

Pillars of Hercules: Must... have... story... KidC, you keep right on resisting. Sagiro, you keep right on typing.

Man, this is exciting. I don't think it's intended to be the end of the campaign, but it certainly is the end of a major story line (and probably one of those deals where the party reaches the top of the mountain only to see that it's but the foothill of the Himalayas).

Ernie immediately flies back out to the corridor, and as quickly as he can tells the others what he saw. Most notably he describes the dimensions of the room, the locations of the three people, the giant spheres in the far corner, and the shimmering in the air above the lines of blue energy on the floor. Morningstar relays all of this to Grey Wolf, who waits in the upper floors with Cobb and about twenty guards and priestesses.

Ernie then flies back into the huge chamber – just missing out on the *bless* spell cast on everyone else by Dranko. But the whole group follows close on his heels, streaming into the room to engage the Black Circle worshippers. Dranko, Ernie and Kibi are flying. But because they are unwilling to cross the blue energy lines, and because they have been arrayed far down the corridor, it takes a few rounds for them all to get inside.

And during that time, their enemies are not idle. The woman in the lightning-bolt breastplate downs a potion, and the next round drinks two more potions. Mokad reads off a spell from a scroll, and the halfling woman casts a spell on herself. The next round, the halfling appears to cast *stoneskin*, and Mokad runs over to stand near her before casting a spell that brings up a white hemisphere of translucent energy around the two of them.

Piratecat: Our battle cry was "Stop using one-use magic items; when we kill you, those will belong to us!"

The bad guys weren't impressed by our logic.

Only Aravis waits out in the corridor. While the others go in, he sits down and enters the Crosser's Maze.

Ernie flies in, skirts the left-hand wall to avoid the nearest blue energy line, and quaffs a *potion of heroism*.

Kay stands just inside the doorway and decides to see what happens to objects that pass over the blue lines. She fires an arrow towards the woman in the breastplate some eighty feet away, but it vanishes when it passes through the shimmering air. That merely confirms that their initial policy – to avoid those lines at all costs – seems to be wise.

The halfling wizard casts another spell, and another hemisphere of energy, this one a faint blue, surrounds both her and Mokad. And the human woman in the breastplate is suddenly surrounded with a familiar grey glow – either she has cast *stoneskin* on herself, or there is another invisible caster about!

One Certain Step moves into the room, intending to get to the armored woman on the far side. Flicker does the same, hoping to get some flanking opportunities when they arrive.

Dranko heads that way as well, flying and invisible. He activates Thriss, instructing the snake to attack the fighter if she moves towards the party.

Mokad, now encased inside two different spell bubbles, starts to cast a full-round spell from a staff.

Morningstar, once she has moved past the *silence* spell around the door, casts *searing darkness* at the female fighter. It goes through the shimmering air above the line of blue energy and strikes true, searing the flesh of her target. First blood!

Grey Wolf, back upstairs, agrees with Morningstar (over a *Rary's telepathic bond*) that he will probably be needed down in the ritual room soon. The World Spheres have clearly sped up recently, and may align in a matter of minutes.

He stops to get the Divination Sink from the *rope trick* – which cuts off the *telepathic bond* – but on his way to talk to Cobb about having his men join him, there are sounds of combat from elsewhere in the upper complex! Some of Cobb's men and several Ellish priestesses go off to investigate, but about ten stay with Grey Wolf. He instructs them to follow him as quickly as they are able, before flying down at top speed to join the others.

Back in the ritual chamber, the sudden conflagration of a massive *flame strike* scorches Step, Morningstar, Flicker and Ernie. Even more disturbing than the gruesome damage (Flicker and Morningstar both fail their saves) is the fact that it was cast by a fourth enemy, heretofore invisible, who is now revealed standing in one of the black circles in their quadrant of the room. He is even thinner than Mokad, wears spectacles, and looks smugly satisfied. And having just torched half the party, he then points a finger at Kay and casts another spell. Kay's vision starts to go dim, and she realizes with sudden horror that she has been struck blind!

Ernie flies just out of reach of the bespectacled Black Circle cleric and pegs him with an arrow. Kay and Oa-Lyanna activate their *fly* spell, and while Kay is blinded, Oa-Lyanna guides her flight towards the enemy human fighter. The fighter responds with a vicious flurry of attacks from a bastard sword she wields one-handed. In one gruesome round, almost half of Kay's own *stoneskin* is whittled away, and a good deal of damage gets through it altogether.

Kibi, flying over towards the human woman, glances down, and sees something quite startling. The large circular three-foot-high wall in the center of the room is actually a railing, and inside its perimeter is a deep circular pit extending downwards over twenty feet. 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. The two enormous translucent globes, each a miniature of an entire world, are moving inexorably closer...

thatdarncat: Oh, DAMN...

Fade: Why does dropping a *fireball* down that shaft sound like a really good idea to me?

Old One: Damn... That is some good stuff! I have been with this Story Hour since the beginning (fervently reading, infrequently commenting), but this cannot be good! Why do I get the feeling there is going to be a significant body count among our heroes?

Piratecat: Actually, I think the flying Dranko was the first person to get a good look down into that hole – and he almost wet himself. Bad. Very bad.

Samnell: You should have used that to your advantage. Imagine the Concentration DC if your aim was good...

coyote6: As long as he doesn't also try to lick himself, I think he'll be fine.

Piratecat: It's not a spoiler to tell you that several times during the combat, my question was, "Do something to hurt him, or pee on him?" I was trying to express to Mokad the depth of my displeasure that he chose to leave Delioch's faith. Decisions, decisions...

Samnell: I can respect that.

Kibi decides that this is the perfect place for his newly learned *confusion* spell. He casts it down into the pit, targeting an area that encompasses the priests in the center of the lower circle. Unfortunately, the spell is blocked by some kind of force barrier covering the pit like a lid, which glows as it blocks the magic of Kibi's spell. Damn!

Kay strikes out at the enemy fighter, but without sight, her swings go wide despite the helpful whispers of Oa-Lyanna.

The halfling wizard then casts another spell near the entry door, catching the slow-footed One Certain Step. A large rectangle of wispy white fog appears around him, and Step feels it seeping into his mind, addling his thoughts. He shakes his head and exits the fog cloud (which stays hanging in the air around the door), and even though he finds it hard to concentrate, he moves over in position to attack the bespectacled cleric the following round.

Dranko flies across the room until he's directly above Mokad (and above the two magic hemispheres). He takes careful aim and snaps his magical whip down hard on Mokad's arm. Mokad is still in the process of casting some full-round spell with a staff, but now his arm is jerked out of its pattern, and there is a brief, dim flash. Whatever he was casting has clearly been disrupted!

And a good thing, too! Mokad was about to finish casting a *summon monster VI* that would have added a barbezu to the fight.

His spell ruined, Mokad looks up and sees Dranko (now visible) hovering above him. Dranko flips him off and grins. Mokad glares back – and casts a targeted *dispel magic*. Suddenly Dranko is stripped of almost all his spells: the *fly*, *cat's grace*, *bless* and *bull's strength* are all gone, and only his *endurance* remains. And with the *fly* spell gone, Dranko drops five feet, hits the downward curve of the white hemisphere (now revealed as an *antilife shell*), and slides down to land on his feet at the hemisphere's base.

Back nearer to the room's entrance, Morningstar casts *chill seeds* (the Ellish version of *fire seeds*) and flips a frozen acorn at the cleric. **WHOOOM!** There is a blast of frozen energy, and the cleric's expression goes from smug to concerned. In return, he casts *circle of doom*, dealing out inflicted damage to several nearby party members.

Then he points at Morningstar and casts *searing light*. A beam of bright energy springs from his fingers – and just misses, shooting past Morningstar’s ear. Whew!

Kibi, still flying overhead, decides to ready himself for the cleric’s next move. Specifically, he readies a *fireball* on the condition of the cleric making any move to cast another spell.

Meanwhile, Ernie draws *Beryn Sur* and swings at the cleric, landing a damaging blow. Still, the enemy is standing.

Flicker is still running (while avoiding the blue force lines) over to where Kay and the enemy fighter are exchanging blows. Kay takes a full round of blind swings at her foe, and with Oa-Lyanna continuing to whisper advice (“She’s feinting right... sword up... now, swing low!...”) manages to land a couple of hits. But the armored woman is protected by her own *stoneskin* that absorbs almost all of the damage.

The halfling woman casts another spell across the room that has no immediate or obvious effect. But a moment later it becomes clear what she did: One Certain Step strides forward to where Ernie is battling the bespectacled cleric, and hacks at Ernie with his greatsword!

Ernie wheels in surprise, and when he sees Step finishing his backswing, he angrily shouts, “What were you thinking!?” But then he sees the terrible sight of Step’s face, contorted in horror and shame, as he struggles futilely against a *dominate person* spell. His mind, dulled by the *mind fog*, is unable to overcome the halfling woman’s control. Ernie realizes what has happened, and casts *magic circle against evil* on the paladin. Step feels the enemy wizard’s mind forcibly denied control by Ernie’s spell.

Dranko, standing ten feet from Mokad, smirks and says, “If the Black Circle is all about knowledge, how come you didn’t know to wear waterproof clothes today?” Then he sets the *decanter of endless water* on ‘geyser’ and sprays Mokad with it. It knocks Mokad down, but the Black Circle cleric manages to stand again, and concentrate enough to hit Dranko with an *enervation* spell. Dranko feels the negative levels settle like evil gravity on his soul, and two of his few remaining spells vanish from his mind.

Flicker glugs a healing potion and keeps running, almost reaching the enemy fighter, who is in the process of butchering Kay even through the *stoneskin*. Her glinting broadsword is moving almost too fast to see, and an inordinate number of her hits are criticals. After another flurry of swings, Kay is badly wounded, and her *stoneskin* left with but a single point of protection.

The bespectacled cleric begins to cast another spell, but never gets a chance to finish. Kibi, flying above him, sees the casting begin and nails him with a *fireball* from Aravis’s wand. When the flames clear, the foe has fallen, the lenses of his glasses melted into slag. There is much rejoicing.

One thing that has puzzled the party is a phrase from the last letter from Califax, that the ritual must take place “beneath the open noon sky, and yet not beneath the direct watch of the sun.” That particular puzzle is now answered, as a loud grinding noise comes from somewhere above. The party glance up to the dark ceiling in the center of the room, and see now that, above the circular pit in the floor, is a cylindrical hole in the ceiling, extending upwards a good forty feet. And at its top, at ground level, two sliding panels are slowly retracting, exposing the twenty-odd Black Circle priests in the pit to the twilight afternoon sky above Kallor.

And the World Spheres move closer, so close now that they’re surely less than a minute away from touching. The black energy is flowing up the side of the pit like a solid wave, and the beat of the loud thrumming, timed to the pulsing of the huge black circle beneath the Spheres, gets faster and faster...

Plane Sailing: Oh, no! They are not going to make it! Charagan is doomed, doomed I tell you!!

Fade: On the other hand, there’s going to be some vacancies in the Black Circle soon. The Company don’t necessarily have to be doomed with Charagan.

Carnifex: Talk about building up to a climax...

LightPhoenix: But where’s Aravis? Ahh, too much suspense... head exploding...



Aravis’s body is still out in the hallway, and his mind is still voyaging in the Crosser’s Maze...

He sees Grey Wolf represented by a bright patch of energy, suspended between the two massive planes that are practically overlapping. For several rounds he has tried to find and manipulate the dark energy the Black Circle priests are using, to no avail.

He has also seen thousands of dots of light hovering between the planes – all of them planar travelers on the verge of crossing over at the completion of the ritual. Strangely, only about two dozen are likely to come out in this particular vicinity.

Realizing that he's not doing any good outside, Aravis drops out of the Maze...

When his head clears a few seconds later, Grey Wolf comes flying down the stairs, streaking towards him. The wizards each take a round to cast *haste* (Aravis via his *boots of speed*), and then enter the fray. Both are able to shake off the effects of the *mind fog* right inside the door.

Ernie sees that Kay won't last much longer, and pulls out one of his more potent magic items: a *heal* scroll. He starts to read it, but the power of the spell proves too much for his abilities, and he is unable to manifest its effect. He utters a vicious oath: "Gosh darn it all to heck!"

Kay, realizing that Ernie's attempt to heal her has failed, disengages from her foe, flying up and away towards the center of the room. Morningstar shouts that she should fly towards her, so that she can cure her blindness.

Meanwhile, Flicker is finally flanking the enemy fighter (with Thriss providing the flanking opportunity). He manages to hit with a damaging sneak attack, much of which penetrates the *stoneskin*.

The woman wheels to face the new half-sized threat, smiles contemptuously, and launches another dizzying series of attacks with her bastard sword. Blood flies everywhere, and Flicker drops to the ground unconscious. Ernie shouts in alarm, "Flicker's down!" Step, shaking his head clear, runs forward towards the woman.

Dranko readies his *decanter*, to spray it directly on whichever of the two enemy spellcasters tries to cast. That turns out to be the halfling woman, who is knocked down by the blast of water. But she is still able to stand back up and concentrate enough to cast another spell: a *slow* spell, aimed at Dranko. The half-orc feels his muscles slowing down, and the world around him seems to speed up slightly.

But Dranko doesn't stay *slowed* for long. Morningstar blankets the area with a *dispel magic*, and while it fails to penetrate to the enemies within the *minor globe of invulnerability*, it does get rid of the *slow* spell.

Mokad casts another spell on himself, and his body shimmers. Immediately after that, Kibi arrives, flying directly over the heads of Mokad and the enemy halfling. He thinks he remembers reading about the *minor globe* spell, and has some recollection that powerful spells can blow through its protective bubble. He pulls a scroll of *cone of cold* out and reads it, hoping for a better outcome than Ernie's. He finishes the spell, and a blast of frost covers his foes.

When it clears, both of them are covered with ice, though Mokad seems more annoyed than injured. The halfling looks worse for wear. "Should have worn warmer clothes, too," Dranko suggests.

But Mokad is no longer looking at Dranko. He is looking over Dranko's shoulder, looking at Grey Wolf, who has just flown into the room. Mokad's brow furrows in worry.

Grey Wolf wastes no time; he casts *lightning bolt* at the fighter who has just felled Flicker. The electricity strikes the woman, but much of it is drawn into the breastplate with the lightning bolt design on the front, and she takes little damage.

But there's no time to worry about such things. With his *haste* allowing him more movement, Grey Wolf flies over to the World Spheres and positions his body so that it touches both of the great globes. There is a terrible jolt, and the ever-present churning in his guts becomes overwhelming. He drops unconscious and falls to the ground, no longer touching either of the Spheres. Edghar, to whom Grey Wolf has given orders to feed him the poison pellet as a last resort, also blacks out.

And now the edges of the Spheres are actually touching, and still moving towards perfect alignment. Each of the Spheres has a black core, and these have not yet met, but their merging seems inevitable. And well do the Company remember the words of prophecy that the Eyes of Moirel spoke to Grey Wolf through Skorg:

STAND IN SHADOW. STAND 'TWIXT THE SHADOWS.

WHEN THE SKY IS REVEALED AND THE ARCS TOUCH YOUR FRAME, THE WINDOW WILL OPEN.

YOUR FLAME MUST BE EXTINGUISHED BEFORE THE CORES CONVERGE ON YOUR SOUL.

Kibi, with no spells left that can penetrate the *minor globe*, decides to try out his dwarven throwing axe. He's not much good with weapons, let alone thrown weapons, but the axe flies true, hitting the flinching Mokad and drawing blood. Kibi is psyched.

On the other side of the battlefield, Ernie scoops up Flicker's body and flies with it to safety – but is nearly killed himself by the enemy fighter's attack of opportunity.

Then the woman in the breastplate steps forward to meet the approaching Step, shrugging off Thriss's attacks. Step meets her advance and swings his greatsword, but his swing is mostly blocked by the *stoneskin*.

Morningstar, having seen Kibi's success in overpowering the enemy defenses, calls a *flame strike* down on Mokad and the halfling. Mokad seems mostly uninjured by the blast, but the halfling collapses in a smoking heap. Another one down!

Dranko catches a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye, just above the pit in which the two dozen Black Circle priests continue their ritual. "I think the force barrier may have just gone down!" he calls.

Aravis decides to test the theory before wasting serious firepower. He runs over to the nearest segment of the low circular wall and casts *magic missile* from his wand, aimed down at one of the priests. The missiles strike the very-much-intact force barrier and are harmlessly deflected.

"Nope!" Aravis calls. "Still up!" At least this use of the wand gets rid of his snaky hair. In fact, it gets rid of his hair altogether. For once, Pewter is happy to be bald.

Kay lands near Morningstar, and while waiting to have her blindness cured, uses the healing power of her warhammer to undo some of the damage done by her adversary.

And then the cavalry arrives. Four priestesses of Ell and eight of Cobb's guards come running into the room, where they look around in awe at the enormous chamber. Fortunately they were warned by Grey Wolf to avoid the lines of blue energy!

The woman in the breastplate turns to Step, with a confident sneer that seems to say, "Next..." And she backs up the look, slashing at Step and landing four heavy and well-placed blows. The paladin falls into a pool of his own blood. Aravis sees Step fall, and pegs the fighter with a *sonic bolt* (a *lightning bolt* spell that does sonic damage rather than electricity). Then he casts *dimension door*, appearing next to the unconscious Grey Wolf.

Dranko whips Mokad again, and then tries to prevent his enemy from seeing Grey Wolf over his shoulder. But Mokad sees, and it's clearly dawning on him just what a danger Grey Wolf's presence here represents. He casts a horizontal *blade barrier* at shin height, over where Grey Wolf's body lies. Aravis leaps backwards, avoiding the whirling blades, but Grey Wolf, just regaining consciousness, is brutally slashed. He grabs Edgar and runs as fast as he can out of the *blade barrier*, feeling the magic slice his legs.

Morningstar finally casts *remove blindness* on Kay, and shouts orders to her priestesses to either help Step or shoot ranged weapons at Mokad. Kay, finally able to see, shoots arrows at the enemy fighter. Kibi turns from Mokad and shoots the fighter with another *fireball* from Aravis's wand. The woman is still standing, and strides forward, eager to engage a new opponent. Ernie stabilizes the unconscious, bleeding Flicker before flying back to see if Step is still alive.

Aravis is not pleased with Mokad and his *blade barrier*. Fuming, he levels his *staff of earth and stone* and casts *passwall*, opening up a pit beneath Mokad's feet. Mokad totters, lunges, falls into the ten foot deep pit, but just catches himself, hanging onto the lip by his fingers.

Aravis then turns and casts a second *passwall*, diagonally and downwards towards the large pit in the center of the room. He hopes to bypass the force "lid" and create an opening into the lower ritual chamber. But the *passwall* is thwarted by another force wall; it seems that the entire space must be so shielded.

Dranko, smiling, cracks his whip at Mokad's exposed hands – and Mokad drops into the bottom of the pit. The *antilife shell* and *minor globe* still shield him. But they don't protect him from Kibi, who flies back over his pit and again flings his dwarven axe downwards. Still aided by Dranko's *bless* spell, Kibi scores a direct critical hit, slicing deep into Mokad's chest!

Mokad looks up, realizes the predicament he's in, and casts a small *wall of stone*. It creates a horizontal barrier about halfway up the pit, covering about two-thirds of the opening. He steps back underneath it, shielded now from everyone's line of sight, but still with an escape hatch should he want it.

Grey Wolf, lying on the floor, drinks a healing potion but doesn't stand up yet, not wanting to make a target of himself.

Morningstar, seeing the enemy fighter still moving forwards, decides enough is enough. She nails her with one final *searing darkness*, and the woman in the breastplate screams before finally falling dead to the ground.

Only Mokad now stands among their enemies, not counting the Black Circle priests in the pit below. Those have not looked up, not taken any notice at all of any of the fighting going on above their heads. And the black energy still continues to flow, drawing the World Spheres ever closer to convergence...

Suddenly there is a tremendous tearing sound. The World Spheres have lurched forward, and as the party look on in horror, they meet directly above the large black circle on the ground, the cores overlapping in their center. Grey Wolf is still alive, and not in the proper place! He feels the churning in his guts become a terrible burning, and as the party watch helplessly, his body and soul are burned away as the Black Circle ritual reaches its terrible finale. There is a deep shadow around him, followed by a sickening greenish glow, and then he is gone, with only a black vapor marking his passing.

And all around them in the room, enemy soldiers begin to appear. One after another, dressed in spiked black armor, they step forward across the planar boundary from Volpos to Abernia. In only a few seconds the room is full of them, all wielding cruel, curved swords. And then one last soldier appears, towering above them, red plate armor covering his body, a blood-red helm covering his face.

"We are here!" he exults. "We have returned to Abernia, and this time we shall not be driven out."

The Company realize they are doomed, but some of them must get out to warn the Spire. Kay, Kibi and Ernie, who are still flying, flee through the hole opened to the sky above the large pit. Behind them they hear the sounds of battle, as the black-armored soldiers move in and overpower those remaining in the room. For Dranko, Morningstar, Step and Flicker, the adventure has come to an untimely end. And the others, fleeing through the air, see below in Kallor that every street is filled with black-armored soldiers, and even the countryside beyond is swarming with the enemy. Some of the buildings in the southern parts of the city are already burning.

Naradawk Skewn has come to Charagan at last.



Piratecat: Disintegrate: it's an ugly word. But for Dranko, it was horribly appropriate.

Waylander the Slayer: Holy crap – damn! I'm numb... I mean... er... they are dead!! Nooooo. You can't kill Dranko – all the others, sure, but not him... Wahhhhhh... noooo! Don't worry, I'm on my way to Boston to whack your rat-bastard DM!!

That was just astounding!! What exactly was Grey Wolf supposed to do? This is still unclear to me; he stood touching both of the spheres and passed out?? Was this supposed to happen? Is the PC supposed to kill himself before this?? Huh?

Tareth Greenbriar: What happened to Aravis? You did not mention whether he got away in that last update...

I do not post much to these boards, but this story ROCKS! Keep up the good (if now somewhat downbeat) work.

Piratecat: Morningstar and Dranko died back-to-back, at least. I honestly thought I could hold out long enough to figure out an escape, but my dice did not help. Neither did Morningstar's; a failed Will save meant that before I went, Mokad got to taunt me through her mouth. It was... upsetting.

The whole campaign has got to shift at this point! I have the strong feeling that whatever my replacement PC is, he's going to have to be good at guerilla warfare. Sagiro will tell you the details, though; no spoilers for what happened next.

Lord Pendragon: Reading the latest update, my first thought was, "Well, this is terrible, but since some of them escaped, they should be able to get the others a *true resurrection* to carry on the struggle." But from the sound of your post, you're actually going to be playing new PCs.

I'm curious: how did everyone take this? I don't know how I'd handle this, after playing a PC for over five years. That's a lot of emotional investment to be blasted by a single night of bad rolling. Granted, the story will continue to be fantastic, and the world is more exciting than ever, but I'd still be upset at losing my PC, I think.

Can't wait for the next update. Have you already created new PCs yet, or is that something you'll be doing during your next session?

Kajamba Lion: That was rather impressive. I'm very much interested to see where this will go...

Maybe I'm missing something here, but what happened to Aravis? I think I've accounted for everyone else, but I can't seem to figure out where he went. I may, of course, just be having a bit of a brain fart, but... (*checks watch*) it's a spot early for this lion to have been awake for nearly 4.5 hours...

Vurt: Very nice, Sagiro, but the jig is up! Please post the *real* part 131d!!

Kid Charlemagne: I'm amazed! The whole story has been spectacular, and I commend Sagiro on having the guts to let it play out without fudging things in the players' favor (or maybe he did and it was just one of those days when it just isn't going to work!).

As for the PCs who died... I truly feel that there are only two ways for a PC to end his or her career. To either succeed against overwhelming odds, or to die well in a spectacular fight that will live on in memory forever.

If ever there is a time to die for a D&D character, it's in a session like this one. Kudos all around!

Kid Charlemagne: Then again, it is April 1st.

Don' make me angry... You wouldn't like when I'm angry!

KidCthulhu: The real suckage is that of the three of us who got away, none of us has a *sending*. So how we're going to notify the Spire is a little, er, troubling. I presume the Archmagi are going to notice the planar conjunction.

What Sagiro didn't mention is that Kay had to deck Ernie to get him to fly away. He was heading back into the room with his tiny can of halfling whup-ass, ready to die with the rest.

What rankles almost most of all is that Mokad lived. And was successful. All hail the king rat-bastard.

Rune: No... words... can't... speak... shock... wow...



You know what the best thing about April 1 is? It gives me an excuse to tell GREAT BIG WHOPPERS!
The Company still live, the ritual hasn't been completed, and the *true* outcome is still to be revealed.
April Fools, everyone!

Dawn: Well, damn! It is April 1st. Didn't even realise that when reading that last post. After my co-workers got my heart restarted, I was able to continue reading and learn the wonderful truth – the PCs are still alive and Sagiro is truly a rat-bastard!

Kid Charlemagne: Oooooooooooooohhhh!! I'm angry! D'oh!

Hook, line, & sinker. I'm such a putz.

Micah5: I'll fess up. I bit. I don't usually check the forum more than once a day, but I came back to see what type of reaction you were getting to half of the Company being knocked off. I am relieved that I am only a sucker and that the aforementioned events did not happen.

Kudos Sagiro, Piratecat, & KidCthulhu, you are now entitled to yell APRIL FOOLS as loud as you wish!

Memory: I fell for this one hook, line, and sinker. A great story, masterfully told. Now you owe us the real update, mister!

Rune: Damn! That would have been an awesome ending to an incredible campaign!

Swack-Iron: I fell for this one hook, line and sinker.

So Sagiro, it's a testament to your writing and storytelling skills how well you pulled this one off. And it's a testament to your rat-bastardness that, due to the amazing coincidence of having the telling of the culmination of your entire campaign fall on April Fool's, you pull the wool over all our eyes. And as someone else mentioned, the only way you can make it up to all of us is to post the *real* ending post-haste!!

J'quan: Yeah, but the kicker is, either outcome is viable. As PC put in his post, dice luck can make the difference in this epic-level encounter. I cannot wait to see the "real" outcome, though either way, it leads to more great storytelling.

Kajamba Lion: (looks curiously at fish hook embedded in paw, thus not noticing the net that lands on him from behind)

Let this be a lesson to lions – 5 a.m. wake-ups on 1 April leave us open to trickery. Well done, Sagiro.

Plane Sailing: One of the nice things about reading this from the UK is that on a new day I have to go to the end of the Story Hour and work back to the last bit that I read.

On April 1st, that is an inestimable advantage.

Gafnidus: The Company still lives, the ritual hasn't been completed, and the true outcome is still to be revealed.

...but Buttercup's nightmares were growing steadily worse. Nice job, you RBST!

Boss: ARRGHHH!! That was a beautiful April Fools... Now please excuse me while I pick the rest of my mouth up off the floor...

Waylander the Slayer: You suck Sajeero!! You are a true rat bastard. Not a lil' ratbastardy or somewhat ratbastardy but the king. Now I am really going to live up to my promise and come to Boston and whack you!!

Victim: You people are mean. How can you torment us so?

How did I fall for it? Since spells can freely pass through *minor globes*, the section about Mokad still being protected should have been a giveaway! Now where's the real deal?

Aravis: Argh!! The Joke was announced before I had a chance to contribute... Oh, well.

I still want to know though, WHAT HAPPENED TO ARAVIS?

coyote6: For me, the funniest thing is that I even checked the time/date stamp after reading it – just in case. However, I was logged in, and all the times are displayed in my local time – which means the post was stamped 03-31-2002 09:39 PM.

Gideon: You know, it is still April 1st; no trust from here 'til tomorrow. By the way, add one more fish to the line.

madriel: When Sagiro mentioned that Edgar went down without feeding Grey Wolf his poison pellet I started to get suspicious. When Grey Wolf drank a healing potion I knew. Piratecat mentioning he wasn't going to give away any spoilers *after* telling us how Dranko died was, well, a giveaway.

Of course it helped that I cast *Protection vs Rat-Bastardly DM Tricks* before reading. Good one, Sagiro.

Now post the real update.

KidCthulhu: OK, the really funny thing is how many of the things that really *did* happen you all aren't believing. Heh.

Pillars of Hercules: That was brutal, KidC – now I'm all worried about our heroes and heroines again!

Even if some of them did punch out, and even if Charagan is totally doomed 'cause they failed, it would still have been a great ending to this story arc, Sagiro.

OK, it's been April 2nd for a while now, so everything from here on out is on the level... until next year.

KidC is right about the fact that the "evidence" presented regarding the hoax is stuff that really happened. Specifically:

- When Mokad fell into the pit, he was still within the ten foot radius of the *minor globe of invulnerability*.
- Edgar never had the opportunity to feed Grey Wolf the poison pill, since he went unconscious as soon as Grey Wolf did.
- Grey Wolf really did drink the healing potion, since he needed to stay alive until he was in both the right place and moment to die.

Next installment coming up, including the *actual* ending to the story arc!



Ernie lands by Step and sees that the paladin will almost certainly live until the priestesses of Ell reach him. He flies back towards the others, healing himself as he goes with a charge from a healing wand. As he does this, he sees a group of a dozen enemy soldiers come rushing into the chamber, dressed in the varying uniforms of local Silent Quarter house guards. The front two of them go charging directly across the nearest blue energy line, and vanish. The others stop short, and start to go around.

Kibi notices their approach, and lays down a *spike stones* covering the entire area around the door. The advancing enemy soldiers come to a halt, many of them hopping in pain.

Dranko summons *Iglat*, the small fire elemental from his mace, and it drops into the pit to plague Mokad. There is no indication of what happens to him.

Wanting to inflict some personal pain against his enemies, Grey Wolf casts an *iron storm* around the enemy guards, who are already immobilised by the *spike stones*. Some try to flee, and drop from spike damage. Others stay put, and start to take damage from the whirling iron filings.

The other members of the Company stay just outside the two protective spheres still shielding Mokad, wondering what he's doing down below the *wall of stone*. Then Aravis uses a wand to cast *levitate* on Grey Wolf, lifting him back up so that his body intersects both Spheres. Once again, Grey Wolf tries mightily to stay conscious, but the pain is too great and he (and Edgar) both black out. Aravis makes sure he stays floating in the air; Grey Wolf's body hangs limply between the two World Spheres, Edgar on his chest.

And Aravis goes into the Maze again, right there in the very shadow of the World Spheres, hoping to see something that will spare the necessity of killing Grey Wolf...

He sees something very curious. At this close range, he can see Grey Wolf's body suspended at the center of the two planes. And around him, binding him to both worlds, is a latticework of crystal webbing. There's a rainbow of color: white, orange, red, blue, yellow... and a purple and green color, both the same shade as the Company's two Eyes of Moirel.

Realizing that the worst he can do is kill a man already destined to die, Aravis tries focusing the energy of the Maze through Ernie, intending to burn away the crystal webs and unbind Grey Wolf from the two planes.

Ernie feels a strange tugging at his soul, as if something is trying to suck the life-force out of him. He realizes that it cannot succeed unless he wills it, and thinking it's probably some Black Circle magic, he doesn't cooperate. But when he runs over to where Aravis has fallen to his knees, he sees that Aravis has entered the Maze. Ernie recalls Aravis's report of how he thinks the Maze works, that its power has to be drawn and focused through living beings, and realizes that the pull on his being is probably Aravis. He shouts out that suspicion to the others, and then gives in to the pull. He suddenly feels a great chill down to his very core...

...and in the Maze, Aravis is able to direct the raw elemental energy at the crystal webbing. Some of it flakes away, but it is not enough. Realizing it will take all the power he can get, he reaches out to the others in the room, trying to draw on their energy as well. He spares only Morningstar and Kibi, since they are the ones tasked with killing the suspended Grey Wolf before the cores of the World Spheres meet.

After Ernie's shouted speculation about what's happening, the others also voluntarily give up their life force. Morningstar shouts to the priestesses and soldiers that they should do the same (the four priestesses all do; of Cobb's men, some do, but about half are too frightened).

Aravis, deep in the Maze, suddenly finds a flood of power at his disposal. He channels it all at the crystal webbing, which starts to break away in large chunks...

Those outside contributing to Aravis's efforts feel life and warmth sucked out of them, stolen away to fuel the Maze. The Spheres get closer and closer, the cores practically touching now. Black energy is spilling across the floor in a solid wave beneath Aravis...

...and in the depths of the Crosser's Maze, the webs break apart entirely; no longer is the bloodline of Moirel bound into the connection between Volpos and Abernia.



Grey Wolf snaps awake, hovering in the air. For the first time in a long, long time, he feels no churning, no discomfort, no sensation of his body or soul connected to the planes. He flies up and away from the World Spheres, leaving Morningstar and Kibi (poised to kill him) confused about what to do now.

The cores of the Spheres meet, and their huge volumes ripple with black energy. The cores glow an impossibly luminous black. Around the room, two dozen forms start to take shape – black-armored warriors all, except for one. A huge soldier in familiar red plate starts to coalesce in the room, a huge sword in his hand.

The Spheres linger at perfect conjunction for a sliver of time...

...but there is no descendant of Moirel to keep them bound together, and they slide out of phase, each heading to where the other had started.

The black energy surges back away from the Spheres, back down into the pit where the two dozen Black Circle worshippers still stand. There is a moment of massive magical feedback, and with a sickening rending sound, the pit is suddenly filled with a damp red mist. Blood splatters against the underside of the force ceiling. One of the soldiers, whom Morningstar had told to keep an eye on the ritual pit, turns away in sudden disgust and vomits on the floor.

The black-armored soldiers and their red-armored leader are suddenly frozen, and just as they fade away, the Company watch as their bodies are also torn silently apart. Much cheering follows.

Aravis stops channeling the life force of his comrades, and instead tries to see if he can draw Mokad into the Maze, as Solomea Pirenne had done to the Company months earlier. But the strain finally overwhelms him, and his mind is ejected from the Maze.

He sits upright, and sees most of the Company standing near Mokad's pit, still outside the *antilife shell*. Morningstar has cast a *mind fog* down in the pit, and Kibi, once the *minor globe* vanished, had shot another *fireball* down into it, but there's no proof that Mokad is even still down there. Just in case, Grey Wolf walks over to the edge of the *antilife shell* and calls down to Mokad: "No army for you today... so sorry!"

So Aravis, foggy from being in the Maze for so long and able to do little else, dismisses the *passwall*. Ordinarily this would harmlessly eject anyone inside the pit out of the opening... but Mokad has created a *wall of stone* sealing off most of the pit halfway up! **WHAM!** Mokad is ejected, but not so harmlessly, as he slams into the *wall of stone* and then flips around it, before landing shakily on his feet at ground level. His body is bruised, and one of his legs looks broken. But still alive, and defiant to the last, Mokad immediately flies up, over the center of the room and towards the open ceiling high above.

The Company hit him with everything they have. Dranko fires off the *searing light* from his whip, but Mokad had cast *spell resistance* while down in the pit, and the spell fails to affect him. Aravis, still *hasted*, nails him with a *sonic bolt* that gets through the spell resistance, but the *cone of cold* that follows doesn't seem to have any effect. Morningstar and Ernie cast *searing darkness* and *searing light*, but like Dranko's they fail to penetrate the *spell resistance*. Grey Wolf casts a final *lightning bolt*, which singes Mokad but still doesn't bring him down.

It comes down, then, to Kay, who is flying in pursuit. She just catches up to him before he can fly off into the twilight of Kal-lor. Very quietly, she whispers, "This is for you, grandpa." And then she takes a last desperate swing with her warhammer.

Due to a scheduling necessity, Kay's player couldn't make this run. Afterward, she told me that Kay had been hoping to deliver a line like that to Mokad, ever since learning he was responsible for her grandfather's death in the ravaged city of Ghant.

CRUNCH! Mokad's body plummets seventy feet, from the top of the shaft to the force wall ceiling of the ritual pit below. There is a satisfying thud. Then the force wall gives way, and Mokad's body falls the remaining fifteen feet, into the inch of gore covering the floor.

RavenSinger: Can I just say, all my co-workers were startled when I let out a hearty "WOO-HOO!" when I read this.
Thanks, Sagiro and Abernathy's Company, for such a GREAT campaign!

Dranko climbs down the wall, and stands over Mokad's lifeless body. A grim expression on his face, he takes out a piece of the blood gargoyle, carried around since the devastation of Ghant years before. Fulfilling a promise he has made to himself many times since, he opens Mokad's mouth and stuffs the chunk of red stone inside.

The thrumming of the Spheres has stopped, as has all flow of black energy between the circles on the floor. The Company, exhausted, bleeding, and drained of life energy, look around in wonder.

The Black Circle has failed, its devotees gruesomely slain, and its grand design in ruins.

Victory!



Plane Sailing: What an excellent conclusion to the Black Circle business! Coming right down to the wire, heroes putting their life force on the line, Grey Wolf being a descendant of Moirel (had we known that? I don't remember that snippet of info), bad guys being hit by the backlash of their foul magics, Mokad biting the dust. Yay, Abernathy's Company (or whatever they get called now...)!!

I felt a warm glow of satisfaction at the resolution here. Sometimes it is best for the villains to not escape. (Does that only leave Meledien of the red-armoured warriors still extant?)

Fade: Could someone please help me remove this hook? I fear it may have become permanently embedded. Seriously... great job, Sagiro! And a very satisfying milestone in the campaign.

Lord Pendragon: You know, the funny thing is that I checked the post date and time after reading it, saw the "4-01-02" on the bottom, and considered it. But the faux-update seemed so plausible that I decided it was the real deal. The campaign shift would have been dramatic, but doable and interesting.

I suppose I should have re-read my own post, though. Since PCs have been brought back to life before, there'd be no reason for creating new PCs - the one hint I should have picked up that it wasn't real.

Still, in a very real sense I got to read two great updates for the price of one. Thanks Sagiro, for both of them!

Aravis: Well, you have to remember that some players may decide that their characters don't want to come back. Those players would then presumably start a new character. Not sure at this point who would make that decision, but some might.

Enkhidu: It's a rarity that I post in a Story Hour - even one I've read since the party was whisked to Abernathy's Tower - but I just have to say one thing: thank you!

My favorite campaigns have always been "save the world" campaigns that start with 1st- or low-level characters, and this is one of the best ones I've ever seen. I could go on and on about the breadth and depth of the campaign, but instead I'll just say this. I actually find myself caring about these characters - more so than in much of the published fiction I've read. If you do eventually turn this into a book of some sort, you'll have at least one buyer!

And don't count out the possibility of a book based on a campaign: if I remember rightly, a certain pair of writers (Hickman and Weis was it?) used campaign inspiration to create one of the quintessential pieces of gaming fiction of the 80's...

Anyway, thanks for the fun! And keep it up, dang it!

KidCthulhu: What Sagiro hasn't described here is the long, terrible moment, when the globes merged. Remember that the characters didn't know that Grey Wolf was free. We just knew he wasn't dead, and the Spheres had joined.

Dranko is panting outside Mokad's pit, his shoulders slumping. Kibi grips his axe tighter. Kay nocks an arrow, the wind blowing her hair, even here. Flicker raises himself on one elbow, worry etched in the lines of his face. The allies look up from healing Step, certain that something bad is coming, although they know not what.

Aravis is still sunk deep in the Maze and in front of him, Grey Wolf's limp form hangs, like an unwanted sacrifice to some finicky god.

Ernie spins his blade, and drops the visor on his helmet, prepared to take some of the bastards with him if he can.

Then, slowly, imperceptibly, the Spheres move apart.

And the whole world breathes again.

And all hell breaks loose.

That's what a rat-bastard Sagiro is. All hail his squeaky, long-tailed greatness.

Zaruthustran: That... was... AWESOME! Many thanks, Sagiro, for a wild ride. Once again, I beg you to make a full novel of this creation. Actually, I suppose that'd be a series of novels.

Can't wait to see what's next!

Carnifex: Woohoo! A truly glorious victory - congratulations to the party!

RangerWickett: It's like *Twin Peaks*. I love it, I know it's brilliant, but I have almost no idea what just happened. So, please, remind us of all the details when you get a chance. Mainly, how did you know Grey Wolf was supposed to be there and die? And what did the Eyes of Moirel and traveling nowhere have to do with this? Ack. Too many old hints and foreshadowings.

Lord Pendragon: My guess is that that part is yet to come. The Black Circle's been defeated, but Naradawk Skewn is still in that alternate Prime, and he's probably still battering at the barriers the Archmages have been holding shut. The Black Circle was working a short-cut, but with Naradawk alive and kicking, he's still a threat. So the Company's going to have to track down another Eye of Moirel so they can pass into the alternate Material plane and take care of the problem for good.

(Unless the red-armored soldier who was torn apart was Naradawk...)

madriel: Was that Naradawk? Either way, that was simply amazing. It was really cool how Kay's last-ditch effort paid off. For us at least. Were you really hoping Mokad would make it out, Sagiro, or were you happy to let the party finally nail him?

KidCthulhu: As we have for so many other victories over big, long-standing enemies, we were all muttering around the table, "Drop, drop, drop! Drop, damn you, die!"

Sometimes this strange ritual actually works.

Fade: So are the Company going to continue on to solve the loose ends and unresolved injustices, or is this really the end?

KidCthulhu: This is the end of the first attempt to bring the Emperor through. There will be more. Look at the *commune* Morningstar cast a few runs ago. The divine answer was pretty clear about this trick working "this time."

I think the Company's next task, after training, and a flurry of magic item creation (Ernie needs a *fly* item SO badly), will be to go to Kivia, recover the third Eye of Moirel, and go "nowhere." From there, we suspect we can use the Focus, the Maze, the Opener, the Light and the Eyes to disconnect the connection between the two planes, finally removing the weak points between the worlds. The Archmagi can then retire to a beach somewhere (all except the one in the Mouth of Nahalm, who's probably had enough sand).

Then we just have to deal with Parthol, who wants the Spire dead with or without the Emperor, that weird Slayer prophecy, Shreen the Fair, destroy the Guild of Chains, save the halflings of Appleseed... Did I get everything?

LightPhoenix: Find out why the cats want Aravis so badly.

nemmerle: ... I have to say I was little disappointed that none of the PCs died in that last confrontation – especially Grey Wolf. Now, from a game perspective, if the PCs were clever enough to figure out how to keep from dying and keep Grey Wolf from dying that is totally cool and great – but from a story perspective I guess I am into heroic sacrifice or just plain old tragedy.

Then again, they still seem to have some evil left to deal with in this place and in general with the remaining plot threads – so perhaps I will still get my wish...

Dinkeldog: I'm about the exact opposite. Heroic sacrifice and just plain old tragedy of this nature is only good if: (a) the player knows up front; or (b) the player is leaving the game and the DM wants the departure to be final or dramatic. I would be rather pissed if I started a game in good faith and the DM just decided that my death was necessary to the storyline without talking to me first.

nemmerle: But Dinky, how am I supposed to know Sagiro didn't talk with Grey Wolf's player?

And when I mentioned the story perspective, I meant as someone reading a story, not someone playing in one.

Rel: You know, Nemm, I feel sort of the same. Not that I have any ill-will toward Grey Wolf, but I had sort of mentally prepared myself for his demise (and I also figured that there was no way that Sagiro would let him be resurrected).

But I can also appreciate the "plot-twisty-expect-the-unexpected" aspect of this turn of events as well.

What I'm really looking forward to is how the campaign progresses from here. In my experience from 20+ years of gaming, once the party saves the universe, everything else seems pretty old hat. But I have seldom seen so masterful a storyteller as Sagiro. If anybody can pull that off, it's him.

KidCthulhu: Don't worry guys, this is only part one of many world saves.

And as for Grey Wolf or anyone else dying, you should remember that at least two party members were knocked unconscious during the battle, and only fast flying and a *wand of cure serious* saved their bacon. Sagiro told me afterwards that there was a very small chance that we would hit on the one plan that could save Grey Wolf. We just got very clever and very lucky.

Piratecat: As for killing Grey Wolf, I think Nemmerle is dead wrong. What happened is actually more heroic than killing Grey Wolf, which was the main plan we had prepared for. Instead, Aravis managed to hit on possibly the one other method, disconnecting Grey Wolf from the very planes. In order to do so, everyone had to sacrifice life energy (XP) – and I'd rather do that than have one person die. We were clever, or at least we tried to be; I'm glad Sagiro didn't penalize us for that.

nemmerle: Again, allow me to reiterate – it was not so much that I *wanted* Grey Wolf to die, or that I think he *should* have died, but maybe that someone important might have died, and this is just from a "reading the story of the events" point of view. From a gaming point of view, *of course* if the PCs are clever and inventive they deserve to win and have none of them die.



Before the Storm**The Hall of Horrors**

Run #132 – Sunday, April 7, 2002

Kibi glances up uncomfortably at the walls and ceiling of this huge room – over 100 feet on a side, with no pillars or arches for support. As a dwarf and former stonemason, he knows this room should be collapsing under its own weight. He casts *detect magic* – and of course it doesn't work, because Grey Wolf is still carrying around the Divination Sink. They stick it in the *bag of holding*, Kibi casts again, and he sees that all of the walls are glowing with enchantment magic. He breathes a little easier.

While he's got the spell up, he does a quick sweep of the room identifying magical loot. There is plenty on the bodies of the four they fought, but none down in the bloody soup in the lower part of the room. "Just as well," says Ernie. "I'm not into looting with a sieve."

Dranko: Mokad said a lot of things sneeringly.

Ernie: Now he says them smearing...

Kay flies up through the hole in the roof, to get a better sense of just what this ritual room is below. She discovers that the retractable roof opens into a courtyard nestled nicely in the center of several city estates. It looks like it abuts three different properties – those belonging to Lord Southinghorn, Lady Canterrin, and "that nice old chap" Lord Cosnor.

With many party members low on health after the fight, and nearly out of spells, the Company decide to burn a few more charges of their *wands of cure serious wounds*. Shaking their heads at how many total charges they've used, they estimate that since they were made, those wands have cured over 1,100 hit points of party damage!

Ernie takes some of the remaining soldiers and goes upstairs to see what has become of Cobb. He finds signs of heavy fighting throughout the upper level of the Black Circle complex – over twenty dead house guards from the Silent Quarter, along with fourteen of Cobb's men and six priestesses of Ell. But Cobb still lives, his unconscious body tended by two Ellish clerics who also survived the battle. Together with two other injured city guards, the five of them are the only survivors of the skirmish.

The clerics are out of healing magic, so Ernie uses more charges from a healing wand to restore Cobb. The guard captain opens his eyes, sees Ernie, and says, "Oh, hell, they killed you too?"

"No!" Ernie says cheerily. "We're alive. And we won! We beat the Black Circle, and they're the ones who are dead."

Cobb looks around, the truth dawning on him. "Hot damn!" he says, breaking into a grin.

Down in the ritual room, Dranko has spotted a door in the lower chamber, semi-concealed by the patterns of stonework. It seems that there's more to discover down here, but the Company know from experience that the door is probably trapped. Sure enough, Kibi detects strong abjuration magic.

Out of other useful spells, and not wanting to subject Flicker to the risk, Morningstar casts one of her few remaining spells, *summoning* an octopus which Dranko then heaves against the door. As it strikes, it triggers the *harm* glyph, and wounds open up all over the body of the poor sea creature. It writhes in pain for a few seconds before Dranko puts it out of its misery with his mace. All of the clerics wince, and look up to the heavens in an apologetic manner. It's not their finest moment.

Dranko swings the door open. Beyond is a straight hallway, lit with *continual flame* torches. It goes on for over eighty feet, and ends at another door. There are two doors on either side of the hallway as well, making five in all.

Little do the Company know just what a hall of horrors it is they are about to explore...

coyote6: Is that "horror" as in "indescribable atrocities and offenses against all that is good and decent," or as in "should never have started down the hall without full hit points and a full complement of spells"?

KidCthulhu: Conveniently enough, he means both!

madriel: Bah, prudence is for sissies. A true adventurer pursues evil at all times, even when they're half-dead and out of spells.

Old adventurers never die, they just never live to get old!

Flicker bravely volunteers to try disarming the magical traps detected on four of the five interior doors, knowing the painful price of failure. He gets the first three, but an ill-timed sneeze while working on the last one sets off the *harm* glyph. Ernie is waiting with the healing wand, and Flicker's agony is short-lived.

Dranko first opens the near door on the right – the one that wasn’t trapped. It opens into a small room containing only a cot and a magical pitcher that never runs out of water. After a bit of searching fails to turn up anything sinister, Dranko tries the nearest door on the left.

The room beyond is also not large, maybe twenty feet on a side. It is full of shifting shadows, though there is no obvious light source inside. A grey metal cauldron squats in the center of the room, filled with either a black vapor or a black liquid. It’s hard for Dranko to say which, because when he feels the familiar chill and wave of unease indicative of proximate null shadows, he slams the door as fast as he can and puts his back to it.

“I think I know what’s in there,” he says, his face pale. When no null shadows come out of the room in the next few moments, the party decide to check the other doors before dealing with the cauldron.

Some thirty feet down the hall, Dranko opens the other door on the left-hand side of the hallway. It creaks open, revealing another smallish room, stone walls and floor, slightly larger than the one with the cauldron. There is a small round pit in the center of the floor, perhaps four feet in diameter. Suspended above this pit is a small iron cage, hanging from the ceiling by a metal chain, and in the cage is a chunk of black rock. Dranko doesn’t need to cast *detect evil*; he can *feel* that the rock is evil, just by standing there. Greasy vapors waft up from the pit, playing over the cage and the black stone.

There is another chain linked to the cage, and at the other end of the second chain is a metal ring clamped tightly around the head of a man. The man, unshaven and filthy, is curled up in the fetal position in a corner of the room. Around him on the floor are scattered empty flasks, just like the ones filled with green liquid that the party found earlier in the magically protected cabinet of the alchemy lab on the floor above. Black energy plays along both chains.

The party are hesitant to go into the room, but Ernie cannot stand to see the man suffering. He runs into the room despite the party’s protests. As he passes by the pit, he sees that it is full of a thick, mostly clear oil, and that several objects are suspended therein. But he ignores that for now, and goes to check on the bedraggled victim. Ernie reaches out and touches the man’s shoulder, and the man stirs, turns slowly, and lifts his head. Dranko, watching from the door, gasps in shock. He knows this man. His hair is longer, his bones thinner, and he didn’t have a beard when Dranko last saw him, but there’s no mistaking him. It’s Califax.

The black iron ring is affixed so tightly to Califax’s head that they cannot loosen or pry it, but an *enlarge* spell causes it to come free. It takes a layer of skin with it, leaving a red band around his head. They carry him out and take him to the room with the cot, where Ernie spends another charge of the healing wand, and trickles some water into his mouth.

Califax has said nothing coherent, producing only moaning noises and occasional snippets of babble. Morningstar casts *detect thoughts*, but Califax is deranged. When Dranko and Ernie try to make it clear that the Black Circle has been defeated and that he’s safe, Califax’s tortured mind cannot comprehend it, and he thinks it must be a trick, or that he’s not understanding them. He says something incomprehensible, and Morningstar, reading his mind, says he’s trying to say: *You have to stop them! You must stop them!*

Plane Sailing: Sagiro, I just want to say that I love the thread which has woven through here of the redemption of Califax. I think the theme of redemption is woefully underused in most fantasy where the bad guys remain blacker than black – your plots rise above that, and in no clearer way than the matter of Califax. Bravo!

While some stay tending to Califax, the others go back to take a look in the oily pit. Dranko drops a magical light source into it, and the light sinks about halfway down before stopping. It illuminates a folded up piece of paper, which Kibi lifts out with a *mage hand* spell. Neither oil nor paper detects as magic, so they unfold it on the floor of the room.

It’s a chart of magic schools; there’s one like it in apprentice wizards’ rooms in mage guilds across the kingdom. Aravis, Grey Wolf and Kibi have all seen numerous posters like this one, showing the relationships between schools of magic, which ones oppose other ones, and what basic hand gestures form the roots of casting. Grey Wolf takes a closer look, when he sees a slight tear in one corner. The chart he had in his room studying under his master Melido had the same tear. It also had the same discolored spot from a misfired *ray of frost*, and the same pattern of creases...

There’s no mistake. It is the poster from Grey Wolf’s room as a young student, so many years ago. It’s here, now, in this Black Circle den of abominations. But why would they have gone to the trouble of... The resurrection! Califax had warned the Company that the Black Circle had some means of resurrecting Grey Wolf against his will, should he die. Grey Wolf looks up again at the evil black rock hanging over the pit, and the Company realize the terrible purpose of this room.

They move on to the door at the end of the hall, wondering if what’s beyond it could possibly be worse...

Dranko takes a deep breath, wonders for a minute why *he*'s the one opening all these doors, and pulls the handle. It opens, and a wave of such malevolent and overpowering evil comes out of the room that Dranko drops unconscious on the spot. The others, standing back from the door, not only can feel the evil pouring from the room, but cannot even look straight at the doorway, as if the evil is a blinding light shining out from the opening. Alarmed, they drag Dranko's body away from the door and slam it shut. The evil hangs in the air like an after-image for a few seconds.

Perhaps that door can wait until tomorrow.

Dranko comes around soon enough, and describes what he saw in the room before he was knocked out. He remembers seeing walls lined with bookshelves, all heaped with books and scrolls. In the center of the room was a large, thick wooden table. And around the corner to the left, where he couldn't see, there was... something. Just the memory causes him pain.

The last of the five doors turns out to be much less dire. It reveals a tiny room, hardly more than a closet, with a large crank handle protruding from the wall. On the floor near the wall with the handle is a pile of crumbled obsidian.

Dranko surmises that the broken rock was some sort of construct that turned the crank, and that the crank opened the retractable roof above the Black Circle's ritual pit. The construct must have fallen apart when the Black Circle "power supply" shut off Aravis *polymorphs* himself into an ogre, and turns the heavy crank until the roof draws closed.

The party send Cobb (now feeling downright spry after being healed and learning the details of the Black Circle's downfall) to report what has happened to Rhiavonne, and to let her know that there is still some unfinished business that will have to wait until tomorrow.

The priestesses of Ell who were dispatched to check the estates come back to report general confusion on the surface. Servants and some guards are milling around, not entirely sure of what they've been doing recently, or why. A few servants, finding their lords not at home and sensing that they aren't coming back, are having an impromptu feast using some of the best silver to eat some of the best stuff from the larders. Three of the Lords – Lord Cosnor, Lady Canterrin and Lord Southinghorn – have definitely gone missing, and come to think of it, haven't been seen for days.

The party prepare to spend the night sleeping in the safety of *rope trick* spells. Morningstar casts a *sending* to Eddings, giving him a short message to give to Ozilinsh regarding current events. Eddings, who hasn't been the recipient of a *sending* in all this time, wastes a few of his 25 words being puzzled, before promising Morningstar that he'll try reaching their patron archmage on the crystal ball.

Then Morningstar prepares to enter *Ava Dormo*. Two nights ago she dreamt that she should go to the temple of the Illuminated Sisters in *Ava Dormo* two nights hence, and now that's tonight. Aravis decides to watch Morningstar using the Crosser's Maze, to see if he can learn anything about *Ava Dormo*. His mind slides into the Maze, and he draws his attention inward toward Morningstar, trying to find her in the dreaming plane.



Morningstar appears outside the temple buildings. Unlike last time, there is not a large crowd of sisters training for dream-battle, but Previa is there having a discussion with half a dozen other Dreamwalkers. She spies Morningstar, excuses herself from the others, and walks across the field to meet her. "So you are here, after all," Previa says. Her demeanor is calm and steady as always, but Morningstar can tell that something unusual has happened recently that she is itching to tell.

"I had a dream that I should come here tonight, but I don't know the source," Morningstar says. "Do you know something about it?"

"Yes, I think so. You have a visitor. She is... a priestess of Ell, I think. She is old. And there is something strange about her. She is waiting for you inside the chapel."

Morningstar walks inside the darkened building and straight through to the chapel. At its far end, looking up at a statue of Ell below an inverted black triangle, is an old woman, short, in her 50s or 60s at least. Her short hair is a pale white color, which makes her different from all other Ellish priestesses, save for Morningstar herself.

The woman turns around. "It's all so... overwhelming. And maddening, to think that you've been here all this time, and She never told me. But it's wonderful, too. You must be Morningstar. It is an honor to meet you. My name is **Evenstar**."

Madriel: Mama? ... It can't be that simple, can it?

Sagiro: No, no, it's not that. Morningstar's mom lives in the city of Kynder Hold, a short ship journey from Tal Hae. Morningstar has even visited her on occasion.

Way back in the campaign, right around the time when the Delfirian invasion was beginning, Morningstar asked the chronicler Previa if she could do some research. Specifically, she wanted to know if there were any holy writings in the Ellish library pertaining to the whole "Child of Light" business, or at least mentions that it was OK for an Ellish priestess to be active beneath the light of the sun. After a few days, Previa had dug up these three passages from three different holy books:

Those that follow Ell shall see the truth hidden in darkness, but truths there are in light that are not less true.

And this:

...for though we shall stand 'neath the moon and be blessed by the Goddess, also we shall stand 'neath the sun and be not burned...

And finally this bit, a dialogue between an old priestess and a novice, written long ago:

Priestess: Children of the night are we, and always will the children of the day be more numerous. We must therefore be ever watchful, for the day-kind will mistrust us, and at times use the light as a spear to blind us.
Novice: But should we not then become children of the dawn, with the night as a shield in one hand, and our own spears of light in the other? We should not fear the day-kind.
Priestess: Indeed. In time, we must have guards beneath the morning star and the evening star, else our dreams become nightmares.



The Spoils of Victory

Run #133 – Sunday, May 5, 2002

Morningstar nods, smiles slightly, and asks where Evenstar is from – where she is right now, in the waking world.

"I am in Kivia," she replies, "in a hidden temple high in the mountains, on the border between Bederen and Delfir. Like my mother and her mother before her, I have been in charge of this temple, and have been so for over thirty years. We worship a Goddess of Night who is not like Dralla, who protects rather than threatens. For three generations we have been visited, on occasion, by a dark avatar who has trained us. We obeyed her, for we knew the Goddess sent her. She was sent by Ell."

Morningstar's eyes widen. A temple of Ell, in Kivia!

Evenstar continues: "We have done our best to do as the avatar – as Ell – has commanded. We have recruited sisters, and they have come to our hidden shrine. Some of them, most of them, have received the calling to become Dreamwalkers, and I have been doing my best to train them to fight in *Ava Dormo*. It has not been easy. We have been training for a long time, but it is hard, and Ell is far from us. Many of the sisters have left us over the years, and others simply show little aptitude despite long months or years of training. Even I find it a struggle, but we have persisted.

"Through all these years, I have been told to wait for a messenger, who would tell me when the time drew near for me and my sisters to be put to the test. Some days ago, that messenger arrived. He was a half-orc who called himself Snokas, and somehow he discovered the hidden paths that lead to our shrine. He carried with him a number of scrolls with a prayer we knew not of, called *direct dreaming*. He told us about Charagan, a kingdom across Posada's Boundary, where the Ellish religion thrived, and Dralla held no sway. And he told me I must contact you, for you would need our help.

"At first I was outraged, that Ell had not told me that there was a whole land of fellow priestesses. I had always felt that we were keeping the faith alone. But I allowed myself to be calm, and I meditated. I saw that the urgency engendered by my feeling of responsibility drove me to do the task appointed. And I feel that I have done that task. I do not know how strong we will be compared to those you have trained here in Charagan, but I have a hundred dream warriors ready to battle in *Ava Dormo*, when you need us."

Morningstar is amazed, and delighted. But Evenstar has grown weary, exhausted from the effort of dreaming from Kivia, even with the *direct dreaming* prayer. They agree to talk further about their experiences. Morningstar slips from *Ava Dormo* back into true sleep.



Aravis has been watching from the Crosser's Maze, trying to see what a Dreamer looks like from the unique viewpoint of the Maze. But he sees nothing unusual (given the already strange context) and slips back out of the Maze. With a few words to the others, he goes to sleep for the night. The next morning he finds himself refreshed, and there is no sign that anything is amiss...

...but Pewter is frantic, meowing piteously at Kay. Aravis has not come out of his trance, and his breathing is shallow. As has happened on at least one prior occasion, Aravis has become lost in the Crosser's Maze, and it takes upward of half an hour of shaking and shouting to bring him back to the real world. But despite the experience, Aravis shakes it off with his usual equanimity, commenting only that "it's easy to see how one could become lost in there forever. If one didn't have friends."

Saturday, July 19

The next day, Morningstar casts *heal* on the still deranged Califax. He becomes more lucid, but even more despairing. "They've taken my soul," he says despondently. "Nothing can help me, and I am no longer in the favor of Delioch. I have no soul, and am no longer holy. The Black Circle burned all that away." Still, the party, and Dranko especially, are eager to help him, and vow to take him to the mother church in Hae Charagan. An *augury* cast regarding Califax and the grease-filled pit to which he was attached returns a clear answer:

The oil is irrelevant.

Cobb delivers the most recent news from above ground. Most of the servants and guards of the estates have now fled, and have taken many valuables with them. But a few stalwart staff members have stayed behind, and continue to do their jobs.

Morningstar goes back to the Temple for further debriefing, but Rhiavonne is indisposed. A priestess named Corshanni is sent to hear what Morningstar has to say, and despite Morningstar's misgivings (given how Stersa worked out), she gives a full report. (Corshanni does allow Morningstar to cast a battery of detection spells on her first, and all of them check out.)

Back in the Black Circle compound, the party decide to have another go at the room with the unspeakable evil *something* in it. But this time they are girded with *protection from evil*, and are ready for any sort of horrible thing to come lunging out at them. Dranko opens the door. Again, everyone in the hallway feels evil radiating out of the room like hot sunlight, but Ernie's *circle of protection* bears the brunt, and the party are able to enter the room, albeit with great discomfort.

The first thing they see is the table, a long, sturdy wooden table that runs much of the length of the room. Carved into it is an intricate map of the Kingdom of Charagan. Black lines, burned into the wood, radiate outwards from the city of Kallor to several other locations, and next to each of these is a number. A large number. Near the plains of northern Lanei – 21,000. Fifty miles south of the town of Sampan – 15,000. A spot just north of Sand's Edge – 19,000. Inside the city of Kynder Hold – 7,000. Just outside the city of Sentinel – 24,000. Inside the city of Oasis – 6,000. In the forest near Gahan on the Gahantropalas Isles – 12,000. And next to Kallor is the number 26. Other reddish lines head into the sea, mountain ranges, or deserts, and there are no numbers next to these.

There were 26 armored soldiers who nearly appeared in the Black Circle ritual room, before they were torn apart when the ritual was disrupted. From that, the party guess that those numbers were expected numbers of troops, who would have arrived on Charagan had the evil plot succeeded. Taken together, that would have been many times more soldiers than all of Charagan could muster.

Fade: If all those thousands of soldiers got disorporated too, someone is going to have a lot of cleaning up to do.

But the table isn't what's radiating the overwhelming evil. That's coming from one of the bookshelves lining the walls of the chamber. Squatting on one of the shelves is a large book, its unmarked spine a flat black. The malice radiating from that book is palpable, beating against the *protection from evil* that keeps it from blasting the minds of the Company. Even so, no one can look straight at it for more than a couple of seconds; they glean what they can from sidelong glances.

After a search of the rest of the room turns up nothing save more (ordinary) books and papers, they back out into the hallway and send Cobb to the surface to fetch the sturdiest trunk he can find. A few minutes later he returns with another guard, dragging a large wooden chest with a solid steel lock. New *protection from evil* spells are cast, and the party plunge back into the room with the horrific book. Using a long wooden plank, they tip the book off the shelf and into the trunk. Then they hastily close and lock the trunk and drag it outside. The pure evil can still be felt through the wood, but muted and at least tolerable to those without magical protection. Morningstar casts *detect evil* on everyone who had come near the wretched tome, but all seem personally untainted.

Grey Wolf and Ernie go back into the room where Califax had been kept prisoner, and fish around for more objects in the oily pit. First they find another book (non-magical) which contains a disturbingly accurate biography of Grey Wolf, chronicling his childhood, the death of his parents, and his apprenticeship with the wizard Melido. Then they find the bones. Kay examines them – there are several, all half-elven. Grey Wolf doesn't need confirmation – he *knows* that they're the bones of his parents. He remembers back many years, burying those remains near the farmhouse. The Black Circle must have exhumed them, to prepare their evil ritual.

Grey Wolf smolders, his heart racing in outrage. Without a word he stalks out of the room, and the others shrink back as he marches back to the bloody pit where so many Black Circle savants met their end. Mokad's body still lies on the floor, a chunk of blood gargoyle wedged in his mouth. His eyes are open, staring up lifelessly. Grey Wolf draws *Bostock*, and without uttering a word brings it down heavily, severing Mokad's head from his body in one savage stroke.

Kibi casts a *fly* spell on Ernie, who flies above the oil pit and severs the chain holding the small cage with its chunk of black stone. While not as eeeeeevil as the book, it's still radiating malice on its own, so the party get a second trunk and lock it away.

Lastly there is the shadowy room with the cauldron, that holds the chill of null shadows. Morningstar tries casting *dispel magic* (from the hallway outside) on both the room and the cauldron, to no avail. Aravis drops into the Crosser's Maze and "zooms in" his point of view onto the room itself. He has some success before the effort overwhelms him, and when he comes to a few seconds later, reports that the room seems to somehow be both on the Prime Material plane and the Shadow plane at the same time. It's fascinating, but it's not clear what to do about it. The Company lock the door.

Tired and saturated with evil Black Circle ambience, but convinced that nothing more dire will happen, the Company go to the surface. Most of them return to the Moonspell to clean themselves up and get a good hot meal, but Morningstar has one more commitment to keep. She has been dreading it, knowing what may come. But the morning is getting on, and soon High Priestess Rhiavonne will be going to bed. Morningstar marches resolutely to the High Temple to face judgement. Her fiancé Dranko goes with her.



Morningstar is swiftly granted an audience. She and Dranko are escorted through the darkened halls of the temple to the office of the High Priestess. Dranko is asked politely by a neophyte to wait outside; Rhiavonne wishes to speak with Morningstar in private. The half-orc gives his betrothed a reassuring squeeze on the arm, and in she goes.

High Priestess Rhiavonne, most holy of Ell in all Charagan, has her back to the door. She looks out a window onto the eternally twilit rooftops of Kallor. Without turning, she says: "Ah, Morningstar, please come in. Come stand by me."

Morningstar walks quietly to the window. Rhiavonne is small, old, and radiates a great power as she gazes upon her city. "Morningstar, look outside, and tell me what you see."

"I see the holy city, blessed by the Goddess," Morningstar says.

"I see a philosophy," says Rhiavonne. "I see a truth. I see a choice that the Goddess made, that the land on which her foot first fell should forever be in darkness."

"I have spent many years with my head in books, reading the wisdom of sisters who have gone before us. I have read accounts of people who think as you do; of women determined that our immersion in the night is a weakness. I have seen prophecies warning about the consequences of staying our current course. I have read the histories that Swan made sure I saw: that once Ell was a Goddess of dreams, and all her children Dreamwalkers. I have read them. I have pondered them."

"And for every one of those voices of dissent, I have read a dozen that confirm that our current philosophy is the right one. That our commitment to the night must be absolute and that to divide our efforts will lead to ruin. That our shift from the world of dreams to the world of reality was caused and confirmed by Ell herself, realizing that in dreams we could not affect the world as we can otherwise."

"And if there is one message that permeates Ell's teachings and those of her prophets throughout the ages, it is this: that she leaves it to her mortal children how to interpret her will. She does not dictate to us. Rather she presents a divine truth so expansive that none can see it whole. It is for us to make of it what we will."

Morningstar takes a deep breath. "That is what I am doing, in the best way I know how. I am also charged with interpreting Ell's will."

"Yes. Yes, you are," Rhiavonne says. She sits behind her table, and motions toward a chair opposite. "Morningstar, sit down. If you'll indulge an old woman, I wish to tell you a parable."

"Once there was an apothecary who lived in a small town. There were others of his profession there, but this one prepared only one potion. It was a cure for a rare but deadly disease that struck maybe only one person in a whole year. The cure itself was difficult to prepare, and the ingredients were rare and expensive, but he devoted 10 months out of every year to its brewing, and every year, if a child was stricken with the sickness, he would be ready with his potion, and he would administer the cure. His wife earned enough money for them both to live, by weaving cloth."

"One day his wife said to him, 'What you do is commendable, and you save a life in many years, but there is more that you can do. The other leeches and alchemists in town make a good living selling cures for the flux, and for the rash, and for expelling ticks and lice. You could do the same, but still have time to keep brewing your special cure, and we would be even better loved. Also, we are vulnerable. What if a year comes when no one has the sickness, and there is no demand for my cloth? We would starve!'

"That following year the apothecary made his cure, but also mixed many other potions and powders to help the people of the town. People started to buy from them who once bought from others, and their business thrived. And while no one came down with the singular disease for which he usually prepared, they ate well that winter and had means to give to charity as well.

"In the six years that followed, the apothecary spent more and more time branching his business, and less and less time gathering the ingredients and mixing his special cure. At first he still found the time to mix it, and managed to prepare a fresh dose each fall, but it became more and more difficult to spend time on it when there was so much else to do. And after six years had passed, during which time no one contracted the deadly illness, he decided that for one year at least he might forego his usual specialty, and spend more time helping the people of the town in more practical and numerous ways.

"In the seventh year the apothecary's own granddaughter fell ill, and died within a day, for no cure was ready."

Rhiavonne sits up straighter and looks directly into Morningstar's eyes, a sad but stern expression on her wrinkled face. "I listen to Amber, and to Swan, and to you, and I hear the first whispers of the wife. We would not set out to abandon our mission. But in ten years, or a hundred... It is my place to speak to the future, and hearing you, I know more than ever what I must say.

"Ell leaves it to each of us to further the church's ends in the ways that seem most right. I will not seek to do harm upon Amber and her followers, nor claim any reparations from her. But I must issue this edict: that the Illuminated Sisterhood is a heretical organization, and has no place within the Church of Ell. Its followers must either renounce in total their adherence to its tenets, or consider themselves excommunicated from the Church, divided entirely from its holdings, its temples and services, and its support. They shall not pray or perform miracles within Ellish temples, nor make claims to have done so. And I will start with you, Morningstar, though I think I already know your answer. But here is the choice: will you renounce the Illuminated Sisterhood and rejoin the Mother Church, or will you face excommunication?"

Carnifex: Very interesting development. Surely by her own words though, Rhiavonne is contradicting her own actions?

"And if there is one message that permeates Ell's teachings and those of her prophets throughout the ages, it is this: that she leaves it to her mortal children how to interpret her will. She does not dictate to us. Rather she presents a divine truth so expansive that none can see it whole. It is for us to make of it what we will."

Basically says its up to the followers to interpret Ell's will – indicating an individual's choice. Then she herself acts as a dictator, declaring the Sisterhood heretical because they disagree with *her*, where Ell has made it clear, apparently, that it is an expansive faith that can cover many different facets.

Sounds like the church needs a little bit of reorganising.

Great stuff as always!

Blackjack: Ah, see, I disagree there's a contradiction here. Ell left it to her mortal children to interpret Her will; she didn't say which children. She didn't say "each and every child," nor did she say "my church." Rhiavonne undoubtedly sees herself in the right, since to her, clearly it is the Church that should be determining the interpretation. One expects that Morningstar will disagree, believing her personal interpretation to outweigh the Church's.

This is a running tension in any group (religious, political, or otherwise) that has a starting tenet and then successive interpretation... is interpretation up to the individual, or the organization, or both?

Sagiro: I think Blackjack has the right of it. To paraphrase Rhiavonne: "Ell didn't write down specific rules for what to do in situations like this one. Instead, I get ponder the mysteries and then decide for myself what to do. And since I'm the High Priestess, what I decide becomes official church policy. You also made a decision, which is fine as far as it goes, but if we both choose different interpretations, mine's the one we go with."

Of course, things aren't as grim as they seem, as you'll see...

Morningstar sits silently for a few long minutes, and Rhiavonne says nothing, full well understanding the weight of the choice.

For Morningstar it is the moment she has dreaded would come, but it's chilling nonetheless to hear the words out loud. Still, she has prepared for this moment. "High Priestess, I think there is another choice, and there are some... other matters you should consider. First, know that I have come to my unusual position by the direct will and intervention of the Goddess herself. I did not wish to be the 'Child of Light.' That was chosen for me, and an avatar of the Goddess has trained me."

"This is not news to me, child," Rhiavonne says. "You were given a great gift, clearly. But it has been your own choice how best to use that gift."

"But I was not the only one to whom it was given." Rhiavonne sits up a bit straighter and leans forward. Morningstar continues. "There is another priestess like me, called by Ell to train in the light, for an upcoming moment of great need. Just as I have. The signs from Ell were as clear to her as they are to me – and she is from Kivia, the land across the Uncrossable Sea. Does that not tell you how serious this is? This Dreamwalker – Evenstar – was directed in no uncertain terms by a direct representative of the Goddess to prepare a force of dream warriors. A messenger, under no guidance save what the Goddess put into his head,

sought her out and warned her that the moment of crisis was approaching. We are required to be ready. The Illuminated Sisterhood makes that possible."

Rhiavonne's face is unreadable, but she senses that Morningstar isn't finished, and stays quiet. Then Morningstar plays her trump card. "Holy Mother, it is clear to me, and should be clear to you, that Ell is preparing my fellow sisters and me for an important, specific task. You know all about the Black Circle plot we just foiled. The kingdom is in true, dire peril, and Ell is making sure we are trained to face it. But when that job is done, we will have fulfilled our purpose. I don't foresee a need for the church to stay divided once the threat – whatever it is – has been dealt with. And that moment comes soon."

Rhiavonne's eyes widen and she leans forward further, elbows on the table. "So, you would be willing to abandon the Illuminated Sisterhood once your... mission... is complete?" Morningstar nods.

They both sit silent for a moment while the High Priestess cogitates, and then Rhiavonne speaks again. "Perhaps there will be no need for any excommunications after all. Morningstar, I want you to promise me, in Ell's holy shadow, that you will renounce the Illuminated Sisterhood after the Kingdom is saved from its current danger. Furthermore, you will make sure that Amber dissolves the order completely. In return, there will be no further restrictions imposed on the members of the Illuminated Sisters, and they will be welcome fully back into the church proper upon its dissolution. Do you promise this?"

With a great sigh of relief, Morningstar nods her head in agreement. "I promise," she says.

Rhiavonne's expression softens. "I'm glad we were able to come to an agreement. I have great respect for you, daughter, and have never doubted that you seek to do what is right for our church. And Ell obviously has great plans for you. We are already in your debt for your service in this very city. I hope that when all of this is over, we can talk more regularly, without the tension of politics." Morningstar nods politely.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, it's time I was getting to bed. An old woman needs her sleep, and the sun is already well over the horizon. Good night, Morningstar. And thank you."

Milo Windby: I've got to wonder if [the religious rift] will have more far-reaching effects... Morningstar was quick to promise that the Illuminated Sisters will be dissolved upon the completion of their mission, whatever it will be. How capable will she be to effect that dissolution when the time comes, though? Will the other sisters go willingly back into the church or be declared heretics? Will Ell herself withhold Her divine blessings to indicate the need for the sisters to end? Or would she allow two opposite-thinking factions to exist in her religion? Not to mention, will Morningstar have to give up her dream warrior abilities and become a simple cleric of Ell again?

I think Sagiro has left this particular conflict open for later crunchy roleplaying.

wolff96: I think Sagiro does that with *everything* in his Story Hour. After recently going back and reading through the Story Hour from the beginning, there are literally hundreds of this kind of dangling plot thread that the great spider at the center of the web could pull on if he wanted to. Plot hooks are scattered like confetti. My personal favorite being the Guild of Chains that the group pretty much vowed to come back and destroy some day.

Wolfspirit: I personally think it's rather short-sighted to assume that once This Big Thing is over, there isn't some Other Big Thing that's going to become really important too. And what happens if during the next Big Thing, the Illuminated Sisters' abilities wouldn't become even more important, or if nothing else really darn useful?

I realize that this is a really good solution for now (why get excommunicated now when you can deal with the consequences later?), but this is probably going to come back to haunt Morningstar. And of course, barring Ell giving a ground-shaking pronouncement to the church at large, I doubt that the two factions can exist. Heck, the fact that an avatar pretty much started the whole thing doesn't seem to faze the high priestess; what else could?

Nail: What if, during "the Big Danger," the upper echelons of the Church of Ell are wiped out? Put another way: what if, through the whims of Fate, Morningstar becomes the head of the Church of Ell? Things change.

Lord Pendragon: Also, just because the Illuminated Sisters are dissolved doesn't mean the members would lose any of the abilities they'd gained, they just wouldn't openly be using them anymore. So what, if the sisters rejoin the Mother Church? When the next Big Bad appears, they can just re-form the group, this time likely at the High Priestess's request.



En route to the Moonspell, Califax suddenly asks to be taken to Soulmender Tomnic in Hae Charagan immediately. His words are desperate, but his voice carries no inflection. Ernie tells him that first thing the next morning, Morningstar can cast a *wind walk* that will get him there as quickly as possible. Califax thanks him and hangs his head as they walk – he says nothing, but his meaning is clear: today would be better. But Aravis, the only member of the Company with the *teleport* spell, has never been to Hae Charagan and does not want to risk an accident.

At the Moonspell, the innkeeper greets them grandly, wealthy customers that they are. But he is not ready for their outlandish request. "Sir?" Ernie asks. "How much would it cost for the use of your commons, exclusively, for the rest of the day and through tomorrow morning? For just us, I mean?"

The innkeeper does some quick accounting in his head, figuring the meals that won't be served, and other customers who might be discouraged from taking rooms that night. Then he adds on a bit extra, smiles, and says, "Master halfling, two hundred gold coins should cover the costs, including our best meals for all of you this evening, and as much ale as you wish to consume."

Ernie doesn't even blink. "OK," he says cheerily, and hands over the cash.

The Company celebrate in grand style, relaxing in stuffed couches, eating marvelous food and retelling tales from their victory over the Black Circle. Morningstar and Dranko arrive an hour or so later, and the celebration now encompasses Morningstar's agreement with Rhiavonne. Any misgivings they have over the price are soon washed away by as much ale as they can consume.

Later that evening, Captain Cobb makes an appearance; a servant starts to explain that the commons is closed to the general public for the evening, but Dranko spies him and waves him over. Before Cobb can start explaining his business, Dranko gets a drink in his hand, sits him down in a stuffed armchair, and calls for a slab of seasoned mutton to be brought over. The typically dour Cobb turns nothing down.

Eventually the good Captain gets around to his business. He gathers the Company around him to make his announcement. "Friends, I've spent the day talking with various city officials, nobles and church dignitaries. They all agree that the service you have rendered to Kallor and Charagan in the past few days is difficult to measure. It's been difficult to convince some of them of the extent of the danger, but I think by and large they all understand that you saved their bacon from a very hot fire.

"As such, a reward is clearly in order. We talked some about what would be appropriate, and what we can spare in a time when the kingdom is at war. Now, as you know, there are some prime estates in the Silent Quarter whose owners and occupants have recently come to an untimely end. And that patch of real estate has some – er – unusual features that we don't want anyone rushing into. There's a lot of messy paperwork that I'd really rather avoid.

"The simplest expedient would be for me to arrange for those estates – formerly of the families Cosnor, Canterrin and Southinghorn – to be signed over to you. All we'd ask is that you agree not to sell those estates or their furnishings for a period of three years, and that you be responsible for upkeep and taxes in the meantime. Oh, and that you observe the strictures of general quiet that are observed in the Silent Quarter."

The Company happily accept. Then, to Cobb's delight, Dranko says, "Captain, we're thrilled to take ownership of those estates, but we're awfully busy, and won't be able to be here very often in the near future. Not to mention that most of us would rather be somewhere that the sun is shining. It would be a big favor to us if you could think of someone..." (and here he gives Cobb a meaningful look) "...who might occupy one of the Estates and keep an eye on our properties while we're gone. Of course, his family could move in too. There's plenty of space. And we'd leave behind enough coin to cover the expenses for the next few months. How does that sound?"

"It sounds like I have some good news for the wife and kids," Cobb grins.

In the City of Eternal Twilight, light and laughter spill from the Moonspell far into the small hours of the morning.



Sunday, July 20

The next morning, the members of the Company straggle down to the common room of the Moonspell with hangovers of various degrees. Califax is already there, sitting in a chair and staring blankly at the far wall. "It's still gone," he says flatly. "They burned away my soul. I don't think I can get it back. But if there's a way, Tomnic the Follower will know. You said you would take me there."

And so they do. Using a combination of *teleport* and *wind walk*, Dranko, Aravis, Kay, Morningstar and Califax arrive a couple of hours later at the High Church of Delioch in the kingdom's capital city. Despite his past heresies, Califax is admitted and tended to, while Dranko is granted audience with Tomnic the Follower.

In that audience, Tomnic promises that Califax will be examined, and healed if possible of whatever the Black Circle has done to him. Dranko tells the tale of the Circle's recent defeat, and Tomnic is obviously pleased. Still, Dranko finds him unimpressive as the spiritual zenith of his faith. More like an officious bureaucrat, he thinks. Tomnic requests that he be allowed to examine the powerfully evil tome discovered in Kallor, but Dranko becomes a bit evasive. He says that he'll have to check with the higher-ups in the Spire to be sure that it's safe, and in any case figure out a safe way to transport it. Privately Dranko thinks that Tomnic might not be able to withstand the power of the book, and intends to keep it far away from Hae Charagan if possible.

From there, the group head to the gates of the Royal Palace, intending to make a report with Yale, the advisor to King Crunard. They are given a slight hassle at the gate by a bored guard named **Lackland**, who (when pressed by General Windstorm) agrees to have a written message delivered to Yale, and would they please wait here outside the gate until a return message is delivered?

While they wait, Kay hears suddenly the sound of a *sending* inside her head. She doesn't recognize the sender, but the message is urgent:

*General – emergency north of Tal Hae. Dangerous stench-beasts from Calnis swarming south and east.
Hundreds of them. We lack available manpower. Please assist immediately.*

Well, that's awfully inconvenient. With only one *teleport* remaining, there's no way to get the whole Company back to Tal Hae today. Since a reply to their message to Yale hasn't come back yet, Morningstar decides to press the issue, with a *sending* directly to Yale:

It's Morningstar. I am waiting at gate for appointment with you. But received distress call from Tal Hae – many Golguthrans – can someone arrange teleport now?

It turns out Yale isn't even in the city – she's down on the peninsula inspecting the armies fighting against the Delfiri. But she returns the message:

*Morningstar, I'm in Hydra, but you can get a teleport scroll at palace from court wizard Nysturn.
Password for day is "vigilance." Good luck.*

Kay again gets the attention of Lackland, tells him straight out that they've just spoken with the King's advisor by magic, and that he'd better get them an audience with Nysturn in a hurry. When the guard shows skepticism, Kay gives the password. Lackland, allowed to come to his own conclusion about the consequences of non-compliance, runs off into the palace grounds.

A few minutes later he comes huffing and puffing back to the gate, and – between gasps – invites the party inside. Nysturn will meet with them in ten minutes. Leaving their weapons with the palace guard, they go to their meeting, and **Nysturn**, a nice old chap with a long white beard, lends them the two *teleport* scrolls that they need from the palace archives.



Kibi and Grey Wolf have finished casting *identify* on some of the magic items recently removed from deceased Black Circle practitioners, when the others come *teleporting* back to Kallor in the mid-afternoon. Kay quickly briefs the others on the *sending* regarding the stinkwiggles, and there is some hurried handing out of newly identified magic items.

A few minutes later, after numerous magical and logistical contortions involving more *teleports*, *reduces* and *wind walks*, the entire party is flying out from Tal Hae towards the open farmland to the northeast. Several of them are connected mentally via *Rary's telepathic bond*, and all are scanning the ground for signs of stinkwiggles. They don't have long to wait.

The smell comes first. Ordinary farmland manure is one thing, but the reek of stinkwiggles is many times stronger and many times fouler. Even in wind form they can smell it, the stench of rotting offal and carrion that wafts from the creatures' bodies. A few minutes later, the first stinkwiggle comes into view.

There are several, and despite the urgent *sending*, they don't appear to be swarming. Rather, they're contentedly munching on cow dung, grazing mostly peacefully. "Mostly," because near the cluster of creatures is a dead cow, and two more stinkwiggles are dining on its bloody flesh. Rather than re-solidify to fight them, the Company fly on, hoping to get a better sense of the beasts' dispersal and number.

There are more pockets of slowly moving stinkwiggles, but finally the party see a herd of them, over thirty in number, striding quickly and methodically toward the nearby town of Tal Korum – where (incidentally) Dranko was raised. The Company fly on to the town to warn them of the coming swarm.

The stinkwiggles and their accompanying odor are already the talk of the town, and many townsfolk are patrolling the dirt streets with pitchforks and clubs. But none of them suspect that three dozen of the creatures are only a few minutes away from old Jonas Thorndike's farm at the northern edge of town. The head militiaman of the town is a pompous but competent fellow named **Tankersley**, who helps the Company organize a hasty defense. This mostly consists of getting the people indoors, excepting some of the stronger militia, and putting the three men up on rooftops who both own bows and know how to use them. Most of the people don't recognize Dranko, who was only eleven when he was sent away to Tal Hae, but all of the Company are held in awe by the commoners of Tal Korum. With their shiny armor and festoonery of armaments, they will certainly be able to defend the town!

Then the first wave of stinkwiggles arrives, the Company launch their attack, and it's a rout for the good guys. Stinkwiggles are engulfed in *fireballs*. Stinkwiggles are filled with arrows. Stinkwiggles are hacked with swords, bludgeoned with hammers, torn apart by *searing darkness*, and plunked with sling bullets. The beasts are strong, but not that strong, and their movement is ponderous.

The only time the fight gets interesting is when an especially large stinkwiggle arrives in one of the last waves – crusted over with a yellowish crystal. The patterns of the crystal are familiar to most of the Company – clearly an Eye of Moirel has at one

time used this beast. But the Eye is not there now, and while this stinkwiggle is clearly the driving force behind the others, it is not much tougher than them. Less than two minutes after the battle is begun, thirty-three stinkwiggles lie dead along the northern borders of Tal Korum, and the townsfolk are peeking out of doorways, holding their noses and cheering.

Krellic: Nice that after some earth-shattering battles the party actually get a showy and fairly easy(?) victory. Of course, Sagiro is just softening them up...

madriel: Nice little battle, Sagiro. How many Eyes of Moirel have they tracked down now?

wolff96: Sagiro I am not, obviously. But the best I remember, they have two of the Eyes. They need one more to "go nowhere," if I recall correctly.

Sagiro: wolff96, you remember correctly. The Company have two Eyes of Moirel in the basement of the Greenhouse. One was found in the eye socket of a huge lizard, and another was pried from the skull of a skeleton. The third Eye, which they need to "travel nowhere" (assuming they ever figure out what that means and want to do it), is in a place called Het Branoi, probably in northeastern Kivia.

As for the stinkwiggles – you may recall a while back when a wizardess named Sarai won an Eye of Moirel in an auction. She took it back to her home in Calnis (the city 50 miles north of Tal Hae, and which had a stinkwiggle infestation for a while) for study. Some months later Calnis was overrun and sacked by gnolls, after which rumors began to circulate about a giant crystal palace being built in the center of the city by a huge one-eyed gnoll chieftain. Soon after that there was a strange mass exodus of gnolls and kobolds out of the city and back to the mountains, after which the city walls became sealed by yellow crystal.

For many months after, no one knew what was happening inside Calnis. The Company toyed with the idea of investigating, but always seemed to have something better to do. Then, not long ago, all of the crystal on the city walls vanished. With the war going on, no official investigation has been sent to find out what's going on there now, but reports are that people have been slowly trickling back in to sort through the wreckage.

No one knows what has become of the Eye of Moirel that belonged to Sarai.



The following was mostly written by Piratecat as part of his character's backstory. I've made some small additions and changes.

Cue flashback...

It is just over ten years ago, and a straight rain is falling hard and cold. Mellendiel Brightmirror peeks out the window of the rickety covered wagon and watches trees and farms roll past, blurred by the downpour. Idly he rubs a swollen bruise on his face, still sore after four days. A neighborhood kid had thrown a rock at him while he was preparing to leave Tal Korum, cutting his cheek and slightly chipping one of his tusk-like lower teeth.

He thinks about the kid – an older boy of almost thirteen called Spark. Spark is considered a good lad in town, smart, helpful, always respectful of his elders. Nobody had seen him throw the rock, and no one would have believed Mellendiel had he felt like complaining. But Mellendiel had said nothing. Plenty of kids had hurled stones at him over the years, and he at them. But now he was leaving them all behind, and there was no point in continuing any feuds. He is being taken to Tal Hae, the Great Wooden City, to be made a slave of the church.

No one had ever actually used the word "slave," but Mellendiel knows that's what is meant. His grandfather, Cormin, has been telling him for years that someday he would be shipped to Tal Hae to be made a ward of the Church of Delioch. They'd show him. If Mellendiel thought his grandfather a harsh taskmaster, he would be in for a rude awakening in Tal Hae. The Church would be unwavering in its discipline, and would not be anywhere near as patient as his grandfather with his truancy and thieving.

Mellendiel hates his grandfather, and that hate is returned in kind. Only his kindly grandmother Sarabel has kept Cormin from administering even more severe beatings all through the years of his youth. Still, Cormin is quick to apply a healthy bit of corporal punishment for any number of misdeeds. Mellendiel often deserves it, to be sure, but that does not soften his sullen resentment. He knows the source of his grandfather's hatred, and his own helpless role therein. Cormin has never made any secret of the tale of Mellendiel's birth.

Mellendiel's mother, Saramin Lightbellow, had lived in Tal Korum with her new husband Dalsmith. Only three months after their midsummer wedding the town was overrun and partially burned in an attack by the Heartcarver Tribe of orcs. By the time the Storm-knights arrived or any militia was organized, the orcs had looted the town and returned to their hills. It is thought that the fairly rare attack occurred at the demand of the tribal shaman, Gruschak of the Five Eyes, who predicted that the winter would be harsh and thus the tribe would need additional food stores to survive. Ironically, the following winter was the mildest in fourteen years.

During the attack, Dalsmith was cut down by three orc soldiers while defending his forge and his wife. Saramin was discovered sometime later – horribly abused and bleeding internally, she had survived the attack, but was lapsed into a deep sleep from which even the Healer's apprentice (for the Healer had been slain in a single blow by the orcish champion) could not lift her.

In the weeks that followed, Saramin's parents were summoned, for they were worshippers of Delioch and could care for the girl. Under their care Saramin regained her consciousness but not her wits. She would slip into and out of a delirium, never truly understanding where she was or what had happened. Worse, it was soon obvious that the girl was pregnant.

No one knew for sure whether it was a child of Dalsmith or of the orc raiders, but both Cormin and Sarabel Brightmirror prayed for the best while fearing the worst for their daughter.

As Saramin's time drew near, her health worsened and her delirium grew worse. Concerned, her father Cormin left Tal Korum for the Church of Delioch in Tal Hae, in the hopes of bringing back a more experienced Woundtender than the village possessed. Cormin's foresight was wise, but luck was not on his side, for Saramin went into labor that same night he left.

The labor was a long one, and the small wooden house often rang with screams of pain. Saramin was lucid through part of it, and despite the pain, she begged her mother to care for the child if she could not. Secretly, Cormin and Sarabel had agreed that if the child were orcish, it would be better for all concerned if the baby were left in the wilderness; Sarabel agreed to her daughter's wishes nonetheless.

When the baby was born, it was clear that the child was not entirely human. The baby boy had a grayish-black tongue, and the shape of his face carried the hint of an orcish strain. Other than this, he was a healthy screaming child, and Sarabel was able to hold and feed him before she finally died the next day. When Cormin returned with a Healer, it was to find his daughter dead and his wife stubbornly refusing to give up the inhuman baby that had killed once already.

The child was taken to the Brightmirrors' home under Sarabel's protection and over Cormin's protestations. There they named him Mellendiel, an old Elvish name meaning 'unexpected,' and raised him as best they could.

Mellendiel's childhood was not especially pleasant. Other than a neighbor's large dog, he had no friends to speak of. The village boys all taunted him and threw rocks when they could, and gangs of boys beat him up whenever they caught him. Pieter Roofswallow, one of the worst bullies, made up the nickname "Coaltongue." Mellendiel became a loner, sullen and angry, and spent much of his free time tormenting his pursuers with malicious pranks.

At home, things weren't much better. He received distant affection from his grandmother, who tried to protect him from the worst of his grandfather's rages. His grandfather, however, grew progressively colder and more distant to him. His grandfather grew more and more religious, often spending hours praying while Mellendiel would do chores about the house.

Mellendiel survived in this unhappy environment until age 11. In the winter his grandmother took ill and died within two days. The death plunged his grandfather into a black depression, and it was but two weeks after the funeral that Mellendiel found himself being taken by wagon to Tal Hae.

That was four days ago. Mellendiel's grandfather has hardly spoken a word to him during the journey, which is a blessing to the boy. In a few hours they will arrive in Tal Hae, and he will never have to see his grandfather again.

The driver curses as the carriage becomes stuck. The dirt road is sodden, the wheel ruts filled with mud in the heavy rain, and Mellendiel is ordered out to help push. He does so with neither complaint nor enthusiasm. Half an hour later he gets back into the carriage, drenched and dripping. His grandfather glares at him, as the wagon lumbers slowly forward.

As the hours pass and the daylight wanes behind the sheets of rain, the farms become more numerous outside and they start to pass other travelers on the road. A few minutes later Mellendiel is staring wide-eyed at the towering wooden walls of Tal Hae. He has never seen a city before – the crowds, the shops, the clusters of beggars and urchins in the streets. A few minutes later the wagon is pulling up to a large wood and brick cathedral, the Healing Hand symbol of Delioch prominent above its façade. His grandfather motions at him to get out.

A man stands outside the church, awaiting his arrival. When he sees the half-orcish boy, his lips quirk in a cruel smile. Mellendiel sees that the man's face is covered with scars. "You'll get yours soon enough," his grandfather laughs. "As I've often told you, the Scarbearers of Delioch understand punishment. You'll finally pay right for your behavior."

Mellendiel gets out and stands in the rain, and the scarred cleric walks over to speak briefly with Cormin. "I am called Califax," the man says. "This is the boy?"

Cormin nods, and pushes his grandson forward. "See if you can't make something of yourself, make up for all the pain you've caused," are the last words his grandfather says, before he rides away from the Church's gate in the old black wagon.

One of the first things offered to the new initiate is the chance to choose a new name, as a symbol of his new life in the church. Mellendiel immediately chooses **Dranko**, an Orcish word meaning 'unwelcome.'

Plane Sailing: Aww, that is a really sad background for Dranko. It is unfortunately too easy to picture it as a completely realistic childhood, too.

Mind you, he's come on a bit, eh?

Quartermoon: Perhaps Dranko will choose a new name... on the day he marries Morningstar...



With the stinkwiggles dispatched, the unpleasant cleanup effort begins. Tankersley takes charge, ordering crews of townsfolk to start gathering and burning the bodies of the creatures. He relays the important warning from the Company that they should avoid direct contact with the carcasses, which could easily transmit disease.

Despite the horrid smell, many small children are out and about trying to catch a glimpse of the heroes who saved Tal Korum. They are particularly curious about the halflings and Kibi – they've led sheltered enough lives to have never seen halflings and dwarves before. Scree tries to offer a friendly greeting, but the animated pile of rocks scares most of the kids away. Another child makes the comment: "Those other two wizards have a monkey and a cat. How come you only got a bunch of rocks?" Kibi is not amused.

Helping coordinate things post-battle, Dranko finally gets some recognition from the townsfolk. They remember him as little Mellendiel Brightmirror, a mean little prankster, but time, to say nothing of in-your-face heroism, has a way of mellowing old memories. Dranko cringes at each utterance of his birth name, but accepts various compliments with good grace. It seems that the entire town has forgiven him his delinquent youth – with one exception.

Ernie spots Dranko's grandfather, **Cormin**, helping one of the clean-up crews. He jogs over and tries to strike up a conversation about Dranko. "Greetings, sir," he starts cheerily. "My name is Ernest, and I'm a friend of Dranko. I really think you should talk to him. He's a much different and better person than you're giving him credit for."

Cormin just snorts and turns his back to the halfling. Ernie goes straight from cheerful to incensed. "Why are you being so stubborn? You won't solve anything by ignoring him!"

Dranko's grandfather stops and turns slowly around. "Listen. You don't realize what a blessing it's been to be able to ignore him. Delioch knows it was impossible when he lived here. It was a good riddance to him, and it still is." He again turns his back on Ernie, and walks away to rejoin his crew. Ernie turns red, but doesn't pursue.

The mayor of Tal Korum, a tall woman named **Larissa**, walks over to the Company to inform them that, in the evening, there will be a celebratory dinner in their honor for their role in saving the town. They graciously accept her invitation to join them at the town meeting hall. Dranko thinks that might make a good place to try reconciliation with his grandfather. But as the guests arrive, mostly farmers and farmer's wives (with the latter bringing a variety of fine-smelling platters), Cormin ends up a no-show.

There is much feasting, and a short speech by the mayor followed by great applause for the Company, but three hours later, as most of the guests are going back to their homes, Dranko stands and looks around in disappointment. He turns to Morningstar. "I guess I'm going to have to go to him," he says. "I don't want the others along, but I do want you... as we're engaged to be married and everything. For one thing, he'd never believe me without evidence."

Dranko and Morningstar walk out into the warm summer night, where a lucky breeze is blowing the stink of the stinkwiggles back into the fields and away from the town. They walk down the dirt streets, waving back to several grateful townsfolk they pass, until they arrive at Cormin's small house.

The rest of the Company, eager to eavesdrop, send the trio of familiars to follow. And as soon as Dranko and Morningstar are out of sight, Grey Wolf and Aravis grab the mayor as she's on her way out of the meeting hall. "Excuse me," Aravis says politely. "We have a favor to ask."

"Anything, of course!" beams Larissa.

"We were wondering," Grey Wolf says, "If you were planning on making this any sort of town holiday."

"I had thought about it, yes," Larissa answers. "Something like 'Victory Day.' I hope you could make it back every year to celebrate, since it would be in your honor, after all."

"Actually," says Aravis, "it was Dranko who was most responsible for us coming to save the town. And seeing as this was his hometown growing up, we thought it would be nice if you could name the holiday after him. 'Dranko Day,' or something like it."

"That's a splendid idea!" exclaims Larissa. "Though people here don't remember him as 'Dranko.' I think we should use his old name. How does 'Mellendiel Day' sound?" Aravis and Grey Wolf grin. That sounds just fine.



At his grandfather's house, Dranko knocks, but there's no answer. "Grandfather, it's me! Come open the door." There's no answer from inside. Dranko tries the door, but it's locked. "Oh, for crying out..." Dranko applies a bit of skill, and a bit of force, and the door pops open.

Inside, he and Morningstar are greeted by the tang of alcohol and the sound of Cormin muttering to himself from the other room. Dranko goes to stand in the doorway, and shakes his head at the sight of his grandfather slumped over in a chair, a one-third-full bottle of cheap wine nearby on a table.

The old man looks up and his face darkens. "Go away," he slurs. (Pewter and Edghar have found windows at which to listen. Scree has poked an eye through the floor into the darkest corner of the room.)

Dranko sighs, points a finger at Cormin, and utters an orison to quick-sober his drunken relative. Cormin sits bolt upright, grips his head, and then glares at his grandson. "I didn't ask you to do that," he snaps. "But now that you've done it, get out."

"Not until we talk about some things," Dranko says. He notices then that his grandfather is shaking, possibly coming down with filth fever from the stinkwiggles. "You're sick," he points out.

"I am not. I feel fine."

Morningstar grins in spite of herself. "I see where you get your stubbornness from."

Dranko turns to Morningstar. "Would you cure him?"

"He has to ask me, Dranko," Morningstar reminds him.

"Dranko?" Cormin snaps. "Why are you calling him that? His name's Mellendiel. Mellendiel Brightmirror. Though Delioch knows he's nothing but a blight on the family name."

"Grandfather, Dranko's the name I've used since you... since I left. Now would you please ask Morningstar here to heal you? We both know you're sick."

"Hmph. If I do, will you promise to leave afterward?"

Dranko sighs. "Yes, I promise. If that's what you want."

"Fine," answers Cormin. He turns to Morningstar. "Go ahead and heal me then, if you can. And just who are you, anyway?"

"Ah, forgive me. Grandfather, this is Morningstar. She's a priestess of Ell, and... my fiancée."

Cormin snorts, and then starts to chuckle. "Oh, please. Who in their right mind would agree to marry you?"

Morningstar steps forward. "I would. Sir, I don't know what Dranko was like as a child, but this man here is one of the bravest and kindest men I have ever met. He has saved my life and the lives of others on numerous occasions, and he serves with an elite group that has defended Charagan against many threats. Including the one that just attacked your town today."

Cormin gazes levelly at her for a moment before replying. "So, Mellendiel, how much did you have to pay her for that bit of tripe? Kind and brave? There isn't a bone in your body that isn't malicious and cowardly, and we both know it. That battle today, even. By all accounts your friends fought bravely to defend the town, but you were nowhere to be seen. And then you come here with some dressed-up slattern claiming to be a priestess and your betrothed to boot. You never did know how to lie."

Dranko opens his mouth, not sure whether to explain about invisibility magic and how it helps his fighting style, or to defend the honor of his fiancée. He doesn't get the chance to do either.

Morningstar stands tall, and calls a personal darkness around her; the room becomes immersed in dark shadow, with Morningstar's form a black silhouette against the twilight gray. "I do not lie about my religion," she says sternly. "I am a Priestess of Ell, just as Dranko is an honored cleric of Delioch. You do us both a disservice with your stubbornness. Here..." She casts a prayer, and Cormin's tremors slowly cease.

Cormin's lips quiver, and a conflicted look crosses his face. But when he finds his tongue again, he sneers, "So you're a priestess, then. And my grandson is a priest. Good for you both. Mellendiel, I hope it's given you the opportunity to make up for all that you put me through, though I doubt it."

"It has," Dranko says. "Look, I won't pretend that I wasn't a horrible little shit. I was an outcast, and I didn't handle it well. I know I put you through a lot, and I'm sorry. But... well, mostly I wanted you to meet the woman I'm going to marry. And, I guess, to see if we couldn't patch things up. We're family."

"Family?" Cormin whispers harshly. "You didn't even keep your family name. What does 'Dranko' mean, anyway?"

"It's Orcish," Dranko says. When his grandfather glowers, Dranko continues, "I looked it up when I got to the church, the very first day. They make you take a new name there, and I knew the name I wanted. Dranko means 'unloved.'"

Cormin looks up, wide-eyed. Suddenly his face contorts, and his body becomes racked with sobs. Through his tears he says, “By Delioch’s healing hands, there’s not a day that’s passed in the last fifteen years that I haven’t thought about my daughter, and the monsters who killed her. And poor Dalsmith, who died protecting her. He was such a good man. I loved them both, so much...” He looks at Dranko with puffy eyes. “Dranko, I look at you, and all I can see are those... those beasts who... who attacked... who killed my daughter. I’m sorry... I know it’s not fair...”

Cormin lapses into uncontrolled sobbing for a few minutes. Dranko puts his hand on the old man’s shoulder, and Cormin does not flinch. (The three familiars decide it’s time to stop watching now, and slink away...) “Grandfather, forgiveness is a tough thing. It took me a long time to forgive you for shipping me off to Tal Hae. But I did it. Let it go.”

A minute goes by and Cormin says nothing, but when he looks up again, something in his face has changed. The corners of his mouth turn up in an unfamiliar smile. “Morningstar,” he says, “you do realize what you’re getting yourself into, don’t you? I never thought there’d be a woman on this earth with enough patience to spend an afternoon with Mellendiel, let alone marry him. Gods, did he ever tell you about what he did to the Roofswallows’ barn? Or the bucket of tar he rigged to fall on old man Cartwright, that nearly suffocated him? Or the frogs? Mellendiel, where in Delioch’s name did you find so many frogs? You never told me. You never even admitted it.”

“I... uh...” Dranko stammers, looking guilty. “I found where they were breeding, down by the stream. I saved them up. It was just supposed to be a joke.”

Cormin turns to Morningstar. “Those frogs got into the food stores that were supposed to last us through the winter. We had to burn most of them. The extra hours we had to work that year just to stay fed would have pushed anyone to distraction. And in the end there still wasn’t enough; we had to beg food from our neighbors on many a night that year.”

Morningstar laughs. “Dranko has changed, but he still has some of that old streak in him. I’ll be able to handle him.”

“Good, good.” Cormin smiles again, and his face is clearly unaccustomed to the expression. Several more moments pass in silence, as if neither Dranko nor his grandfather wants to risk breaking their emerging truce. Then Cormin yawns. “I think I need to be getting to bed. Mellendiel, it’s... it’s not all going to heal overnight. I’ll need some time to think things over. I’ve been feeding these feelings for a long time.”

“I understand,” Dranko says. “We have to leave in the morning, but we’ll come back and visit you from time to time, I promise. And I’ll look into getting you some help, someone to do chores and look after the place. I owe you that much, for... er... past transgressions.”

Dranko and Morningstar turn to go. As they reach the doorway, Cormin says quietly, “Thanks for forcing your way in.”

Dranko looks sheepishly at the busted latch on the front door. “I’ll get that fixed tomorrow before we go, I promise. I’ll make sure that...”

“Mellendiel. I didn’t mean the door. Good night.”

Samnell: Awwwww...

RangerWickett: That... *teary-eyed* I wanna give Dranko a hug, so he’ll change his name to somethin’ happier. I mean, sure... in the grand scheme of literature, it might not be much, but it still did make me choke up. Good job, Sagiro.

Milo Windby: Getting choked up is the last thing I expect when I log in to the Story Hour forum. I’m impressed, Sagiro. Same to PC for the great backstory that made it possible.

madriel: Awwww... That was a beautiful moment.

Piratecat: He left out the bit where he claimed I came to bum money off him and I emptied my *Heward’s handy haversack* onto the table. Then he claimed I stole them all. Stubborn old coot. But he’s *my* coot. And we brought him around.

Morningstar’s player was magnificent, as was Sagiro. You see the gradual change he’s made from true neutral to neutral good, over the past three or so years in game. This “reunion” was one of my favorite moments of the entire seven-year campaign.

Zaruthstran: Good grief. That was beautiful. I didn’t expect to encounter emotion when reading a fan D&D site. At least, not that particular emotion. Great work!

Ancalagon: Awesome post! Best update in a long, long time!

shadowthorn: I don’t pop into the Story Hour thread expecting to get choked up, but you fooled me again, Sagiro! Awesome roleplaying, PC et al. Somebody ought to novelise this when it’s all said and done. Blows away about half of the fantasy books being pulp-marketed today. Kudos.

Sagiro: I’m glad you folks enjoyed the write-up of that session – it was one of my favorites as well. Truly fine roleplaying by Morningstar’s player and by Piratecat. They made it easy to get real emotion out of a scene when it was called for. I also liked the sheepish look on the other players’ faces when they remembered that their familiars were snooping on such a personal moment.



The next day, the Company split up. Through a combination of *teleport* and *wind walk* spells, most of the party go home to the Greenhouse in Tal Hae, while Kibi, Morningstar and Grey Wolf go back to Kallor to tidy up some loose ends. Grey Wolf rescues the bones of his father from the oily pit below the city. Morningstar blesses them, and they are given a proper burial beneath a spreading tree in the backyard of one of their new estates.

Kibi spends some time inspecting the huge Black Circle ritual room, remembering that the Black Circle enchantments keeping it from collapse won't last indefinitely. He figures out where a few stone columns should shore it up, and instructs Morningstar as she casts *wall of stone* in some key places. When she is done, Kibi is satisfied that there will not be a catastrophic collapse of the surrounding buildings into the huge gaping pit.

Speaking of which: the three of them spend some time walking through their new houses, which are generally only one or two storeys, but roomy and elegant. Captain Cobb is busy moving his family into the vacated estate of Lord Southinghorn. In the drawing room of the manse formerly occupied by Lord Cosnor, a man comes to the door and clears his throat. He is tall and well dressed, and in a smooth, oily voice introduces himself as **Farris**, the major-domo of the estate. While most of the former staff has fled, he and a few others have stayed behind to assist the new masters in anything they might need. They thank him, but thinking it prudent they also cast *detect magic* and *detect evil* on him. He is not evil, and has no magic on him, but there is powerful magic coming from a nearby wall. A large four feet by six feet painting hanging there (a sunny landscape complete with trees, pond and ducks) is strong in both illusion and conjuration magic.

Farris shows them the most interesting feature of the upper floors, which is a large orrery beneath a retractable roof. It's a huge contraption with spinning planets and moons against a backdrop of stars, set in motion by a switch at the base of the wall. Lord Cosnor used to spend many evenings up with the orrery, but never allowed Farris or the other house staff to be present.

After dismissing Farris for the evening, they investigate the magical painting. A bit of poking around reveals that the bucolic landscape is an illusion and that the picture frame is really a magical gateway into an unknown space. To Morningstar and Grey Wolf's horror, Kibi sticks his arm through, and then pulls it back. Before the dwarf can put his head through to look inside, the other two pull him away. "Are you crazy?" says Morningstar. "This place was owned by the Black Circle. That painting could go anywhere. What if there's another Black Circle temple or something on the other side?"

"I didn't feel anything," says Kibi, shrugging. "I'll bet it's fine."

But the paranoia of the others wins the moment. They try a number of ploys to learn about the painting without actually sticking body parts through. Grey Wolf tosses a candlestick tied to a rope into the painting, then quickly pulls it out again. It's unharmed. As a second experiment, they untie the rope and toss the candlestick inside, after which Kibi casts *locate object* to find it. Nothing. Kibi goes outside, casts *fly*, and searches all around Kallor for the candlestick via the spell. Still nothing. Wherever the painting goes, it's either more than several hundred feet away, or on another plane.

Back in Cosnor's drawing room, Kibi can't contain his curiosity, and before the others can stop him, he sticks his head through the painting. A few seconds later he pulls it back out, a big grin on his face. "See? Nothing ate me. It's just a small room with no windows or doors." He grins. "But there are some barrels and trunks around the edges of the room, a stack of bricks, and a bunch of coins scattered on the floor. I think it's a treasure room!"

Kibi wants to go in immediately and start opening the trunks, but Grey Wolf and Morningstar convince him to wait for Flicker to check them for traps. A *sending*, some *reduces* and a *teleport* later, and the whole Company are assembled in their new estate, crowded eagerly around the painting. Dranko, Morningstar, Kibi and Flicker crawl through the mahogany frame and into a small, damp room with earthen walls, ceiling and floor, supported with wooden posts. Morningstar checks the room for both evil and magic but finds neither. Flicker discovers (and easily disarms) some needle traps on the trunks and starts popping them open; coins glint in the light of their *continual flame* torch. Flicker's eyes widen. There are twenty trunks, each overflowing with gold and silver pieces. He does some quick guessing and figures there are probably about 100,000 coins all told.

The six barrels are even better. They are filled to various degrees with small gems! Flicker takes a few minutes to appraise a random sampling, does some more figuring, and guesses that their total worth could be over 100,000 gold pieces. And it gets even better – the "bricks" stacked by one wall of the room are silver, gold and platinum trade bars, worth another 30,000 gold pieces. That brings the total value of the Black Circle's treasury to almost 200,000 gp. Flicker and Dranko weep with joy while giving themselves a treasure bath in a half-full barrel of gems. Morningstar rolls her eyes and shooes them out of the room, where they tell the others (waiting expectantly) about the haul. The next day they will use the *bag of holding* to get the loot back to Tal Hae, and start some much anticipated crafting of magic items.

When everyone else has gone to bed, Morningstar sneaks down to the drawing room, looks about furtively, and climbs into the painting. With an embarrassed yet blissful smile on her face, she digs her hands into a barrel of gems, and sprinkles them onto her head, letting them fall back into the barrel and onto the floor.

Ah, what a lovely sound.

RangerWickett: Aww... her fiancé's rubbing off on her. How cute. Remind me who plays Morningstar in real life. I seem to recall that it's not KidCthulhu, right?

madriel: KidCthulhu's playing Ernie. Ah, the burden of dignity.

Fade: So are the Company going to claim the treasure on the standard principle that 'if we had to kill someone to get it, it's ours'? I can see some heavy taxes in their future...

Sagiro: Darn right! As you'll see a few installments from now, they've already spent most of it crafting magic items.

And technically, back in the very first session of the game, Abernathy did tell them that their primary job benefit would be that they could keep what treasure they found while fighting evil.

Zaruthustran: Wow. Reading Abernathy's name reminded me of how very far the Company has come.

Sagiro: That would be about twelve levels.

The players' favorite indication of character growth is that now they withhold information from others because "it's too dangerous for them to know."



Under Siege

Run #134 – Tuesday, July 16, 2002

Thursday, July 24 – Friday, July 25

Sitting cross-legged in the center of the Greenhouse living room, Flicker lets out a contented sigh. Around him are piles of gems on the floor, stacks of gems on the low table, gems being batted around by cats and (in all likelihood) gems that have found their way into a few hidden pockets. The other members of the Company are nearby, eating lunch and waiting for the final tally. "Including the trade bars, I'd say we've got about 190,000 gold pieces worth of loot out of that place. The Black Circle must have been building up that nest egg for years!"

Even after several generous donations to various churches, that still leaves enough left over for plenty of the exotic ingredients required for making magic items. The Company have started to make shopping lists when there is a knock on the door. A messenger delivers a letter to Eddings, which he passes to Kay. It seems that their royal uniforms are ready to be picked up at the palace tailor, at their convenience. "All right!" Dranko exclaims, and at his urging, they leave for the palace grounds straight away.

The tailor, a nice old lady named **Bella**, makes them all change into the new uniforms on the spot, and then makes some impromptu alterations while they stand there. They are ornate but tasteful, crimson with gold trim, bearing the royal crest of Charagan – a fish over a sword. Wearing them, the Company will be now be recognized as soldiers of the King's Guard, as Kay had requested. "Pulling rank will be a breeze in these," Dranko notes.

While they're in the neighborhood, Kay makes an appointment for the Company to debrief with Duke Nigel of Harkran the following afternoon, since they still haven't made any official report to the Spire about their defeat of Mokad.

Back at the Greenhouse, while Ernie prepares dinner, there is another knock on the door. Eddings grabs his *continual flame* coin from its pouch, opens the door a crack, and shines the light in the face of the man standing outside. But there's no cause for alarm – it's Sutton, their erstwhile replacement navigator hired on after Makel's departure. He squints straight into the light and clears his throat. "Yeah, yeah, I remember the drill," he says, walking past Eddings into the house. "I ain't no crazy body-possessin' critter. Not today, anyways. I just figgered I'd drop by and remind you that you still had me on retainer."

"We haven't forgotten," Morningstar says. "We've just been very busy lately, and haven't had any reason to sail anywhere."

"You think you might need me anytime soon?" Sutton asks hopefully.

"Er... we're not really sure," says Aravis.

"Well, I wondered if you'd mind, then, if I went and did a bit o' sailin' on my own. I'm itchin' for a rocking deck beneath my feet. Antsy for the ocean and all that. It'd just be a short job, two weeks maybe, but I'd be out of touch."

The Company assure him that that's fine. Ernie brings him some fresh rolls for his trouble. If anyone notices his wide-eyed stare when he spots Flicker's stacks of gems on the floor, they are polite enough not to point it out.



Saturday, July 26

Duke Nigel lets out a long, slow breath. Before him in his audience chamber, the Company have just given him a full report of Mokad's operation in Kallor. The closeness of the shave is not lost on him.

"Abernathy chose well when he selected you," he says. "Charagan is indebted to you once again. I wish time and circumstance could allow for a celebration, but I still fear for the Spire and the Kingdom."

"Has something specific happened?" asks Aravis.

"Not as such," says Nigel. "But Ozilinsh isn't the only Archmage who's gone silent. It's all of them. No one else in the Spire has heard a word from an Archmage in weeks, and the most likely explanation is not promising. They must be being put to the test, out there in their towers..." – he gestures vaguely toward a window – "...spending all of their energy and focus on their task. We must face the possibility that Naradawk is making his final push, and that our wizards may fail. I believe that we should be repositioning troops to Verdshane."

"But what about the Nifi worshippers?" asks Flicker. "Aren't the...?"

"Yes," Nigel snaps. "The Delfiri still press us on the peninsula. I wouldn't propose giving up the southern theatre. In fact, soldiers we've already recommitted to the fight with the Delfiri have allowed us to push the front back in recent days. But we have other troops who were in more demanding engagements with the humanoid forces, and who have not yet been reassigned to the Balani. We were hoping that they could have time to recover before being thrown back into the fray, but I feel that is not a luxury we have. We could field a force of two thousand troops near Verdshane without devastating our defenses elsewhere."

"I hate Verdshane," Dranko mumbles.

"At least the news from there is good," says Nigel. "No more monsters have escaped from the hanging boxes, no sign of change in the stasis field around the *gate*. And no sign of that woman... Meledien." The Duke sighs. "I wish I knew where Rosetta and Etria had gone."

"Rosetta?" Ernie asks. The Company are immediately on edge at the mention of her name.

"She took my court wizardess and a dozen guards off on some kind of 'secret mission' against Black Circle interests. That was a few days ago. I don't know when to expect her return."

No members of the Company voice their vague suspicions of Rosetta out loud to the Duke. There is an awkward silence.

"Ah, I must get back to work," the Duke says finally. "I'll send word should we have need of you. You should do likewise, if you learn anything new, or hear from Ozilinsh."



Back at the Greenhouse, Eddings has taken control of the Icebox, so dinner is happily free of Skorg's culinary influence. There is some preliminary discussion around the table about what to do next, and the group decision is to spend some downtime training and crafting magic items, until the next crisis hits.

As dinner ends and Eddings starts bringing out dessert, the sound of a violent wind comes from the Greenhouse chimney.

Nail: Now, why am I not surprised they won't have any of that "downtime"?

Zaruthustran: Wind could be good. Kay being Kay, and all.

Piratecat: Err. Not so much. Unless you like angry wizards attached to your wind.

Zaruthustran: Doh.

Sparrowhawk: Dedicated lurker here, checking in on his favorite Story Hour. I'd like you to know that I keep playing D&D (and RPGs in general) because of this and other Story Hours on this board. Knowing that games this good exist gives me hope that I might one day take part in one.

Dranko's confrontation with his grandfather is a touching moment indeed. This game has had several already, most memorably the death of Abernathy; and Ernie lecturing Solomea's father (or rather, the memory of his father) inside the Crosser's Maze. It's these times that make this story the best, in my opinion.

Now, did somebody say it was an angry wizard coming through the chimney? I really hope that's not who I think it is. Looking back to when the Company fought P's *simulacrum*, the highest spell it cast was *chain lightning*, I believe. That would put the real Parthol Runecarver at 18th-22nd level (or even higher!) The Company's good, but they've been caught at the dinner table, probably completely unarmed. Besides, what can they do to compete with *wall of the banshee*, *prismatic spray*, *horrid wilting*, and *power word: kill*?

Also, I thought that the Greenhouse was supposed to be impregnable. Considering that Abernathy was a centuries-old archmage, how could someone break through his protections? Guess the Spire will have to find a new place to meet...

Anyway, post another update! I know they didn't fight P. But that makes me more impatient to know what happened!

The Company abruptly stop talking and listen for a moment. Then they are all leaping backwards out of their chairs and scrambling for weapons, except for Morningstar, who begins to cast *detect thoughts*. As the others are arming, she casts about for minds and discovers one more than there should be. A few seconds later she pinpoints that extra mind up near the top of the chimney, right at the source of the noise. And the round after that she skims its inhuman surface thoughts, which are of frustration at being unable to descend any lower, and determination to keep trying.

Morningstar reports this to the rest of the party, and there is some tempered relief that the wards of the Greenhouse are still working. Kibi goes over to the fireplace and cautiously extends his head, to look up with his darkvision. He sees a swirling mass of cloud-like vapors up near the very top of the chimney. He pulls back and stands up. “I think it’s an air elemental. It can’t get in.”

“An air elemental?” Aravis raises his eyebrows. “It must have been *summoned*, by someone outside...”

“Should we go out, then?” Step is already headed for the door.

“Wait!” says Morningstar. “I’m not prepared for a fight. I don’t think we’re ready, in case it’s... another one of P’s simulacra.”

“We should at least try to spot him out of the windows,” says Dranko.

The front door of the Greenhouse begins to shake. The Company look on, weapons drawn, tense, as the door rattles loudly, glows softly for a moment and then quiets. “Ha!” says Ernie. “That won’t work either. Abernathy sure did...”

“What’s that?” Aravis barks sharply, pointing at the center of the room.

Several heads swivel to look, but there is just empty air above the living room table. “I see nothing,” says Step, frowning.

“There was a blurring in the air,” says Aravis. “It was almost like... it was the size of a scrying sensor, like someone was casting *clairv*...”

Everyone sees what happens next. A dark shape like a doorway’s shadow appears in the center of the Greenhouse living room. It flickers out, flickers back in again. It warbles like a reflection on a disturbed pond. Then it winks out, leaving another soft glow behind. Step lunges forward and swings his sword through the spot, harmlessly. Grey Wolf casts *see invisibility*, but sees nothing. Aravis looks thoughtfully at the spot for a few seconds before speaking again. “That was someone trying to *dimension door* into the house. Looks like it failed.”

From upstairs, another sound. A window is rattling. Dranko takes the stairs two at a time while the others fan out to various other windows. Kibi also casts *see invisibility*, and soon everyone is looking out of windows, hoping to spot their attacker. Dranko finds one window entirely frozen over (on the outside) and very cold to the touch, but unbroken.

Minutes pass. Nothing.

An hour later, it seems that they have weathered the storm. Flicker summarizes the general sentiment. “This sucks!”



The Company spend the remainder of the day inside, continuing to make plans and lists for magic item creation. The main list is long. On it are numerous potions and scrolls as well as wands, amulets, sashes, vests, shields, and (to Ernie’s delight) a new *flying carpet*. Divided up efficiently among the many party members with the requisite feats, it could take two or three months to make everything on the list. This discovery segues into a discussion of what urgent tasks the Company might have to undertake, or might want to undertake, in the near future. Maybe they should go to Kivia now, to find Het Branoi and its Eye of Moirel. But what if Aravis (and the Crosser’s Maze) are needed in the meantime?

The debate continues for hours before they decide to consult a higher power. Morningstar prays for a few minutes for the spell of *commune* before retiring to her room, invoking a personal darkness, and asking for the wisdom of Ell.

“Is leaving for Kivia in order to get the Eye of Moirel the best course of action to prevent the Emperor from coming through to Charagan?”

NO.

“If we leave for Kivia in nine weeks, will the Crosser’s Maze be needed before we return, to prevent the Emperor from coming through to Charagan?”

MOST LIKELY.

“Was ‘P’ or his agents responsible for today’s attack on the Greenhouse?”

YES.

"Have 'P' or his agents tried everything he (or they) can to get into the Greenhouse?"

NO.

"Will 'P' try again?"

YES, OR AN AGENT.

"Would we be likely to be successful in finding and taking out Parthol Runecarver?"

NO, NOT AT PRESENT.

"Are the Eyes of Moirel safe in the Greenhouse?"

AS SAFE AS THEY WISH.

"Is pursuing the Black Circle the best course of action to prevent the Emperor from coming through to Charagan?"

NO.

"Is pursuing the Sharshun the best course of action to prevent the Emperor from coming through to Charagan?"

NO.

"Is investigating Calnis the best course of action to prevent the Emperor from coming through to Charagan?"

NO.

"Is pursuing the remaining red-armored soldiers the best course of action to prevent the Emperor from coming through to Charagan?"

NO.

Morningstar offers a prayer of thanks for these divine answers. You're welcome, a voice sounds in her soul.

She returns to the others to share her new intelligence. "That's good news," says Dranko.

The others turn to look, puzzled. "It means we shouldn't feel like we need to run out and kill Parthol Runecarver."

"Yeah, that's a relief," says Flicker, rolling his eyes.

"What I think it means," says Aravis, "is that I'd better figure out how to use the Crosser's Maze to stop the Emperor, and soon. I've spent a lot of time inside it, moving around, testing it, probing it. But I still don't know how I'm going to use it for what we really need it for. I have an idea, though."

"Yeah?" Grey Wolf asks. "Why do I think we're not going to like it?"

"Oh, it shouldn't be that dangerous," Aravis assures the others. "I intend to seek out previous Keepers of the Maze and ask their advice."

"You can do that?" Ernie asks, wide-eyed.

"It should be possible," Aravis nods. "I'll craft myself an *amulet of intellect* over the next week or so, since I think I'll be helped by a, um, deeper understanding, if you will, of certain aspects of the Maze interior. Then I'll go in."

No one says anything for a moment. "I noted that Ell said 'P' wasn't finished with us," Grey Wolf says despondently.

The Company sleep uneasily that night.

Sparrowhawk: Well, that's a relief. The Greenhouse is still safe. ... Of course, now the Company knows that the enemy's out to get them. I suppose that they're afraid to go out now, lest they be assassinated? If they are, I'd say this latest attack served its purpose.

I wonder if 'P' is willing to keep sending *simulacra* on search-and-destroy missions like this. If he keeps this up (and the party survives) the XP cost will get to him eventually. Of course, when you're a high-level wizard, you've got XP to burn. Especially if you're an NPC and don't have to follow all the rules exactly.



Sunday, July 27

Late the following morning there is a knock on the door. A messenger in the ducal colors is there with a sealed letter.

"I have an important missive for General Windstorm that she should read at once," he tells Eddings (while squinting through the Farazil-check *continual flame* that all visitors endure). Kay comes forward to take the letter and politely dismisses the messenger. She breaks the seal (signifying the royal army) and hands the letter to Ernie to read for her.

General Windstorm,

Your presence is required on the Balani Peninsula as soon as is possible. Yara Karenne, the leader of the Yrimpa, has withdrawn the support of his soldiers at an extremely inopportune time. He demands to speak with you before recommitting his forces to the war effort. The sailing ship Stalk Swift is departing from Tal Hae an hour after noon on the day of July 27. It will take you directly to a landing point on the peninsula, where an armed escort will bring you to the main rear encampment.

- General Largent

With hardly more than an hour before her ship leaves, Kay gathers her belongings, says her goodbyes, and leaves for the docks.

Twenty minutes later, Eddings is summoned to the door yet again. This time there is a teenage messenger boy there, carrying something in a sack. “Mister? A woman named Kay gave me these to bring to you. Her message was, she remembered her ring could hold stuff, and it turns out there was something already in there. She said they’d be more useful to you than to her. She also said you’d pay pretty well for bringing them back.”

Eddings passes the sack back to the others. Step, wanting to take the risk in case it’s a trap, accepts the bag and looks carefully inside. “Hmm. It’s books. Two gray books tied together with a cord. There’s a Black Circle on the cover of the top one. It...” He concentrates for a moment. “It’s not radiating evil. I think they’re...”

“Spell books!” Aravis and Grey Wolf shout, jumping forward. Ernie comes to the door and hands the youth three gold pieces; the boy goggles for a moment before running off. Grey Wolf and Aravis have a brief and unseemly tug-of-war with the tied-up books, before an exasperated Kibi comes over and (being much stronger than either of them) yanks them away. Before the other two can stop him, he unties the cord and flips open the top book.

“Mmmmm. Yup. Spells in here. Some good ones.” He turns a few pages. “*Energy buffer*. That looks interesting...” The other wizards crowd around, and all three are basically useless for the rest of the day.



Morningstar has prepared a large number of *sending* spells for the day, and spends the afternoon as the “switchboard of Ell.” First she sends one on behalf of Grey Wolf, to his sister Jaina:

Hi. I'm alive. Back at Greenhouse. How are you? – Grey Wolf

HA! I knew it! I knew you weren't going to die! Told ya! Told ya! Told ya! You should have listened to me when I

Morningstar smirks. The next one she sends for Ernie, who wants to check in with their old city-guard friend Marbury Tillerson. (Lt. Tillerson is currently stationed in Verdshane, and has been since the expulsion of Meledien some weeks earlier.)

*Hi! It's Ernie. How are you? I'm fine. Just checking in. We always have too much pie now.
Reply 25 words or less.*

Ernest! Things are busy here. I've been cutting trees as well as guarding creepy magic buildings. Rumors of trouble but nothing has happened yet.

Finally, Morningstar sends a *sending* of her own, to her father in Kynder Hold:

*Dad – How are you? Am good. Working hard. Probably going out of sending range again soon.
Is Mom well? How are things at temple? Morningstar.*

*Your Mother and I are both well, and things at the temple are normal. Stay safe wherever you go.
Say “Hi” to Dranko for us.*

So all is well. Flicker and Ernie go out to buy some supplies both culinary and magical for the impending craft fest while the others start reorganizing and refitting the large basement as an alchemy lab.

They are still out early that evening when a sharp scratching sound comes from beneath the basement floor. Morningstar casts *detect thoughts* and finds it similar to the air elemental from the chimney. Scree offers his opinion that it's an earth elemental trying to dig its way into the house.

While Step draws his weapon and stands ready in case the elemental breaches the floor, Kibi casts *see invisibility* and runs up the stairs. Once on the main floor he runs from window to window looking out, hoping to catch a glimpse of Parthol's *simulacrum*. He sees nothing, but a moment later there is a great **FWOOM** from around the side of the house. All the Company know that sound well – a *fireball* has impacted the Greenhouse! There is a scream from the street, and the sound of retreating footsteps as a passing commoner flees down the street.

Morningstar breaks off her concentration on the elemental's mind and casts another *sending* to Ernie, warning him and Flicker that the house is under attack again. She follows with her fifth and final *sending* of the day, to Duke Nigel:

*Greenhouse under serious magical attack. Runecarver. Stronger than Sharshun. DON'T HELP.
But you should know. Will check in when over.*

Understood. Let me know if I can render assistance, send troops, or request court wizard provide aid.

As she finishes, an upstairs window starts to rattle violently and doesn't stop for several minutes. Everyone is looking out of windows on all sides of the house, but again the assailant is not in evidence. Then Dranko spots Ernie and Flicker running around the corner and down the street toward the house. "Those idiots!" he groans. "They should be hiding somewhere, not coming back here!"

The halflings reach the front door of the Greenhouse. Ernie takes out his key, but as he moves it toward the keyhole his hand strikes something invisible. While he manages to hold onto the key, they cannot get into the house – there is a *wall of force* entirely blocking the door! They run around to the back door but entry is similarly prevented. Realizing that they're sitting ducks, Flicker and Ernie run off again to the safest other place they can think of in Tal Hae: the Temple of Yondalla. They are not attacked en route.

Hours pass without incident. In the interim, Kibi indulges his curiosity and casts *detect magic* to observe the wards on the Greenhouse. He discovers that the enchantment and abjuration magics are actually stronger at the spot on the floor where the earth elemental had tried to break in. Interesting. The wizards then debate whether the *walls of force* (since expired) were part of the Greenhouse's defense system, or placed there by the *simulacrum*. Aravis performs an experiment to see if one can *dimension door* out of the Greenhouse, and in fact this works.

Eventually, the halflings come back and the Company eat a sullen dinner, frustration showing on every face. "This is intolerable," Grey Wolf grumbles. "Eventually it's going to decide it can't get in, and start picking us off when we leave."

Aravis jabs a fork into his mutton. "Tomorrow I'm going to be loaded for combat," he says. The other spellcasters nod their heads. One way or another, the situation is going to change.

coyote6: Y'all are much more patient than my group. They'd have been out the door looking for a fight way earlier.

What was the deal with Kay being called away? Missing player?

Sagiro: Yes, Kay's player has moved two hours' drive away, and just had a beautiful baby daughter. As such, her attendance will be sporadic at best for a while.

Quartermoon: How wonderfully creepy!! I love all this "monster banging at the door... will it get in?" tension. You are so cool, Sagiro.

madriel: I love the Siege of the Greenhouse, too.

Nail: Agreed. And I also love the PCs' "not-yer-typical-PC" behavior. NOT dashing out into the street. THINKING about the potential outcomes of direct combat with 'P.' Where, oh great Sagiro, did you find PCs that can think?



Monday, July 28

Ernie wakes early and starts cooking. By the time the others wake, a savory breakfast awaits them, spread nicely on the table by Eddings. Conversation is clipped and businesslike, devoid of its typical irreverent humor. By mid-morning the dishes have been cleaned and the Company are sitting nervously in the living room, half-heartedly discussing what laboratory equipment they'll still need for their impending projects.

Skorg, having slept late, comes groggily down the steps, heads for the Icebox, and does a doubletake. He stares for a moment at the Company, sitting quietly around the living room table – fully armed, fully armored, festooned with wands and scroll cases and brimming quivers. He grunts and motions toward the Icebox. "Do you mind?" he asks of no one in particular.

Eddings nods his head. "Thanks!" Skorg says. "Black lizard pie. A fresh one." As he reaches for the Icebox door, everyone jumps up at the sound of an explosion – from outside on the street! The Company rush to the front windows and behold the

horrible sight of a smoking body in the middle of the road. It's a woman dressed as a commoner who has barely survived a *fireball*, lying prone and moving her arm feebly.

Ernie says some uncharacteristically bad words. Flicker states the obvious: "He's trying to draw us out."

"He could be waiting right outside the door," says Kibi.

"Flicker!" Dranko barks. "I'm going to heal her from here. When I've been casting for about four seconds, I want you to open the window. As soon as I'm done, close it again. Understand?"

"Got it."

Dranko calls upon his limited Delioch-granted ability to cast healing spells at range, and casts a curative spell out the window at the woman. To his dismay, he feels the healing energies dissipate uselessly. The woman looks no better, though she still stirs. "It didn't work," he frowns. "Maybe something blocked the spell. Or... she could be an illusion."

"If it's an illusion," says Aravis, "it means he's out there, somewhere, concentrating on it. Let's go."

Kibi casts *improved invisibility* on Dranko, which starts a brief flurry of buffing spells. Grey Wolf casts *see invisibility* and peers out the window, scanning the street and the air above. Aravis then grabs Dranko and *dimension doors* the two of them to a rooftop across the street. Both start looking around, but see no sign of the *simulacrum*. Kibi casts a second *improved invisibility*, this time on Morningstar, who uses a *word of recall* set to the street outside to leave the Greenhouse without opening the door. Finally, Kibi casts *see invisibility* on himself before *dimension dooring* himself, Ernie and Grey Wolf out into the street. Flicker and One Certain Step stay inside to safeguard the Greenhouse, while Edgar, Scree and Pewter all scan the streets from various windows.

Kibi, Ernie and Grey Wolf are greeted rudely by an Empowered *lightning bolt* from somewhere above. When the smoke clears the three of them are suffering from horrific burns, and no one can find any sign of the attacking wizard. Ernie immediately heals Kibi, who took the worst of the blast, before curing his own wounds. Grey Wolf and Kibi, realizing that they should have done it earlier, make themselves invisible.

Aravis casts *fly* on Dranko, who starts flying around the skies above the Greenhouse, straining his eyes and ears to detect the *simulacrum*. Aravis thinks he hears the sound of an invisible spellcaster, but so faintly that he can't even discern the direction.

Grey Wolf runs around to the back of the Greenhouse, communicating with Edgar and instructing his monkey familiar to lead Step to the back window. Once there, Grey Wolf gets healed by Step, reaching out the window to *lay on hands*. Step also gives him his *wand of cure serious wounds* to take to a cleric (after some fumbling, since Grey Wolf is still invisible).

All of the Company are looking around everywhere, frantically. Somewhere, Dranko thinks he hears another spell being cast, but like Aravis he cannot pinpoint the location. Seconds later Morningstar, despite being invisible, is struck blind by a spell from P's servant. *I guess if he was going to blind someone, Morningstar thinks, I'm glad he picked me. But still...*

Nail: Sagiro, how did you rule on the PCs locating "s-P" by hearing? He was spellcasting...

Sagiro: I had any nearby PCs make Listen checks whenever the sim cast a spell, but none of them made a check by enough to really pinpoint his location (the sim would always cast from the maximum possible distance to make this as difficult as possible). To make matters worse, he was *hasted*, and so would cast with his partial action and then do a double move to fly 180 feet away in some random direction afterward. So even when Dranko got a general sense of direction and distance, the sim would be long gone from his casting location just a few seconds later.

Realizing that extraordinary measures might be needed to spot their attacker, Aravis sits down on his rooftop and enters the Crosser's Maze. His mind slides back into its vast depths and he begins to focus inward and downward toward the Greenhouse. The others continue to spread and search, but it seems hopeless.

The next sign of the *simulacrum* is when a growling fiendish dire bear appears a block to the west, roars, and charges. Before it can reach the Company (Morningstar most specifically), Kibi casts *wall of force*, effectively containing it within a transparent enclosure with ten foot high walls. The bear scrabbles at the hidden barrier and roars in frustration.

Ernie, realizing that (a) even with their own spells they cannot see their enemy, and that (b) their enemy can see the invisible members of the Company just fine, rummages in the *bag of holding* and withdraws the Divination Sink gem. Assuming it's working as before, all divination spells for hundreds of feet should now be defunct. That leaves Ernie and Aravis as the only visible targets, and so it's they who are caught in a ferocious Empowered *ice storm*. Huge chunks of ice pummel them both, and Aravis's consciousness is forced violently out of the Maze by the pounding to his body. *Oof!* Morningstar, realizing that (blind-fighting notwithstanding) she needs to see what is going on, casts *heal* on herself, and her vision is instantly restored.

Grey Wolf sees that the fiendish dire bear is trying to climb the *wall of force*, and *summons* a celestial badger above the bear to distract it. But the bear makes short and gruesome work of the small creature and continues to work toward its escape. Unable to get purchase on the frictionless force wall, it takes a small running start and leaps. **WHOOOMF!** It fails spectacularly, getting only the front half of its body over, and catching the very middle of its fiery abdomen on the top of the wall. It ends up balanced there, comically, all four paws scrabbling but unable to reach the ground. It roars again, in rage, embarrassment or both. Kibi takes the opportunity to fire *magic missiles* at the bear, but they are reflected harmlessly away by the target's spell resistance. Dranko, realizing that Ernie and Aravis are still easy prey for the *simulacrum*, casts *obscuring mist* above them, shielding them from sight.

And then Kibi has a splendid idea. He *summons* a fiendish dire bat, up in the air and as far away from the bear as possible. A bat should be able to spot something invisible just fine! Alas, the bat appears, and immediately swoops back down towards the dire bear, that being the closest enemy it can discern.

Morningstar, eyes back to normal, sees this and figures out what to do next. She *summons* another pair of dire bats, and as they go to harass the bear, she follows it up with a *Rary's telepathic bond*. Over the mind-link she instructs them to ignore the bear and look for the flying wizard. *Oh, and tell that third bat to leave the bear alone and join you.*

The bats fly around for a few seconds, and suddenly take off in a deliberate upward climb. Aha! Dranko immediately starts to fly after them. Aravis casts *levitate* on himself and starts to rise through the mist, while Grey Wolf casts *fly* on Ernie and Morningstar casts *air walk*. Ernie and Morningstar fly over to join the ascending Aravis while the bats continue to chase their invisible prey.

Magic missiles appear from nowhere and slam into the foremost bat. In a red flash it vanishes, but the other two continue undaunted. At Morningstar's telepathic command the bats are relaying how far away they are (measured in bat wing lengths) from their enemy. She relays this to Ernie, who casts *invisibility purge* on himself before reaching out to hold on to her and Aravis. *Eight wingspans, and a bit to the left... now higher up by three spans... he's banking left... okay, now he's ten spans, directly ahead of them...*

Ernie activates his *ring of dimension door*, taking himself, Morningstar and Aravis up into the sky, as close as he can get to where the bats are telling Morningstar their target is. They reappear high above the wooden city of Tal Hae... and there is Parthol's double, revealed by the nearby *invisibility purge*!

To his great delight, Dranko sees that he himself is not within the range of Ernie's spell. Invisible, he fires off a *searing light* as a sneak attack from range. The ray of white-hot light goes right through the ice-and-snow body of the *simulacrum*, dissolving away the fake flesh where it hits. Morningstar follows it up by lobbing a massively damaging *chill seed*, which tears away chunks of the enemy wizard's body.

Somehow, Parthol's servant is still alive, still flying, threatening to escape... until Kibi's dire bat finally swoops in and plunges its fangs into the *simulacrum*'s head. In a white flash the adversary's body melts away, sending droplets of harmlessly enchanted rain down to the rooftops below. The flying, levitating, and *air walking* members of the Company can hardly believe the success of their coordinated attack, and are soon all grinning from ear to ear.

It is amusing to think that, just perhaps, the droplets land upon the helpless dire bear, a final annoyance before it returns to its infernal home.

madriel: I was wondering how long it'd be before the *simulacrum* lured the Company out. Cool battle.

coyote6: That's a cool fight. Were the players getting frustrated by the *simulacrum*'s ability to see them while they couldn't see it?

Sagiro: Yeah, the players and characters both were tearing their hair out during that fight. Their enemy was *hasted, improvedly invisible*, and was protected by *nondetection* against PC divinations. He was casting spells, then flying hundreds of feet away for a round or two to assess things, then flying back to cast again. Repeat, repeat. Until the end of the fight, I honestly wasn't sure what the party was going to do about it. They had talked about giving up and retreating back to the Greenhouse. Dire bats had never occurred to me.

Their plan at the end was (I thought) staggeringly cool, and a real group effort. Tracking the *simulacrum* via *Rary's telepathic bond* connected to dire bats, and then *dimension doorwaying* a flying halfling with *invisibility purge* close enough to allow other nearby flyers a devastating round of attacks... whoa. I love my players.

Milo Windby: That was a very cool fight. I especially liked the bat tactic. I imagine that may be used again in the future. So how many *simulacra*s will the Company have to wade through before the real 'P' is revealed? And, do they even want to find the real 'P' since Ell told Morningstar that he isn't a priority? Seems like he's doing a really good job of making himself one.

Fade: The real question is, why is he only sending one at a time? Or does this come under Rule 1?

Piratecat: You SUCK! Bad Fade. No Rule 1 violation! Incidentally, our latest bit of good news is Duke Nigel's opinion that 'P' may be a li-li-li-lich. Yikes.

Sagiro: One would presume that Parthol Runecarver doesn't have an infinite supply of XP to blow on duplicates of himself. It's also not a certainty that he hasn't made other simulacra with agendas outside the Company's knowledge. That said, there's no guarantee that there won't be more such foes in the Company's future...

To be specific about Morningstar's *commune*, she learned nothing about the priority of attacking 'P.' She learned that, if they were to attack him right now, they would have no chance of defeating him. There's a difference. *evil grin*

Milo Windby: Aha. I see now. Very RBDM of you, Sagiro.

wolff96: Okay, it's a niggling little detail, but... was the old lady scorched by the *fireball* real or an illusion? I'm guessing illusion, but you never clarified.

Sagiro: The party discovered that the *fireballed* woman was an illusion.

Nail: The alignment of 'P' is interesting...

Sagiro: Maybe he used an illusion to spare a real person. Or maybe it was the best way to get an injured-but-not-killed commoner exactly where he wanted it. I don't think anyone in the party has ever taken the time to cast *detect evil* on an "s-P."

MavrickWeirdo: On the other hand, he summoned a "fiendish" dire bear.

Nail: Nice thought, but: "...and then Kibi has a splendid idea. He *summons* a fiendish dire bat..."

Perhaps Kibi is evil too? Is Kibi, in fact, an evil mole? The gravity of the situation amazes me...

Sagiro: Well, on the lists of summonable creatures, the only dire bats are of the fiendish variety. They weren't happy, but were compelled to serve.

MavrickWeirdo: That's OK; the only dire bears on the lists of summonable creatures are of the celestial variety.

Sagiro: I'll probably institute a house rule that for any creature on the *summon monster* lists with the fiendish or celestial template, the template listed can be swapped for the other. There's nothing inherently evil about bats, after all. Heck, eating all those annoying bugs is a good thing!

Nail: I'm sure some DMs already allow this. It's a Good Idea™. On a tangent: arcane spell casters can summon whatever aligned beings they choose. We've seen good casters summon evil things... do evil casters ever summon good things? Moral ramifications of the good creatures doing evil acts? Perhaps evil arcane casters do this "just for fun"? Perhaps the much vaunted *Book of Vile Darkness* suggests this? Or is that not Vile™ enough?

drnuncheon: I played a NE halfling conjurer who did just this. For some reason it gave people even less reason to suspect he was evil. (Most people merely assumed he was grouchy.) He did it because it amused him to force good creatures to fight for him.

If I were an evil caster, though, I would be very wary about summoning powerful, intelligent good creatures to fight for me. They may be forced to attack my enemies but that doesn't guarantee that they won't show up again later to whup my butt for my insolence.

Fade: Same goes for evil creatures.

coyote6: That's why you only summon the dumb ones, so they can't find you and don't think to tell anyone smarter. Skip the archons and osyluths – too damned sneaky, never mind all that teleporting they can do.

Milo Windby: Sagiro, I game in a few groups, one that is pretty massive as far as amount of PCs. It seems like you've got a lot of players as well. How long does a fight like this generally last? Many of our players aren't experienced, so there's a lot of looking spells, feats, and skills up during a battle. One round of our fights has taken up to 30 minutes at one point.

Sagiro: A typical run in my game has six players, though I occasionally go as high as seven or eight, or as low as five. Typical non-epic battles, like the one against the *simulacrum*, are in the one to three hour range. On rare occasions I'll have a gigantic combat that lasts for most of a long Sunday session, and right now (teaser alert!) the Company is in the midst of a battle that's already taken up an entire run, and isn't finished yet.

My players range from "rules literate" to "rules expert," and I manage (I think... er, I hope...) to prevent combats from dragging. Having Piratecat and KiddCthulhu as players is like having extra DMs around for rules purposes, and even my less pointy-headed players have come to know their own characters' mechanics pretty well. Also, I'm willing to move on to the next combatant while the previous one is still working out details, if I'm sure the former won't have an effect on the latter.

Milo Windby: Not a bad idea. I may adopt that in the one game I'm running and suggest it to the others. My game is thankfully only five players, so it's not too bad.

Sagiro: And while I'm no Dr. Rictus-style walking rulebook, I have a pretty good grasp on the core stuff. Oh, and I'm also happy to make snap judgements, even if they're wrong, and look them up later. When it's important I'll stop combat while someone looks something up, but those delays never last more than about 45 seconds.

There is a pretty clear correlation between number of PCs and length of combat, though. Not just because more characters take actions each round, but because out-of-game table-talk increases, dinner takes longer to order and eat, each individual is more likely to get distracted, and the general chaos level is higher.

Milo Windby: So very true. Some days the game doesn't get started until one to two hours after everyone has arrived. I've also been thinking of adopting PC's "Pay the Pig" policy to keep things moving. I wouldn't want to limit it too much though. Game night is the only night some of us see each other so it's a good time to catch up with current events and such.

Piratecat: "Pointy-headed"? *sniff*

Sagiro: It was a compliment. Sheesh...



Interlude on the Peninsula

Kay's longboat detaches from the *Stalk Swift* and rows discreetly toward the rocky western shore of the Balani Peninsula. For a few moments Kay wonders if the boat has been launched in the right place – there is no inlet, no clear landing point, nothing but rocks and coral. But the rowers know their craft, and maneuver into a tiny hidden bay with an entrance just wide enough for the smallish longboat to slip through.

A dozen armed men are standing back from the shore, waiting for her. Fifteen horses are tethered to some scrubby trees nearby. A tall man in officer's dress strides forth to greet her, snapping off a crisp bow before speaking. "General Windstorm, I am **Corporal Stathis**. We are here to escort you to the main rear encampment. The journey should take a day and a half overland. General Largent expresses his gratitude that you've come to see him on such short notice."

Kay looks around at the low rocky hills, concerned. "Thank you, Corporal. But isn't this dangerous? Such a small group, so near to the battlefield? We could easily be ambushed."

Stathis smiles, but without condescension. "We are far from the front lines, General. No Delfirians have been sighted anywhere near this put-in or our route to the camp. And we have many hidden scouts who will be providing additional protection as we travel. We'll be safe, I assure you."

His assurances prove well founded. Kay and her entourage are unmolested through the day's travel, winding through dry rocky valleys between brown shrub-speckled hills. They camp for the night by a small stream trickling down from a small peak.



The next morning they break camp, expecting to reach Largent later in the afternoon. But they have only been travelling for an hour when an ethereal blue form comes flying in from over a near ridge. The men-at-arms ready their spears and surround the General as a precaution, but Oa-Lyanna starts excitedly to ruffle the wind in Kay's hair. "It's a Yrimpa!" she whispers. "My people are near!"

The Yrimpa lands a respectful distance from the armed men, and flies slowly along the ground toward Kay. Like all Yrimpa, his upper body is that of a translucent blue human or half-elf, details discernable in a wispy sort of way. From the waist down he is a swirl of blue vapors. "Kay Windstorm!" he calls. "I am **Tua Pawayya**, servitor to our chief, Yaro Karenne. May I approach?"

"Of course," says Kay, motioning him forward.

"I have a brief message," says Tua. "Yaro Karenne requests that you speak with him immediately – this afternoon. The Yrimpa have built an air-city that is only a few miles distant – a brief flight."

"I am on my way to speak with General Largent," says Kay. "Can this wait?"

Tua Pawayya pitches his voice in a whisper that only Kay can hear. "Bonded One, I believe that Yaro knows why you are here. He would prefer that he see you at once, before you talk with your human leader. But that is a decision for the Bonded One. You should do as you see fit, of course."

Kay thinks for a moment while Tua maintains a respectful silence. "Could you excuse me for a moment?" Kay says at last. "I want to talk with Stathis."

"Of course, Bonded One."

Kay steps her horse over to where Stathis has (discreetly) removed himself. "Corporal, I have been summoned to speak with the Yrimpa, on an urgent matter. Can General Largent wait an extra few hours?"

"I can't really say, General," says Stathis, frowning. "I know that he wanted to see you at your earliest possible convenience. But..." He looks nervously at Tua, hovering nearby. "If you have personal business, I'm sure he can brook a short delay."

"Very good. I will be flying to the Yrimpa camp, but I can't fly for long enough to get all the way back. I'll be walking on my own, so I'll need directions."

"I'd prefer that you retain an escort..." Stathis begins, but Kay cuts him off.

"I trust your assessment that I'll be perfectly safe, Corporal. Don't worry about me. I'm very good on my own in the wilderness, and I have Oa-Lyanna to help protect me. Just tell me where I go to reach the camp."

Stathis sighs. "Yes, General. See that hill a bit off to the left, with the double peak? The camp is just beyond and to the right of that hill. The path we're taking actually winds to the left for several miles, through that shadowed valley, before bending sharply to the right."

"Tell General Largent I still intend to speak to him before he goes to sleep tonight. If not, I'll see him first thing tomorrow morning."

"Yes, General."

Kay dismounts from her horse and walks back to Tua Pawayya. "I'll come with you now," she says, and together with Oa-Lyanna she casts *fly*. Tua streaks up into the sky. Kay follows.

An hour later they come within sight of the Yrimpa's air-city. In a vague way it resembles a human city, with some structures that could be buildings, avenues, towers, walls; but all is made of thick white clouds, piled on top of one another and somehow

sculpted into shapes and forms. Around these clouds streak the Yrimpa themselves, dozens of them, at home in the vapors. Oa-Lyanna stirs happily. "It's beautiful," she whispers. Kay nods her agreement.

Minutes later she is escorted into an especially large and detailed cloud edifice, through what might be considered hallways, and into the presence of Yaro Karenne. The leader of the Yrimpa floats toward her, his arms extended in greeting.

"Welcome, Bonded One. I am pleased that you have accepted my invitation. And welcome also to your young companion, Oa-Lyanna."

"It's our pleasure," says Kay, hovering. "But I can't stay for long. My ability to fly only lasts another hour. And I promised General Largent that I would not delay any longer than is necessary."

"Ah, General Largent," says Yaro. "It is on that subject that I wanted to speak. Are you comfortable?"

"Yes, quite. Thank you."

"Good. I'll get right to the point then. I know that you have been brought here because of my decision to withdraw Yrimpa support from the war against the Delfiri. Yes?"

"Yes. Exactly. What has happened?"

"It hasn't been anything specific," says Yaro. "But I feel that the interests of my people are not being reasonably served, even considering the war. I'm sure you realize that the Yrimpa are elite fighting units in a campaign like this one. We are stronger, and incredibly more quick and maneuverable, than a typical Charagan foot soldier or horseman. Largent has used us as such, and that makes sense. But in recent months he has grown more and more... reliant on us, for dangerous missions. We do not fear danger of course, but we have now lost over twenty of our number since we volunteered to serve. Twenty-four, to be precise, bringing our number down from 206 to 182. Given our small population, and our slow rate of reproduction, I must always take into serious account the rate of attrition we suffer. I have already reached an agreement, made a few weeks back, that no more than fifteen Yrimpa would ever be assigned to a specific military operation, in case of a specifically designed ambush or other catastrophic failure."

"That seems sensible," says Kay.

"Yes. Well. General Largent was not happy with that compromise, but I made him see reason. I fear that the humans here do not understand the value of a single Yrimpa life. We are a unique race, a blend of magic and element that exists nowhere else on this Prime, or on the elemental planes. A Yrimpa has much, much greater value than one of your prolific humanoid races."

Kay shifts uncomfortably. Yaro continues: "A few days ago General Largent approached me and asked to break our agreement. He asked for thirty Yrimpa to commit to a single risky venture. I refused, though I almost reduced him to begging. I decided then that he had lost the right to command us. Traditionally only a Bonded One may issue direct commands to the Yrimpa, and we have fought so far with your blessing, though you have been far away. But without your guidance, our superiors have lost track of priorities. I wish to win this war, and I have no love for the Delfiri, but I will not risk the extinction of my people for this venture."

"Nor should you," Kay agrees.

"Bonded One, I wish for you to stay and command us. No other here adequately understands the issues involved."

"Yaro, I have my own mission, which is also very important to Charagan. But I will go talk to Largent, and try to make him see reason. I'm sure you can come to some sort of compromise that assures the safety of the Yrimpa."

"Perhaps." Yaro Karenne's expression is unreadable.

"I should go at once, then," says Kay. "With luck I can reach Largent tonight and discuss this with him. I'll return in the morning if we reach an agreement."

Yaro stares at Kay for a moment before smiling wanly. "I will await your return, then. Good luck, wind speed."



Duncan Haldane: Are you running something separately with Kay's player now that she's moved?

Sagiro: All of Kay's journey to the Balani Peninsula took place over the table, as Kay's player was in town and able to play. (And her husband, who often comes with her, does an admirable job playing One Certain Step.) These scenes were actually interlaced with other characters' actions at the session, but for narrative purposes I'm presenting it all at once.

Kay and Oa-Lyanna travel from the air-city for another hour before their *fly* spell runs out and they float gently to the ground. For the rest of the day Kay walks across the rugged terrain of the Balani Peninsula, easily following the tracks of her departed escort. Night falls and the going becomes slower, but the moon is full in a clear sky, enough for Kay to continue on. An hour past sunset she is challenged by a well-concealed watchman set specifically to meet her, and from there she is escorted into the camp.

Hundreds of tents have been erected, dotting the landscape along with wagons, watch platforms and fires. There are over two thousand soldiers in the camp, and it smells like an army: gruel, sweat, urine, smoke, horses. Kay is led silently through the masses of soldiery, many of whom have set their bedrolls out beneath the moon on this warm summer night. She nods in passing to those still awake and on watch.

After five minutes she is brought before a large tent, though not much different in style or color than the others. Two armed guards flank the tent flap. They snap to attention as Kay approaches. One speaks in a low voice to the guide who accompanies the General. "Has she been checked?"

"Yes. She's clean, and she is who she seems." Kay looks startled. She has noticed nothing in the way of divination spells directed at her.

"Very good," says the guard. "General Largent is still up, and expecting a guest." He holds back the flap, and Kay goes in.

General Largent is a grizzled, middle-aged man, large in every sense of the word. He stands well over six feet tall, with a barrel chest puffing out over a paunchy gut. His nose and ears are over-sized on his large round head. His voice is deep and resonant even when speaking quietly.

The only other person in the tent, aside from four silent guards, is a smaller, unassuming man without uniform. Both men are leaning over a set of maps laid out on a low square table in the center of the tent. They look up as Kay enters, then rise to greet her. "General Windstorm, welcome. I am General Largent, and this is **Jonas**, my chief strategist. Please, sit down. Can I interest you in some refreshment?" Soon Kay is sitting comfortably in the General's tent, drinking a cup of water and eating bread and sliced fruit.

Largent shifts his bulk around in a low chair and clears his throat. "I understand you have already spoken with Yaro Karenne."

"I have."

"Then you will have heard his grievances," Largent continues. "I would like to know how he presented them to you."

"Yaro is concerned for the welfare of the Yrimpa," Kay says. "He worries that you are putting them in too much danger, considering how few they are in total. And he said that you've asked him to break an agreement you've made concerning the number of Yrimpa to be committed in a single maneuver."

"Did he talk about that... maneuver?"

"No. He didn't go into detail."

"Ah. Then allow me. The Delfiri war operations are as a rule very well organized on a strategic level. Their positions are strong, and they don't overextend themselves. They don't throw away soldiers unnecessarily. They may lack creativity at times, but they make very few mistakes. When they do, it is imperative that we take full advantage."

"Just recently, they have made a mistake. Here, look." He points to one of the large maps between them. "Our scouts report that they are shifting their main focus from this region here, to the Seven Hills region, southwest. At first glance their positions seem too well entrenched for us to accost them. But they have left a gap, here, a gap with a blind spot caused by these cliffs to the north." Largent gestures to various features on the map as he talks. "We have a tremendous opportunity. If we can dislodge the Delfiri from the Smokehill Valley, the terrain and numbers will suddenly favor us for a series of follow-up strikes. From there we can gain control of several strategic hills and valleys in the area, giving us new launching points to harry their supply lines. Jonas and our other strategists estimate that we could push the Delfiri back another fifteen miles, and hold that territory with enough strength to deter a counterattack. It would be the most decisive victory for our side in months."

"But the window on this opportunity will only last another three days, four at the most. And the Delfirians, as I said, are no fools. They may realize the potential weakness at any time and correct it. We must act now."

"What part are the Yrimpa going to play in this?" asks Kay.

"In order to breach the near-side defenses, we must draw away a good part of their force for the initial assault. I intend that the Yrimpa fly high above the Smokehill Valley and launch a surprise assault from the rear. If that threat is credible, it will force

the Delfiri to take it seriously. We have set the minimum number of Yrimpa needed to make it work at thirty, to provide the offensive force that will convince them it's not just a distraction."

"You said it's unlike the Delfiri to make this kind of mistake. What if it's a set-up? We could be sending thirty Yrimpa into a trap."

"We have discussed that possibility at length. All signs, including good information from scouts, say it's not. And if it is, the Yrimpa are my soldiers most able to make a safe and easy retreat. They can go straight up! An ambush here would be more costly to my conventional troops. But I, and they, are willing to risk it. Which seems more than we can say for the Yrimpa at the moment."

"If this operation goes as planned, what casualties do you expect for the Yrimpa?"

"Less than a half dozen," says Largent. "Probably less than four. Very likely zero or one."

"You understand Yaro's concern," says Kay. "Those Yrimpa represent all that there are of his race in the whole world."

"I am very aware of that," says Largent. He lets out a long breath. "Look, I won't lie to you. The Yrimpa are extraordinary soldiers, and I am grateful for all they've done for us. Without them, we would not have held the enemy back even as well as we have so far. And... I have grown to rely on them for certain types of missions, I admit. Perhaps more than I should have. But I do not risk them unduly. Did Yaro tell you that a group of six Deliochan clerics of significant skill accompany the Yrimpa (as well as they can, on foot) on every mission, specifically to provide healing at a designated fallback position?"

"Er... no."

"Furthermore, if this maneuver is successful, we should not need to risk the Yrimpa at all for several weeks, giving them time to rest and heal at their leisure."

"And what if this whole thing turns out to be a trap, set specifically for the Yrimpa? What if they cannot escape, and all thirty are killed? I know it's unlikely, but do you realize what a blow that would be to them?"

"Of course I realize! Do you think I have a desire to commit genocide on my own allies? Yaro Karenne needs to be cautious, I realize, but I don't think he gives me enough credit. I know the situation. General Windstorm, I am supremely confident that this is not a trap, and that the potential outweighs all reasonable risk. And..." He pauses, touching his fingertips to his lips.

"...And, if by some horrible miscalculation this *is* a trap, and all of the Yrimpa are slain, then I would excuse the remaining 152 from the duration of the war. If they wanted that."

Kay glances down at the map, covered with markings, arrows, and small wooden disks. She looks back at Largent, trying to read his expression. There is no hint of desperation there, no trace of deception, or even nervousness. If she had to guess, Largent was probably already thinking about alternate plans if she took Yaro's side.

"You are welcome to spend the night considering what I've said," Largent says. "But I'll need to know tomorrow morning. If we wait much longer, the whole debate will become moot."

"Thank you, General," says Kay. "I'll make a decision in the morning."

"We have a tent at your disposal, as well as a personal guard. I'll see you again at dawn."



The next morning sees Kay again standing in Largent's tent. "Sir, I've made my choice. I will fly to Yaro Karenne and try talking him into accepting the mission on the terms you gave last night. I can't make you any guarantees, though."

"I cannot ask for more than that," booms Largent. "Good luck to you."

Kay and Oa-Lyanna fly back to the air-city, and are soon in audience with Yaro Karenne.

"So, you've spoken with General Largent. What is your opinion?"

"He seems like a reasonable man," Kay says. "It sounds like he really has given the matter a lot of thought. We talked about the risks to the Yrimpa, and I don't think he's underestimating that risk. Also, he has offered that if the mission goes as planned, he won't use you in battle for several weeks afterward. And... and if the worst happens, and all thirty are killed, he'd expect that you would remove yourself from the war altogether."

"I see."

"Do you think... I mean, could the Yrimpa survive if they suffer thirty more casualties?"

"I think so. It's not quite the same as it is with you humans and elves and such. Our reproduction only requires individuals, not pairs, but is less frequent and less... predictable. In theory a single one of us could replenish our race, but not with certainty."

"Nonetheless, if you command us to return to the war, and to take part in Largent's mission, we will. You are a Bonded One, and we will obey you."

"Yaro, I don't want to command you. You are not slaves. You don't have to do what I tell you."

"But you are a Bonded One. The only one remaining. It is part of our being that we do as you command. I don't blame you for not understanding fully. We are not slaves. We have all the free will we desire. But it is our will that a Bonded One should lead us, command us. Don't you see?"

"I'm afraid not," says Kay. "How is it part of your nature? Where did the Yrimpa come from?"

"Many of the details are lost to us," says Yaro, "but this much we know. We Yrimpa are not natural. There are no Yrimpa native to the world, not to the Primes, and not to the Elemental Plane of Air. We were a creation, long ago, of a mortal being, a wizard of great power. He crafted us from the primal elemental stuff, imbued us with life, intelligence, and the ability to perpetuate ourselves. That we were created makes us no less real, no less alive. All races were created by some high power, after all."

"And what about people like me? Bonded Ones? What does it mean to be a Bonded One?"

"I don't know," admits Yaro. "I have never been Bonded to a mortal. But that was also part of our creation. One of the rules of our being, you might say, just as you must eat food and breathe air. We must have ties to the elvish people."

"Then what happens if I die? If I'm the last Bonded One, and I die, what would happen to the Yrimpa? Would you all immediately perish?"

"I doubt it, but who knows?" Yaro spreads his arms wide. "Perhaps a new Bonded One would come into being. We would not have you live as a recluse because of those possibilities. You must live as you must."

"Yaro Karenne, I'm still not going to order you to follow Largent's orders. But as the Bonded One, I'm going to ask that you do. Largent is a good man, and like I said, he understands the issues."

"If you say it is so, then I believe you," says Yaro.

There is a pause, and then Kay speaks again. "I would like to accompany you on the mission."

Yaro smiles at her. "It is a offer both bold and kind, but I do not think it wise. Even when you are flying, the Yrimpa are both faster and more agile in the air. You mean well, I know, but I think you would only impede us. Also, should your own life be in specific danger, we would be in the position of possibly having to compromise the mission for the sake of the Bonded One."

"I understand," says Kay, disappointed.

"But we for our part are still citizens of Charagan," Yaro says. "We will continue fighting for our kingdom. You ask us to return, and a request from the Bonded One is as good as a command to us. Your confidence is enough. We will return."

And please, Kay thinks, let Largent know what he's doing.



Preparing for War

Run #135 – August, 2002

Tuesday, July 29 – Thursday, August 1

"Hey Eddings, you're sure Skorg had nothing to do with this meal, right?"

"Yes, Master Proudfoot. Our guest has been out all morning. This is bread from the Icebox, accompanied by expensive cheeses I purchased yesterday from the market. I'm sure it's not up to Ernest's standards, but I trust it will be to your satisfaction."

Flicker picks up a large platter of food from a butcher block. "It's just that the smell down there is already pretty bad, and I don't want to make it worse!"

He carries the tray down to the basement. As he reaches the bottom step his nose crinkles up reflexively. He averts his head quickly to avoid coughing on the food. "I'll just leave this bread and cheese on the bottom step if anyone wants some," he says. "I wouldn't worry about the cats getting it. They have enough sense not to come down here." Flicker bounds back up the steps.

The basement of the Greenhouse has been transformed into a large laboratory, replete with bubbling flasks, palettes of various powders, alembics, mortar-and-pestles, retorts, funnels, fermentation chambers, and dozens of additional pieces of alchemical apparatus. Ernie stands over a large basin, carefully measuring herbs and chemicals into a progression of glass vials. Dranko's workbench has some coarser tools – chisels, a hammer, an engraving knife – in addition to iron pots of glowing inks and dyes. Morningstar is alternately turning a long black wand over a small fire, and painting it with a fine brush. And Aravis, whose workplace reeks of something sulfurous, tinkers with some gold wire that will be looped through his *headband of intellect*.

"I still plan on going into the Maze once this is done," he says. "Somewhere are the previous Keepers of the Maze who have had experience using it. Well, in theory they're in there. I'm pretty sure. Anyway, it'll be fine."

"Tell us that again when you really are smarter." Kibi points to the headband.

"He'll be smarter, not wiser," Ernie observes.

Kibi and Grey Wolf are still setting up their own work spaces in different corners of the basement; they have spent the past several days cloistered in their rooms scribing spells into their spellbooks. (Kibi is particularly excited about adding *teleport*, and is eager to try it out, but he also wants to get everything prepared properly for making *sashes of transparency* for Grey Wolf and Dranko.)

"Oh... *drat!*" Ernie is sitting at his small table, a flask in either hand, having just been dripping the contents of one carefully into the other. Said other is now foaming over with a stinking black froth and spilling onto his hand. "Oh dear, oh dear! And quickling sweat is so expensive..." He chuckles the flask to shatter against the side of the basin. There is a small flash, a puff of gray smoke, and then a pleasing smell of fresh fruit that lasts for almost a minute.

"Everything's under control." He grins nervously at the others, all of whom have paused in their own projects to stare.



Friday, August 2

Another day passes, and things are for the most part going smoothly, but Ernie and Grey Wolf are both feeling ill, and some of the others are noticing a disturbing shortness of breath. Ernie comments to Kibi about it during lunch, and the dwarf promises to come down from his spell scribing and have a look.

He spends a few minutes sniffing the air and examining everyone's reagents before stopping at Dranko's table. Dranko is working on improving his *whip of the searing tongue*, but on the corner of the table he is steeping sparrow feathers in a thick infusion, in anticipation of the *winged shield* he intends to make for Ernie.

"Ah!" says Kibi. "Here's the problem. The vapors from the yellowvine extract Dranko's using for his bird wings are mixing with Aravis's sulfur. You don't want those things to mingle in the air – it'll thicken in your lungs and give you the wheezes. The extract's pretty thick though, and the vapors don't travel far. Aravis, you should probably switch places with Morningstar. That should solve the problem. And we should all get *remove disease* spells in the next couple of days."

The arrangements are made, and work continues apace. The only incident that comes of the switch is when Edghar, finding himself closer to Aravis's pungent project, vomits on the floor. Aravis glances up only long enough to observe, "Save that. Spell components" – before returning to his *headband of intellect*.



One Certain Step has stumbled into an unusual way to avoid boredom. Only a few days into the item crafting frenzy, the Kivian paladin finds himself the only one in the living room. Flicker is off honing his roguish skills on an unsuspecting citizenry (and the less Step knows about that, the better), and the others are all either down in that horrific basement or shut in their rooms with their spellbooks. He has spent the morning out in the backyard hacking up a practice dummy, and is enjoying a cup of juice on the sofa when there is a knock on the door. Eddings is in the kitchen cleaning up and doesn't hear, so Step gets up and answers the door himself.

He greets a young teenager, a boy of fourteen or so years, wearing a tabard denoting him as a novice of Werthis. The youth is clearly nervous, and Step (after applying the Farazil Test himself) invites him into the Greenhouse. "I am **Foster**, from the Church of Werthis," he says. "You must be... er... One Certain Step, right?"

"Yes," says Step. "You know me?"

"This is the Greenhouse, right? I was told that the Heroes of the Kalkas Peaks lived here. The ones who also helped Faskel Giantbane kill the Ventifact Colossus. That's you, right?"

"While I personally was not involved with the Colossus, yes, you have come to the right place," says Step. "What can I do for you?"

"Er. Well. We were, um, hoping that you could help us. Over at the church, I mean. Of Werthis."

"Take a deep breath, boy," says Step, giving a reassuring smile. "I'm sure we can help you. What do you need?"

"Well, it's kind of embarrassing, but... er... we need warriors. To train the kids. You see, the place is pretty much emptied out what with the war going on, but there's always the need to teach the next group of students. One of our last trainers just got called to duty down on the Peninsula. Mosca is the only one left, and said we could really use the help, but all the likely people are gone, except for some city guardsmen who can't take the time with manpower stretched so thin already, and someone said that there were fighting men and women in the Greenhouse who might be able to help, so they sent me to... er..."

Step stands up and bows to the boy. "Foster, I would consider it an honor to come and assist in the training of your young warriors. Please, lead the way."

Foster is dumbstruck but delighted. He stammers out an expression of gratitude and the two of them head for the door.

"Eddings, please tell the others that I will be at the Church of Werthis for the remainder of the afternoon."

"Very good, sir."

A few minutes later, Step is being greeted at the Church by **Mosca**, a strong, heavyset, middle-aged woman in chainmail. She is overjoyed at the volunteer brought back from the Greenhouse by Foster. "We have two classes," she says to Step, leading him down a high-ceilinged corridor. "They were supposed to start this morning, but Tyveron was called to the war last night. I can teach one, but there are too many for a single instructor. The group I was going to give you is mostly teenagers, with a few younger children. The oldest is seventeen. Have you taught children to fight before?"

"No," says Step. "But I am a skilled fighter, and I learned the arts myself at a young age. I will be able to train them."

"We don't have as much time as I'd like. The church leaders want them ready for real conflict in six weeks. Now, I don't think anyone intends them to be front-line combatants that soon, but they will serve as runners, aides and servants, and should know what to do with a sword in a pinch. A couple of the older children have real potential, I think. And here we are."

She turns from the hallway into a courtyard, where thirty children ranging in age from nine to seventeen are taking the opportunity to misbehave in the absence of adult supervision. Most are sparring chaotically with their wooden training swords; Step notes that their technique ranges from decent to atrocious.

Mosca clears her throat and the students snap to attention, forming up in ragged rows in front of her. They gawk at Step, an impressive figure in his magical plate mail. "Children, this is One Certain Step. He has seen many battles and vanquished many enemies. He is going to help make you into strong warriors. You will treat him with the respect due to any elder of the Church, and obey his commands as if they were my own. Understood?" Thirty heads bob up and down.

Step looks out over the ranks of kids – mostly boys, but with a few girls as well – and picks up a wooden sword that leans against the wall. Without saying anything he walks to the nearest boy (a gangly kid about twelve years old), flicks his sword out, and trips him with a clean sweep. The boy falls with a thud on his posterior.

The other kids start to laugh, but Step is already moving to the next kid. **WHOOOMPH!** A sixteen-year-old tomboy is sent sprawling. Before ten seconds have passed, another three kids have been knocked on their butts.

The others, realizing what's going on, start to defend themselves. It doesn't matter. Step moves gracefully through the crowd, leaving bruised, scattered children on the ground in his wake. One minute later, all thirty kids have been knocked down. Only the oldest boy, the seventeen-year-old (whose name is **Thommel**) forces Step to execute so much as a single feint.

The paladin returns to stand by Mosca and watches while they stand, groaning and muttering. "That was the first lesson," he says gravely. "How to fall down. The next lesson will be how to fall down without hurting yourselves so much. Let's begin."

Mosca turns, somehow manages to suppress a grin, and murmurs, "Have fun," before leaving her students alone with their new teacher.



Step returns in the early evening, satisfied that his students have made progress. By tomorrow their bruises should have healed well enough for another session. Mosca was pleased that Step wanted to return, her students somewhat less so. The others of

the Company are greatly amused to hear what Step has been up to. Several of them express interest in helping with the training with some of their few free hours – Ernie especially, who knows plenty of tricks useful for shorter combatants.

Kibi announces that he's going to leave for Eggemoggin in a few minutes. "I'm going to *teleport*," he says proudly. "Anyone want to come with me? It'll just be for the evening, so I can surprise my folks. We'll be back in the morning."

"On your first *teleport*?" Morningstar raises her eyes skeptically.

"I'm sure there won't be any problems. We'll go to my front doorstep – I'm very familiar with it, so the chances of a mistake are really small."

Morningstar agrees to accompany him – she just wants a few minutes to pray for the spell *water breathing*. Step also agrees to go with him. Kibi waves his arms around, utters some arcane syllables, and in a sliver of an instant the three of them are standing safely outside Kibi's childhood home. The sun is setting over the mountains, and the sounds of dwarven laughter come from a neighbor's house. "It worked!" Kibi exclaims.

"Just as you said it would," says Step. "Well done."

Kibi knocks on the door, and is soon swept up in the overjoyed embrace of his mother. "Bim! Your son is here! He just magicked himself over straight away from Tal Hae!"

A warm family reunion follows. Kibi notices that his parents have acquired more expensive furnishings since his last visit. It seems that the prestige afforded the father of one of the Heroes of the Kalkas Peaks has increased the demand for his stonescutting. Business has been booming for Bim Tazhadson.

Overnight in the Bimson household, Morningstar goes into *Ava Dormo* to meet again with Evenstar. Evenstar introduces a dozen or so of her sisters from Kivia, training in the field outside the dream of Amber's church in Tal Hae. There are others, says Evenstar, who are busily scribing scrolls of *direct dreaming* so that they can all come to Charagan when the pinch comes. They discuss matters of personnel and training techniques for a few moments, before Evenstar suddenly holds up a hand.

"Excuse me, Morningstar. I am being addressed. Please guard my body for a moment." Her eyes glaze over for a second, and she stands mute. Morningstar looks on, puzzled. A minute later Evenstar's eyes refocus. "My apologies," she says. "One of my sisters had a message for me to give to you."

"How did you do that?" asks Morningstar, intrigued. "I mean, communicate with someone in the waking world while also staying here with me."

"Don't you know?" Evenstar looks surprised. "It is one of the dreaming techniques my mother taught me. I can maintain a general awareness over my real body while I walk in *Ava Dormo*. If someone approaches or addresses me, I will know it. If I wish, I can move my consciousness from one aspect to the other, depending on where my awareness is needed. For a short period of time, I can even act in both places at once. If you'd like, I can teach you the techniques."

"I'd like that very much. But what was the message?"

"It was a query from your associate Snokas. He wishes to know if you give your permission for him to return to his home in southern Kivia."

Morningstar thinks for a moment before answering. "I'd like for him to stay with you a little while longer," she says at last. "But tell him soon. He has served us well, and I'd like to have him as a possible guard and messenger until our business – whenever that is – is concluded."

"As you wish."



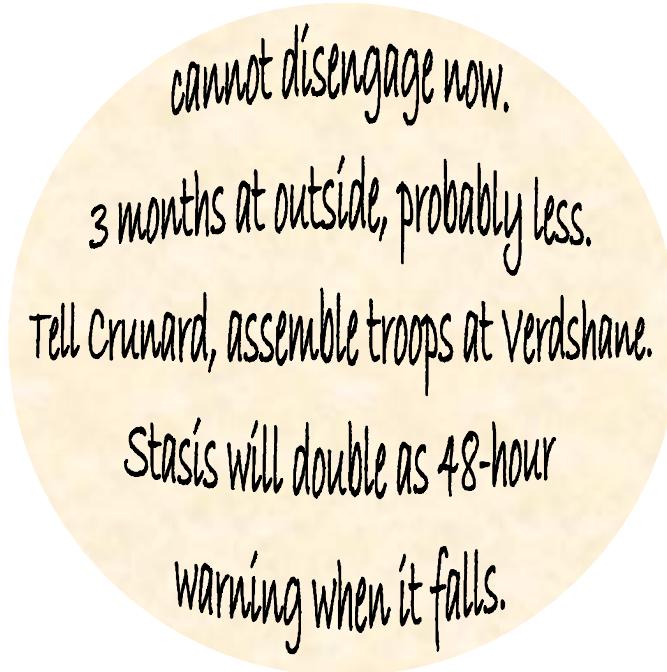
Saturday, August 3

The next morning, Kibi *teleports* back to Tal Hae, again without mishap. Most of the Company settle in for another day of busy crafting and scribing, while Flicker hits the streets and Step heads over to the Church of Werthis to continue his volunteer work.

All is going smoothly, when Grey Wolf (in the midst of drawing a tricky symbol of the spell *assassin's senses*) hears a sharp sound from down the hall. He sits bolt upright. It sounded like the start of a high-pitched shriek, cut off after less than a second. It was a familiar sound. It was... "That was the crystal ball!" cries Ernie, bounding up the stairs. "It's Ozilinsh!"

They rush into the secret room, expecting to see Ozilinsh's face (or maybe Mrs. Horn's) in the glass globe upon the table. Instead they find that a piece of paper has been stuck to the – well, the "inside" of the crystal ball.

It's bowed out (from their point of view) in a convex curve, making it hard to read. The badly scrawled handwriting doesn't help matters any. But soon the whole Company are crowded around the crystal ball, and together they make out the content of the message:



Victim: What the heck does that mean? You'd think someone would invent a more powerful version of *sending* with a greater than 25-word capacity.

Samnell: That means that Naradawk and his army are about to break through. The Spire are too busy holding them up to let off for a second. They think they can keep this up for three months, but probably less. Naradawk et al will be coming through a portal in Verdshane. Forty-eight hours before they do, the stasis trap on said portal will fail. The Company are to inform King Crunard of the problem so he can concentrate troops in the area.

Sagiro: Correct on all counts!

Fade: So, "End of world rescheduled for three months' time. Tell Crunard."

Plane Sailing: And don't forget, this isn't a *sending* – it is a note scrawled on a piece of paper held against a crystal-ball-communicator-thingy!

P.S.: Lovely to see One Certain Step move out of the shadows and onto centre stage for a change!

coyote6: Interesting – it was a note, but (assuming you count "48" as one word) it was also exactly 25 words long. Maybe it was a note dictated from a *sending*. I bet the players were just getting over the last end of the world.

Nail: Oh, I'm sure they jus' take it in stride. Or jus' add it to th' list...

Fade: Written on a scrap of paper in someone's pocket:

- Make magic items
- Defeat P.
- Collect laundry
- Save world
- Free dwarves from Guild of Chains
- Call (*sending?*) mum
- Collect other Eye
- Order food
- Save world (again)
- Have fireball damage to Greenhouse repaired
...etc.

Piratecat: We were pretty freaked out over this. And by "we," read "I." It took me a while to figure out why. Turns out that I was making some implicit metagame assumptions about when this would all come down. I thought it would be the climax of the campaign, occurring in another few years. I was wrong. So now I'm feeling dreadfully underprepared and vulnerable, like showing up for school and learning that there's a test that day, and you forgot to wear pants!

Milo Windby: Cats don't wear pants... Seriously though, does this look like the climax of a years-long, enormous, intricate story arc or is Sagiro planning some more RBDM-ness to spring on you guys at the last minute, thus prolonging the story?

Piratecat: I asked him about what comes after. He shut his mouth, grinned knowingly, and chortled. Always a good sign.

Plane Sailing: It is an understandable bit of metagame thinking though... "Mmm, we are probably going to end up fighting against a guy who is only just being held back by a bunch of archmages. I guess when we reach their level we might be able to join in and turn the tide."

That Sagiro is a bit of a RB, eh?

Nail: Two ways to think about this IMO:

(1) This "planes overlapping" thing needs to have a permanent solution. Since those of high level (i.e. the archmages) haven't been able to do it, seems as if PC power level is not relevant to the solution. Their items, OTOH, may be...

(2) No good DM in his right mind would throw away a good villain. The upcoming end of the world is just a pause... after which, yer bound to see some form of that bad, bad, Emperor again... or at least his lackeys.

There is a dumbfounded silence. On the one hand, the message is fairly unambiguous. But... is this really the beginning of the end? Three months before the planar *gate* falls and Naradawk returns to Abernia? The Archmagi, for all their tremendous power, are going to fail of their task? "I frikkin' hate Verdshane," Dranko grumbles.

"Say," says Kibi, only half innocently. "Isn't that where that woman caught you sneaking around and held you hostage?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"We should get word to the Spire right away!" exclaims Ernie.

"I'll cast a *sending* to Yale," says Morningstar. She sends:

Message from Ozilinh follows. Three months maximum, probably less. Tell Crunard assemble troops at Verdshane. Stasis will double 48 hour warning when it falls.

The response:

Understood. Knew this day would come. Troops will be sent to Verdshane from Balani pending confirmation. Inform Duke Nigel. Send more information if possible.

Morningstar follows up with another *sending*:

We're not sure where to go next. Could be at Balani in 30 days. Best place for us?

Back from Yale:

Prefer to have you ready to assist Verdshane defense. Is Aravis ready? Protect him! You'd be valuable in Balani, but not sure if worth risk.

"I can prepare another *sending* for Duke Nigel," says Morningstar.

"Here's an idea," says Dranko, grinning despite the grim news. "How about we *walk* across town and meet with him in person? It's crazy, I know, but I'd like to stretch my legs and get some fresh air."

"Oh," says Morningstar. "Yeah."



Duke Nigel runs his hands through his thinning hair. "I suppose it was inevitable," he says quietly. A splash of sunlight from a window in the ducal audience chamber falls across his face. "I hope we're ready. Aravis, are you ready?"

"I don't know yet," Aravis admits. "Right now, probably not. But I intend to be ready. In another week I will have finished work on an item that will expand my understanding of the arcane. I will go into the Maze, and learn what I need to learn."

"Good, good," Nigel nods, frowning. Such things are obviously beyond him, and they all know he has no choice but to take Aravis at his word. "Keeping Aravis safe needs to be your top priority." The Company agree.

"We haven't been idle, I'm happy to say," the Duke continues. "We've had several hundred troops and plenty of workers up in Verdshane for some time now, preparing the battlefield and making strategic preparations. Now we'll start reassigning troops there in earnest. We'll have to weaken our positions on the Peninsula, but we won't have to decimate them. It's a concern, obviously, but Verdshane is now our top priority. We can only hope that the Delfirians' enemies in Kivia – the Bederen – can keep them busy enough in the upcoming weeks and months."

Ernie suddenly perks up, and the others can almost see the light bulb above his head. "Er, excuse me, Your Grace, but I have an idea."

"Yes, Ernest?"

"Well, Your Grace, Morningstar has recently made contact – in the Dream World – with other Priestesses of Ell, in Kivia, who live close to Bederen. Maybe we could use them to contact the Bederen leaders, and set up a meeting in Dream where you could coordinate with them."

Duke Nigel looks over to Morningstar. "Would that be possible?"

"I don't know," answers Morningstar. "But I could certainly talk to Evenstar tonight. I don't know how much contact she's had with the Bederen. They've always valued their secrecy. But it won't hurt to ask."

"Please do," says Nigel. "We've often wished there was some way to contact the Bederen directly, but the Uncrossable Sea prohibits all of the usual means, magic and mundane. It would be of tremendous benefit if we could convince them to push harder while our own troops are moved elsewhere."

“We could help with the Delfirians while our soldiers are redeployed,” Grey Wolf offers.

“While I’m sure you could be of great use, I don’t want to risk Aravis,” Nigel answers. “Or any of you, for that matter. However things go in Verdshane with the Crosser’s Maze, I want as much strength in place as we can spare. I want your Company to be ready to defend Verdshane.”

“As far as that goes,” says Kibi, “I could get plenty of dwarves up there in a hurry. I know a lot of people from Eggemoggin and Hae Kalkas who could do a lot of good in one month, let alone three.”

“That would be extremely useful, I’d imagine,” says the Duke. “You should coordinate with **General Anabrook**; she’s in charge of the defense at Verdshane. She’s the best we have. As intelligent as Largent, but more adaptive, more creative. Is there anything else for you to report?”

“Well, Your Grace,” says Dranko. “We might as well let you know that we were attacked again recently, by another one of Parthol’s frikkin’ simulacra. It makes me think that we shouldn’t be surprised if ‘P’ makes his presence felt at the battle.”

“Ah, the elusive Parthol Runecarver. He’s an unpleasant wildcard in all of this. The Spire has given much thought to how Parthol could have survived this long unnoticed. I don’t like saying so, but at least some of the Archmagi have expressed the opinion that he has become a lich.”

“Crap!” Dranko utters, even in the presence of royalty.

“My thoughts exactly,” says the Duke with a grim smile. “But we have too much to worry about already, just including the dangers we know we’re facing. If Parthol wants to have his say, well, we’ll deal with that when the time comes. I trust that the Archmagi will know what to do.” Everyone agrees on that!

“And now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to help get things rolling. Moving a few thousand troops won’t happen by itself.”

He stands. “It’s the beginning of the end, my friends. I hope it ends well.”



Day of Reckoning

Sunday, August 4 – Tuesday, August 6

The Company return to the Greenhouse, ready to answer the question: “Just how many magic items can we create in three months?” The busy days start to tick away...

Step continues to help train the kids over at the Church of Werthis. Some other members of the Company start to join him for evening sessions, eager to leave the smelly basement lab of the Greenhouse and keep their muscles loose. On one such evening, Step stands at one end of the training yard with Dranko, Ernie and Grey Wolf spread out near him. Before him the class of thirty kids stands at attention, ordered in crisp rows, alert.

“I have been teaching you about teamwork,” says Step. “Tonight you’ll need to show me what you’ve learned. The four of us are here, ready to defend ourselves. You outnumber us almost eight to one, but we are much stronger than you are. Remember what I’ve taught you about flanking, and about assisting one another in battle. You may begin when ready.” Step stands back. Grey Wolf grins at him, and the members of the Company ready themselves.

Immediately the oldest boy, Thommel, gathers all of the kids into a huddle, and starts whispering to them. Dranko tries to listen in but is too far away to hear what’s being planned. After about thirty seconds they break the huddle, form into groups of eight, and start to slowly advance on the defending instructors. But when they have closed to about fifteen feet away, Thommel shouts “Now!”

The three groups of kids that had been advancing on Grey Wolf, Step and Ernie veer away. The fourth group charges Dranko en masse. Dranko readies himself to deflect their swings, but the kids don’t bother. The kid in front leaps at Dranko’s chest, and the half-orc easily knocks him aside. But the second kid lunges at his ankles, and two more grab at his arms. Although he shrugs off a good half dozen of the kids, the students from the other groups also start throwing themselves on the pile. Soon Dranko is dragged down by the sheer weight of the entire class pig piling on top of him. Some are grabbing at his hands, trying to disarm him. Others are managing to poke him with their wooden swords, or simply pummeling him with their fists.

After thirty seconds of this – with Step looking on with approval – Thommel shouts “Change!” and the kids start disentangling themselves from the pile. Quickly they are back in formation, some of them hopping or limping to simulate wounds incurred in the rush. Dranko just lies there, slightly bruised. “Now!” Thommel cries again, and the whole class converges on Ernie. A similar scene ensues, ending with Ernie buried beneath 1500 pounds of students.

When they disengage, Step orders them back into formation. “In battle,” he says sternly, “many of you would have died using that tactic. But I am very pleased. I did not teach you overbearing, but you applied other lessons, and took advantage of your collective strength. Thommel, your leadership skills are noted. All of you should be proud.” The students beam. They have learned that Step is not easy to please. “You have earned three minutes of rest. Afterward, we will run.” Thirty smiles fade.



Morningstar meets Evenstar one evening in *Ava Dormo* to discuss sending an emissary to the Bederen warchiefs. Evenstar confesses that her enclave has never made contact with any officials in Bederen, and only rarely do they even venture to small villages to trade. But she is more than willing to send a half dozen sisters, with Snokas serving as bodyguard, to make contact with Bederen leaders if possible. She figures it shouldn’t be too long before such a group would be captured and questioned as to their purpose. With luck, they’ll get to talk with someone who will take them seriously.

On many evenings, Morningstar also continues to train the rest of the Company in *Ava Dormo*. Using the prayer *dream anchor*, she can bring all of them to *Ava Dormo* with her, where they practice fighting, moving, and concentrating on maintaining their personal realities. All of them become accustomed to arriving with their own equipment and items. Casting spells is tougher, but with practice they learn this too. The speed-of-thought movement is still beyond most of their skills; only Ernie and Step can muster the mental discipline. Still, Morningstar is confident that the rest of the Company could prove useful in an *Ava Dormo* altercation.

Evenstar is also continuing to school her own sisters, and helping to coordinate them with Amber’s troops. June and Previa, the two most proficient of the Charagan sisters, work closely with the Kivians on developing group tactics. Many of Evenstar’s sisters are too old and frail to fight, but they are extremely good at removing the arms and armor of others with concerted thought.



Kibi just wants to finish up a *sash of transparency* he's been working on for Dranko, before *teleporting* to Verdshane to speak with General Anabrook. On the last day of its creation, Kibi holds it up to the light of a *continual flame* torch. "Dranko, you said you wanted it red, right?"

"Yeah," says Dranko suspiciously. "Why?"

Kibi has been threatening for days to do something embarrassing in the creation of Dranko's *sash* (which will allow the casting of *improved invisibility* once per day, with fifty charges). Dranko has been growing more and more tired of these 'threats,' especially knowing that Kibi really would follow through if given any leeway. "What would you think of a pale red?" Kibi asks innocently.

"How pale?"

"Um. Very pale. Extremely pale."

"You mean, pink?"

"I guess you might say that. It just seemed fitting for a froofy sash like this."

"No!"

"Oh, fine."

Grey Wolf gets a similar item but accepts it in the form of a proper dwarvish-styled vest. Kibi, always one to consider style as keenly as substance, clearly considers Dranko's fashion sense to be less than sensible. A *sash*? Please!

Dranko grumbles and turns back to his own work. He is nearly done improving his *whip of the searing tongue*, making it more magical and imbuing it with the *sure striking* ability. He dabs a bit of enchanted dye onto the handle, and there is a curious hissing sound. "I wonder if that's supposed to... whoa!"

The handle of the whip starts to glow a dull red. Dranko yelps in pain and drops it to the ground. "That thing is hot! I hope I didn't mess something up..."

As he watches, the whip handle turns a bright orange, and then pure white. Only after several minutes have passed does it cool down and return to its normal hue.

Dranko gingerly picks it up, and notices right away that it's lighter and more balanced. He gives it a test crack, curling the end around an empty metal vial and deftly depositing the vial into his open hand. "Hot damn! It worked! Man, I'm good."



Wednesday, August 7

The next day, Kibi, Morningstar and Ernie get ready to *teleport* to Verdshane. Kibi is familiar enough with the inside of the inn (the Shadow Chaser) to feel comfortable that nothing will go wrong. Morningstar suggests that they put on their official uniforms, designating them as King's soldiers.

When all is ready, Kibi waves his arms around and...

...they find themselves surrounded by armed guards, all scrambling to point loaded crossbows at them. Kibi looks around, confused... this is the Shadow Chaser, clearly. "Hello!" he announces cheerfully. "We're here to offer our assistance."

None of the guards lower their crossbows. "How nice of you," says a sarcastic voice, approaching from behind the lines of bowmen. "Perhaps you'd care to introduce yourselves."

"My name is Kibilhathur Bimson," says Kibi, addressing the advancing figure. "This is Morningstar of Ell and Ernest Roundhill. We're from Tal Hae. Duke Nigel said that General Anabrook could use our help."

A tall figure emerges from the ranks of crossbowmen. His face is furrowed with a deep frown that softens – if you can call it that – into an annoyed grimace. "Kibilhathur Bimson," he says. "While I'm sure we will be most grateful for your help, perhaps in the future you could give us a warning that you are about to *teleport* directly into the command center of our military operation!"

"Err..." says Kibi.

"We're very sorry!" pipes up Ernie. "We didn't know this was where you had your headquarters."

"And it's the only place I remembered well enough to *teleport* to," adds Kibi.

The man sighs. "Please don't do it again," he grumbles. "It's a good thing you're wearing those uniforms. Otherwise my men might have shot first and asked questions afterward."

"We really are sorry, sir," says Morningstar.

"Yes. Well." The man gestures to the guards, who relax and go back to their posts. "I am **Lieutenant Madoc**," he says. "Perhaps we should talk in private about the purpose of your visit."

The four of them adjourn to a windowless office. Kibi makes his offer to supply dwarves to help in the defense, and Madoc accepts. "They can help build redoubts along the perimeter of the Mud Zone. We're putting up as many as we can, and building platforms in the trees."

When the three members of the Company look puzzled, Madoc explains. "For months we've been clearing out all of the trees around the *gate*. Our best intelligence is that, when the enemy forces arrive, they'll tend to be clustered in that vicinity. We'll have quite a welcome in store for 'em. You see, we've also diverted part of the river that flows just south of here. We've got wooden channels pouring water into a huge area, night and day, day and night. It's a big area – half a mile on a side – and we're turning it into a muddy soup. Give us another couple of months to add new channels, and pretty much that whole area will be a nightmare for foot soldiers or cavalry. We call it the Mud Zone. But it should be a killing field."

"You see, we'll have hundreds – maybe over a thousand – archers, set up all along the forest perimeter. We have tens of thousands of arrows at hand, and fletchers are working around the clock making more. While the enemy troops are slogging slowly through the mud to get out of the Mud Zone, we'll be raining arrows down on them like... well, like rain."

Dr. Rictus: Just so Sagiro's players don't think that I only conspire against them (when I get a chance to conspire at all), I'd like to note that I also helped him cook up this little reception area for the invading forces.

takes a bow

Madoc tells them more about the defenses – that since there are no guarantees that every enemy soldier will appear in the Mud Zone, there will be kingdom forces spread out in strike teams throughout the surrounding forest. And that Kinnet Gorge will have a stationary guard ordered to drive enemies away who might tamper with the hanging boxes. And that the magical key-room itself (from which Meledien was chased away some months ago) will not only be physically barricaded with logs, but rigged to explode with dozens of barrels of Karthian Oil. Some brave soldiers are sealed inside with plenty of food and water, along with orders to blow the place up if any enemy forces gain entry.

"Anyway, if you can get us some stonewrights and carpenters and such, it will help us fortify the perimeter. We won't have the time to wall off the whole two miles, but every bit helps."

Kibi finds a spot on the road about fifty yards down from the Shadow Chaser, near a roadside sentry post. He spends a couple of hours studying that spot, memorizing every detail, intending for it to be his future arrival point when teleporting. Morningstar casts *wind walk* and returns to Tal Hae with Ernie, while Kibi *teleports* again, this time to his home in Eggemoggin.

Thursday, August 8 – Saturday, August 10

Over the next few days he visits numerous local watering holes, and even makes a trip into Hae Kalkas. By making clear the great prestige that will be earned by helping fortify kingdom positions against a perilous foe, Kibi manages to collect many eager dwarves for the task. The dwarves are less happy to learn that they must be *reduced* to expedite teleporting large numbers of them, but Kibi assures them that no will see them in a shrunken state. On the matter of his *teleport*'s reliability Kibi dissembles a bit, making vague assurances that everything will be fine.

The first batch of tiny dwarves arrives near Verdshane – in plain view of two human sentries. The dwarves are mortified, and start to mutter angrily at Kibi. One of the guards guffaws. "Dwarfish dwarves! Who'd a thunk it!"

Kibi, at full size and wearing his royal uniform, advances on the guard and lets his hand drop to the handle of his axe. "You will not speak of this to anyone. That is an order. Do you understand?"

Scree amasses threateningly around Kibi's feet. The guard becomes businesslike and snaps a salute. "Yes, sir!"

Kibi and the dwarves retreat around a bend in the road until the *reduce* wears off, after which he studies a new patch of ground, more reliably out of human sight.



Sunday, August 11

About a week after receiving the note from Ozilinsh's tower, Aravis finishes crafting his *headband of intellect +4*. He gathers the Company around him.

"Friends, I'm going to journey into the Crosser's Maze. I want to find past Keepers, and get them to tell me what I should do about stopping Naradawk. I don't know how long it will take. If you absolutely have to snap me out of it, Pewter can claw my shoulder – I'll know that's the signal. But only if it's really urgent. While I'm gone, I'm leaving Pewter in charge of my body – just in case of emergencies. He should be able to move me around in a pinch."

Don't worry, boss, Pewter says over their mindlink. *I'll take good care of you while you're gone. I bet it'll be fun driving you around.*

Pewter...

Just kidding, boss. No worries.

Aravis sets the headband on his brow, and feels his mind expanding, his understanding of the arcane mysteries growing. The Maze seems clearer to him now than ever. "Wish me luck," he says. And in he goes.

Aravis is sitting down, back against a wall, Pewter perched on his shoulder. Aravis's face goes slack, the stars still glittering out of his eye sockets. About a minute later, the body starts moving around jerkily. His arms twitch, his head lolls, and one of his legs starts to wander. Pewter still sits calmly by Aravis's head.

Then Aravis opens his mouth, and slurred, incomprehensible vocalizations come out. Worried, Kay casts *speak with animals* and asks Pewter if everything's OK. "Oh, yeah, sorry. I'm just trying out the body. I want to get in some practice, in case we need to go somewhere in a hurry. Never hurts to be prepared, right? Still having a bit of trouble with the vocal cords, but I think I've almost got it."

In a horrific parody of Aravis's normal voice, his body says: "Hiiiieeeeyy, Eeeeeevory Wunnnnnn."

"Please don't do that," says Kay.

"No problem," Pewter says in feline. "Aravis is about to head inward, for real. I don't really understand the Crosser's Maze, but I gather it's got some kind of huge inner universe full of different – er – space-times, or something. He's not having any difficulty that I can... uh, hold on."

Pause.

"Aravis says... uh-oh. He says you should get your weapons ready." Kay relays this startling suggestion to the others, who scramble for weapons.

"He's really sorry about this, but something's coming back through the Maze. The boss didn't see that one coming. I'll bet he's... Oh, he says it shouldn't happen again. There are... there are two of them. Watch out!"

Aravis's head tilts back and two jets of gray smoke blast out of the star-wells of his eyes. Everyone leaps back, nearly knocking over tables of delicate lab equipment. The smoke jets arc out and downward, striking the floor in the middle of the basement. They quickly form into two strange vaporous creatures, mildly reminiscent of null shadows, though (thankfully) without the same emanating horror. They're not much larger than ordinary humans, but their arms end in solidly sharp claws.

One Certain Step strides forward and swings with his *flaming greatsword*, but the blade goes right through the body of the beast. "Not again," he grumbles.

Kay discovers that, unlike null shadows, these things can be harmed by magical weapons. Her warhammer discovers some solid skeleton within the smoke – **CRUNCH!** Grey Wolf decides this is a good time to try out his new magic gift from Kibi, and activates his *vest of transparency*. He hears a sound in his head like rocks grinding together, and his body fades from sight. He draws *Bostock*, who whispers gleefully that Grey Wolf should waste no time in attacking.

Aravis executes an awkward crawl, his body controlled by Pewter. With only a few bumps to the head, Pewter gets his master under one of the lab tables, with Step and Kay between him and the creatures. But also wanting to contribute, Pewter thrashes Aravis's arm around until it grabs the *wand of magic missiles*.

The creatures lash out with their claws, striking Kay and Step. The touch causes their muscles to stiffen, effectively making them slowed. Step slashes again, hoping to make contact, but the result is unfortunate. Not only does the blade pass harmlessly through his foe's body, but as he swings, everyone feels, just for a moment, the chill of null shadows. Step's *flaming greatsword* erupts in a fiery conflagration that catches on his arm and shirt. Before he knows what's happening, Step is on fire!

Flicker, who's been having no luck hitting the monsters with his own short sword, deftly shrugs off his cloak and starts putting out the paladin. Dranko whips the monsters with his newly improved magical whip, tearing away chunks of strange smoky flesh.

Pewter concentrates as hard as he can, and just manages to pronounce the command word for the *wand of magic missiles*. With Aravis's hand poking out from under the table, three *magic missiles* thunk into one of the monsters.

Extinguished by Flicker, Step drops his greatsword and draws his bastard sword, a weapon carrying a more potent enchantment. To his satisfaction, it cleaves effectively into his opponent.

Before too long, both of the monsters are efficiently dispatched by the present members of the Company. A minute later Kay and Step's muscles start to relax. There is some grumbling directed towards Pewter, who crawls Aravis's body out from under the table once it's safe. The cat arranges the wizard's body in a comfortable sitting position. Everyone else watches in silence, wondering to what end the mind of their friend is voyaging...



The Crosser's Maze cannot be fully comprehended. Any explanation must resort to simile and metaphor.

Hheretofore, most of Aravis's manipulations of the Crosser's Maze have been to use it like (in effect) an extraordinarily powerful telescope, mounted high up in the multiverse beyond most normal planar boundaries. He could "pan" and "zoom" his point of view, and in some cases (most notably with Grey Wolf) direct elemental energy to affect what he has seen, by focusing that energy through the "lens(es)" of living beings nearby. It's as though there's a laser beam mounted on the side of the telescope.

To extend this metaphor, Aravis has discovered that the telescope is mounted in the window of an impossibly huge and labyrinthine mansion. He suspects that he can take his eye off the telescope, and go back in through that window, wherein lies the strange inner world of the Maze. He knows that, even with his newly expanded consciousness, only a being of intellect far exceeding his own could hope to understand what the Maze truly is. But full understanding (he hopes) is not necessary. He opens the window and casts his mind forward into the "Inner Maze."

(At this point there is a glitch. Some creatures are waiting to jump through that window and out through Aravis into the real world. There's nothing he can do to stop them, but he figures that Pewter will warn his friends to beware. Quickly he "closes the window," and sees now that it should be easy to stop it from happening again. He observes that the borders of the Maze are crawling with such creatures, looking for ways out. He doesn't know what they are, how they came to be there or what they want, but they're not very intelligent. They shy away from Aravis, seemingly afraid, and do not pursue him into the Interior. Ah, well. On to more important business.)

Dawn: Is this how the null shadows were brought into the world? Could someone have selectively brought them out?

KidCthulhu: Nah, we know where null shadows come from. They're the result of magical torture, not extraplanar.

Sagiro: Kid, I think you're confusing two of the Black Circle Horrors. [Can you blame me? They were pretty darn, er, horrific. – KC] The magical torture was what they were doing to Califax, so that they could use him for the instant-resurrection of Grey Wolf had he died.

The null shadows were almost certainly coming from that icky cauldron, in a room that was partly in the Plane of Shadow. A cauldron, I'll note, that is still there, albeit (to the best of anyone's knowledge) dormant. Not that I'm trying to make anyone paranoid or anything.

Nail: This correction by Sagiro is so... unlike him... KC, I'd be worried if I were you. I see a future full of shadows.

bertman4: Question about the null shadows... They are only affected by non-magical weapons, correct? Then what happens with a high-level monk? Does the unarmed strike count as magical or non-magical? Same question with adamantine weapons. Technically non-magical but still enhanced.

Sagiro: Regarding whether the natural weapons of a high-level monk would affect null shadows: yes, probably. Since there are no monks in the party, I've never had to worry about it.

One of the surprising things he learns early on is that "time travel" within the Maze is not only possible, but also intrinsic to the way the Maze is constructed. Such travel is difficult, tedious and extremely limited, but necessary for his journeys. The Maze contains all things at all times, and with some work Aravis learns to shift his own frame of reference to any of them.

(It's still not clear to him whether he'd actually be visiting other space-times, or if he'd be exploring a recreation generated by the Maze, or simply just witnessing a very elaborate and accurate illusion. Sure feels real to him, though. He decides to assume that it's either a real or semi-sentient recreation that acts in enough respects like reality that he can learn what he needs from it. If he starts doubting what he sees and learns... down that path madness lies, and not just figuratively.)

This still leaves Aravis with a "needle-in-a-haystack" problem – where (and when) in all the vast expanse of the Maze are its former owners? This would be an impossible task, save for the fact that Aravis has met a former owner before, not including Solomea (whom he had met before acquiring the Maze himself).

In an undocumented side adventure run by Piratecat earlier this year, the Company were drawn into the Maze by a villainous mirror-master named Paulos. In the course of extricating themselves, the Company had a brief visit with an old Keeper of the Maze from Kivia.

Aravis is able to recognize a type of mental energy signature unique to former Keepers, and he begins to concentrate, casting his mind deeper into the heart of the Maze. Right away he notes that the Inner Maze is a veritable minefield. Some of the danger is “physical” – magic vortices that could suck him in and spit him out into distant planes; eddies of magical force that could crush him into paste; energy storms raining down acid or ice in huge quantities – that sort of thing. But stretching through the general maelstrom is a connected lower-case-‘m’ maze of “constructed” bits – like what Solomea had built for himself, or the mirror-master.

If he can find one of these “safe places,” he can use it as a jumping-off point for nearby space-times. Want to go back 3000 years to a Djinn kingdom in the Elemental Plane of Air? Find a safe spot built in approximately the correct time and place, go there, and start using the Maze to move yourself through the dimensions.

After some time (and he has no way of knowing how long, measured in the real world), Aravis’s concentration and mental exploration reveals several dozen “homes” of former Keepers of the Maze. They are mostly concentrated in various times and places in Kivia, but a few are scattered throughout various Outer Planes, and two or three are in other Primes. One – the oldest – is in the Ethereal Plane. The most recent is the “place” built by Solomea Pirenne – it’s already beginning to suffer from entropic breakdown.

Aravis realizes that one of the Primes could be Volpos, where Naradawk presently resides. That could offer some possibilities... but alas, it is not to be. He still has to do this the hard way.

With a start, he realizes something else – that if he wanted to spend a few decades at it, he could build himself a place of his own in the Inner Maze. Maybe a good lab, or study, or library, or...

...must... concentrate...

Shaking his mind loose of stray thoughts, Aravis decides to start with the eldest of the various Keepers. This is the one in the Ethereal Plane, a place which should be easy enough to navigate, as the mind-based method of traveling the Ethereal is similar to how one voyages in the Maze. His destination – the home of the Keeper – is not difficult to find, but is extremely well protected by its owner. The Keeper lives in a semi-solid floating fortress, constructed from adamant and congealed thoughts. Swaths of sucking void swirl around its perimeter, and it takes great skill and concentration for Aravis to avoid them as he approaches. And when he arrives at what look like the gates, he is bombarded with distracting thoughts. For a moment he forgets why he is even here – more important matters await him back on Charagan. Or perhaps he should further explore the Ethereal Plane, or even the Astral. Pewter is hungry; he should make sure his familiar is properly fed. Wait! His parents are in danger! He must go to them! He must... he must... But Aravis’s concentration holds, and the gates become as mist to him; he recalls his errand, and he goes in.

The Keeper, the oldest that survives, calls itself **Ascending**. It has no form, no gender, but it is all around Aravis within the fortress. Its thoughts form in his mind, all at once, and it takes gruelling concentration to sort them out.

Another has come.

I am no longer concerned with your universe, Keeper.

I sense your need.

You are lucky to have survived this journey.

Vhadish knows. Long after me he shared your purpose.

I dislike disturbance. It draws me back.

Return to your world, Keeper. Your answers are there.

Leave me.

Vhadish knows.

And then he finds himself miles away from the place, still in the Ethereal. The fortress of Ascending is a mote at the edge of his perception within the Ethereal, and then it winks out, gone. He feels weak. Even by Crosser’s Maze standards it has been a surreal experience.

Zaruthustran: Wow. Nice work! The Maze is so very cool, and it’s completely not what it could have been: a supposedly awesome and mysterious item reduced to mere stats. I mean, how many campaigns have you been in (or run) where something like “the Ancient relic-sword of Kings of Old, Gurndast, the Edge of Thilmar” is reduced on some PC’s sheet to “+2 LS, Holy, Flming.” In other words, thank you for not making the Maze:

ARAVIS: I use the Maze.

SAGIRO: Make a Will save modified by Intelligence instead of Wisdom. DC 30.

ARAVIS: I make it.

SAGIRO: Okay, you learn that you need to go to [this] place and do [that] task, which will prevent [this other] disaster.

No, the Maze is something else. It’s cool. It’s big. It’s powerful. It’s dangerous. Sweet. Also, way to go with the *A Mind Forever Voyaging* reference. Nice touch!

Sagiro: In the interests of full disclosure: I do often ask Aravis’s player to make “Maze checks” when he tries something new or difficult. He uses Aravis’s “Knowledge: Planes” ranks, divided by two and then adjusted for INT bonus.

I have tried to make the Maze something that no one, including both Aravis and the DM, will ever be able to comprehend in full.

Hovering in the Ethereal, Aravis says a prayer of thanks to Ascending for the help it has provided (figuring it will pick up his thoughts at some point). Then he utters a prayer to Pikon, thanking Him for the strength of purpose to carry on.

He rests there for an unknown time, collecting his strength. Then he starts to broadcast thoughts out into the Maze, of the name Vhadish, along with a notion, an idea, of an unknown Keeper. More time passes. His mind grows weary. But he does eventually pick up a slight return resonance that allows him to narrow down his search to a series of Keepers in western Kivia, within a 700 year window. He glides through the space-time of the Maze to investigate them.

He finds Vhadish on his third attempt. The first Keeper he tries to visit has built himself (or herself) a sealed cube made from what looks like fused skulls. It's horrible, and, for better or worse, impenetrable. The second is worse – the abode looks like a fairly normal mansion, but it is in the center of a raging storm of boiling acid.

Fortunately for Aravis, the home of Keeper **Vhadish**, once King Vhadish XXIII of Tev, is more reasonably protected. He has built for himself a glade of carefully positioned trees, surrounded by a ring of steel-bodied golems. But Vhadish has been waiting for Aravis, having sensed his thought emanations from afar. He instructs his golems to allow his guest entry, and invites him to talk over a meal of crown beetles in wine (a Tevian delicacy from the time).

Vhadish XXIII ruled Tev about 650 years ago (relative to Aravis's own time). He is magnanimous, pompous, philosophical, generous, and unconsciously arrogant. When asked, he shares his thoughts on why some Keepers have died. "Time is meaningless in the Inner Maze," says Vhadish. "Were all Keepers of steady and sound mind, they would all be here in perpetuity, regardless of when their physical bodies met their end. Of course, some Keepers did not control the Maze well enough or for long enough to build themselves any kind of lasting dwelling here. And of those that did – well, some of them grow tired of the Maze, and wish to rejoin their souls that have moved on. Others are killed while traveling, or killed by invaders, or killed by themselves in fits of ruinous insanity."

Aravis turns the conversation to his current task, explaining the nature of his difficulty and what he has learned thus far. While there is a "main gate" between Abernia and Volpos, all of the fabric of space-time in the vicinity is weak and starting to tear. The chief problem facing the Archmagi is that they can only hold the *gate* closed... but it's like putting extra locks on a door when the whole wall is in danger of crumbling apart.

As far as using the Maze to affect space-time, Aravis has already got the basics figured out. He can redirect strands of elemental energy through the bodies of nearby living beings, and use the resulting focused energy to affect the universe. Vhadish listens intently as Aravis explains the problem and then smiles condescendingly, as might a schoolteacher asked a simple question by one of his students.

"Ah, yes, the problem of planar portals, and their effects on surrounding space-time. It took me a long time to puzzle that one out. I faced a similar problem in the 19th year of my reign, when some renegade Black Circle madmen tried to open a portal to the 8th layer of Hell. Their brute force method made closing the portal exceptionally tricky, since trying to affect the doorway itself simply opened up a new tear nearby. They still call that the Year of the Demon Plague – though scholars chafe at the name, as it was devils, not demons, who found egress into Tev.

"But the Maze was built for such things, in a time before you or me. I had to look deeper. In my infinite wisdom, I realized that the Maze could do more than simply force gates open or seal them shut. It can rebuild the very fabric of space-time, within a restricted region. In the end I fixed nothing. No, what I did was burn away the weak strands of the cosmic weave, and build space-time anew where it was needed. Yes, a dozen more devils moved through during that time when the hole gaped, but I was quick, and my genius allowed me to direct the energies of the Maze with great efficiency. I created, Aravis. I built my own piece of the multiverse, stronger than it had been. I focused the energy through my most trusted servants, and it did not go so well for them, but their sacrifice was freely given and absolutely necessary. When I was done, there was no portal. There was no hole between Abernia and the Nine Hells. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

Aravis does his best to look impressed and grateful. "I think I do, Your Majesty. However, please understand that next to your years of experience and wisdom, I am but nothing. At the time of your troubles you had been a king for 19 years, and most certainly a scholar for longer. While that certainly seems the most permanent way of sealing rifts in the cosmic weave, it did allow some dem... er, excuse me, devils through. The foe we face is terrible enough that all the Archmagi of our land are tied up in keeping him out. Further, a very large area seems to be ripping apart. I don't know that I have the strength to rebuild that large an area, although I do have some thoughts on that. So, I have to wonder if it might not be better to figure out a way of strengthening the fabric around the *gate*. If that would hold even for only a short time, it might allow me to better prepare. What are your thoughts on that, Your Majesty?"

King Vhadish is clearly pleased that Aravis has recognized his great power and knowledge. He smiles indulgently. "No doubt you will not have anywhere near the facility with the Maze that I did. I don't know the extent of the problem area in your kingdom, but here is an encouraging fact: the fabric between two Primes should be easier to rebuild than that which I had to create. A portal between a Prime and one of the Outer Planes poses its own difficulties, that you are indeed fortunate not to face.

"And your own idea has merit as well, young Aravis. If you spend some time and energy strengthening the surrounding space-time, it will make it easier should you choose to build your own section. An apt analogy would be thus: if you intend to knock out a pane of glass from a window and install a new pane of your own making, it will be easier for you if you also make sure the window frame does not suffer from rot.

"I do not doubt that it will be a mighty task for one as young and inexperienced as you. You will need staunch allies through whom you will focus the energy of the Maze. Hold fast, maintain your concentration, and you can succeed. If you wish, I can even offer you a demonstration of some mental techniques that served me well."

"I think I understand, Your Majesty," answers Aravis. "A demonstration would be wonderful. I would be foolish not to accept such a gracious offer of your time. Before I forget, I assume, but do not know for sure, that the focusing of energy needed in this must be freely allowed. Is that correct to the best of your knowledge?"

Vhadish replies, "That is correct, young wizard. It is the great weakness of the Crosser's Maze, but also a necessary balance. Were it not for that inherent restriction a Keeper could destroy the universe, were that his aim. Understand that this limit is literally as you assert. The life energy must be freely given. If a being is coerced by threat of force against self or loved ones, or dominated, charmed, or otherwise controlled, the energy will not be properly focused. It will wreck the mind of the Keeper should he, or she, try such a thing. If you wish to see first-hand an example of such, visit the succubus Kel-Shai who now resides in the para-elemental plane of Electricity. She sought to extort life energy from beings in return for their stolen souls, and when she tried to use that energy, she... burned away all ambition, all motivation to act, from her mind. She has become an automaton, immortal and useless.

"Now, although I have many projects I wish not to delay, I will take some time to teach you proper focusing techniques, as well as certain mental tricks and procedures useful for directing Maze energy. And what do you offer in return for my services?"

Aravis is silent for a moment, taken aback by the request. Vhadish watches him with a curious expression, almost as an owner might watch a pet struggling with a new impediment to its food.

Eventually, Aravis answers. "Your Majesty, I could not begin to imagine what it is that I could offer you that you would consider of value. However, I can at least offer you my services for a task or tasks that we would mutually agree was of equal value to the information you have to give me.

"Obviously I cannot speak for my friends, but I am very sure that they would provide support and assistance to me in accomplishing that which you desire from me, assuming it is something they can assist with. I must make my offer conditional upon two things, though. I cannot agree to anything that would obviously run counter to the interests of my king and country. And I must first have time to accomplish my current goal for which I seek this information."

Vhadish XXIII looks at Aravis intently, giving the unsettling impression that he's measuring the young wizard somehow, both for honesty and utility. After a few seconds of this, he smiles expansively. "Agreed!" he says. "As for your friends, they are no matter to me, though if you feel they can assist you, then by all means enlist their aid. That will mean drawing them into the Maze, which is risky. But I see you are no stranger to risk."

"There are many tasks for which some assistance would be useful; I will ponder which of these to set for you. When your current trials are over, and if you still live with your sanity intact, I will contact you and hold you to your promise. And now, since time is precious to us both, allow me to demonstrate the focusing technique I call 'burning feather' which I invented in the year 523 in response to..."

And King Vhadish begins to instruct.

Piratcat: Oh, man! Bad Aravis. You added something else to The List. It was long enough already.

Nail: The Maze continues to amaze... Good job, Mr. Twirly Moustache. I wonder... how much of Aravis's travels are done with other players present "at the table"?

Sagiro: Although I often do smaller-scale Maze-related activities over the table, all of Aravis's questing [here was] done over extensive back-and-forth e-mails.

Ancalagon: Nice work! Ah, e-mail, what would a DM do without it!

I get the feeling that this king, if he so chooses, has the power to force Aravis to keep his promise. It seems to me that the Maze is the ultimate wizard's "toy." I wonder if Parthol (well, P) is going to try to get his hands on it...

KidCthulhu: Well, seeing as we went looking for the Maze because Lapis was instructed to find it by the then-mysterious "P", I'd say, yes, he does want to get his hands on it.

We don't know that he knows what it does. Only that he felt it would make a big difference to Team Badguy, which was enough for us to want to get there first.

Dawn: Just finished catching up after a long time away. I am still in awe at the forethought that went into the planning of this campaign. Did you know in the beginning that the Maze would be of such great importance or did it just evolve as plot thickened?

Sagiro: At the very beginning, no. But it was pretty early on that I had the idea of a Big Important Artifact™ that the party would quest long and hard to get, and which would be vital for stopping Naradawk. Two confessions, though:

- (1) When I first included a reference to the "Crosser's Maze" in a letter the PCs found, I didn't know yet what it was. The specifics gestated in my mind for a long time. To repeat advice I know I've given before: don't sweat the details until you have to.
- (2) I stole the idea from Piratecat. Well, not the Maze specifically, but a "non-conventional artifact that was necessary to save the world, and which would require a long overland journey to find." It worked so well for him, I ripped it off without shame.

Lord Pendragon: I just wanted to add my admiration to the masses regarding the Maze. For me, the trickiest part of artifacts is trying to make them impressive and awe-inspiring in a world of high magic, while at the same time keep them from overshadowing everything else in the game. The Crosser's Maze is a perfect example of this. It can literally re-weave the universe, and yet by having it, Aravis still doesn't overshadow the other members of the Company. Well done!



On the Verge

Run #136 – ?September, 2002

Monday, August 12 – Saturday, September 8

Weeks pass and the magic items pile up, while the Company work nervously, awaiting word either from Ozilinsh or from Verdshane.

Morningstar receives good news from Amber regarding Evenstar's emissary to Bederen. Her sisters (along with Snokas) were captured by Bederen patrols less than a week after their departure, and their message was passed swiftly along. Not three weeks after they set out, a meeting was held in *Ava Dormo* between Charagan commanders and members of the Bederen War Council. A tentative agreement has already been reached wherein the Bederen forces will step up their offensive push while Charagan's armies are relocated to Verdshane. Charagan has agreed to some unnamed concessions to which Amber is not privy. (Bederen, it seems, is a Spartan kingdom with little patience for cumbersome bureaucracy – a fact that allowed for swift negotiations and subsequent action.)

Also during this period, Kay receives a long handwritten summary of the battle to which she had committed the Yrimpa. To her great relief, it had gone almost exactly as General Largent had hoped and expected. It was not a trap, the Smokehill Valley was wrested away from Delfiri control, and the Yrimpa's surprise assault from the rear was crucial in the victory. Four Yrimpa were slain in the fighting, but even Yaro Karenne agreed that these were acceptable losses in light of Largent's agreement that the Yrimpa would be excluded from combat for several weeks.

After forty-one days, the number of finished magic items is astounding. Dranko, having finished enhancing his own *whip of the searing tongue*, has made for Ernie a *winged shield* that allows the halfling to fly once per day. After that, he improved the enchantment on his own buckler, and on Grey Wolf's shield.

Morningstar has finished work on a number of magical wands. Two *wands of cure serious wounds* were the highest priority, but with the help of some of the others, she has also made wands of *fly*, *reduce* and *enlarge*.

Ernie has brewed almost two-score potions for the Company – *haste*, *fly*, *see invisibility*, and of course many healing potions. Grey Wolf, collaborating with Morningstar, has scribed some scrolls with powerful divine spells (including *heal* and *flame strike*).

Finally, Kibi has made a *vest/sash of transparency* for both Dranko and Grey Wolf, as well as a *headband of intellect +2* for himself. There are more items in the list still unmade, but there is not the opportunity to make them.

Sunday, September 9

Aravis has been journeying in the Maze for weeks now. Pewter has assured the others than Aravis is still alive and well, though the cat doesn't know specifically what his master is up to, or how much longer he intends to be away. The familiar has kept Aravis's body exercised and well fed (though Eddings had to dissuade him from asking for "mouse stew" from the Icebox).

On the forty-first day since the Company settled in for craft projects, Pewter begins to cry loudly at Kay, who casts *speak with animals*. "I... we just got a *sending* from somewhere," Pewter tells her excitedly.

Stasis has fallen. No confirmation that the Archmagi can keep the gate closed, but we must assume the worst. Please come to Verdshane immediately.

"Wake Aravis," Kay says. Pewter jumps up on his master's shoulder and digs in his claws. A few seconds later Aravis stirs and shakes his head. The others look at him anxiously.

"I think I know what I must do," he says groggily. "Whether or not I'm strong enough to do it is another matter." As quickly as he can, Aravis tells the rest of the Company about his journey into the Crosser's Maze, what he learned, and what he hopes to do. "The next step is for me to go to Verdshane, and look at the *gate* up close in the Maze."

The Company erupt into a veritable storm of last-minute planning. Magic items get distributed, a *sending* is sent off to Duke Nigel, and the clerics debate who gets to cast the mandatory *shield other* on Aravis. Skorg is even convinced to come along, despite his preference for being left behind with Eddings and the cats. Some *reduce* and *teleport* spells later, the Company arrive in Verdshane and are escorted into the Shadow Chaser.

Minya, the friendly but feisty owner of the inn, spots them amid the chaos and hurries over. “I heard a few of you were here some weeks back; so sorry I missed you. Can you believe what they’ve done with the place?” She smiles wryly and gestures at the commons, teeming with military types.

“Minya, may I have a word with you in private?” Morningstar motions to the kitchen. It’s just as busy as everywhere else in the inn, but the two are ignored amidst the bustle. “Here, take this. It’s a healing potion. Just in case you need it.” Minya gratefully accepts the potion.

Corporal Edridge approaches the Company, informs them that he will be their official liaison with the general and asks for a report. But when Ernie starts talking about magic gates and Aravis’s unique hope, and other guards start listening in, curious, the Company clam up and suggest that perhaps they should be talking with Anabrook directly.

KidCthulhu: What this dry description doesn’t convey is the scorn and group forehead slapping behind this little exchange. We’re trying our best to be polite to this little flunk, but we know he can’t handle the stuff we’re carrying. And after all his official bustle, he passes us on to the guy we knew we’d need to talk to all along, you could hear a chorus of “Duh!” run around the table. We were in no mood to dally with flunkies.

Fade: ...And the Company were keeping the information from the guards because they didn’t need to know and the information would be too much for them. Nice to come full circle, isn’t it?

Creeperman: “You want the truth? YOU CAN’T HANDLE THE TRUTH!”

The general meets with them in a storeroom-turned-meeting-room and hears their report. Aravis guesses that he has about an 85% chance of success in using the Maze to seal the planar *gate*, but warns that in doing so he may have to open the *gate* wide open for a short time. Aravis asks Anabrook to spread the word as widely as possible, that every soldier might feel the cold sensation of the Maze drawing upon their life energy. They should willingly give that energy; the welfare of the kingdom could depend on it. The general agrees to issue the suggestion, with no promises of how many soldiers will go through with it.

Ernie casts *divination* to determine where the Company should be if/when an invasion begins, but receives no answer.

Aravis doesn’t want to waste any more time. He retires to one of the rooms prepared for them in the second floor of the Inn, while Ernie arranges for a heavy guard to be placed on the door. Aravis sits cross-legged on the bed and drops into the Maze, focusing his attention on the *gate* and the ragged space-time around it. He sees straight away that it’s going to take everything he’s got. He starts to give it.

Corporal Edridge walks outside with the rest of the Company, to give them a tour of the area, similar to the one Kibi, Ernie and Morningstar received some weeks earlier. Two food wagons pull up by the Shadow Chaser and soldiers immediately start unloading. The Company also watch as a teenaged boy runs up to a waiting guard, screws up his face, and recites a long list of random words from memory. The guard has a scrap of parchment in hand, comparing the runner’s ‘report’ to what’s written on the scrap. Edridge explains: “We have dozens of trained runners that will be spread throughout the area. They’ll provide the basic avenue of communication once the shit hits the fan. If you have to send a report back to HQ, or anywhere else on the field, grab a runner and tell them your message. They’ve been selected for sharp memories and fast legs.”

“We may have a better way,” Morningstar says. “We have magic that can keep us in direct mental contact with a small number of people. When the time comes, you should probably be one of them.”

Edridge blinks. “Right. Er... yes. Now, let’s go see how things are progressing at the Mud Zone.”

En route to the swampy Ground Zero the Company pass a medical tent still being prepared. Clerics of Delioch, God of Healing, are preparing cots, bandages and healing herbs. Dranko recognizes one of them as Brother Nolman, a priest from Sand’s Edge. (A couple of years earlier, in the week before the Ventifact Colossus rose from the Mouth of Nahalm, Nolman had flat-out refused to believe Dranko’s contention that a huge turtle was going to leave the desert and stomp across the city.)

“Greetings, brother,” says Dranko, grinning. He knows that Nolman had hated the taste of crow, but the two of them had come to respect one another at subsequent meetings.

“Dranko!” returns Nolman. “Good to see you here. You and your friends. I’m not surprised that you’re right where the worst trouble is brewing.” He lowers his voice and his smile fades. “They’ve told us to be ready for many casualties. Do you really think there’ll be war? That an army is just going to appear by magic?”

"I'm afraid so," says Dranko. "But I know you'll do right by Delioch when the time comes."

Nolman smiles again. "No turtles this time?"

"No turtles."

The air over the Mud Zone has a strange chill, out of place for late summer, and there is a faint rumble of thunder. Sporadic flashing lights like orange-white heat lightning flicker across the sky. Around the long perimeter are dozens of platforms built into the trees, each with a store of arrows. The low walls and redoubts have multiplied tenfold since some of the Company visited weeks earlier. Kibi notes with satisfaction that many of the new stone towers are of dwarvish construction.

On the way back to the Shadow Chaser, threading their way through camps of soldiers, the Company are stopped by someone shouting from a nearby clearing. "Hey, look. Those guys are the Turtle Slayers! That little guy, he flew this magic flying carpet around that huge turtle that attacked Sand's Edge. I saw it myself! The rest of 'em, they fought those damned Watchers who were mind-controlled by the turtle. They and the Stormknights, they killed the biggest damn creature in the world. Them guys are heroes! Hey! Turtle Slayers!" A soldier is waving at the Company, and the others around him start cheering and waving as well.

Ah, the adulation of the masses.



The Company return to the Shadow Chaser to find a briefing about to begin at the far end of the commons. Anabrook is standing up in front, talking quietly to an aide, while before her sits a group of nine people sitting in chairs. Most have the look of hardened adventurers.

Two of the newcomers stand immediately when the Company arrive. They are one man and one woman, armed and armored and exceedingly graceful. They approach the party, their expressions neutral. "We are going up to collect your friend Aravis," says the woman. "One of you should accompany us, so that he is not taken by surprise."

Somewhat surprised himself, Ernie goes up with the two and almost knocks on Aravis's door. He thinks better of it for a moment and casts *detect evil* on the two fighters. Negative. Satisfied, Ernie knocks, and inside Pewter hears the sound and claws Aravis's shoulder, bringing the wizard back to the here and now.

The first thing Aravis sees is a pair of fighters drawing their weapons, and he instinctively shrinks back. But the man says, "Aravis, my name is **Attrius**, and you are our charge. This is **Portia**. By life or death we will protect you. Please come with us down to the briefing." Portia moves silently to stand by Aravis's side, and Attriush moves into the hallway. They bracket the wizard as they march down the stairs. Neither has so much as raised an eyebrow at Aravis's strange appearance. Ernie follows them.

In the commons, General Anabrook looks over the assembled heroes, counting silently. "There is one more," she says. "He should be arriving momentarily, and then we will begin."

Indeed, less than a minute later the door to the Shadow Chaser opens and a pudgy, balding man is admitted into the room. "Ah, **Fulton**, you are here at last," Anabrook says. "Good! Now we may begin."

Dranko knows he has heard that name before. But where... where...? Ah! Yes. In Sand's Edge, there are those two wizards who had taken advantage of the devastation's aftermath to gain political power. They had only met the woman, Imperia, but the other one's name was Fulton, and the description matches. Dranko calls over to him. "Hey, you're the guy running that scam in Sand's Edge!"

Fulton looks discomfited and obviously guilty. "I'm sure I d...don't know what you're t...talking about," he stammers.

Dranko grins. "We'll talk later."

Anabrook clears her throat. "Some introductions would be in order first, I think." She motions toward a group of four, sitting together at a table, a comfortable bunch who had been laughing and talking quietly. A tall, rugged man stands up and addresses the others.

"We are an adventuring group founded some years back. Though I don't claim any spiritual gifts, I formed our group in the service of my goddess, Corilayna. We are called 'Fortune's Children.' My name is **Royce**, and I am a fighting man." He gestures to a small, lithe woman sitting beside him. "This is **Sparrow**, who has many useful skills, particularly where stealth is needed."

Next over is a tall, skinny, shock-haired man in a green robe, showing the device of a die balanced on one corner. “That is **Brassel**, a cleric in the service of Corilayna.” Finally he nods to a middle-aged woman with straight steel-gray hair and a steady expression. “And this is **Bettany**, a wizard of no small ability.”

The Company are next in order as all are seated, and before anyone can stop him, Flicker stands up and announces proudly: “We are the Heroes of the Kalkas Peaks!” When the others roll their eyes, he sits back down, muttering. “Well, we are...”

One by one, the members of the Company introduce themselves to the assemblage, briefly outlining their professional strengths. When Kibi’s turn comes up and he declares himself a wizard, a bespectacled boy of no more than thirteen years stands up and interrupts. “A dwarven wizard? Such a thing should not be possible! It is the essence of dwarven nature that they cannot cast arcane magics.”

Kibi looks indignant. “I am absolutely a wizard,” he huffs. “I have been casting spells for many years now with no difficulty. This is my familiar, Scree. He is an earth elemental.” Scree forms up around Kibi’s feet, rocks grinding together noisily.

“Oh, I believe you,” says the boy. “It’s just... fascinating, that’s all. Absolutely fascinating.”

“Hmph. I’m glad you think so,” grumps Kibi.

The boy introduces himself as **Wellington**, a sorcerer. A tarantula crawls from his robes onto his shoulder. “This is my familiar,” he says.

“What’s his name?” Royce asks.

Wellington turns red, and under his breath mutters, “His name is **Crawly**.” Sparrow can’t help but snicker.

“I named him when I was very young,” the boy explains haughtily, but this just draws even more laughter.

Next to the boy, a beautiful woman with flowing brown hair stands up. She puts a hand on Wellington’s shoulder, and the laughter stops abruptly. In her other hand is a long-handled scythe. “I am **Glade**,” she says. “A paladin in the service of Pikon. And since Wellington is likely the smartest person any of you will ever meet, I suggest that you treat him with a bit more respect.”

“Smart?” mumbles Kibi under his breath. “Might have known dwarves could be wizards, then...”

Fulton stands up, looking extremely uncomfortable and out of place. “I... I’m F...Fulton,” he stammers. “I’m a w...wizard.” And he sits down.

Finally a portly man in Pikonish robes stands up. The Company have met him at previous meetings of the Spire. “I am **Matthias**,” he announces in a deep voice. “I am the High Priest of Pikon in our kingdom, and I am here with a hundred knights at my command. We are honored to serve in this dark hour.” He bows to the others and sits back down.

General Anabrook moves to stand again in front of the assemblage. “You represent the finest combatants that Charagan can muster at this time. There has still been no word about Cencerra and her group’s investigation of the gartine arch in Karth. Divinations indicate that they’re still alive, but we cannot reach them – not even with *sending* spells. As for Jerzembeck and Junaya and their group, we’ve made the decision that they should stay on the Peninsula to help counter any offensive the Delfiri might launch while our manpower is compromised.

“With two exceptions, I’m not going to assign any of you to a particular duty. We expect an invasion of unknown size and likely unknown location, save that it will be in this general area. I feel that you will best serve us as free-ranging strike teams that can get to hot spots as they appear. We have over a hundred trained runners who you’ll meet outside in a few minutes; their job is to help keep you as informed as possible about changing battlefield conditions, should they arrive. We may send them with specific orders in dire circumstances, but as a default behavior, you’ll be on your own, and the runners will simply serve as conduits for tactical and strategic intelligence.

“Now, what I’m about to say is not to leave this room. This is Aravis Telmir, and he is our best hope for avoiding a bloody mess altogether. If he succeeds, there will be no invading army, and we can all go back to the chore of getting those damned Delfiri out of our kingdom. But we are acting under the assumption that he will not succeed. None of the rank and file know of this chance we have, and they’re not going to know until it happens or it doesn’t. In the meantime, Attrijs and Portia are being assigned as bodyguards to Aravis. They are experts at this sort of thing, and once this briefing is over, they will not leave Aravis’s side. Is that understood?”

There is no misunderstanding.

Kajamba Lion: Whoa.

RangerWickett: What the lion said.

wolf96: Do I smell a pair of Devoted Defenders?

Amazing, Sagiro... You really took the time to crank the intensity to 11, didn't you? It's really cool to see all the preparations made by the kingdom for this invasion – it makes the world come alive.

Galfridus: Yeah, this is really impressive... Actually, I was put in mind of some of the larger battle scenes from the *Black Company* series. Nice.

I'm curious (and perhaps it will be clear soon) how much "front stage" time all these NPCs will receive, and how much is just background...

Quartermoon: I absolutely love the way this is not just the Company's game... it is the world, with other adventurers just as powerful being called up and given the same orders as 'our heroes.' Such richness is really wonderful, Sagiro.

Dawn: Have to agree with Quartermoon. It is nice to see other adventuring groups brought in. Lets the players know that it really is a large world out there and others are affecting it also.

Nail: Besides (let's be honest here), they need th' help.

Piratecat: Ohhhh, yes. We sure did. You have no freakin' idea.

Read on, and discover how bad tactics on Dranko's part come back to bite him! And bite him. And bite him. And bite his friends. And bite his allies. If area-effect spells have teeth, that is.

Duncan Haldane: You know, that scene with everyone introducing themselves seemed like an AA meeting – Adventurers Anonymous.

"Hi. My name is Dranko, and I'm an adventurer. It's been 41 days since my last combat. Oh, and I like to lick things."

General Anabrook looks over the assembled adventurers of Charagan and smiles, even as ominous thunder continues to roll in the distance. "Ladies, gentlemen, I leave it to you to deploy yourselves effectively. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to return to my staff."

Much discussion follows as the heroes make plans. It is decided that they will form into five groups, four of which will generally patrol quadrants of the battlefield. The Company will patrol the southwest quadrant; Fortune's Children the northeast; Glade, Wellington and Fulton the southeast; and Matthias (with his knights) the northwest. Kay has been joined by five Yrimpa who have traveled with great haste from the Balani; the seven of them (counting Oa-Lyanna) will serve as a free-ranging sky patrol looking out for airborne threats. They are also tasked with checking in periodically on the triangular "control room" building by which the monster boxes over Kinnet Gorge could conceivably be opened. Each of the groups has one designated *sending* recipient, and they also plan to be linked together via a *Rary's telepathic bond*.

Once the inter-party coordination is worked out and the groups start talking among themselves, Dranko walks over to the nervously fidgeting wizard Fulton, puts an arm around his shoulders, and leads him over towards the wall. "Fulton, my boy," says Dranko, "your associate Imperia extorted a lot of money from us earlier this year. I've written a full report to the proper authorities that gets delivered if I die. If both you and I survive the next few days, my friend, perhaps we'll need to have a serious chat about your... governing methods. Eh?"

Fulton looks horrified. "Uh... uh... D... Dranko, I... I'm not r... really sure what Im... Imperia is doing. I j... just do what she t... tells me to do. I kn... know things have gotten out of h... hand, and I'm s... sorry. I'd actually be g... glad if you could d... do something ab... about her."

"Oh, I think we can manage that," Dranko smiles. "When all this is done, we'll go back Sand's Edge and all deal with her together, how 'bout?" Those of the Company who overhear groan at the thought. They hate Sand's Edge almost as much as Dranko hates Verdshane.

Fulton nods, still looking discomfited. "You still look nervous," Dranko remarks. "Why is that?"

"Er... er, um..." says Fulton, turning a bit red, "It's j... just that I've never k... k... killed anyone before with my s... spells. I d... don't know that I c... can do it when I h... have to."

Dranko manages not to show his surprise. "Well, you can always cast support spells, you know. Wizards can be damned useful even without killing people."

"I d... do have w... wall spells prepared, to help p... protect our s... soldiers," says Fulton. "And j... just in c... case, I have a ch... ch... chain lightning r... ready." Well, that's good to know.

There are only a few loose odds and ends left before the Company go to sleep. They track down Captain Madoc and give him two of their magic items for distribution elsewhere – Dranko's magical mace that summons a short-lived small fire elemental, and Morningstar's seldom-used *javelin of returning*. Aravis (protected by his new bodyguards) goes out to a sheltered forest glade near to the Company's assigned corner of the Mud Zone, and places a *Leomund's secure shelter* that will last well into the next day.

Aravis has spent the morning immersed in the Maze, slowly and steadily building up the strength of the space-time around the *gate* area, which he intends to tear apart and rebuild entirely. He expects to execute that final and critical stage of his plan the next day in the early afternoon, which (judging by the time difference noted by Kibi and Grey Wolf when they unexpectedly visited Volpos) should be early morning in the enemy camp.

The rest of the Company cast a few 24-hour buffing spells before retiring to their rooms in the Shadow Chaser. Then, tired from both the day's events and the steady trickle of life energy donated to Aravis, they enjoy a final night's rest before the day of reckoning. Steady unnatural thunder booms to the north and eerie distant lightning flashes through their windows as they fall asleep.

Monday, September 10



All of the Company are awakened instantly. In Aravis's room, Attrius moves to the window and looks out while Portia stands between the wizard and the door. Bright lights are flashing outside in the dark. From the north, from the direction of the *gate*, is a brief, quick shout, as of thousands of voices bellowing. It lasts less than a second.

Kibi leaps to his feet and sees that it's still dark. He is dismayed to realize that his mind is not yet refreshed enough to prepare a new day's worth of spells. A minute later the Company have gathered in Aravis's room. A minute after that, there is another tremendous **BOOM!** from the north, another flash of white-orange light, and another abbreviated shout. Other noises can be heard outside as Charagan forces scramble, but it still doesn't sound like the enemy army has arrived.

Aravis drops into the Maze. Something is different. An unknown force is pounding on the planar *gate* from... somewhere? It's some new threat he hasn't seen before, and even close scrutiny with the Maze doesn't yield up information about its source. But with each magical blow to the *gate*, its effectiveness dwindles. It is only minutes away from breaking unless he does something...

The rest of the Company feel an eager tug at their souls. They give up more of their own living essence, and Aravis uses that life-force to shore up the *gate* directly. It's neither an efficient nor permanent solution, but after a few moments Aravis is satisfied that he's bought the kingdom about two more hours. He leaves the Maze and tells the rest of the party to grab another couple of hours' sleep if they can. Somehow, they do.



At about six o'clock in the morning the Company rise again. The pale morning light of sunrise filters through the trees outside the inn, and they can see soldiers moving about hurriedly, making final preparations for the impending war. The Company arm and start casting more short-term preparatory spells.

They are almost ready when another **BOOM!**, louder than the ones that went before it, rolls through the forest. Lights like flashing suns flood outward from the Mud Zone, and a thousand Charagan soldiers flinch away for a moment. There is another multitudinous shout, that does not abate. And from the north, the sounds of battle can be heard.

"*Fly* spells for everyone," says Grey Wolf. He squeezes off ten inaugural charges from their newly-made *wand of fly*.

"Is everyone ready?" asks Dranko. "We should... er..." He stops, looking at Morningstar, who has a strange expression on her face. They all look at her.

"I just received a *sending*," she says, her voice quivering with anticipation, excitement and fear. "From Amber. She says:

Morningstar, assault beginning Ava Dormo Oasis. Enemy forces bombarding stone tower in Dream. Bright lights. Mustering all Dreamwalkers for defense. Come quickly!

coyote6: Attack from quarters unknown? Assault on a second front? I believe the operative phrase is, "Uh-oh."

Fade: I think the Company should have got used to that by now.

KidCthulhu: Nah. You see. That's the really EVIL thing about Sagiro. Even when we're ready for it, he still finds new ways to make us suffer. He's a mad genius, really.

Fade: Is there any other kind?

Oasis. Once the home of the now defunct Order of Preservation. Later home to a group of Sharshun styling themselves the Oasis Mages' Guild, though for centuries it has been illegal to organize any mages' guild within city limits. And in its *Ava Dormo* reflection, there is a tower without doors or windows, with which the Dreamwalkers were warned not to meddle. It seems someone is meddling with it now.

Less than a minute later, all of the Company are flying at top speed through a light drizzle toward their assigned corner of the Mud Zone. Corporal Edridge has been included in a *Rary's telepathic bond* from Morningstar, along with Dranko and Pewter.

As they skim over the trees the sounds of battle ring out from below. Here and there through the canopy they catch glimpses of soldiers, some on the move, others engaged in small skirmishes. As feared, at least some of the invaders have appeared in the forest outside the Mud Zone.

The area by the *secure shelter* is still clear, and Aravis spots the roof through a gap in the trees. He flies down with Attriush and Portia. Morningstar and Skorg follow. While the rest keep flying, those five enter the *shelter* and lock the door behind them. Aravis sits on one of the bunks and immediately drops into the Crosser's Maze, while Morningstar sits opposite and wills herself into *Ava Dormo*.

Skorg has been loaded down with freshly brewed healing potions, ready to administer them if Morningstar's body becomes injured.

Attrius and Portia look at Skorg. Skorg looks at the two bodyguards. All three look down at their charges, whose minds have departed for parts unknown.

"You get used to it," Skorg shrugs.



The Company fly on over the trees, looking for signs of trouble in their part of the woods. As they near the edge of the Mud Zone they see that things there are going well, everything considered. Hundreds upon hundreds of enemy troops have arrived in or near the center of the Mud Zone, and are slogging through the mud as well as they can toward the perimeter. As the enemy get within range, hundreds of Charagan archers are launching withering volleys of arrow fire into the soup. It is hard to count the dead from their vantage point, since the Mud Zone itself is over half a mile on a side, but it's clear that there's not much they need to do to help that situation at the moment. Still, some of the invaders who arrived closer to the perimeter have reached the tree-wall and are starting to fight their way into the forest. And from all through the trees comes the clamor of battle, joined where the enemy has arrived outside the Zone.

From somewhere far to the north comes the sound of many wolves howling in unison. There is another bright flash of orange light, another tumult of thunder, and more enemy troops appear in the Mud Zone and elsewhere.

As they swoop out over the trees in their quadrant, a few of the Company spot an especially thick knot of fighting in a partial clearing. Kingdom soldiers are shouting and running through the woods, converging on the battle. The Company fly down and see a grim sight. About fifteen ogre-sized humanoids with gray skin and sharp claws are tearing through groups of disorganized Kingdom soldiery.

The Company descend and attack. Grey Wolf begins by casting *mount*, a spell which Step had learned existed only last night. (*Step: "You mean, I could have had a magical horse in every battle we've fought? And you never told me?" Grey Wolf: "Er..."*)

Bill Muench: LOL... That's priceless. Keep up the good work, Sagiro!

KidCthulhu: Well, to while away the time, I can give you a little sample of Ernie's little poem about the Battle of Verdshane (with many thanks to the late Dr. Seuss).

Emperor at the Door by Dr. Ernie

Do you like the Emperor?
We do not like the Emperor.
We do not like that Naradoc.
We would not like him on our block.
We do not like the Emperor.
We do not want him at our door.
Would you like him in Verdshane?
Would you like him in the rain?
We do not want him in Verdshane,
Not even in the pouring rain.
We do not like that Naradoc.
We would not like him on our block.
How about in Circle Black?
Come stab 'ole Grey Wolf in the back!
Not Circle Black.
Not in the back.
Not in Vershane.
Not in the rain.
We do not like that Naradoc.
We would not like him on our block.

And then the Company tear into them. The ogrish creatures are more powerful by far than the rank-and-file Charagan footmen, but they have no obvious recourse against (for instance) flying spellcasters. Ernie spots a large group of the monsters in one general location without friendly units nearby, and (fingers crossed) reads *blade barrier* from a scroll. (He still remembers what happened the last time he tried to use a scroll to cast divine magic beyond his means, when a *heal* spell fizzled at a bad time during the fight with Mokad.) But he gets through the words, and a disk of knee-high spinning blades starts slicing the ogre-beings to ribbons. Adding insult to injury in fine fashion, Kibi follows up by casting *confusion* on most of the enemy

within the *blade barrier*. Several of them stand around stupidly, not understanding that their lack of action is a ticket to swift bladed death.

Still, not all of them are caught in this trap, and if nothing else they are extraordinarily tough. Many continue to fight, and more Kingdom forces fall to their claws. Then Step comes galloping in through the trees, executes a devastating ride-by attack that all but cuts one of the ogroids in half, and veers safely away before turning for another pass. Several members of the Company who have never seen Step attack on horseback are agog. (“Mental note to self,” mutters Grey Wolf. “Always have a magical horse for that man.”) Although a few of the Company take wounds at the hands of the foul monsters, the airborne fighters and spellcasters combined with Step’s ferocious mounted assault make relatively quick work of the enemies who survived the *blade barrier/confusion* combination.

Even as the last foe falls, Dranko’s expression is pensive. It’s not because the battle still rages all around Verdshane, or at the sight of the allied soldiers who fell at the hands of these beasts. It has more to do with the ongoing connection he has with Morningstar over the *Rary’s telepathic bond*.



Morningstar, seated comfortably, falls asleep at once. She casts her mind into *Ava Dormo*, intending to appear about fifty yards distant from the lonely tower near Oasis. Being a highly skilled Dreamwalker, she appears right where she expects. What she sees – well, that is less expected.

Over a hundred feet away is a tower of gray rock, tall and slender and impervious. And forming the third point of an equilateral triangle with Morningstar and the tower is the enemy. The enemy in this case is a large square formation of over a hundred black-armored soldiers, their spears bristling through a set wall of tower shields. The entire area of space around them is lit up as if by powerful floodlights, though there are no light sources to be seen.

Over the top of the shields, Morningstar can see that a strange device like a large ballista made of dark green metal squats in the center of the square. Even as she begins to fly upward to get a better view, a blast of bright greenish light emerges from a cannon-like barrel on the ballista device. It streaks toward the stone tower but misses high by about fifteen feet.

A hundred feet on the other side of the tower, Ellish soldiers are appearing by ones and twos; already there are several dozen, squinting into the bright light, but undeterred. Some are hastily conferring while others form a shield wall of their own. Morningstar soon sees why. A hail of arrows comes arcing from inside the enemy formation, slamming down around the Ellish Dreamwalkers.

As Morningstar flies higher, she sees that there are dozens of archers inside the square, forming an even tighter cordon around the ballista. And standing next to the blasting machine is a tall figure in blood-red plate. Morningstar doesn’t need to see the helmeted face to recognize her old adversary: **Octesian**, who years ago was squeezed through the planar boundary along with Meledien and the late Restimar. She swears vehemently. Back when they first met, Octesian had already learned to deal damage in *Ava Dormo* that caused wounds in the waking world. So while she and her Ellish forces can only knock people out of the Dreaming by overcoming them in combat, Octesian can actually kill.

“This should give them something to think about,” Morningstar says to herself. She casts *blade barrier* at knee height, centered on the metal ballista. There is understandable chaos within the ranks of the enemies, as the black-armored soldiers scramble to escape the circle of whirling blades. Some of the archers are sliced apart, and some of those who are able to move quickly out of the spell area are badly wounded. But many escape unscathed, including Octesian. They form up in a new perimeter, just beyond the edge of the blades, and resume guarding the ballista. They show no sign of moving to attack the amassing Ellish forces.

The magical device fires again, and this time the bolt of green light smashes into the tower with a sound like thunder. A sickly glow plays around the stones for a moment before it fades.

Morningstar moves with the speed of thought to join her assembling sisters, who now number well over a hundred. As she does, she thinks to Dranko over the *telepathic bond*: *Did anything just happen out there in the battle?*

Yeah, Dranko answers. There was just another big blast of thunder with some flashing lights, and a new boatload of enemy soldiers appeared.

Morningstar moves to join Amber, June, Swan, Previa and others who are arguing about the best course of action. Quickly she sets them straight. “Every time that cannon strikes the tower, more of Naradawk’s soldiers arrive in Verdshane. We have to press the attack, and find a way to destroy that ballista. Beware of Octesian, the one in the red armor. His sword blows can kill your waking body.”

Their battle plan is made quickly. Most of the Ellish sisters move forward in formation, spreading out to engage the enemy, hoping to press them back into the *blade barrier*. Evenstar and her older priestesses form up from a distance, and through sheer concentration begin to remove enemy shields and weapons from *Ava Dormo*. The reconstituted enemy shield wall starts to flicker strangely as some of the shields vanish. But Octesian's soldiers are also proficient Dreamers, and the shields blink back into existence as quickly as they are removed. It's a strange sight: enemy weapons and shields flashing on and off as if in strobe.

Morningstar focuses her mental energies on the ballista itself; she knows that she can affect objects in *Ava Dormo*, creating, destroying, reshaping. But the device withstands her best attempts at a direct mental assault. It fires again, and another shaft of green energy slams into the tower. *There goes another one, huh?* Dranko's voice sounds in her head.

Morningstar curses again. She changes tactics. Instead of concentrating on the ballista itself, she focuses her thought on the ground beneath it. The earth starts to ripple and fold. The device sinks a bit and then tilts, canted to one side. It fires again, and its energy bolt misses by a good hundred feet. Quickly she lands near some of her soldiers and spreads the word, instructing some to concentrate on warping the ground underneath the enemy weapon, and others to continue pressing the attack. Then she moves forward to join the melee. Behind the sounds of battle is the incessant clanking of magical blades whooshing through the air and clanking harmlessly off the metal ballista.

Octesian has easily fought his way through a knot of Ellish soldiers; Morningstar takes a deep breath and flies down to attack. They exchange blows, and Morningstar gets the worst of it, slashed by Octesian's glowing black longsword. She falls back to be healed by one of her sisters.

Back in the *secure shelter*, Skorg sees wounds open up on Morningstar's body, and quickly feeds her a healing potion.



To the north, the Company have just finished off the humanoid soldiers. Kibi flies above the trees again to check in on the Mud Zone. Even from a great distance he sees a strange new thing: a large block-shaped object like a huge siege engine, set upon huge stone cylinders like a great steamroller. Stone arms protrude from its sides. Whatever it is looks extremely dangerous — or at least it would be, were it not sunk several feet into the mud. Kibi flies a bit closer, until he can see that dozens of enemy soldiers are enduring arrow fire as they attempt to move the siege engine. He is happy to see that it's not budging.

Soon after, a runner comes sprinting through the trees. After taking a few seconds to catch his breath, he gives his report to the Company. "There are two strange wolf-pack creatures, one to the northeast, and one to the south. Fortune's Children are in the area near the northern one, but they are already in bad shape. A red-armored warrior has been spotted to the northwest of the Mud Zone, near to where Matthias and his troops are. Hundreds of foot soldiers have appeared in isolated pockets outside the Mud Zone altogether. Inside the Mud Zone we still command the field. Have you received and understood this report?"

The Company are left to ponder what to do next. Some want to go help Fortune's Children, and others itch to confront the red-armored enemy (whom they assume must be the hated Meledien). But Dranko turns to the others. "I think Morningstar's going to need help. Her troops are fighting Octesian, and it's him that's causing troops to appear. I'll explain as we fly. Quick... back to the *shelter*!" That ends the debate. The rest of the Company begin to fly.

Plane Sailing: Great story, Sagiro! I'm especially pleased to see One Certain Step's moment of glory since I was able to moonlight as him and swing a big sword.

What Sagiro doesn't capture here is the wonderful rendition of gormless, confused ogrish creatures having bits sliced off them by the *blade barrier*, which was absolutely priceless!

As you might guess, the tension around the table was palpable... There was a real sense of desperation in the defence against Naradawk's forces... Who will prevail?

Carnifex: Excellent stuff! It's really got me on the edge of my seat now!

MavrickWeirdo: Would this have anything to do with [how bad tactics on Dranko's part come back to bite him]?

Piratecat: Oh, no, it's so very much worse than that. There's a very good possibility that a bad decision on my part resulted in the death of...

But that would be telling. Hey, no one else blames Dranko. You have to make combat decisions on the fly, right? And no matter what happens, people are going to die in a battle, right? And when it comes right down to it, people are people, and you shouldn't hold yourself accountable for the murderous actions of enemies you choose not to take on right away, right?

Sure. Dranko's telling himself that late at night, these days, in those early hours when the night closes in. But he's not entirely sure he believes it. And he'll never know for sure.

Samnelli: PC, that was either a hint virtually to the point of just screaming it at us or a devilishly clever teasing ruse.

You are a bad, bad man.



Note that for much of the following, Aravis's player also ran Flicker.

The battle in *Ava Dormo* continues frenetically on its unconventional course. Morningstar quickly spreads the word for more of her Ellish sisters to start focusing their concentration on the ground beneath the ballista, and for others, if possible, to knock Octesian into the *blade barrier*. The sounds of the whirling blades clinking off the metal engine resound through the Dreamscape.

The battle becomes stranger. The earth beneath Octesian's ballista is rippling like water, as Ellish forces try to disrupt the ground and enemy soldiers try to flatten it. Another bolt of green energy flies wide by a dozen yards.

Many Ellish soldiers have surrounded Octesian. Morningstar sees with horror that they are practically throwing themselves against him in the attempt to drive him back, and several of the ones in front are taking damage as they come in contact with the red armor. Octesian is a masterful swordsman in Dream, and his evil black sword is chopping through his enemies. Blood spatters the ground of *Ava Dormo*.

June, Morningstar's headstrong but devout and talented protégé, has struggled to the fore of the melee. She manages to land a damaging blow on Octesian's shoulder. And then Morningstar, herself unable to reach the front line, watches helplessly as Octesian scythes his blade across in a perfect, vicious cut... and strikes the head clean from June's shoulders.

Then, finally, the sheer number of Ellish warriors overpowers Octesian, and he is borne back into the *blade barrier*. Two more sisters are cut apart by blades, but these (as Morningstar thinks gratefully) will simply be expelled from *Ava Dormo*; the only thing here in the battle that is truly deadly is Octesian's sword. A lump forms in Morningstar's throat at the sight of June's body.

Octesian is wounded, but manages to drop and roll mostly beneath the deadly plane of blades. He emerges from the killing zone some distance away from his attackers, and stands shakily, blood dripping from beneath the plates of his armor.

Then the metaphorical cavalry arrive. The rest of the Company have reached Aravis's *secure shelter*, and Morningstar drops out of Dream just long enough to cast *dream anchor*, bringing in Ernie, Step, Grey Wolf and Flicker. Dranko and Kibi remain outside, to fly around and scout out the battlefield. Skorg looks at the new pile of entranced bodies sitting on bunks, glances at the battle-ready Portia and Attrijs, and lets out a long sigh. He checks again that his healing potions are at the ready.

Ernie appears in *Ava Dormo* directly next to Octesian (fortunately not on the side with the blades), who is just finishing getting to his feet. The red-armored warrior looks appropriately surprised to see this new addition to the fight, and is surprised further when Ernie launches a furious attack upon Octesian's knees, slashing *Beryn Sur* through the small gaps in his opponent's armor. "Hi there!" says Ernie happily. "Goodness calling!"

Flicker, still invisible, immediately flies over the blades to the ballista itself. He lands on the barrel, nearly deafened by the sounds of blades striking the metal below. Concentrating as best he can (not easy with the ground undulating beneath), he starts a close examination of the machine's barrel. Fearless, he puts his face right up to the business end and peers in. Inside the dark interior of the barrel, dull green energies swirl, growing slowly brighter. Suddenly those energies flare up, and Flicker just jerks his head out of harm's way as another bolt fires. He instinctively watches its flight, and grimaces as it clips the side of the distant stone tower. Gulping, he starts to fish an oil flask and rag from his pack.

"I need help!" Octesian bellows. He lashes out at Ernie and his black blade shears through Ernie's plate mail. Halfling blood spills upon the ground. A number of enemy soldiers leave off the mental battle for control of the ground beneath the ballista, and come to Octesian's aid (as quickly as they can while skirting the *blade barrier*).

Step and Morningstar also converge. Grey Wolf, still with *see invisibility* up, spots a heretofore unnoticed humanoid figure flying high above the battle. He flies up a bit himself to get a better view, but decides pretty quickly to throw caution to the wind. He launches a *fireball* at the flyer. When the flames clear, the figure is still flying, wisps of smoke rising from his or her clothing.

Morningstar reaches Octesian and swings her Ell-blessed weapon, but is foiled by the red armor. Octesian sneers with contempt. Step's charge is intercepted by a number of Octesian's soldiers, who surround the paladin and land a number of telling blows. Step staggers back...



Dranko and Kibi soar high above the battlefield; below them, the war rages on. In the Mud Zone, hundreds upon hundreds of enemy troops have survived the hail of arrows and broken into the forest to engage kingdom forces. Hundreds more have arrived near the *gate* and are still slogging through mud, but the rain of arrows has grown noticeably sparser since the engagement began. And all through the forest itself, heard more than seen through the canopy, small battles are being fought in isolated pockets. There is no way of telling which side has the upper hand, but one thing is clear: if enemy soldiers keep arriving at the same steady rate, attrition will spell the death of the Charagan forces. At least the huge stone siege engine in the

Mud Zone has not budged; stone arms hang lifelessly at its side, and Naradawk's minions have given up trying to push it out of the mud.

From across the battlefield, toward the northwest corner of the Mud Zone, Dranko sees a sudden flash of flames high in the air. "That was a *flame strike*!" he shouts to Kibi.

The two of them veer off at once to investigate...



Aravis remains calm at the center of the storm. He has brought the focus of the Crosser's Maze to the very heart of the battle, and is sewing up the ragged tears in local space-time as a master tailor might mend a tattered tunic. But instead of thread, Aravis uses life-force. It is exceedingly delicate work. He is drawing life-force from whomever he can – the Company, the officers, the soldiers in the field. There is an unexpected surge in the pressure beyond the tears, and he instinctively reaches out with his mind to patch a sudden hole. Before he can stop himself, he realizes that the soul he is using isn't strong enough for the task, but it is too late. Just like that, a footman's life somewhere out in the forest is snuffed out. Aravis is shocked and chilled in the realization of what he has just done, but he sets his mind back to the task. There will only be time enough to mourn if he succeeds in his task.

Nail: Did we (the readers) ever get told what the Maze's "life draining ability" actually does, in game terms? That is, is this XP we're seeing taken from the PCs and NPCs? Yowsa.

Sagiro: It's straight XP. My players don't know exactly how many, though.

As Aravis sets his mind back to the business of shoring up space-time, he is startled to hear voices coming from alarmingly close by. He swivels the focus of the Maze around, fearing an attack. But no... there is nothing.

He hears the voices again, faintly. He cannot make out what they're saying but he senses urgency. But where are they coming from? He takes precious seconds to comb the space-time around the planar *gate*.

Aha! There, not far away – a small opening into a tiny, well-hidden demiplane, facing directly toward the planar *gate*! Aravis moves his mind closer. It is a demiplane no larger than a small house, and there are clearly many voices within, but he still cannot make out what they are saying. Could this be the launching point for Naradawk's assault on the *gate*?

For a few seconds Aravis toys with the idea of simply plastering over the opening with a *wall of force*. But at the last minute he decides to move just a tiny bit closer, hoping to overhear something that will confirm his suspicions. He moves his mind closer... closer...



Flicker has managed to stuff a rag into an oil flask and set it alight. He holds it outstretched in one hand, and maintains a tight grip on the ballista barrel with the other. His body is contorted around so that he can still peer into the barrel, watching the swirls of green glow, waiting, waiting.

It flares up. Flicker yanks his head away and jams the flask into the barrel just before it fires. There is a tremendous explosion and Flicker is nearly knocked off the barrel into the flashing blades. But the bolt still fires, albeit at a crazy trajectory. With a sigh, Flicker realizes that, although he thought he timed it perfectly, he used the oil just a split second too soon. Of course, if he's just a split second too late, it could blow his arm off. But caution is not on Flicker's list of virtues, and he immediately starts preparing another vial.

Grey Wolf watches as the figure above him drinks a potion and flies up even higher. He takes off after it, takes his best guess at distance, and launches another *fireball*. He's pretty sure it hit, but the figure still doesn't drop. It continues to flee.

Morningstar falls back from Octesian to heal Step, and gets a vicious attack of opportunity for her trouble. But here it becomes clear that Octesian's ability to do real damage can be a liability as well, because just as Morningstar's Dream self is damaged, so also is her real physical body. And since Skorg is standing by with healing potions, Morningstar's Dream persona can be healed from "off stage" as it were. So even as Morningstar is healing Step, Skorg is healing Morningstar.

Ernie hacks again at Octesian's legs, but all of his sword blows are deflected by the red armor. Octesian ignores the halfling and steps again toward Step. He lands three devastating blows, and Step goes pale from pain and blood loss.



Back in the *secure shelter*, Skorg sees three wide gashes open on Step's body, and the floor runs red with the paladin's blood. "Oh my god!" he exclaims. He is still dribbling the last of a healing potion into Morningstar's mouth. "You two. I know

you've got to watch Aravis, but no one's coming in here in the next five seconds. Pour some of your potions into this guy, while I get the next ones ready."

Attrius and Portia exchange a quick look, nod, and move forward to administer their healing potions to Step. As soon as the last drops have been swallowed, they move back to stand over Aravis...



...who has finally moved close enough to hear what's going on in the demiplane. Somewhere in the back of his mind he realizes that what he's "hearing" is actual telepathic communication between persons inside the pocket dimension:

The fifth seal is breaking – Koenig, quickly! I need help here. Salk, you should have the softest sector for the next fifteen seconds – divert one third of your energy to the ninth seal. Ozilinsh, how are you holding up? Forty-one seconds before the next surge; Fylnius, I'll need all of your help when that happens...

Well, thank Pikon that he didn't go ahead with that *wall of force* plan!

Aravis approaches the demiplane from within the Crosser's Maze and sticks his head in. Despite their desperate circumstances and critical task, the Archmagi have enough wherewithal not to startle. They are seated in simple wooden chairs set around a large and complex three-dimensional pattern in the air. The pattern is made of magical energy, and it pulses, streaks and blinks in places as Aravis watches.

"Hello Aravis," says Ozilinsh calmly. "I hope that... oops, hold on." Ozilinsh concentrates for a moment and twitches his fingers. "Alykeen, I'll need you to evoke *iron wards* around my second quadrant in forty-nine seconds. That should hold the sixth through tenth seals for a good minute. Will you be ready?"

"Yes," gasps another one of the Archmagi. Aravis sees that all of the assembled wizards are sweating.

"Good," says Ozilinsh. "Now, Aravis, what can we do for you? Nothing too time consuming, I hope!"

Aravis thinks for a second. "I may need your life-force," he says. "I'm going to blow open the *gate* in a short while, and I'll need all the life energy I can get to remake space-time as quickly as possible. But I don't want to do anything that will distract you..."

The Archmagi, listening as they continue their rituals, glance at each other. Some communication passes among them that Aravis, even tied into the Maze, cannot hear. "Aravis," says Ozilinsh softly. "When the time comes, do as you must. Our power is at your disposal. Now, if you'll excuse us, we still need to keep up our end until you're ready."

"Fylnius!" shouts Alykeen. "We're getting another surge. I need you to..."

Aravis backs out of the demiplane and returns to his task: to prepare the universe for his great plan, wherein he will destroy a small piece of it, and build a new section in its stead. Gently he teases more life energy from his allies in Verdshane. Not long now. Not long.



Back in Verdshane, a very light drizzle begins to fall from the clouded sky, reducing visibility. Dranko and Kibi fly lower, the better to spot things (where possible) between the trees. They continue to fly in the direction from where Dranko saw the *flame strike*.

Kibi spots another spell effect in the distance; he guesses that this one was a *cone of cold*! And... is that black speck a human figure flying high above the trees? It's still some hundreds of feet away. Kibi and Dranko continue to fly.



Grey Wolf continues his pursuit of his flying target, and launches a third *fireball*. For a moment he's not sure if it struck, but he is rewarded a second later as a crispy body comes plummeting straight out of the sky above. It rockets past him, bounces off the back of the ballista, falls into the blades, and is quickly chopped to bits.

Flicker waits. He thinks he has timed everything just right. The rag should burn down just at the moment the ballista should next fire. All he has to do is anticipate. He holds his breath, peering into the barrel.

Wait for it... Wait for it... Now!

He crams the vial into the barrel just as it fires. The explosion is much bigger than last time, and it blasts Flicker off sideways almost thirty feet before he remembers that he can still fly... A great cloud of crackling green smoke hangs around the ballista for a few seconds, and when it clears, it reveals that the barrel is kinked near the end at a near ninety-degree angle. It's bent almost straight upward!

Morningstar, standing before Octesian, chuckles with satisfaction. "It doesn't seem like you had much time with that thing," she says with a smile.

Octesian answers defiantly: "Perhaps not. And I wanted to do it myself," he says. "But I think you'll find we distracted your precious Semek long enough. In a few days, when I need a good slave for my retinue, I'll be sure to look you up. Things can't be going well for your side back in the waking world. See you soon." And with that, Octesian vanishes.

Morningstar starts to curse under her breath, but stops as she feels a thrill running through her body. As if from far away she hears a soothing sound of waves breaking on a distant shore, and the faint sounds of gulls crying in salt air. It comes to her heart that her debt for Mrs. Horn's life, made so long ago, has been repaid at last.

But on the heels of this blessed relief comes another message, this one a warning. The voice is that of her Ellish avatar. "You are not finished here," it admonishes. "You have done well, but there will be more battles fought in the Dreamscape before the end. And Octesian will not forget you."

Plane Sailing: Way to go, Flicker! "Disable Device" was never more appropriate! And c'mon Step, my man! Hold your end up!

Piratecat: When Flicker (being played by Aravis's player) said, "I'm going to try to Disable Device on the apparatus!" Sagiro gave us one of those looks. You know, the look that says that a certain plan is ludicrous and almost certainly can't succeed, but he's a good DM so he'll let us try. And in fact, the DC for what Flicker did was extremely difficult; I think it was DC 40. "How can you disable something with no moving parts?" Sagiro must have thought. And then Flicker rolled a 19 followed by a natural 20 on two different Disable Device checks. DC 39 followed by DC 40. Sometimes, luck is on OUR side.

Ancalagon: Great post! But (and curse my feeble memory) who is Semek, again?

Piratecat: At this point, the only time we had ever heard the name of Semek before is the Mirrors of Semek, where Flashing Day takes place [see runs 12 to 14].

Tor Bladebearer: Wow, things are getting quite intense! It's exciting to see the culmination of a lot of these plot threads after sooo long.

But that visit to the Archmagi really scares me... I have sudden visions of Aravis accidentally snuffing out the Archmagi in one mis-step with the Maze... Eagerly awaiting the next update... :-)

Plane Sailing: I was actually there at that point (yes, you can touch me if you like) and I have a vague recollection of an idea flitting across Aravis's mind... Something along the lines of "Hey, I could end up being the most powerful mage in the world if all the top guys... have an... accident..."

Caliber: Mucho cool Sagiro! I especially liked Flicker using Disable Device on the Green Energy Cannon... Very inventive. We still don't know what Dranko regrets though! Get to it, man!

Piratecat: Apparently, I was blaming myself for one person's death that in retrospect I wasn't responsible for – so it's not quite as bad as I thought it was.

But lordy, does it get worse from here.

Dawn: Well, let's have it!

Plane Sailing: And just think – this ISN'T the campaign finale yet !!!

Kosh: *looks back at the archives and twitches* I'd rather not delve through those to figure out what Morningstar specifically had to do to repay the debt for Mrs. Horn's resurrection... Can someone fill me in?

Sagiro: Sure! Here's what Brechen asked of Morningstar:

Already you walk a path not often trod by your sisters. For the soul of your friend, you must promise this before Brechen and before your Goddess Ell:

Your feet shall not stray from the road before you, though the shadows fade and darkness wanes. Some will follow, and others will vilify, and betimes you will be stretched to the breaking point. But even if the future tears you apart, you must stay the course. You will turn your eyes to the light when it comes, and not turn away though it burns you. For you are a child of darkness, and you are a Child of Light. Swear this, for the journey of Isabel Horn's soul, from the Endless Shore to the land of mortals. What say you?

Tor Bladebearer: So does that mean we've finally completed repaying our debt to Brechen?

Abernathy: Shuffled off this mortal coil and went to join the choir eternal.

Tor: Prevented great-great-great-great-great-great-grandad from eating my soul.

Kay: Rescued the Yrimpa.

Dranko: Redemption of Califax.

Morningstar: Defeated Octesian.

Can't recall what Ernie & Flicker had, but I seem to recall that they were fulfilled also...

Piratecat: Ernie's promise was to keep himself safe. Flicker's was to concentrate on rogue instead of fighter, I think. I don't believe either has been fulfilled.

KidCthulhu: Ernie has not yet fulfilled his promise. In fact, he rather gratuitously broke it by getting killed, thus incurring further promises, this time directly to Yondalla.

I had to get the stupid promise. "Ernie, don't you get hurt." It's like telling a kid he can go in swimming but he can't get his feet wet. Grumble, grumble...

Swack-Iron: And speaking of all these debts, whatever happened to Mrs. Horn, anyway? Have we heard what's the latest with her? And since I've been lurking for the last, oh, 50 episodes or so, allow me to again be with the heaping praise and say: Dang, this story hour is still the best!

Sagiro: Regarding the promises for Mrs. Horn's life, only Flicker's and Ernie's remain unfulfilled. They are:

Ernest Roundhill, though your Goddess is not one of the Travelers, still this charge is given with Her assent, and you must swear to it before Brechen and before Her should you wish Isabel Horn's soul to be returned.

Your charge is the least onerous of all given this day, but important nonetheless. 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 that lifeblood 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. What say you?

Flicker Proudfoot, there is a great weight now upon you, and only you may lift it free. It will never be for you to know, if by the action you almost took, you might have prevented the death of your comrade. But by action you might bring her back. Your cowardice is a cancer, and by the exercise of your skill and bravery you will burn it away. From this day forward you will forswear the sword, and use the talents your God gave you to help protect the lives of your comrades. In promising this, you will do your part in bringing back the life of Isabel Horn. What say you?

(In response to his task, Flicker immediately left off accruing fighter levels and has concentrated entirely on improving as a rogue. He has never announced that his task was formally completed, but I don't recall that anyone has asked...)



With Octesian's departure, his minions now quickly start dropping out of *Ava Dormo*, though Ernie makes sure some of them get a painful sendoff. Morningstar thinks herself over to Swan for a quick debriefing. "I need you to stay on guard," she says. "We must return to the battle in the waking world, but Octesian could come back, or more enemies could show up. How many have we lost?"

Swan looks around briefly. "Some scores who had their Dream bodies killed will have returned to their temples," Swan answers. "And... fourteen of our sisters were truly killed, by Octesian. I'm sorry, Morningstar. But they fought bravely, and died in the name of Ell, and for their kingdom." She gestures at the ground, where fourteen corpses lay scattered.

Ernie has flown right up to the stone tower, which seems much as it did when they arrived. Its smooth face is unblemished from being battered by the green bolts from the ballista, and there is still no sign of door or window.

"Time to go?" asks Step, flying up to join Morningstar.

"Time to go," she agrees. "Flicker! Ernie! Grey Wolf! I'm dropping us back out. I'm getting reports from Dranko over the *Rary's* that he and Kibi have found some signs of enemy spellcasters."

"No rest for weary halflings then," mutters Flicker. A moment later the five of them are coming out of their trances back in the *secure shelter*.

"We've got to get moving," says Morningstar. Linked with Aravis via Pewter over the *Rary's*, she asks the wizard how things are going in the Crosser's Maze. *You haven't reported in a while. Everything OK?*

Yes, I think, thinks Aravis. *In fact, I believe I have things under enough control that I could come with you. If I understand things correctly, I should be able to split my consciousness for a few minutes; part of my brain will continue with the Maze, while the rest of me acts as artillery to help the battle. And don't worry... if anything goes awry, I've got a teleport to get me back here.*

Aravis comes out of his trance. "Let's fly."

A moment later the whole lot of them leave the *shelter* behind and beneath them, flying through the increasing haze and drizzle to join Dranko and Kibi. Only Skorg stays behind, "...to... uh... guard the place. For when you get back."



Kibi and Dranko race towards the spot where the spells had flashed, and the lone figure is flying. Dranko just starts to make out the details of the flying person – he sees the green and gold robes of a priest of Pikon – when two globes of energy come streaking out of the mist (from two different directions) toward that person. One is a green acidic-looking blob and the other looks like a ball of lightning. Both strike the Pikanish figure in a torrid explosion of acid and electricity. The targeted figure falls out of the sky and crashes through the trees below.

Dranko and Kibi spot two different enemy spellcasters in the vicinity of the fallen man. One of them lets loose with *magic missiles* – five of them – which strike Kibi from a direction not blocked by his *shield*. Dranko swoops down on the other one and lashes out twice with his whip – only to find that his flying target is also *displaced*. Both attacks miss. Kibi fires *magic missiles* of his own back at his attacker, but the enemy caster's *shield* is properly aligned, and the missiles are harmlessly

deflected. Dranko's caster launches a *fireball* at Kibi, but all of the damage is absorbed by his triggered *energy buffer* (now attuned to fire damage).

The first enemy mage targets Dranko with a *slow* spell, but Dranko shrugs off the effects. Dranko pulls out a sling stone, casts *silence* on it, and flies directly at his attacker. Kibi blasts the second enemy mage with a *coldfire*. Flames burst in midair, followed by a quick cold hiss. The second mage flees from Dranko (earning an opportunistic whipping), and once out of range of the *silence*, casts a spell and vanishes. The first mage flies down beneath the trees, effectively disappearing in the misty rain.

And then Dranko catches a glimpse of red from below, in a patch of forest where the trees are sparse. He does a double take, looks again... yes! It's a woman in red plate mail. Meledien! "It's the bitch!" Dranko cries to Kibi. "Meledien. I'm going after her!"

"We should wait for the others," Kibi cautions. "Those two spellcasters are still around somewhere, and Meledien is no pushover."

But Dranko cannot be dissuaded. "They'll be here in half a minute or less," he says. "I know what I'm doing. Cover me."

Piratecat: Stupid, stupid, stupid. This is the major tactical mistake I was referring to before; if I had stayed on those dratted wizards, the fight might have been much different. Lord knows, it would have occurred with all of my enhancement spells intact! *sob*

Instead, they're going to make life fairly miserable for a lot of people, and I learn the hard way not to underestimate my foes. Man, I hate having to apologize to Morningstar for doing somethin' stupid.

Kibi sighs. The two of them swoop down into the forest, where a furious battle is taking place amidst the larger war. A woman in red armor fights along with several elite soldiers, whose black armor is studded with red-tipped spikes. A number of weaker enemy soldiers have rallied to their leader, and the lot of them are engaged in a frantic melee against a couple of dozen Charagan soldiers. The ground is covered with bodies, and some carrion birds have not waited to start feasting. There is a light mist beneath the treetops, which along with the drizzle is making visibility very poor.

Dranko makes a beeline for the woman he thinks is Meledien – but as he approaches, it comes to his mind that she is taller than he remembers Meledien being, by about six inches. Inwardly he screams in frustration – but Meledien or not, red armor means trouble. Hoping that she can't see him while he's *improvedly invisible*, Dranko takes a moment to position himself for a full attack, and then strikes twice with his whip. He finds the chinks in the armor; the woman turns around to look, but sees nothing. Dranko smiles, even though he's enduring a constant stream of *Don't start attacking... wait for us...* from Morningstar over the *Rary's*. Kibi uses his *staff of conjuring* and starts brewing up a celestial dire bear.

Suddenly Dranko feels a distortion around him, and the spells cast upon his person start to unravel. Someone has cast *dispel magic* on him, and in an eyeblink he is divested of his *improved invisibility, see invisibility, bull's strength, cat's grace, fly, endurance, protection from evil, endure elements, and silence*. Only his *protection from elements: electricity* remains intact.

If you had just waited, thinks Morningstar.

The last thing I need right now is a Rary's I-Told-You-So, thinks Dranko.

The woman spots Dranko descending down to ground level and strides over to him. She has the same black coruscating long-sword that seems to be standard issue for these red-armored types, and she opens up a gash in Dranko's side with it. A crimson helmet hides her face, but Dranko hears a feminine chuckle from inside. It doesn't sound like Meledien either... damn!

A huge white-glowing bear appears right next to the woman. She whips around just in time get a good look at its claws as it mauls her, rending gashes into the armor with its sharp claws. But alas, even as it deals its damage, its claws and arms and body come into contact with the armor. There is a horrible hissing sound and the bear falls backward in surprised agony. It slumps to the ground, unconscious. At almost the same instant, a number of thick rubbery tentacles erupt from the forest floor some 40 feet away, where many of the enemy soldiers had been gathered. Kibi looks on with approval as his *Evard's black tentacles* start grappling the hapless footmen.

Dranko lashes out with his whip, striking damaging blows two more times on the woman. She turns to face him, sword raised. Dranko gestures hopefully at the bear. "Don't you think that's a better target? It's still breathing."

"So are you," she points out. Her sword lashes out in a flurry of slashes, two of which open new gaping wounds on Dranko's body. "But not for much longer," she adds.

A crackling orb of electricity comes flying from the trees and slams into Dranko only seconds after the woman's sword. The damage is all absorbed, and Dranko prays silent thanks to Delioch that at least his *protection* spell survived the earlier dispelling. He could very well be dead otherwise.

And just as Dranko starts a desperate retreat away from his attacker, at last the remainder of the Company arrive, and the battle is joined in earnest.

The Battle of Verdshane, Part II

Run #138 – ?November, 2002

“Watch out!” cries Kibi to the new arrivals. “There are two evil wizards flying around.” Aravis immediately pegs the red-armored woman with a *magic missile*, and spends a few seconds scanning the area for the mages without success. Grey Wolf casts *spectral hand* from a scroll and also looks around for the hidden casters, but he doesn’t see them either.

Morningstar flies to Dranko and reads a *heal* spell off a scroll; Dranko’s many and serious injuries (88 hp worth!) are instantly cured. The withering look she gives him is almost enough to open the wounds up again. Dranko gulps down a *fly* potion, and both of them join in the hide-and-seek game, looking for those mages.

Hey! There’s one! Well, no one actually sees her, but a *fireball* pellet comes streaking out of the mist and explodes around Dranko, Aravis and Morningstar. All of them manage to shield themselves from at least some of the blast, and Dranko uses his quick reflexes to avoid the damage altogether. Several nearby soldiers, mostly Charagan but with a couple of Naradawk’s, are caught full in the fiery blast and incinerated. But when members of the Company look in the direction from whence came the fireball, they see nothing. “She must be invisible!” shouts Dranko. “And I’ve lost my spell to see them! Kibi, I need another *see invisibility*!”

Another spell comes hurtling from the mist, from a different direction. A massive *acid orb* catches Grey Wolf directly in the chest and splashes up into his face. He smells the foul odour of his own dissolving flesh and screams in pain. Kibi, who has *see invisibility* cast upon himself, catches a quick glimpse of the mage vanishing into the mist, but before he can pursue, the red-armored woman flies up (yikes!) and over towards him, slashing him with her wicked blade. He flies away from her toward Dranko, and gets hit with a second sword swing, but he makes it over to the half-orc and casts *see invisibility*.

Flicker lands behind one of the elite warriors, who is cutting his way through some ill-trained Charagan farmer conscripts. Using his allies to flank, he delivers a punishing sneak attack, sending the enemy reeling. Ernie drinks a *haste* potion, and flies directly toward the red-armored foe. Step lays into another one of the elite minions, almost knocking him out with a single swing of his flaming greatsword. And then everyone in the immediate vicinity feels the soothing healing magic of a *healing circle* from Morningstar. Aaaaah.

Aravis drinks a potion of *see invisibility*, further increasing the likelihood that someone will spot one of those damn enemy mages. But they are staying out of sight, using the trees, rain and fog to great advantage. Dranko flies to Grey Wolf and heals much of the acid damage.

Another *fireball* pellet comes streaking out of the fog, but this one strikes a tree branch and explodes harmlessly, except perhaps from the tree’s point of view. Dranko actually sees the caster clearly for a moment, but to his great frustration she immediately flies back into the forest and out of sight. The red-armored warrior sees Ernie and launches contemptuous swings at him, and is dismayed that only one of her blows strikes true, the others deflected by his plate mail. Still, as single hits go, it’s a powerful shot, and Ernie winces in pain. Kibi, without many spells left, grabs Aravis’s *wand of magic missiles*, and drinks a potion of *cure serious wounds*.

Flicker spends a round looking everywhere for signs of the enemy wizards, to no avail. Dranko casts *bless*, and he manages to spot one of the wizards soon after. He watches as she casts *web* among the tree branches, catching Morningstar and Ernie inside. Dranko points at the wizard and shouts, “There she is!” Morningstar, wearing a *ring of freedom of movement*, slides effortlessly out of the webbing and moves to pursue. Kibi takes off with Morningstar, drinking a potion of *haste* as he goes. Flicker launches an attack on the red-armored warrior but cannot penetrate the armor.

The red-armored woman finds herself a mere five feet away from One Certain Step; she shifts position, her longsword flashes, and Step is badly diced by three vicious cuts. Ernie, who knows from recent experience where the weak points are in the red enemy armor, smiles as he sees an opening in the knee joint. Two critical hits later, blood is pouring down the left leg of the armor and dripping onto the leaves below.

KidCthulhu: I’m thinking about creating a new feat for Ernie called ‘Sunder Kneecap.’ When will those red-armoured guys learn not to dismiss the halfling? Although it’s probably just as well for him they do. They can deal out a heap o’ damage.

Step looks like he’s also going to move in, but Ernie sees that he looks near to death from his injuries. “Step!” he practically screams. “Heal yourself first!” One Certain Step withdraws and uses his *wand of cure serious wounds*, grumbling.

Grey Wolf joins in the hunt for the enemy mage. Aravis flies low to get an angle where he can cast *flaming sphere* to burn away the webs that have entrapped Ernie. He catches a glimpse of an enemy soldier running up to him and swinging, but suddenly Attrijs is there, interposing himself in front of the blade. A slice from one of the woman's elite minions opens up a wound on the bodyguard's chest. Aravis casts his spell and torches the webs.

Dranko moves to where he's flanking the red-armored woman with Flicker, but he too can't get past the armor. She has no such trouble with him. A furious flurry of cuts with the black sword follows, and Dranko's blood is all over the place. If not for Morningstar's *heal* scroll, Dranko would be dead almost twice over by now!

Morningstar finally gets the enemy wizard in her sights, cuts her off, and throws down a *flame strike* upon her. Kibi is following close behind the quarry, and fires off two volleys of *magic missiles* from Aravis's wand. *WHAM! WHAM WHAM WHAM. WHAM WHAM!* The mage tumbles out of the air and lands with a heavy thud, dead or unconscious, at the base of a tree.

Flicker again attacks the red-armored woman from a flanking position, and hits with a massively damaging sneak attack (which would have missed if not for Dranko's *bless*). Dranko, sensing the foe may be about to fall, takes the opportunity to taunt. "This is our world," he says harshly. "You're not wanted here."

"It was ours before it was yours," she retorts.

Dranko is actually taken aback. "Er... it was?"

Ernie declines to partake in the discussion, preferring to let *Beryn Sur* do the talking. Two more slashes, and the foe is clearly starting to wobble.

Flicker pipes up. "What's your name?"

From the woman's helmet: "Why do you care?"

"We like to keep track of who we kill," says Flicker.

"F*ck you," says the woman.

"That's a nasty name," says Flicker.

Grey Wolf casts *true strike*, flies in, and smacks the woman with *Bostock*. *Good!* says the sword. *You must wield me at every opportunity!*

LightPhoenix: This whole exchange is just golden. That's a nasty name indeed.

Caliber: I know *Bostock* is supposed to gain powers as it is used, but has this ever occurred in game?

wolf96: Yes, it has. I don't remember exactly what it gained – I'm thinking it went from +1 to +2 – but it was during the time when they were hunting orcs with the dwarven guides, trying to expose the red-armored foe that was rallying the armies of humanoids.

KidCthulhu: Caliber, we don't know what *Bostock* does. All we know is it creeps the hell out of the rest of the party. We're pretty sure the blade is evil. If you use it in your campaign, make sure to use the little whispery voice. Guaranteed to produce interparty hijinks!

Sagiro: Regarding *Bostock*: it started out as a +1 longsword that let the wielder not have to breathe. It's "upgraded" itself twice during play (as Grey Wolf uses it more), and now it's a +3 keen longsword. Despite the fact that it doesn't detect as evil, the entire party is freaked out about it.

Aravis looks around for a likely place to send his *flaming sphere*, but suddenly there is a twinge in his mind, from the aspect of his consciousness that has been gathering energy in the Crosser's Maze. He has gathered enough life energy to unmake the space-time around the *gate*! Without uttering a word, he grabs Attrijs and Portia and *teleports* back to the *secure shelter*.

Skorg looks up. "How are things..."

"Don't let anyone in," Aravis interrupts. "I'm going to do something drastic. I hope it works."

He sits on a bunk and drops his whole mind into the Maze.



Dranko strikes twice at his foe but the armor turns his whip. But Morningstar comes streaking in, finds the only available opening at the mostly surrounded warrior, and swings her morningstar... crunch! The red armor splits under the force of the blow. The woman's head lolls back, and the whole body drops out of the air. Grey Wolf just manages to avoid having the deadly armor land on him.

Flicker swoops down, and just to be sure the foe is dead, he sticks his short sword into the visor of the red helmet... and stirs. The others look away in disgust. Kibi flies down to the fallen mage and delivers a less messy *coup de grace*.

Then the forest shudders, and time seems to stand still.

Aravis has gathered into himself a great store of energy, along with the confidence that the local fabric of existence will stand up to the punishment he's about to inflict upon it. He reaches out with his mind, remembering all that King Vhadish XXIII taught him...
...and he blows apart the planar gate, the one thing that has protected Charagan from Naradawk Skewn for the past nine hundred years.

A wind begins to blow through the trees, a wind that starts in the very center of the Mud Zone and emanates outward in all directions. Thunder cracks overhead, waves of sound that roll outward as if riding the wind. The gusts pick up intensity, becoming a gale in a matter of seconds, and the thunder does not abate. A white light tinged with orange shines out from the *gate* like a small sun, and the forest is illuminated as it has never been in all its centuries of growth. All around the battlefield a hundred different melees slow to a halt, as soldiers stop fighting to pause and wonder. Is this the end of the world?

Aravis wastes no time. Every second is precious, and every second, while the opening between Volpos and Abernia gapes, more soldiers are arriving. He can see them, dozens, hundreds of points of light, crossing over in a constant stream.

He starts to weave life-force into new, whole fabric, using the Crosser's Maze to focus the power towards the opening, but it doesn't take long for him to realize that it won't be enough. Each individual soldier would be drained to death in the first few seconds of the endeavor, and he's not even sure that the other members of the Company could supply the raw power he needs.

There is only one remaining chance. With the speed of thought he re-centers his consciousness at the entrance to the Archmagi's demiplane and sticks his head through. The Archmagi are seated in their chairs, already looking expectantly at the entrance. The energy pattern that had been the center of their lives for so long is gone.

"I need you," Aravis says simply.

"We have prepared for this need," says Salk. "Do what you must."

Aravis reaches out and begins to draw life energy from the Archmagi.

It's nearly more than he can control. The demiplane, he realizes, was already created to focus and magnify outgoing magical energies. And these old wizards, the greatest of fifty generations, are the source of a huge store of energy. Where other people provided thin threads of life-force, the torrent Aravis draws from the demiplane is like a thick writhing cable of energy that almost tears his mind apart. He barely manages to focus it, but when he does, he knows – knows! – that he can succeed.

Quickly he funnels that energy through various aspects of the Crosser's Maze, using methods and skills learned under Vhadish. He directs the focused power at the gaping hole where once the *gate* had been, and quickly forms a thin layer across it like a skin. The soldiers from Volpos start to slow down in their crossing, and Aravis knows they now must feel that making the plane-to-plane journey is like wading through thick syrup.

The energy stream stays solid, and he strengthens his newly created piece of space-time. It grows thicker and more substantial, and Aravis exults as he realizes the enemy soldiers are unable to make the crossing. But his mind is growing weary beneath the strain, and suddenly something large and powerful attempts to pass into Abernia. Aravis loses focus, and for an agonizing moment he loses control of the energy stream. It starts to overwhelm his mind, and his consciousness begins to slip away, carried on a massive flood. Whatever the mighty creature is, it passes through his nascent creation and into Abernia!

Desperate, Aravis draws on every last reserve of mental control. He seizes the energy cable like a man wrestling with a mighty python, and forces its focus back to the vital task. Power pours from the demiplane like a raging river, and all of it is now translating directly into solid space-time.

Aravis has lost all notion of time – all he knows is that no more soldiers can make the crossing, and that he is very close to completion. The area around where the *gate* once stood is almost indistinguishable from the space-time around it. Just a few more... seconds? Hours? He doesn't know. He only knows the agony of burning energy coursing through his mind.

Something approaches the place where the *gate* had been. Whatever it was that crossed over during his moment of weakness, that was as nothing compared to this. A being powerful beyond comprehension has reached Aravis's creation. It pushes.

Aravis pushes back. He allows the energy to flow even more freely, though he knows it is damaging his mind. He can almost taste the fury of this being that struggles to breach the unexpected barrier between Volpos and Abernia. The fabric of the multiverse bends beneath the might of this creature.

It bends...

stretches...

buckles...

...but it does not break!

The mighty being backs away and out of sight of the Maze, defeated. The boundary between Volpos and Abernia is smooth and unbroken, with no sign that a *gate* ever existed to facilitate the crossing.

Exhausted, Aravis stops drawing energy from the demiplane. In the Maze there is silence; the two planar spheres no longer have congress. Aravis slowly turns his focus towards the room with the Archmagi, fearing to look inside.

The voices there, too, are silent.



In the forest of Verdshane, thousands of soldiers have covered their eyes to the light and are hunched against the hurricane winds. Saplings bend and break before the onslaught. Thunder rolls loud and unceasing. The world shakes, its very bones rattling.

The winds suddenly die down, dropping back to a light breeze over just a few seconds. The blinding light goes out a moment later, though a glowing white nimbus remains on objects for a few seconds afterward, outlining every leaf on every tree in a glowing aura. Some seconds later, that too fades away. The last peals of thunder echo through the trees.

For a time following, every combatant for a mile around stands in awe and confusion, forgetting to fight.

Then: *Are... are you there?*

It is a panicked voice, squawking over the *Rary's telepathic bond*. Is that Corporal Edridge?

We're here, thinks Morningstar. *What's wrong?*

I can see it, babbles Edridge. *I'm near the Mud Zone, and it's... I think... it's a dragon!*

Caliber: Wow, awesome post! I bet no one was looking forward to fighting a dragon after all the other problems they've had. Poor archmages, though.

Kosh: Absolutely amazing...

wolff96: Incredible... A hideous fight, hide-and-seek with mages, life-drain from Aravis unmaking the gate... And NOW a dragon.

My hat is off to you, Sagiro... You really ARE a rat bastard DM.

Kid Charlemagne: I had this momentary image of the archmages all drained of their experience and reduced to the state of new-born babies... leaving the Company to raise a handful of toddlers with immense magical potential...

Dawn: Great update. Excellent storytelling for Aravis's work in the Maze.



Aravis approaches the demiplane, dreading what he might see inside. At first his worst fears seem realized; the Archmagi are sprawled out of their chairs, lying motionless on the floor. Aravis moves inside and looks closely at Ozilinsh. He's breathing! He checks two of the others, and they too are alive, albeit unconscious. Perhaps he should...

Over the *Rary's telepathic bond*: *I think... it's a dragon!*

Ah, no rest for the weary. Aravis leaves the Archmagi to recover on their own, and drags his mind out of the Maze. He's not thinking clearly, and he knows he's not thinking clearly, but he doesn't care – his judgement isn't what it should be, either. His brain hurts.

Attrius and Portia watch anxiously as Aravis stands up suddenly, stumbles, sits down again, stands up a second time. “Are you all right, sir?” asks Attrius. “What happened?”

“I think I did it,” Aravis says groggily. “But we’re not done yet. There’s a dragon out there for us to fight. Come on!”

“I’ll stay here and guard the...” says Skorg, but before he can even finish the other three have flown out of the *secure shelter* and into the damp sky.



Kay and her contingent of five Yrimpa were ordered to patrol the skies above the Mud Zone and surrounding forest. Their directives: make periodic checks of the “key room” which could be used by the enemy to release the monsters from their hanging boxes above Kinnet Gorge; and to be on the lookout for groups of flying enemies, dealing with them as necessary. It is not long after the bulk of the enemy army arrives that this second condition is violently met.

Kay spots a flock of almost fifty flying creatures, above and several hundred yards east of the Mud Zone. They resemble small dragons – maybe they are wyverns? – and have spiked tufts at the ends of their tails. These creatures are swooping down into clearings where fighting is taking place, and firing off volleys of tail spikes into Kingdom soldiers. Their spikes grow back a few seconds later, and they dive-bomb again. They also (again, every few rounds) breathe jets of hot steam at their foes.

When she reaches them to engage, these creatures have already decimated dozens of Kingdom soldiers; the forest is sparser there, and the good guys are having a tough time finding adequate cover. And there are enough enemy soldiers in the area that the good guys cannot simply flee willy-nilly.

The battle against the drakes is long and difficult, a spectacular battle that ranges far and wide over trees and clearings, sometimes down near the ground, sometimes hundreds of feet in the air. For about half a minute Kay receives supporting arrow fire from friendly ground troops, until enemy soldiers engage them in melee. The whole fight takes as long as several ordinary battles often do.

In the end, Kay and the Yrimpa prevail. Kay has used her *control winds* power to blast many of them down into the ground, where kingdom foot soldiers hacked them up with swords. She has used her *whirlwind* power when several of the creatures tried to surround her in the air and attack with claws and teeth. She has used the *cure moderate wounds* power of her magical warhammer as well as both of her *cure light wounds* spells, and still by the time the last of the creatures is dispatched, she looks like a human pincushion. One Yrimpa has been slain, shredded by a concentrated volley of tail spikes. Another is barely conscious, and all of them, including Kay, are badly wounded.

Kay and the four surviving Yrimpa (and Oa-Lyanna, who had not “disengaged” from Kay’s body) find their way to a healing tent, where clerics of Delioch manage to heal them somewhat back to health. As the last Yrimpa is being healed, there is a sudden blast of thunder from the direction of the Mud Zone. Wind begins to blow through the forest from that same direction, increasing until it’s a steady fifty miles per hour, and then that is followed by a shockwave of white energy that sweeps through the trees, leaving a glowing white outline on every leaf and branch.

There is a moment of eerie silence after that, as if all the fighting has stopped to wonder at this new phenomenon. Then she hears a sound of concentrated shouting coming from the Mud Zone, followed by a distant roar. As healed as they are going to get, Kay and her air spirits fly toward the Mud Zone to investigate...



“A dragon!” says Dranko, disgusted. “Don’t we get a break sometime around now?”

“We cannot just leave this woman’s body here,” says Morningstar. “I want to make sure I have the chance to question it later.”

They quickly devise a plan. Ernie flies through the forest away from the Mud Zone for about a hundred yards, where the fighting is less thick. He finds a small clearing, notes its location, and flies back. Meanwhile, the others rig a quick makeshift rope harness around the red-armored woman’s body, being careful not to touch the armor itself.

Ernie returns and explains to the others where the clearing is. Then he grabs the harness and *dimension doors* the body back to the clearing while the rest of the group fly there. Once they’re all in the clearing, Grey Wolf casts a *rope trick*. While most of the Company start hauling the body up into the extradimensional pocket, Dranko spots a small melee about thirty yards away and flies over. To his satisfaction, two Kingdom soldiers have just finished off one of Naradawk’s men, but one of the good guys has fallen over. Dranko heals them both before addressing the one who is still standing...



His name was **Thomas**, and he was a farmer, and that was that. He was a strong man, yes, but not young, not particularly brave, and he’d never picked up a sword in his life. He liked carrots. They were his favorite, and his most successful crop.

Then the war happened, some strange battle in a far-off part of the kingdom. And word soon came that if you had someone you could leave behind to look after your farm, you had to go fight. Thomas was a good man, and knew the law, and did what he had to do. He left the farm to his wife and his daughters, and three weeks later he was on the Balani Peninsula, digging trenches and cooking meals and (to his shame, he felt) hoping he would never have to kill anyone.

To his great relief Thomas was never asked to engage in battle, though once he was sent out with a force of fifteen to make sure a particular hilltop was clear, and they spotted an enemy unit of over two hundred foot soldiers. They hid.

Then one day he heard that the Delfirians, those Fire God worshippers, were fleeing back to where they came from. He knew then that he could go back to his farm and his family and take up his hoe again.

But then word came again of another battle, this one not so far down the road from his farm near Minok. Again he was chosen, and soon was on a ship back to Harkran. This time the invaders were going to attack in the middle of the Greatwood, near that creepy village of Verdshane, the one with all the ruins. He had visited there one time, as a child. He hated it.

For weeks they had built up defenses, mostly chopping down trees. He got the general idea that the enemy was just going to sort of appear by some sort of magic, right in the middle of the forest. So everyone was basically hacking down trees, while a bunch of engineer-type fellows worked out how to divert some of the river into the clearing they were making. That way, when the bad guys appeared, they'd be up to their ankles in mud, and the good guys could just shoot 'em while they were stuck.

He couldn't remember when the crazy thunder had started, and the weird flashing lights. Everyone was nervous, even the real soldiers. They had offered him a sword, but he felt more comfortable with a pitchfork. He was stationed with a group of about twenty soldiers, some of them real fighting men and others who were conscripts like him. His leather armor didn't fit so well, but he was glad to have it. They were stationed a ways into the forest, in case any of the bad guys got out of that muddy stuff.

This morning all hell had broken loose. It was just like they said – enemy soldiers just started poppin' up all over the damn place. The man in charge of his group, an officer named **Allin**, had kept them together pretty well. They spotted a few bad guys in ones and twos in the woods, and finished 'em off as a group. Gods, though, some of them enemy fighters were good. Even outnumbered, one of them had chopped up two of his group.

Then, finally, a knot of about eight bad guys just kinda appeared, no flash, no sound, no nothin'. Everything became chaos. Allin got shot with a crossbow bolt right through his helmet. A big battle was like nothin' he had dreamt about – it was jus' all chaos and jabbing and slashing and screaming and running. He thought he might have got one of the bastards with his pitchfork, but he wasn't sure. Someone had nicked him with a sword on his shoulder, but not so bad, really. And then he realized that they had all gotten separated, and it was just he and one of his buddies, **Rogen**, another normal guy who they had given a weapon to, facing down one mean-looking fellow in fancy black armor.

But thank Pikon, the bad guy was pretty hurt already, and the two of them tried gettin' one of them on either side of the guy, like Allin had taught them. The bugger got Rogen pretty good, but Thomas spotted an opening and jammed his pitchfork into a gap in the bad guy's neck armor. Blood started sprayin' everywhere and the guy fell over, grabbing his throat.

Rogen fell over too. Blood was pourin' out of the poor fellow, and Thomas was no healer. Damn it all! Rogen was a good man, and didn't deserve to die like this. Thomas watched helplessly as his friend's lifeblood poured out onto the matted grass.

Then things got weird.

This hideous looking guy who mighta' been some kind of monster (he had big ol' lower teeth like tusks) came flyin' – no, literally, flyin' – out of the trees. He was wearin' an official fancy uniform, though, and had a holy symbol of Delioch the Healing Hand around his neck. This guy, he landed, and Thomas pointed to Rogen, and the new guy mumbled some words and cast a healing spell, and Rogen's bleeding stopped and he opened his eyes and you could tell he didn't understand what was happening.

Then the healer did the same for Thomas, even though he wasn't as badly hurt. He had a gravelly voice, and he said, "What's your name, soldier?"

"Thomas, sir."

"Where you from, Thomas?"

"Minok, sir. Leastaways, my farm is just outside the city there."

"I have a job for you, Thomas. It's very important, and it doesn't involve any fighting."

"I'm all for that, sir."

The new guy with the tusks picked up Thomas and flew them both back a ways, where there was the most crazy collection of people you could ever think to see. Two of 'em were little guys, halflings, and one of 'em was in this little suit of plate mail from head to toe. There was a tall woman with a pale face wearin' all black, and a short guy in shiny plate mail holding a big honkin' sword that was on fire, and, no kiddin', a dwarf with a pile of rocks that was followin' him around like it was alive. Then another guy's head appears up in the air, just his head, upside down. "The body's all set up here," said the head. Mean-lookin' guy, too.

"Thomas," said the guy with the tusks. "Here's your job. Up there..." he pointed to the guy with the head, "is a hidden invisible room. There's a dead body up there, of an enemy soldier who we killed. We want you to climb up this rope into the invisible room, and guard that body. Whatever you do, don't touch the red armor! It will kill you if you touch it, understand?" Thomas didn't understand any of the rest of it, but that much was clear enough. Don't touch the armor.

"Once you're up there, pull up the rope after yourself. No one will see you, or be able to reach you. Every so often, stick your head out just a little bit, and if we've come back, lower the rope."

"I think I got that," said Thomas. If this wasn't the strangest moment of his life, nothing was.

So Thomas climbed up the rope, and found himself in a plain little room made out of... well, made out of nothin' as near as he could tell, and in the corner was a corpse in red armor, just like the tusked guy said. Thomas pulled up the rope while the strange folk all started flyin' away, and then he moved to the corner opposite the dead body and sat down, scratching his head.

Thomas had often dreamt of what true battle would be like, in those nights on the Balani Peninsula. He had heard stories from the veterans, tales of horror, tales of glory, tales of pain and victory and blood and death.

He'd never heard *anything* like the story he was in just now.



(Particular thanks to Piratecat, who took round-by-round notes of the battle against the dragon...)

The Company are now converging on the Mud Zone from several directions. In the main group, Dranko casts *prayer* in anticipation of a battle. The drizzle has stopped and somewhere above the haze the sun has come out; it is rapidly burning away the mist. From somewhere ahead comes the sound of crackling electricity, followed by a tremendous bestial roar. Step gulps down a *haste* potion on the fly.

The dragon comes into view, a massive shape silhouetted behind mist being roiled by monstrous wings. The still *hasted* Grey Wolf doesn't waste any time – he launches two *fireballs* through the haze at the dragon. The fiery explosions burn away much of the remaining haze in the area, and reveal the monster itself more clearly.

Its body is a dull yellow color, and bigger than a large wagon. Huge leathery wings sprout from its back, and each of its four claws has talons like daggers. Its maw is like a thicket of swords. Around its neck is a huge red iron collar, and in its eyes – madness. From what little the Company know about dragons they have expected a great intelligence, but this one looks more rabid than cunning. A white froth is visible all around its gaping mouth.

But insane or not, it still emanates a tremendous wave of fear. While the Company are not much affected, below on the ground, hundreds of soldiers on both sides are slogging as fast as they possibly can through the mud, fleeing in terror, thinking of nothing save putting as much distance as they can between themselves and the dragon above.

A humanoid form comes flying in from the other side and slashes at the dragon's body, but the Company cannot tell who it is. The dragon swoops up and around, turning on the arriving Company, and breathes a wide, hissing cone of electricity that catches Flicker, Dranko, Ernie and Grey Wolf. The two rogues dodge gracefully and emerge unburned, but Ernie cannot avoid the lightning completely, and Grey Wolf takes the full brunt.

Dranko decides to try getting onto the dragon's back where (in theory) he would be less vulnerable to its claws and teeth. He swoops in toward the creature's back as it flies, but misjudges its speed and direction and bounces violently off its scaly hide.

Another humanoid figure appears, floating in the air nearby. It is Matthias, High Priest of Pikon, who the Company thought had been killed by the enemy invisible mages. Matthias gestures grandly, and in a booming voice intones: "You shall have no victory here, foul lizard of Naradawk! I shall smite you down with holy wrath!" The dragon turns its neck to glance at Matthias, but after a second it turns away, focusing on the Company again. Matthias continues to bellow threats.

Kibi fires off *magic missiles* which bounce harmlessly off the glistening dragon scales. Then the paladin of Pikon, Glade, flies in from the side to attack with her scythe. She is struck hard by a claw as she closes, but recovers, swings her weapon, and scores a gash across its foreleg. Ernie follows, but misses with a swing from *Beryn Sur*.

Kay arrives from above, trailed by her four Yrimpa warriors, and with her magical warhammer in one hand and her magical dagger in the other. She flies down ready to swing but her arm is clipped hard by the dragon's flapping wing. She loses her grip on the hammer, and it goes spiraling down into the mud. Her dagger strike is more successful, plunging in between scales. Three of the Yrimpa close to try bludgeoning the dragon, while the fourth flies down to retrieve Kay's weapon. Morningstar strikes the dragon with a *searing darkness*, but cannot tell if the beast is damaged. Step flies in and swings his greatsword, but it turns harmlessly against the dragon's hide.

Aravis, Attrius and Portia finally reach the battle, but they are greeted rudely by a *cone of cold* that seems to come from nowhere. The invisible mage who escaped earlier has returned at a most inopportune moment. Aravis and Portia survive the blast fairly well, but Attrius is badly frozen. Aravis orders Attrius to go get healing from Morningstar; the bodyguard reluctantly agrees.

The Kingdom wizard Fulton arrives, and peppers the dragon with *magic missiles*. Flicker decides that this would be a good time to try his *ring of blinking*, which (out of fear) he has not used for quite some time. As he starts to blink in and out of the Ethereal plane, he sees in the distance the black ethereal leeches that attacked him previously. They don't seem immediately interested in him, so he keeps the ring on and heads toward the dragon.

Aravis, fully loaded with spells and *hasted*, unleashes a pair of *sonic bolts* at the dragon. Everyone in the vicinity winces at the deafening sound, and the dragon roars in pain. Its eyes roll madly in its head and foamy spittle sprays from around its maw.

KidCthulhu: ... Sagiro has indeed grown a long furry nose, a naked pink tail, and his parentage is greatly in question. The man is a rat bastard, not that this was ever in doubt.

Remember the dragon? Did you all experience the same thrill of fear we did when we heard there was a dragon? Well, after what he did to us in last night's session, we long for the idyllic days of fighting dragons...

Kibi, still under the effect of a *see invisibility*, spots the enemy spellcaster flying in for another attack. He flies himself in that direction, makes his best judgement concerning his target's vector, and casts a spherical *wall of force* in mid-air. Success! The flying sorceress flies smack into the *wall of force* and finds herself trapped in a floating magical bubble.

Ernie retreats and heals himself with a wand of *cure serious wounds*. Grey Wolf flies around to put the force sphere between himself and the dragon, and then activates his *Mordenkainen's cube* to cast *Mordenkainen's lucubration*, recalling a *haste* to replace the one that just expired. Kibi watches with dismay as his trapped mage casts a spell and disappears. He can still *see invisibility*, so he assumes she has *teleported* or *dimension doored* out.

Finally the last combatant comes flying in to join the battle; it's Royce, the leader of Fortune's Children. Those in the Company who see him notice immediately that none of his adventuring group are with him. Royce flies in, swings his flail harmlessly at the dragon, and retreats. One Certain Step flies in from the other direction and has more success, striking twice with his greatsword and opening bleeding gashes in the dragon's flank. The dragon flies upward, twists its body, and breathes another huge cone of electricity, engulfing Step and several others.

The dragon is now in the center of a swarm of attackers – all of the surviving Charagan heroes are flying around the beast like a cloud of insects. Kay flies in and strikes again with her dagger, while her Yrimpa buffet the monster with raw elemental force. Dranko takes advantage of his flanking position to whip the great lizard with pinpoint accuracy, tearing off scales from its neck. The wizard Fulton fires another volley of *magic missiles*. And the flickering Flicker swoops in to attack with his shortsword.

The dragon quickly twists around and chomps down on the approaching halfling, snatching him right out of the air in its jaws. Only the *ring of blinking* saves Flicker's life. The dragon finds itself chewing on something that keeps disappearing and reappearing in its mouth, so it can't quite get a good bite down on the morsel.

At least Flicker's arms are free. Wincing in pain, he digs around in his pack for a weapon long hoarded – a *globe of acid fog*. He smashes it against one of the dragon's teeth, and suddenly a quickly expanding cloud of solid green vapor envelopes the dragon along with Kay and Dranko. Aravis decides to fire off spells again anyway. (Something in the back of his mind warns that he might hurt his friends. It stays there.) Two more *sonic bolts* are sent blasting into the fog towards where the dragon just was. Dranko is hit by one and Kay by the other, but both also strike the dragon, which howls in agony.

Kibi starts turning in place, watching, waiting for the enemy mage to rejoin the fight. There is an unexpected calm in the battle, a few seconds where everyone stops, watching the roiling green cloud, waiting for something to happen. Then the dragon flaps its way out of the top of the acidic fog, its scales scorched and smoking. Flicker (smoking somewhat less due to his resistant armor) is still in its jaws, looking none too happy. Everytime he blinks he tries to fly out of its mouth, but he never quite makes it, and the dragon keeps shifting him around between its jaws.

Morningstar flies around the acid cloud, endures a raking claw from the dragon, and heads right to its mouth. She heals Flicker. Looking up into its insane eyes and glistening fangs, she says out loud, "Well, this is one of the dumber positions I've been in."

"And you're not even married to Dranko yet," calls back Ernie, completely unaware that he might be making an off-color joke.

Step flies in next to Morningstar and also heals the grateful Flicker. The child wizard Wellington launches a *fireball* at the back half of the dragon, but fails to penetrate its natural resistance to magic. Glade slashes again with her scythe but cannot pierce the scales. Kay, annoyed with the giant cloud of acidic fog that's now cluttering the battlefield, takes out her *wind fan* and calls up a *gust of wind*. Within a few seconds the billowing vapors are dispersed and blown away. Once again everyone has a clear view of the madly flapping dragon, Flicker in its teeth.

Dranko uses his healing wand on himself, needing it badly after getting struck full-on by Aravis's *sonic bolt*. Fulton casts a *slow* spell at the dragon that has no effect. Alas, that failed spell is his last act on Abernia. The invisible enemy spellcaster has returned, with an *acid orb* fired straight into Fulton's chest. Horribly burned, the wizard's body tumbles out of the sky.

Aravis yells to the kid Wellington. “Can you see the wizard? Blast it!”

“I can’t see anything!” shouts back Wellington. “It must be invisible.”

Aravis curses, but it turns out well. Kibi does spot their invisible foe, and nails her with a *glitterdust*. “Hellooooo, target!” says Grey Wolf. He shoots off two *ice knives* at the enemy mage.

Lord Pendragon: I've gotta know... Was this an in-game comment? I was lucky I wasn't sipping my soda when I read that.

Sagiro: Yup, that was a direct quote from Grey Wolf's player. Piratecat wrote it down specifically on his round-by-round writeup, it was so funny.

Like Dranko before him, Ernie gets it into his head to get onto the dragon's back, but in preparation he drinks a potion of *spider climb* first. The dragon, badly wounded and sensing its peril despite its madness, flies straight up, taking Flicker with it. Ernie shouts out, “Dragon-back express leaves any time now... who’s coming?” Morningstar flies over to him. Dranko heals Kay before she flies up in pursuit, and then flies himself over to join Ernie and Morningstar.

And that puts them in a perfectly targetable cluster. The glittering mage casts *cone of cold*, catching the three clerics, as well as Glade. Miraculously all of them survive, though Ernie is badly frozen.

Aravis grins, and almost giggles. Two can play at that game! He finds an angle that won’t catch any of his friends, and casts his own *cone of cold*. The enemy caster can’t get out of the way, has no resistance, and takes the full frozen blast. Another body falls out of the sky.

Kibi pulls out a *fireball* scroll and launches the spell at the dragon. It explodes harmlessly, foiled by its spell resistance.

“Here we go!” says Ernie. He grabs Morningstar and Dranko and casts *dimension door*. All three clerics are suddenly teetering precipitously on the dragon’s back. Alas, it turns out not to matter. Grey Wolf launches two more *fireballs* from far below, and both of them penetrate the dragon’s resistance. The dragon lets loose one last cry of pain before it blacks out, and begins to drop towards the ground far below. Unfortunately, one of Grey Wolf’s *fireballs* also catches the badly wounded Ernie, and he drops unconscious, still stuck to the dragon’s back as it starts to fall. Morningstar makes a desperate grab, and by flying upward while holding onto the halfling, manages to peel Ernie away before he is borne downward.

Flicker is still in its mouth. “Heeeeeeeelp!”

Quick as lightning, Dranko uncurls his whip and lashes downward. All of his training as a lasher comes to the fore in this one crucial moment; the end of the whip curls around Flicker’s waist. The gods must be with him as well, because Flicker doesn’t blink out in those few critical seconds. Dranko pulls hard, and Flicker is roughly torn out of the dead dragon’s slackened jaws.

The dragon’s body turns end over end as it completes its fall, down, down...

Squelch!

The body of the beast sinks deep, deep into the mud.



Lord Pendragon: Awesome. Simply awesome.

Duncan Haldane: Wow, that was just incredible...

Krellic: Amazing battle, must have been a bugger to run!

shilsen: Awesome combat description!

Is it just me, or is Thomas’s story one of the coolest NPC cameos ever? It’s great to see the heroes and war and magic which we take for granted in D&D from the POV of the average guy.

Vymair: I too loved Thomas’s cameo. It’s little moments like that they make us truly realize how spectacular the heroes are...

KidCthulhu: The Thomas interlude was indeed a nice touch. Very Tad Williams.

Memo to self: Do not let the guy with the area-effect spells develop a “what the hell” attitude.

Caliber: Woohoo! Amazing battle. That battle sums up very nicely why I love this Story Hour. Teamwork, a sense of humor, a sense of “Oh crap, we’re all gonna die!”... it’s all here.

So am I right in guessing this wasn’t your usual spawn of Takhisis (i.e. not a blackie, bluey, whitey, reddy, or greenie)?

Ancalagon: Cool fight! I was worried with Ernie stuck on the back of a crashing dragon... I hope Aravis’s brain isn’t TOO much broken...

LightPhoenix: It sounds to me like some sort of Wisdom damage...

Piratecat: No, it's pretty broken. At the time, I think Aravis was suffering from something like -6 Wisdom damage. A really bad roll on a Maze check damn near finished everything off, but thank goodness he managed to pull it through just in time. For the rest of the combat, he was... er... reckless. Damn sonic *lightning bolt*. Ouchie.

It was a creepy fight, and a well run one; combat never bogged down. Flicker was so close to being field-pizza. Most upsetting for our other doughy halfling, Ernie (while incredibly effective in the previous fight and very useful as support) never actually did any damage to the dragon! He was about to strike a decisive blow at the end of combat, but got caught in Grey Wolf's *fireball*. But... er... he isn't bitter. No, not at all. And neither is Grey Wolf's food nowadays.

Swack-Iron: Still an amazing Story Hour, and a most amazing fight. Congrats again to Sagiro and his whole crew on yet another masterpiece installment. What's the average character level at this point? And for comparison, what was the age category of that dragon?

wolff96: I'm guessing – and that's all it is – that this was a bronze dragon that had been mind-controlled or driven insane. After all, it had a "huge red-iron collar" on and that's kind of been a trademark, given the red plate armor that seems to be common among the high-ranking enemy soldiers.

The bronze would be a "dull yellow color" and their breath weapon is a line of lightning. There is a feat – I think in *Dragon* magazine – that allows dragons to alter the shape of their breath weapon in exchange for an extra round or two of recharge time. That would explain the "cone of lightning" breath weapon. Anyway, that's my guess.

Sagiro: Regarding the dragon: it was an Adult. And as for its type – well, wolff96's analysis is fantastic, but what I did was much simpler. I just took some existing dragon type with a cone breath weapon (don't even remember which type any more) and replaced the damage type with "electricity." And gave it a skin color that wouldn't immediately make the players think they knew what it was.

Regarding the levels of the characters: they ranged from 9th through 12th at the time of the dragon fight.

Regarding running an aerial fight: Usually in a combat where some creatures are flying and others aren't, I put the flying miniatures on empty clear plastic dice cubes. In this battle, where everyone was flying, I think I put pieces of paper beneath miniatures of characters that were flying particularly high – higher than the dragon, at least. I didn't sweat all the details of exactly how high people were... that would have been a nightmare. When it mattered, I'd make some decision based on what the people involved were in the middle of doing.

Aftermath

Run #139 – ?November, 2002

For hours still, the battle rages. The Company and their allies regroup in the air above the body of the dragon. Below them a hundred smaller skirmishes are rejoined as the dragon-fear subsides. It's still impossible to tell which side has the upper hand.

Dranko flies over to Royce who is hovering alone, staring at the horizon. In answer to the half-orc's unspoken question, Royce says quietly, "They're all gone. Killed. Dead. That... wolf thing... it was too much for us. Every time we killed one the rest grew stronger, and there were so many... so many. One of them bit Brassel's arm right off his body. And Sparrow... my beloved Sparrow..."

"Aw, c'mon," says Dranko. "Morningstar is a powerful priestess of Ell. If you ask, she can bring Sparrow back from the dead."

Royce looks up at Dranko, tears rolling down his cheeks. "No. She told me many times, that if she died she wanted to stay dead. I argued with her often, but she was insistent. No, she's... gone. Gone. It hardly seems worth fighting now."

"Look," says Dranko. "I'm sorry that your wife was killed. But I'll bet she wouldn't have wanted you to stand here crying and feeling sorry for yourself. There are still people down there fighting, and I'll bet a lot of them have lost people close to them too."

Royce looks up and stares daggers at Dranko for a moment before turning and flying away. Ernie flies up to Dranko as Royce departs. "Dranko, how about next time you let me comfort the grieving?"

"Er... yeah, I guess I should. Damn."

A few healing spells later and the Company are ready to go again, albeit with most of their magical resources spent. But in the absence of other perilous threats, their new task is lighter on danger and heavier on glory. They swoop down on a battle where fifteen Charagan soldiers are hard beset by a superior force of Naradawk's troops. In short order the melee is turned into a rout, with allies cheering and enemies quickly deceased. But before the grateful Kingdom soldiers can finish heaping thanks and praise on the Company, the heroes again take to the sky in search of another battle to turn.

And so goes the day. The carnage is terrible. The sound of crows competes with the screams of warriors. Everywhere are the bodies of fallen soldiers, hundreds upon hundreds. Archers dart through the trees looking for stray arrows; their quivers are spent. Healing tents are overwhelmed. The miserable groans of the wounded fill the air.

And yet, for the people of the Kingdom of Charagan, even among the injured it is a day of great joy. By mid-afternoon it is clear that the defenses have held and that the enemy has failed, unable to bring forward a strong enough force. Bloody and bone-tired, the Company survey the battlefield from above and realize that nowhere in sight is their assistance sorely needed. They go back to where Thomas waits in the *rope trick* and relieve him of his duty. Then, flying low above the trees, they head back toward the Shadow Chaser.

En route, Dranko pulls up short with a sharp intake of breath. Below him through some gaps in the canopy he sees the tattered shreds of a Delioch healing tent. Fearing the worst he descends, and seeing the worst, he mourns. Fourteen clerics of Delioch lie dead, including the skeptical Brother Nolman, who has died clutching a mace rather than a bandage. Over twenty patients

have also died. Dranko curses as he looks for survivors and finds none. Kay spends a few minutes examining the trampled ground, and guesses that the enemy must have appeared practically inside the tent itself. Even with guards, the healers never had a chance.

Hardly knowing what to say, Flicker offers Dranko words of sympathy. "War sucks." Dranko nods, tears in his eyes. Together the Company resume their flight to General Anabrook's headquarters back in Verdshane.

There are signs that a ferocious battle took place at the Shadow Chaser as well. Bodies are strewn thick on the ground, and among them are over twenty corpses of giant gnarled spiders. The Company go inside, where the chaos is barely more controlled. Runners and advisors are coming in and out in a steady stream delivering reports to a cadre of colonels, who in turn make their reports to Anabrook. Morningstar looks around and notes that there are bloodstains on the inside walls of the inn.

Minya comes out of the kitchen with a tray of water cups, but puts it down hastily when she sees Morningstar. She runs over and embraces Morningstar in a crushing hug. "Oh, I'm so glad you're alive! I... I wanted to see you again, so I could thank you. Those spiders that attacked us... they could disappear in one place and reappear in another. That's how they got inside my inn! One minute we can hear the fighting outside, and the next thing I know there's spiders in here with us! I ran into the kitchen to hide but one of them followed me. I tried hitting it with a frying pan but it was too quick and it... oh, it was horrid! I almost passed out, and I would have died... I know I would have... but for that healing potion you gave to me. Thanks be to you and your goddess, Morningstar. A soldier came in soon after and spitted the foul thing, but that potion saved my life." Morningstar just smiles and returns the embrace.

Corporal Edridge approaches the Company, sporting a slight limp. "What more can we do to assist?" asks Ernie.

"I think for now, the best thing you can do is stay here, help guard the Shadow Chaser. If we get any reports we may ask you to go out again, but..." He grimaces. "...I think you've earned some rest. Why I don't see about getting you something to drink?" Gratefully the Company sit down at a table, weary to the very core. And through the afternoon and evening they continue to rest, listening as reports come in of victories, of prisoners taken, of comrades lost. Before nightfall they retrieve the body of the red-armored woman and bring it to an upstairs storeroom, setting it carefully in a corner and finding a soldier to stand guard at the door.

And one more piece of good news starts to make its way through the ranks of soldiers milling about. It seems that some high-ranking officer (probably General Anabrook herself) received a *sending* from the Balani Peninsula. Two hours after Aravis erased the planar *gate*, the Delfirian forces down south started a rapid retreating action from dozens of their most forward positions. It's too early to tell if they're giving up altogether, but the rumor is that the Bederen have presented such a large threat on the Kivian front that the Delfirians are being forced to withdraw from Charagan in order to defend their own kingdom.

Despite the chaos, the aching muscles, the sadness of loss and the elation of victory, none of the Company have any difficulty falling asleep that night.

Nail: Excellent post(s), Sagiro... And to the Company: You have our praise and respect for a battle hard-fought and deadly. Wow.

And to Thomas the NPC: You think this is the only weird thing you'll see in the coming year? Keep dreaming, fella.

coyote6: I'm curious, who among the other adventurers survived? Three-fourths of Fortune's Children apparently died horribly (what were those wolf pack creatures they fought, anyways?) – but what about Glade, Matthias, Fulton, and Wellington?

Caliber: I can't think of the name, but the party fought one way back in the day. Every time one of the pack got killed, the rest absorbed its energy and got stronger, until there was only one big bad uber-wolf left.

Nasty monster, all-considered. The party learned about it around the same time they learned of the things that possess people (the Evil King that keeps bothering them. Remember?).

KidCthulhu: Ding! Ding! Correct answer and 100 points to Caliber. They were called the Seki, and they were one of the first of the Emperor's Free Monsters given away with Verdshane Cereal. When we researched them, they were described to us in one of the Ellish tomes: "Seki, the Many who are One, and the Carch-din, the One who is Many." Nice of our enemies to group themselves so nicely on the page, don'tcha think?

The one Fortune's Children faced was far larger than the one the Company faced many years ago. We feel a little guilty about it. We knew it was there, and several times during the battle we said, "Where now? Should we go see about that Seki?" And we'd say, "Nah, it's only a Seki. Fortune's Kids can handle it." Oops.

Sagiro: Glade, Wellington and Royce survived. Fulton and Matthias were both killed by the enemy sorceresses. (The appearance of Matthias during the dragon battle was actually an illusion cast by Wellington.)

Caliber is correct about the wolf-pack creature – it was a Seki, albeit one much more powerful than the one the Company fought in their early days. It's a sort of hive-mind wolf; when one of its bodies is killed, all of the rest of the bodies become more powerful. I was all set to have the Company fight it, but instead they chose to assist Morningstar in *Ava Dormo*, and then go after the red-armored woman – reasonable choices, certainly. I won't publish all the stats here (in case the Company ever fights another one), but the Seki wolves gained a number of nasty abilities as their numbers grew less, in addition to getting better saves, better BAB, more HP, better natural AC, and better damage.



CHAPTER 10

The End of the Beginning

Piratecat: I was just updating Dranko, and came across his **Compleat and Inklusive List of Aventuring Soovenirs**. Wanna see? You might remember a few of these.

- Mrs. H's fishermen's sweater
- Cape made of Seki fur
- 6' long eyebat cable
- Ernie's woolly mittens, hat, & socks
- Storm knight souvenir from Venic giant (big/little knight)
- Square coins (Gohgan's basement; 2695 years old)
- red scarf from Gohgan's
- Kay's silver elvish ring from her Mom (gift!)
- silver ring (ruin of Tharnias' shop)
- bottle of sand from the mouth of Nahalm
- big gray-blue behir (alligator-snake) scale
- bent iron bar (after being strong with strength bean)
- sand-walking kit, stolen from Sand's Edge
- Necklace: jeweled sword (friend of Wurthas)
- Falva's pot for Eddings (souvenir)
- ½ wooden golem head, from Repose
- Moving topiary souvenir from Djaw (?)
- glass jar w/ body of ER's bright red snake/basilisk tail tip
- Djaw paperwork for one month / weapon badge
- Iron cooking pot
- Plate-like piece of exploded orcish Digger
- Orcish trap needle (poisoned) from the Kalkas Peaks
- Chisel stolen from the Kallor Black Circle complex
- bottle of Venic Giant muck; giant turtle souvenirs
- red marble blood gargoyle face piece (to stuff in Mokad's mouth)
- Burning God statue
- black & silver studded leather armor (w/ accessories)
- original footman's mace
- blind cow skull from Blackhope Dungeons
- Used-up invisibility ring from infiltration
- 4 dwarfish adamantine coins (@ 20 gp) from God's Thorn
- empty drug pot
- Mining pincers (rakshasa underground tunnel)
- 2 Dire rhino tusks from bone spider
- 3 feathers from a giant dire raven
- Really nice Yujan carvings
- Three cases of turtle jerky
- 1 pouch Northlynch leaf pipe tobacco (from Barnabas)
- 2 sets of stylish Tewvian clothing (needs tailoring)
- Evil green potion from Kallor Black Circle central
- Abernathy's silver ashtray (75 gp)
- Stuffed Seki head
- stolen snuff box
- Sock stuck into icebox
- Uthalingite dart of virulent poison
- copper ring (Gohgan's basement; 2695 years old)
- silver sash from goblin shaman
- silver food bowl for Smeggy (from auction)
- 18 flatworm teeth (one in good shape)
- souvenir block of Floam
- vial of water from fountain in Ghant
- Gardener's trowel, Pinclot estate, Minok
- Bottle of troll stench
- Manzanill's spiffy wardrobe
- 2 Faceless crossbows, whipped from hands
- Clay golem carving tools from Repose
- Little Cloudbhawk Ferengi banner
- Crude ogre silver (9) & copper (4) coins
- Cool Djawian clothing – both nice and crappy
- Seki-skin cloak
- amulet of Fire God symbol
- Obsidian brick
- Letter from Lord Baravhad, sealed
- jar of Venic giant flesh
- 2 bottles wine from Medir, 1 from Kenderhold
- souvenir from Flashing Day at the mirrors of Semek
- mechanism, pottery & skull from Castle Blackhope
- 3 unholy symbols, black circle w/ 5 diamonds worth 500 gp?
- wooden 18" javelin from Kay's neck (Verdshane)
- wooden plague bat on string
- Miniature blue glass minaret from Zhamir
- golden holy symbol of Nifi on a silver chain (40 gp)
- Bottle of Grond/babbler goop, with small eyeball
- Bone fragments from the battle of Bone Pass
- Handful of miracs, min-miracs, and chits
- Handful of pakeesh, Topia and Gin
- 1 box Tevvian cigars (too mild for our taste)
- 1 excellent corncob pipe (from Barnabas)
- Manzanill's spiffy wardrobe, new clothes (light & heavy)

I will also offer **Dranko's 29 Rules for Adventuring:**

1. Don't tell the guard you're going to go with him.
2. Avoid stealing stupid things.
3. No socks in the icebox.
4. Half-orcs do NOT eat quiche.
5. Too many rats can nibble the halfling. Rat-fishing and rat sausages will never be popular.
6. Avoid the evil baker.
7. Don't hit the monster with a bush.
8. A frontal assault is the fastest way to die.
9. Always club the mage first. (*Note:* Party members wish the word "evil" inserted here.)
10. Heal first, chase and fight second.
11. Look at the ceiling. Yes, now!
12. Sigils are icky. Don't read them.
13. Bad things come in big boxes.
14. Tie down the rope before jumping ship.
15. Look under the altar, or under whatever is heaviest.
16. Don't leap the monster. Yes, even this time.
17. When given freedom, take it.
18. If you seal a room shut, search it first.
19. Don't sass the archmage or the assassin.
20. Look both ways before crossing the carriage-way.
21. Everything is funnier with a monkey.
22. Everything is our fault.
23. Ask for stuff. You never know.
24. I take the one on the left; Morningstar gets the one on the right.
25. Three choices: "subtle", "unsubtle", and "stupid."
26. Low expectations make for a happy half-orc.
27. Don't kill your best friends by mistake.
28. Please refrain from taunting the dire bear.
29. Let Ernie offer condolences to the newly bereaved.



Tuesday, September 11

The Company wake to the smell of bodies burned and unburned, as somewhere outside piles of corpses are being put to the torch. (There isn't time to bury all of the dead before disease will start spreading.) Still, it's a relief to the Company to discover that they have been allowed to sleep through the night with no interruptions for new emergencies. They grab some breakfast downstairs where Minya is commanding a small army of servants in the kitchen.

Dranko mutters, "I still want to go back to Sand's Edge and stick it to Fulton's partner, that bitch wizardess, Imperia." There's not much immediate support in the Company for a return to that city, but Dranko figures it's worth checking Fulton's belongings. He is disappointed to find neither magical goodies nor any useful correspondence to or from Imperia. He returns to the room where the rest of the Company have gathered.

There, on the floor, is the body of their slain red-armored foe, dragged in by the others. For a few minutes they examine the corpse, wondering how they're going to get it out of the deadly armor so that Morningstar can cast *speak with dead*. In the end it takes the lot of them about three hours, using a variety of kitchen and fireplace tools, but they manage it without anyone making physical contact with the armor.

There is a knock on the door, and Corporal Edridge enters. "I just wanted to check in," he begins, "since no one has... seen... er... There appears to be a somewhat unclothed woman on the floor of your room."

"We had to get the armor off so that Morningstar can interrogate the body," says Ernie, smiling.

"I see," says Edridge, unable to disguise his distaste. "I trust you have the matter under control, and won't need any assistance?"

"Actually, I could use a drink," Dranko says.

Ernie elbows him in the ribs. "He's not a servant, Dranko."

"No, it's no problem at all," says Edridge, turning to leave. "I'll just leave you with your body, then, shall I?"

A few minutes later, while the Company are still debating what questions to ask, a servant comes in with a mug of ale. "Hullo. The Corporal asked me to bring this to... aaak! A body!" Startled, the servant drops the mug. On instinct Dranko grabs his whip and lashes out, intending to grab the mug and yank it to himself with minimum spillage. He's too slow, misses the mug, and catches the servant in the cheek. Clutching his face, the servant looks mortified. The rest of the Company look on in shocked silence.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" says the servant. "I didn't mean t' drop your drink like that... I just saw the..."

"No, I'm sorry," Dranko interrupts. "I wasn't trying to hit you. I was trying to use the whip to catch the mug before it fell. I don't blame you for dropping it. Here. Come here, and let me heal that up."

The servant totters forward, glancing nervously at the woman's body. Dranko reaches out and heals his face with a quick orison. The servant touches his healed cheek in wonder, and then reaches out his right hand. "Er, y'know, I've had a touch of stiffness in this hand for a few years now... I don't s'pose you..."

"Yeah, sure," says Dranko. Another spell follows, and the man flexes his hand.

"Glory be. Well, I'm sure you know best about that body then. Must be going." The servant scuttles out.

After some more discussion the Company settle on six questions to pose to the body. Morningstar kneels by the corpse and casts her spell, while the others blanket the area around the body with various other spells (*bless, zone of truth, circle of protection, prayer, bane*) to help overcome any resistance the body might have to being questioned. There is a sickening intake of air through the dead lungs, and the body reflexively coughs up bits of dark spittle.

Morningstar speaks. "What was Naradawk's contingency plan if your attack failed?"

The body wheezes, coughs again, and answers in a rasping vocalized whisper. "*We were not going to fail. If Naradawk had any plans beyond this battle, I do not know them.*"

"Which other of your red-armored friends came to this plane with you?"

"*Only Tarsos.*" Damn. So there's one more red-armored servant to add to the list. Before Morningstar can ask a third question, the body continues unexpectedly, "*But he was not my friend. That sanctimonious, patronising, pint-sized piece of...*"

Morningstar cuts it off with the next question: "What was Tarsos' mission here?"

"*I was not privy to his instructions. I have no idea.*"

"What was your mission?"

"*I was to help clear out any resistance to Naradawk's forces, and pave the way for his arrival.*"

"Where is Octesian?"

"*On Abernia.*"

Oh, that was helpful. Last question: "Where, specifically, would we be most likely to find Octesian right now?"

"*Octesian was sent to Abernia years ago. We've been on different planes since then. I have absolutely no idea. Find him yourself.*" The body slumps, spent.

Kibi goes downstairs and finds the Corporal again, to tell him that there's another red-armored warrior on the loose – information that should be conveyed to General Anabrook without delay.

"Of course," says Edridge dryly. "And if he's found, I'll be sure to have the body sent to your room straight away for immediate stripping." Kibi looks properly offended as Edridge turns and leaves to make his report.

LightPhoenix: I would just like to say that Edridge has quickly become my favorite character in this Story Hour.

The party would like to *scry* for Tarsos, but none of them know the spell. Figuring that the boy wizard Wellington might, Dranko and Aravis go and knock on his door.

"Come in." They find Wellington seated on his bed, deep in study.

"Hey, how ya' doing?" says Dranko, congenially.

"Studying," says the boy.

"Yeah. Well, there's more to life than studying. You should try leaving your room some time."

"May I help you with something?" asks Wellington, a model of politeness.

"Er... yeah. We were wondering if you could *scry* someone for us."

"Of course," says Wellington. "Though it's not one of my strengths. I am not likely to succeed in finding someone I've never met, but I'll certainly try. I'll just finish this chapter, and then I'll need some time to prepare the spell for casting."

"Yeah, great," says Dranko. "The whole kingdom is in mortal peril and all our lives hang in the balance, but you just finish that chapter. We'll be in our room."

Wellington puts down the book quickly. "The kingdom is again in danger?" he asks, startled. "Have you told the General?"

"Well..."

"We must tell her at once! You should have told me right away that this was a matter of such grave importance."

"It's not..."

"I must tell Glade. Does Royce know? I will start to prepare immediately!"

As Dranko turns red, Aravis sighs. "Wellington, Dranko's exaggerating. The world isn't in immediate danger. The guy we want to find is another red-armored warrior from Naradawk's army, but a few minutes isn't likely to make any difference."

"Oh. I see. Dranko, you shouldn't make jests about such things. Still, I will meditate and be in your room in fifteen minutes."

As they leave Wellington's room, Dranko mutters, "That kid's gotta get a life."

A few minutes later Wellington comes in and, like the others, notes the body on the floor. He peers at it for a moment. "Ah. You must have needed to cast a spell on the corpse. Necromancy of some kind, I presume?"

"*Speak with dead,*" answers Morningstar.

"Did you learn anything useful?"

"We learned about the man we want you to *scry*."

"Ah, good. So, where is the mirror?"

Various members of the Company look at each other sheepishly. "Er..." says Aravis. "Oh. Yeah. Actually we don't have one. Er... do you?"

"No. I'm sure you know I cannot *scry* without a large and valuable mirror."

"I'll bet there's one back in our estates in Kallor," suggests Grey Wolf.

"I can *teleport* there right now," says Kibi. "And bring the mirror back with us."

"I'll be in my room studying then," says Wellington. The child walks out.

"That kid gives me the creeps," says Flicker.

“Who’s coming with me?” asks Kibi.

Dranko volunteers. Just before casting the *teleport*, Kibi casts a *familiar pocket* for Scree, and puts on (of all things) a metal helmet. “What’s that for?” asks Dranko.

“It’s my *helm of water breathing*,” says Kibi, smiling. “Just in case. Hold on.”

“Just in case?” cries Dranko in alarm. “Now wait just a...”

In an eye-blink, they are back in the large Black Circle ritual chamber beneath the estates. (That’s the only place that Kibi has “studied carefully,” back from when he figured out where to cast *walls of stone* to preserve the structural integrity of the room.) Both Kibi and Dranko feel the expected but still unsettling chill of null shadows.

While Kibi goes upstairs to retrieve the mirror from Cobb, Dranko walks slowly to the door of the room housing the shadow cauldron. At the door, the unease grows stronger. Dranko takes a deep breath, opens the door, and peeks in. It’s still clear. The room is awash in swirling shadows, and the cauldron still squats there in the center, but there are no null shadows in evidence. Relieved, Dranko quickly closes the door.



While Kibi and Dranko are off retrieving a mirror, Ernie decides to go for a walk outside. As he strolls along the main road he spies a newly built enclosure housing about thirty prisoners of war. He approaches one of the nearby guards, who salutes when he sees Ernie’s royal uniform.

“I’d like to speak with one of the prisoners,” Ernie says cheerfully. “Do you mind?”

“You may do as you’d like, sir. I suggest doing it from outside, though. For safety purposes. Sir.”

Ernie casts *tongues*, and gets the attention of one of the sullen inmates through the bars of the fence. “Excuse me!” he calls. “No, down here!” One of the prisoners looks over, startled.

“I hope they’re feeding you well,” Ernie says. The prisoner says nothing, but his eyes narrow. “You know,” says Ernie, looking at the man, “I’ll bet you weren’t necessarily a volunteer in your army, were you.”

The man still says nothing, but another prisoner nearby whispers: “Say nothing! It is a trick! And if the Emperor finds out you’ve talked with the enemy, it’s more than your life is worth.”

Ernie’s prisoner starts to sweat, and he puts his face up to the bars to talk with Ernie. “I am honored to serve the Emperor, who is most wise and powerful and all-knowing. My life is his.”

“I bet you don’t know this, but the Emperor isn’t coming anymore. He can’t do anything to you, ever again.”

“He lies!” says one of the others.

“You do not know the Emperor,” says the prisoner. “He will come here. You cannot stop him. And he will know my mind. I must not speak to you.”

“I said, he’s not coming,” Ernie reiterates. “I stopped him. Really. You should think about what you want to do with your life, now that your leader has been thwarted.”

“I don’t understand,” says the prisoner, shaking.

“Well, you could become a farmer, or pursue a craft, or probably join our army here.”

“No! I cannot. If I become one of you, then I become the enemy of the most great and powerful Emperor. I will not be his enemy! He would cross all worlds to destroy me if I make that choice.”

“I bet you’ll realize before long that your Emperor can’t do anything to you anymore. You think about what I’ve said.” And with that Ernie walks off, whistling a happy tune.

Behind him the prisoner, trembling, starts to weep.

KidCthulhu: [SPOILER. No, really, major spoiler] D’oh. Just... D’oh. Me and my big mouth.

Kid Charlemagne: So, what you’re saying is, the reason halflings have such big feet is so that they fit ever-so-snugly into their large mouths?



Once the mirror has been successfully returned to Verdshane, Wellington attempts to *scry* for Tarsos. After all that trouble getting it, he fails. He apologizes profusely and leaves, dejected.

As the Company debate what to do next, Edridge knocks on the door again, this time with a handwritten letter from General Anabrook herself. He leaves without a single snide remark.

The Spire wishes to hold a convocation in two days' time, at the Greenhouse in Tal Hae. Please have the house prepared for a variety of Kingdom dignitaries.
– Gen. Anabrook

The Company start packing up immediately. As they prepare there is another knock on the door. It's Wellington, and there is a letter in his hand. "This says I'm to attend a meeting at your house on the day after tomorrow, and that you'll be able to tell me where that is."

"Ummm, do you, er, know about the Spire?" asks Aravis.

"Of course I do. The Spire is an organisation comprised of Archmagi, a few powerful adventurers and mercenaries, and selected persons from the nobility and religious ranks. They are charged with protecting Charagan, particularly in regards to arcane threats. I hope to join it some day."

All of the Company stare in amazement for a moment. It's strange to hear such a succinct and accurate definition. "Well, uh, yeah, it looks like you have," says Dranko. The half-orc thinks for a second, then adds, "Oh, and hey, Wellington. I'm going to say a word to you, and I want you to repeat it back to me."

"OK."

"Sharshun."

Wellington blinks. "Excuse me? I'm sorry, but I didn't hear you clearly."

"Sharshun," Dranko says again.

Wellington thinks hard for a moment. "This is very strange," he says. "I know that you asked me to remember and recite a word, and I know I heard you speak the word. But I cannot recall it, even now. Why is that?"

"It's nothing to worry about," the Company assure him. And sure enough, the whole incident is gone from the boy's mind a moment later.

Morningstar sends to Eddings:

Eddings, it's Morningstar. Do you know if Ozilinsh is okay?

No news. I trust things are well in Verdshane?

Morningstar sends a second time:

Yes... we won. Company okay, but many soldiers died. We need to host a big meeting of the Spire at the Greenhouse in two days.

Wonderful to hear of your victory. I'd best start cleaning then.

It turns out that Glade and Royce have also been invited to the Spire meeting. While the Company work out the schedule of *teleports* and *wind walks* that will get everyone back to Tal Hae, Morningstar drops into *Ava Dormo* to check in with Amber.

There are still dreamers guarding the tower near Oasis, but there have been no further attacks. Someone has cast *speak with dead* on June, as Amber reports: "June has declined to be brought back from Ell's paradise. She died as a warrior in the service of her goddess, and is content."

Artoomis: Was this an error of assumption from a PC or NPC? *Speak with dead* does not speak with the dead person's soul in Ell's paradise, but "the corpse's knowledge is limited to what the creature knew during life." I suppose June's corpse could know that June did not wish to be raised if she died well. The thing that is really interesting here is that a *speak with dead* may reveal what the person's intentions were regarding being raised, but only a *raise dead* (or other bring back from the dead magic) can reveal if they truly wish to be brought back. Thus, a *speak with dead* could reveal the exact opposite of the true desire.

Enkhidu: 'Course, Sagiro could have simply Rule 0'd speak with dead.

Sagiro: I have always figured that people killed in battle: (a) are aware of the circumstances of their own deaths; and (b) probably had decided going in if they would want to be raised or not. Therefore, you can get a pretty reliable answer from a corpse on the subject. The two ways you could get a wrong answer would be: a person expected that their soul would go to heaven, but it didn't; or they reached the afterlife and found that it wasn't anything like (or as good as) what they expected.

For purposes of dramatic license, let's assume that neither of these things were true in June's case.

Artoomis: Well, not to beat a dead horse (pun intended), but if I wanted a really reliable answer I'd ask directly, through raise dead (or similar magic). After all, until you get there, no one knows what paradise is really like, or what advice beings who live there might give the dead person. They might just tell you to go back – a different opinion than what that person had when alive!

In this case it's a dead issue (pun intended), I suppose, unless Sagiro wanted to throw in something new.

Wednesday, September 12

All the arrangements are made to get everyone back to the Greenhouse. In preparation for *teleporting* himself, Wellington and Glade back to Tal Hae, Kibi once again puts on his helm. When Wellington asks about it, Kibi answers, "Um, it's just my lucky helmet. I always wear it when I *teleport*."

"Fascinating," says the boy. And he's honestly fascinated.

Only when they have arrived safely at the doorstep of the Greenhouse does Kibi admit the helmet's magical function. "Ah, of course," says Wellington, nodding gravely. "That way, if your spell goes awry and you have the bad fortune to land in the ocean, you could continue to breathe for several seconds before your dwarven bone density makes you sink far enough to be killed by the pressure implosion." Kibi splutters.

Eddings greets all the Company and the guests at the door. The house is already prepared for the impending gathering of the Spire. To pass the time, Aravis and Kibi discuss the trading of spells to get *scry* from Wellington. To Aravis's dismay, Wellington is mostly interested in improving his repertoire of illusion spells (Aravis's prohibited school). But eventually the boy agrees to accept *energy buffer* from Kibi's book, in return for *scry*. The rest of the day is spent (for them) busily copying spells.

Dranko, still *wind walking*, flies to Tal Korum to check on his grandfather. The old man is doing well, has started working again in his fields, and maintains a polite conversation with his grandson for the duration. The mending of their relationship is well underway.



Thursday, September 13

At last the day of the Spire meeting comes. As before, the attendees arrive directly from Ozilinsh's tower via the "crystal ball" room, and begin to descend the stairs.

The first guest to arrive is an old elf who the Company have not seen since their earliest days together – Fylnius, the elven Archmage of Ghant. (Ernie recalls that the blood gargoyle's attack on Ghant, which distracted Fylnius from his main task, was what allowed Octesian, Meledien and Restimar to slip through to Abernia.) Fylnius – like all the guests – endures the standard light-in-the-eyes test to guard against the long absent Soul Eater, King Farazil. After Fylnius comes Duke Nigel, and then the leader of the Spire, the Archmage Salk.

At that point, Skorg, who is lurking in the kitchen, grabs Ernie's attention. "Hey Ernie," he says nervously. "I was just thinking, with all these important people here, maybe, you know, I should just be kind of out of the way or something."

"Good idea," Ernie agrees. "Why don't you head upstairs and just wait it out in your room."

Skorg dashes out of the kitchen and up the stairs, and all in the Company wince as they hear the sound of two bodies crashing into each other. "Oh, I'm really sorry," they hear Skorg say. "Here, let me help you up... oop... sorry again... why I don't just let you... er... yeah..."

Ernie and Morningstar follow up the stairs, and are treated to the sight of King Crunard IV of Charagan smoothing his silk shirt. His Majesty's expression hovers between amused and annoyed. Skorg has retreated into an upstairs room.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," says Ernie.

"New house servant," says Morningstar.

"Ah," says the king, before heading downstairs to join the others.

Skorg pokes his head back out. "I hope that wasn't anyone too important," he mumbles.

"Oh, just the king," says Ernie.

"Er... the king of what, exactly?" asks Skorg.

"Of Charagan."

"Oh, shit! That was the king? I knocked over the king of the whole country? Oh my god! I'm really sorry! Do you think he'll have me executed? I'm really really..." Morningstar propels Skorg back into the room, closes the door firmly, and then casts *silence* on it. She and Ernie go back downstairs to join the meeting.

Royce is looking happier than when they last saw him. Dranko remarks on this fact, and Royce claps him on the back. "I've spent a lot of time thinking on the last thing you said to me," he says. "And more importantly, I've thought hard about Sparrow and what she would want. She knew the dangers of the line of work we were in. And we're all in fate's hands, after all. I've spoken with the clerics of our goddess Corilayna, and they know that Sparrow and the others have earned their places on the wheel of heaven. I've got to get on with my life, and that's what I intend to do. Besides, if I just sulk, Sparrow's ghost will probably come down here and kick my ass."

After a few minutes the living room is fairly full. In attendance are Duke Nigel of Harkran, King Crunard IV of Charagan, High Stormknight Dalesandro, High Priestess **Cornelia** of Pikon (promoted to that position after the death of Matthias), Yale (the king's advisor), General Anabrook, the Archmagi Salk, Fylnius and Ozilinsh, Royce, Glade, Wellington, and all the members of the Company.

When all are seated, King Crunard stands up and walks to the front of the room. He smiles and gestures expansively. "My friends, we are gathered here in the aftermath of a great victory. No doubt we have just witnessed the defining event of our age, and weathered the storm with our kingdom intact. The great peril of the past millennium has been thwarted, due to the efforts and sacrifices of our citizens and heroes, some of the greatest of which are here in this room. In particular, I would like to recognize two of our hosts – Aravis Telmir and Morningstar of Ell. It was Aravis who made use of the Crosser's Maze artifact to seal the *gate* between our plane and that where our enemy is imprisoned. I understand that this was no mean task, and it was the culmination of many long months of trial and training, not to mention a long and perilous quest to acquire the artifact in the first place. He was the linchpin of our strategy, and he did not let us down.

"Morningstar led a small army of Ellish priestesses in the *Ava Dormo*, the Dreamscape, to blunt the second thrust of our enemy. For while it is not widely known, Naradawk's forces attacked a critical point of our defense in the Dreaming. Had Morningstar not led the resistance there, there's no telling how many more enemy soldiers would have poured through at Verdshane before Aravis sealed off the *gate*. Our army was only barely the better of what it faced. Another thousand soldiers would have tipped the scales in their favor. Another two thousand and we would have been decimated.

"But there are many more who deserve praise in no less measure. The whole Company of adventurers whose hospitality we now enjoy had already saved Charagan from one deadly threat. It was not many weeks ago that they saved us from the hidden machinations of the Black Circle. And now they have been instrumental in saving us a second time.

"Fortune's Children, of whom sadly only Royce Tillman has survived, were instrumental in continuing to provide the Archmagi with powerful artifacts to power their magics. While Ozilinsh's Company was seeking the Crosser's Maze, the Children were making sure we had the wherewithal to keep the planar *gate* closed in the meantime. Without the Shroud of Baynock in particular, the *gate* might have fallen months earlier.

"Wellington's revolutionary astronomical calculations allowed for the solving of an old prophecy, from a book I am told is called the *Blood Inks of Imgur*. As a result he anticipated an attack by magic-leeching creatures on Koenig's tower in Yen Hae, which served as the anchor for the demiplane in which the Archmagi did their work. Were he and Glade not able to both discover and repel that attack, the kingdom would certainly have fallen."

Wellington has turned a bright red at hearing his name spoken in such congratulatory terms by his sovereign lord. Royce punches him in the arm, grinning. The king smiles down at the child prodigy before continuing.

"General Anabrook here organized and executed the most unusual defensive battle in recorded Kingdom history, and was able to defeat a force that well outnumbered her own with a thrown-together force that had just come from an entirely different theatre. It would not be a misstatement to use the phrase 'military genius' in describing her.

"And finally there are the Archmagi themselves, wizards of power beyond the comprehension of the rest of us. They have given centuries of tireless service to the kingdom. Without them there would be no Spire, no Charagan. They are the architects of our great victory." The Company expect that some report on the Archmagi's health will be included, but none is given. Ozilinsh looks fine, though, as does the old man Salk.

"But enough of the congratulatory indulgence," says Crunard. "I have even more good news to share with you. The rumors of the Delfirian retreat are true. They have accelerated their withdrawal in the past two days. The Bederen have gone past what we expected from them, and are pushing so hard on their Kivian front that the Delfirians seem to be abandoning Charagan to defend their own country."

There is a pleased murmuring throughout the room at that announcement, and the king smiles again. But his smile slowly fades as he considers the next part of his speech. Eventually, his expression somber, he goes on.

"Still, for all of our joy in victory, we should not forget the losses we suffered, and the sacrifices that were made. Over two thousand soldiers were lost in the battle at Verdshane, added to the many hundreds who perished defending our lands against the Delfirians. And the fighting has also claimed many of our best and strongest. The High Priest of Pikon, Matthias Fieldstone Sparrow, Brassel and Bettany from Fortune's Children. The wizard Fulton, whose misdeeds we can forgive for his service to his kingdom. And fourteen Dreamwalkers of Ell fell in *Ava Dormo* to one of Naradawk's most powerful servants – their sacrifice bought our kingdom its victory.

"Lastly, as we feared, the Archmage Semek has died. He did not survive the unmaking of the *gate*."

Semek? There is more murmuring. Semek is known to most in the room only as the name from the seven polished obelisks that stand on the plains of Harkran – the Mirrors of Semek.

"Semek is dead," says Crunard, holding up his hand, "but at long last we can tell his tale. Semek was one of the greatest of the Archmagi; in him was the wisdom of Salk, the intellect of Ozilish, and the foresight of Abernathy. Nine hundred years ago he stood at Verdshane when Naloric Skewn, the original Emperor, forced his way back from exile. In that battle many of our greatest heroes and wizards were killed before Naloric himself was slain. One of Naloric's most powerful servants, a demon from the very pits of hell, fled the battle when its master fell. Semek, weakened and wounded, gave chase, knowing the terrible consequences of letting the demon run free.

"The demon fled from Semek, to the standing stones known as the Mirrors. We do not know how, but the demon used the Mirrors to flee into a demiplane. Semek pursued the hell-spawn even there, cornering the creature and finally defeating it. There in that pocket of space, Semek pressed his foe, and the demon confessed Naloric's contingency: that if Naloric died and the *gate* were sealed, his son Naradawk would soon re-open it and return with a great army.

"Semek banished the demon and returned to Verdshane, vowing that Naradawk would never come to Charagan. He was the most knowledgeable among the Spire on the subject of *gates*, and he offered himself as the focus of the magical energies that would keep the *gate* closed. He deduced what place on Charagan would prove optimal for such a focus, without interfering with the *gate* itself. Too close, and the magic needed to keep the *gate* closed would rupture the fabric of space. Too far, and even the most powerful spells would prove ineffectual. The Archmagi tell me that his calculations would have taken anyone else years to come up with, let alone solve, but it took him less than two weeks. He himself built an invisible tower and focusing chamber on the perfect spot, just outside the city of Oasis. For nine hundred years he stayed there in a kind of suspended animation, his mind working to keep the *gate* sealed. Without him, it would have been more like five years. It was discovered early on that other concentrated magic in the vicinity could interfere with Semek's task. That is why it was made illegal for any mages' guild to operate in Oasis, and why the reason for that restriction was never explained." With a wry smile, he adds, "I trust that has satisfied the curiosity of many in this room."

The meeting adjourns for a few minutes while Eddings and Ernie make sure all of the guests have enough to eat and drink.

"You know what?" says Dranko. "We should go back to the Mirrors on the next Flashing Day, and tell those crazy people in the green turbans, the Disciples of Semek, that they were right all along! Of course, now that Semek's dead, they'll need someone else to worship..."

When everyone is settled down again, King Crunard stands up and continues. "Despite our victory, and the fact that the kingdom is now safer than it has been in centuries, we cannot afford to become lax in our vigilance. There are still many questions, many worries, many enemies. Rosetta and Duke Nigel's court wizardess went off on some secret mission 'against Black Circle interests,' and have not returned. We do not know where she is or what she is doing. Likewise, Cencerra and her band have not returned from her investigation of the gartine arch on Karth. We know she is alive, but she is shielded from divinations and does not respond to *sendings*.

"There is also the troubling matter that powerful enemies fled the battle at Verdshane and are now at large in the kingdom. We know from Morningstar's interrogation that at least one of these is a red-armored warrior named Tarsos. And speaking of the Emperor's servants, there was no sign of Meledien at the battle at all. She too is still at large. Worst of all is the existence of

Parthol Runecarver, once one of the great Archmagi of the Spire. He knows we watch for him, and fears to show himself openly, but he still represents a nearly unimaginable threat.

"Finally, we know that the Masking continues to erode, and that some Masked things might be coming back into the world following Naradawk's recent push. We must not become complacent. We in this room must continue to stand between the citizens of Charagan and the dangers that beset them. For while the dangers may not be as great, our ability to defend ourselves is not what it once was." King Crunard glances at Salk, the elderly spokesman for the Archmagi. "It's time," whispers the king.

Salk stands slowly and walks to the front of the room to stand beside Crunard. He carries a large silken pouch that jingles slightly. "This bag contains some of the kingdom's most treasured magical devices," says Salk, his voice scratchy but still full of authority. "We have oft debated using them in recent years, but they only work once, and the secret to their forging is lost."

He reaches into the bag and pulls out a handful of plain brass rings. "I want everyone here to put on one of these." The bag gets passed around, and everyone does as instructed.

"The magic of these rings," says Salk, "is that anything you hear while wearing one cannot be gleaned from your mind by any sort of divination magic. Nor can you be compelled by magic to repeat anything you have heard. I am now going to share with you a secret that you should all know, but which our enemies must never learn." Everyone leans a bit closer.

"In order for Aravis to use the Crosser's Maze, he had to tap directly into the life energies of the Archmagi. I'm afraid that the... strain... was extreme. As a result of that use of our power, all of us... all of the Archmagi... are extremely weakened. Although we still retain our knowledge and experience, we have lost the power that we once had."

"As weak as us?" Ernie cannot help but ask. Salk looks at him sadly.

"Much. Weaker." Aravis goes pale.

"Weak enough," says Salk, "that we can no longer defend our kingdom in any meaningful way by the might of our wizardry. But understand that we gave what we did knowing what the cost might be. And we did it in the fulfillment of our lives' work."

Aravis: I can still hear Morningstar's player as she says, "You broke the archmages!"

He says this while looking straight at Aravis, whose whole body trembles at the thought of what he has done. "I... I never intended for that to happen," says Aravis. "I hope you can forgive me."

"Aravis," says Salk gravely. "When we regained consciousness in Koenig's demiplane and realized what had happened, we spent some time trying to decide what we would say to you when we met. It was a difficult discussion, and there was much we wanted to say. But in the end we decided that simpler was better, and our message is thus: thank the gods for you, Aravis. Thank the gods that you did what had to be done." Aravis looks back blankly, and nods.

"Oh, don't look so glum," says the Archmage Fylnius, smiling. "I'm quite looking forward to a nice retirement, and not having so much responsibility all the time. It's been centuries since I had any free time. I'm thinking of taking up botany!" The tension is broken, and the assemblage laughs.

"But what about Cranchus?" says Kibi, raising his voice above the laughter. "He was an Archmage too, right? He wasn't there in the demiplane. Does that mean he didn't have his life energy drained?"

Everyone grows quiet again as Salk answers. "You are correct, Kibilhathur. Cranchus was not with us. While long ago we bestowed on him the title of Archmage and admitted him to the Spire, he was never truly one of us." Kibi frowns. "Oh, don't get me wrong. He has been a valuable ally. He has given us advice and wisdom over the years without which we could never have held out so long against Naradawk. But his magics were not... compatible with ours, and he always remained aloof and mysterious. He would contact us, when the mood took him, or he had something important to share. Even before Semek built his tower he did not leave his home, and never invited any of us to visit. I confess that in most ways that matter he is beyond our understanding. You are right. Cranchus is presumably still as powerful as ever. But we have not heard from him in years, and he is beyond our reach, and it does no good to count on him."

"You may not wish to admit it, but you sitting here in this room are now among the most powerful citizens of this kingdom."

Many jaws drop at the notion. "Holy crap," Grey Wolf mutters under his breath. "We're doomed."

"Now, I'll need you to take off your rings when I say so. But listen very carefully. Once the rings are off, do not discuss this matter with anyone, or even talk about it among yourselves. That can erode the magic. Too much talk and it will again become possible for someone to divine what you have just learned. Am I clear?"

Everyone takes off the rings and hands them back to Salk. The old wizard walks back to his chair and sits down again, and again King Crunard stands. “In celebration of our great victory, there will be a kingdom-wide festival one week from the day the *gate* was closed. It will be known as the Day of Sealing. To the masses, the explanation will go that the battle at Verdshane sealed the victory against a number of the kingdom’s foes, including the humanoids and the Delfiri. But to the cognoscenti it will always have a truer meaning.

“As a final note, I would ask that those heroes here who fought at Verdshane please remain here. Some enchanted items found on the battlefield will be brought along shortly that you may divide among yourselves. You may consider them well-deserved spoils of war.

“And that is all. Ladies, gentlemen, may the gods of our kingdom continue to show us favor. This meeting is adjourned.”

dpxd: And that, dear friends, is the after-party to end all after-parties.

Amazing. This Story Hour elevates the game.

Swack-Iron: ...And what a journey it's been for all of us breathless readers to bring us to this point. I can't wait to see what happens next! Congrats to Sagiro and the whole crew on a fine job so far.

RangerWickett: *hugs Sagiro* So, how many XP did you have to spend to craft this masterwork D&D campaign?

Fade: Somehow, I have the funny feeling that Naradawk hasn't given up yet... It's wonderful to hear about all the other plots that were foiled, equally capable of collapsing the kingdom, that the Company didn't even know about. They aren't the only fish in this pond.

Enkhidu: This is perhaps the best transition I have seen for PCs to go from low level play to high level play – it's not just about the levels, it's about the responsibility.



A Night of Celebration

Run #140 – ?December, 2002

A few minutes after most of the Spire has left the Greenhouse, a pair of soldiers come to the door bearing a large pile of labeled magic items. It's a collection of the magical loot found around Verdshane after the battle, sent to be divvied up among the surviving adventuring types. There is some brief discussion about how to most fairly split up the swag. Royce says he only wants a weapon, since he is fairly well festooned with magic items following the demise of his adventuring group. He takes a +2 *ghost touch halberd* and is satisfied.

Glade and Wellington alternate with the Company in choosing from the remaining stuff, with the Company getting some extra picks due to its larger size. The paladin and the kid come away with a *wand of keen edge* with 16 charges, a *brooch of shielding* (51 points of protection remaining), and three potions – *tongues*, *blur* and *protection from elements: cold*. The Company get a pair of *goggles of night*; four *beads of stillness* (each is like a one-charge metamagic rod with the Still Spell feat); a permanently enchanted +3 *arrow of distance*; an arcane scroll with *stone to flesh* and *repulsion*, a divine scroll with *neutralize poison*, *water walk* and *inflict serious wounds*; a *potion of vision* (+10 to Search checks for an hour); and (in Dranko's opinion) the cherry on the magic item sundae: a *ring of djinni summoning*.

Glade and Royce take their leave of the Greenhouse; Wellington stays behind, to continue scribing Kibi's *energy buffer* spell into his book. A few minutes are spent portioning out their new magical goodies. When they're done, they sit back and... and...

The members of the Company look around the Greenhouse and at each other. There's nothing to do!

“I think it's obvious what we do now,” says Dranko, after a few minutes of silence.

“Yeah?” asks Grey Wolf.

“Yeah,” answers Dranko. “We just won the frikkin' war, and we're some of the most powerful heroes in the kingdom. Let's go drinking!”

“A fine idea,” agrees Grey Wolf. “I'll buy.”

So our heroes head out through the city. It is strangely empty for a beautiful autumn evening, as all of the men who served in and around Verdshane (and survived) won't return for many days. Those that they pass on the street are clearly glum, nervous, expectant. There has been no official word that the war is over and won, and the typical commoner fears the worst.

The Company choose an upscale tavern and restaurant called the Duke's Footprint, a place that long ago they heard was a favorite dining choice of Sagiro Emberleaf. A stiff, frowning man greets them at the door. “How many I help you?” he asks politely.

“We want food, for, er... nine,” says Dranko. “And hey, cheer up. We won.”

“Won what, sir?”

“The war. Well, we won in Verdshane, and I hear we’ve got ‘em on the run down south,” Dranko says.

“Ah. Well, I’m sure you would know,” says the greeter, not believing a word. “Let me show you to a table.”

“Really,” says Dranko, as the Company are led inside. “It’ll probably be made public in the next day or two. Then I’ll come back and you can apologize for not believing me.”

“Right this way.”

The Company proceed to eat, drink, and get merry. With the exception of Morningstar and One Certain Step (and maybe Aravis – it’s hard to say), all of them get progressively more and more drunk, to the point where everyone is trying to steal steaks off each other’s plates, and Ernie even starts making rude jokes about Dranko’s tongue.

Step, bemused, turns to an exasperated Morningstar. “I don’t understand,” he says gravely. “Everyone gets their own steak. I do not see the need to also eat someone else’s.”

Morningstar shrugs. “I’m thinking of attending midnight mass at my church tonight,” she sighs. “The sisters there don’t trust me, but at least they’ll be sober.”

Step turns back to his steak to find that Flicker has stolen it. The paladin of the sun goddess looks at Morningstar. “Midnight mass? I think I would be glad to accompany you. But while I would happily escape the company of our friends, I also fear to leave them unguarded in their current state.”

Dranko tries again to convince someone that they won the war, this time the shy servant woman, **Arla**, who’s bringing out wine, meat and apple pie.

“Really?” she says, eyes wide. “Did you see my brother? His name is Robert, and he looks something like me, though taller, with red hair and a neat moustache.”

“No, we didn’t,” says Ernie. “But there were a lot of people there.”

“Oh, I do hope he’s all right,” says Arla, wringing her hands.

Around ten o’clock the Company stumble out of the Duke’s Footprint, smashed and laughing. “Where to now?” slurs Ernie.

“What about that church service at your temple?” Aravis asks Morningstar.

“I’m not bringing them there in this state,” she answers. “Perhaps a small service at the Greenhouse before bed.”

“Greenhouse?” says Dranko. “I’m not going home yet. The night is young! Flicker! How about we head over to your parents’ place?”

“Great idea!” answers Flicker, wobbling a bit. “To the Smoke House!” They collectively stagger through the streets of Tal Hae.

A few blocks down, Kibi notices someone watching him. He turns around, but... no one is there. *Damn*, he thinks, *too much wine*. But no, someone is watching him. He can feel it. He doesn’t know who, or from where, but it’s sudden and unsettling. “Er... guys? Guys?” he says.

“What’s up, Kibi?”

“I’m being watched.”

“Where from?” asks Dranko.

“I don’t know. I just sort of feel it, in my head. Someone’s watching me. I know it.”

Dranko immediately hits himself with a quick-sober orison. “Ooooh,” he says, clutching his head for a moment. “Now I’ll need to get drunk all over again.” But thinking clearly now, he fires off a *detect magic*, looking all around Kibi for signs of a *scry* sensor. He detects nothing. “Are you sure about this?” he asks.

KidCthulhu: Quotes from the night of drunkenness:

- “I bet I could grab your steak from 10 feet away with my whip.” – Dranko
- “And I’d take it back with *mage hand*.” – Grey Wolf
- “I could roast it from 400 feet.” – Aravis
- “And I could ward mine with *searing darkness*.” – Morningstar (This was followed by wary silence. Morningstar is proclaimed the winner of the steak standoff.)
- “Ernie, you should cook more steaks.” – Flicker
- “Yeah, we should fight more cows!” – Ernie
- “Did I tell you that the Emperor is much more powerful than that dragon we fought?” – Aravis (for the fourth time)
- “Well, duh. ‘Cuz if the dragon was the Emperor, he’d be wearing a little crown.” – Ernie

It was really a silly run. We, the players, were practically tipsy with relief and triumph, so roleplaying drunk was pretty easy. But, as Aravis said, we had to do *something* during the session, because he wasn’t going home to his wife and telling her we’d spent five hours pretending to be drunk.

Piratecat: A great line from Morningstar when she decided to forego the midnight service in the temple of Ell, and hold one back at the Greenhouse instead: “Well, okay. We’ll hold one at home instead. But in order to simulate the sisters of my temple, you guys have to promise to be rude and snub me.”

"Yeah. It's... well, I don't know what it's like. But someone, somewhere, is watching me."

Dranko scrambles up a nearby building and surveys the surrounding rooftops. He sees no one.

"Hey, it stopped!" says Kibi.

With nothing else to do about it, the Company continue on to the Smoke House, the tavern and inn run by Flicker's parents. By the time they arrive, most of them have forgotten all about Kibi's mysterious watcher and are ready for more alcohol. Flicker stumbles through the door and waves at the people he knows.

Dranko realizes that Flicker is about to make a fool of himself in front of his parents. "Flicker, you're drunk as a skunk. Here." He hits the halfling with another quick-sober orison.

Flicker splutters, grips his head, and turns angrily on Dranko. "Why in the gods' names did you do that?"

"I didn't want your parents to see you drunk," says Dranko, taken aback.

"Oh, for crying out loud, Dranko! My parents run a frikkin' bar. You think they care if I'm drunk? Hey, Dad! Over here! I need a drink in the worst way. Hey, make it one for everyone, on me!"

Flicker's father comes over himself with a large tray of drinks. "You're in a good mood this evening, Flicker. Have any good news? We could all use some, these days."

"You bet!" says Flicker. "We won the war!"

"You what?"

"You heard me. We were there. Isn't that right, guys?"

"Darn right," says Dranko. "We were there at Verdshane. We fought there."

"We kicked Naradawk's ass," adds Ernie.

"Hard," says Grey Wolf.

"And it sounds like the Delfirians are retreating down south, too," says Flicker. "I'm sure you'll hear it officially soon enough, but we won! The war is over!"

Flicker's father jumps up on a table, which causes everyone to quiet down. "Attention, everyone," he says to the assembled patrons. "My son and his friends just came back from Verdshane. The war is over, and we won!"

The place goes berserk, and before another hour has passed, halflings are dancing and singing in the Smoke House as they haven't in many long weeks of worry. It's long after midnight when the Company stagger homeward to the Greenhouse for bed.



Kibi is the last one still awake. He's not so sloshed as the others; his dwarven constitution gives him a higher tolerance for his liquor. He's thinking about that feeling of being watched, how unnerving it was. It was like nothing he had ever...

It starts again. It's in the room, watching him. It's inside the Greenhouse! He shouts in alarm. "Hey! Guys! Help! I'm being watched again, right now! Hey!"

Dranko is the first to arrive. He's still plastered, but has a sudden insight. "I bet I know what it is. I bet it's Cranchus, spying on you. Who else but an archmage could watch you inside the house? Here, this'll make him stop watching." To Kibi's utter horror, Dranko drops his pants. He waggles his backside around, mooning "Cranchus," wherever he might be.

The others arrive a moment later, to find out why Kibi was calling for help. Ah. That's why. Dranko seems to be... er... "Dranko!" says Ernie. "Put your pants on this minute!"

"I'm mooning Cranchus," Dranko explains.

"Blinding him, more like," mutters Grey Wolf.

"And do you think that's a *smart* thing?" asks Morningstar, rolling her eyes.

"Er... I guess not..." He pulls up his trousers. "Hey, if an archmage was watching, I'll apologize later, I promise."

"There aren't any Archmagi left," reminds Kibi.

Quartermoon: I laughed so hard I scared the cats away.

Hey, isn't it about time plans began for a certain wedding?

Piratecat: Incidentally, I'm being maligned here. Dranko only dropped his trousers for perhaps fifteen or twenty seconds. He's not an exhibitionist or anything. Heh heh... mooned an archmage. If it *is* an archmage.

That sobers everyone up quick. “Kibi!” the rest of the Company shout almost as one. “Shhhhhh! We don’t talk about that, remember?”

Realizing his gaffe, Kibi turns a bright red. “I... um, sorry. Oops. Oh, I shouldn’t have said that. Anyway, as horrible as it was seeing Dranko’s bum, that wasn’t why I called for help. I was being watched again.”

“Here?” asks Aravis, alarmed. “In the Greenhouse?” Aravis casts *detect magic* and Morningstar casts *detect thoughts*, but neither of them pick up anything unexpected about the house, its magical wards, or the people inside. With nothing else to do, everyone goes back to sleep. Morningstar watches Kibi’s dreams later that night, and discovers that the dwarf is dreaming of being watched, by two small white pinprick eyes. It’s creepy.



Friday, September 14

The next morning, the Company wake to the sound of a town crier out in the street – news of the kingdom’s victories is at last being made public. Notices are being posted on the doors of shops that a victory parade and festival will be held two weeks hence.

Aravis wakes to find that he is idly scratching an itchy spot on his foot. He glances down to see that he has developed some sort of rash. He yawns, gets up, dresses, and goes in search of a cleric. Dranko prays for a *remove disease*, and the rash is healed. That seems innocuous enough, but Morningstar finds that she has a similar rash, on her elbow. As with Aravis, a *remove disease* takes care of it. They discuss the most likely causes, and decide that they must have picked up something in the forest during the battle.

After breakfast, Kibi goes down to the basement to get working on his *vest of dwarf preserving*, a magical vest that will combine the effects of *water walking* and *familiar pocket* as a safety measure for himself and Scree in the event of a teleportational water landing. After about an hour of work he realizes that he’s being watched again. He looks around curiously, but again no one is there. “Er... hello?”

Nothing.

“I’m just working on this vest,” he explains to the watcher. He holds it up. “Teleporting in an island kingdom can be risky.”

Nothing.

“I’ll just get back to work then, OK?” For another few minutes he senses eyes watching him – two small white eyes. He calls for Morningstar, who casts *detect thoughts* on him again. Nothing unusual is discovered. Kibi tries not to become unnerved, and eventually the eyes stop their strange scrutiny.



Saturday, September 15 – Sunday, September 16

For the next couple of days the Company take care of random business. Morningstar arranges for Swan to deliver a full report on the Dreamscape battle to the High Priestess Rhiavonne. Ernie is asked (not surprisingly) to help out in the kitchens at the temple of Yondalla, as they prepare for the upcoming festival day. He invents a new spicy cookie recipe which he dubs “Nifi Cookies.” Dranko returns to the home where he first lived after leaving the church, a run down rental unit still presided over by his old landlady, **Berthel Jugglegut**. In a fit of overwhelming charity he pays off her own rental of the house for the next fifty years, assuring that she’ll never want for anything again. She is overwhelmed by the gesture, and celebrates with a bottle of traditionally cheap wine that Dranko has thoughtfully provided.

Also during this time, Aravis again finds he has contracted a spot of rash. Suspecting something sinister, Kibi casts *detect magic* and discovers that the irritation is faintly magical. Hmm. Just to be on the safe side, Morningstar casts a *sending* to Corporal Edridge:

Edridge, it’s Morningstar. We are experiencing a slightly magical rash. Anyone else in Verdshane having trouble? It’s dumb, but we’re checking.

No, no rash outbreak. Perhaps you contracted it from that corpse in your room? Will inform Anabrook, just in case.



Monday, September 17

On the 17th day of September, a small box is delivered to the Greenhouse, along with a fancy parchment bearing the royal seal. Ernie gathers the Company together in the living room and reads the scroll.

To the occupants of the Greenhouse, a.k.a. Abernathy's Company, Ozilinsh's Company, and the Heroes of the Kalkas Peaks:

By the decree of His Royal Majesty, King Crunard IV of Charagan, you are hereby granted full deed and title to Longtooth Keep, hill-fort of the Norlin Hills. A sum of five thousand gold crowns will be made available to assist you in the rebuilding, maintenance and upkeep of the Keep; this money can be collected at the bursary of Hae Kalkas.

The Keep and its properties shall be your collective and autonomous responsibility; in addition to the grounds within its outer wall, it encompasses all land within one mile of its center, including all roads, way stations and guard-posts. Right of Taxation still falls to Lady Rose Wymar of Hafast, and although Longtooth will not fall under her direct political or economic influence, you will be expected to maintain a mutually agreeable relationship with the local nobility.

Also, it has been decided that a new Rank and Order shall be created within the Kingdom of Charagan, in recognition of services rendered both past and future. These persons shall be titled as members of the Spire Guard. As such, their responsibilities are: to protect the Kingdom from all known threats of an unusual or arcane nature; and to investigate possible sites or occurrences that could comprise or become such a threat.

Herein is official notice that Spire Guard titles are hereby conferred upon:

Sir Iwellios Forester; Dame Morningstar of Ell; Sir Flicker Proudfoot; General Kay Olafsen; Sir Dranko Blackhope of Delioch; Sir Ernest Roundhill of Pondalla; Sir Kibilhathur Bimson; Sir Aravis Telmir. One Certain Step, in light of outstanding service, is granted similar rank and title for as long as he wishes to maintain residence within the borders of Charagan.

Know that these same titles have also been conferred upon: Sir Royce Tillman; Dame Glade Silvermorne; Sir Wellington Chandler; Sir Jerzembeck Fletcher; Dame Junaya Fletcher; Sir Cavrius Smith; Sir Keez'k'r Red-tooth; Dame Wynalda Farrier; Sir Attrius Cromwell; Dame Portia Oakshade.

All insignia and documents accompany this letter.

With great appreciation and thanks,

His Royal Majesty,

King Crunard IV of Charagan.



There is much rejoicing.

The Company have visited Longtooth Keep once before. It was there that they fought a skeleton being animated by one of the Eyes of Moirel (one of the Eyes now in the basement of the Greenhouse). It was there that Sagiro Emberleaf seemed to meet his end. And it was there that the Eye-in-skull uttered the surprising words: "Ernest, how nice to see you again." Then, to Kibi: "Bimson, my regards to your Grandfather."

Wolfspirit: Heh, I would rejoice at the titles, but not the keep. Maybe I'm just cynical and paranoid, but: (a) it's a responsibility, (b) it's a vulnerability, and (c) it's a plot-hook.

They've now got to be responsible for the running of a *keep*. I'm betting a good part of that money is going to be put into hiring some people to care for it, especially the day-to-day stuff. And since they can't tax, all that money will be coming out-of-pocket eventually. Yeah, they got 5K, but that might go quick, depending on what happens there in the near future.

They've also got a nice "hit me" sign. The Greenhouse is pretty much as safe as you can get, but if the party starts spending time there, their enemies will eventually know. Also, they're going to have to split time between world-saving and making sure the keep is safe. I guess with their teleportation abilities at this point it's not such a big deal, but it might be a concern.

The most scary thing is that the DM *gave* them a keep. A keep with history, and near where one of their enemies *supposedly* died. I'd be nervous.

Piratecat: Not only that, but we've got two or three big mansions back in Kallor (the city of shadow), the ones with the Grey Wolf-slaying black ritual space underneath them. There we hired the captain of the city guard to live in one of the three, and watch the other two. It seemed like an equitable solution. We'll probably do something similar with Castle Blackhope... er, Longtooth Keep. It's cool to own real estate, but the Greenhouse is much cozier – and safer.

Kaodi: As always, a wonderful Story Hour! I think we all have a good guess at a bit of what's coming next, and I'm certainly looking forward to it. You and *Piratecat* certainly have the knack for arousing curiosity and suspense.

Piratecat: So, I'm curious. What do you think is coming next?

Waylander the Slayer: Here is my guess:

1. Aravis finds out that there is no such thing as the Crosser's Maze. It is just the fantasy equivalent of Prozac for insane mages.
2. Dranko learns that the "scrying eyes" belong to Parthol Runecarver. Unfortunately for Dranko, PR has a fetish for hairy half-orc booties.
3. Eddings quits because he has secretly been in love with Morningstar and just cannot stand the fact that Dranko is getting married to her.
4. Parthol turns out to be Abernathy.
5. Dranko has his tongue stuck to PR after trying to lick him during combat. PR's extensive studies on the Company had prepared him well for this dastardly strategy; and he *likes* it.

Caliber: I'm surprised you didn't pick up on all the hints that Parthol is the one with the tongue attack.



Run #141 – ?January, 2003

The Return of the King

Tuesday, September 18 – Thursday, September 20

More days pass. Kibi continues to fall under the unsettling observation of the eyes in his head; they come and go without any pattern. Scree sees them as well but doesn't seem particularly alarmed. They don't seem threatening to the familiar, though like Kibi, he'd like to know what they are. The dwarf takes to talking to the eyes when they watch, keeping up an idle, friendly chatter. They do not respond.

Different members of the Company come down with the "mystery rash," though *remove disease* spells are always efficacious. Before long almost everyone has contracted at least a small patch of the itchy skin condition; only Kibi, One Certain Step and Skorg remain uninfected.

Aravis and Kibi use their free time to train, while others busy themselves making magic items or running various errands. Those in the Company with family start making arrangements for their relatives to come to Tal Hae for the Sealing Day festival and parade.

Friday, September 21

Four days after the Company were named as Spire Guard, there is a knock on the door of the Greenhouse in the early evening. The Company are just sitting down to dinner, and Eddings applies the Light Treatment to the visitor. They hear a familiar voice, gruff, punctuated by porcine grunts.

"There is a... man... named Snokas at the door," announces Eddings. "He wishes to speak with Morningstar."

Morningstar stands immediately. "Let him in, please." She walks into the living room to meet the half-orc Snokas.

Flashback: Snokas is from Kivia, a mercenary who was hired by Lapis (who in turn had been hired by 'P') and then taken prisoner by the Company. Minotaurs in the Crosser's Maze killed him, but the party brought his body back with them to Charagan, where Morningstar raised him from the dead. He was sent on a Holy Quest after his raising, and made his way alone through the Delfirian army back to Kivia. There he made contact with Evenstar, telling the old priestess that the time had come for the telling battle in *Ava Dormo*. Then he had been assigned as a bodyguard for an Ellish emissary to the Bederen War Council, an emissary whose success has seemingly contributed to the withdrawal of Delfirian forces from Charagan.

And now he's back.

He wears chainmail that is flat black. "Snokas," says Morningstar, at a loss. "What are you... I mean, how did you get here?"

"Priestess," says the half-orc. "I have come back to serve you. I pledge my weapons and my life to your service and the service of our goddess Ell."

Morningstar looks shocked. Dranko looks miffed – suddenly there's one too many half-orcs in Morningstar's life.

"I don't understand..." begins Morningstar.

"I was on my way back to my tribe," says Snokas, "when I was struck by a vision. There were a series of images, each crystal clear, more real than any dream. I saw myself traveling back through the Delfirian archway, disguised. I saw myself worshiping in the great wooden temple of Ell. And I saw all of you... all of us... standing around... around *him*." He points at Kibi.

"We were in this very house, and Kibi was holding two large gems, one in each hand. Then the visions faded, and I found that my armor and picks had become blackened. It was a sign from the goddess, I knew in my heart. I should come back to your kingdom and travel the path that your Company treads. If you'll have me."

Morningstar takes a deep breath. "Of course we will. We don't know exactly where that will be, but we will welcome your help."

Kibi grumbles to himself. "Just what we need... more orcish blood in the party. No one ever asks *me* who gets to be one of the gang. Hrumph."



Saturday, September 22

The next morning, over breakfast, Dranko speaks aloud a suspicion he's been having. "I think that Cranchus is Parthol," he announces.

Kibi looks aghast. "Cranchus is a dwarf! And he's one of the Archmagi. He can't be Parthol!"

"Why not?" asks Dranko. "Think about it. He's been around forever, but none of the other Archmagi seem to know anything about him. And it's too convenient that he's the only one who didn't get life-drained by Aravis."

"We could ask Ozilinsh," suggests Ernie. After the meal they go up to the secret room and activate the crystal ball. Before too long, Ozilinsh's face appears. Dranko explains his theory.

"Nonsense!" concludes Ozilinsh. "Parthol cannot be acting overtly. We've been watching for him."

"You didn't catch his *simulacra*," Dranko observes.

"That's different. Look, we've been in contact with Cranchus off and on over the years. He's helped us. If he's Parthol, why would he have helped us defeat Naradawk?"

"First of all," says Dranko, "you've been in contact with someone who *claims* to be Cranchus. If none of you has actually seen him, he could be anyone. And secondly, hasn't everything worked out pretty much as Parthol would have wanted?" He doesn't speak aloud the fact of the Archmagi's reduction in power.

"If that were true," says Ozilinsh, "then why isn't he attacking us right now, when we're most vulnerable? And besides, Parthol couldn't have known that Aravis would use the Maze in the manner that he did, unless he had prescience even greater than Abernathy's. And there's nothing in Parthol's past that suggests any such thing."

"Just like there was nothing to indicate he would betray your order?"

Ozilinsh sighs. "If it will make you feel better, Dranko, I'll bring your concern before the other Archmagi. Would that satisfy you?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Good. Now, if you'll excuse me?" The crystal ball goes dead.

"You'd think that with everything that's happened, the frikkin' archmages would be more paranoid," grumbles Dranko.



Sunday, September 13 – Tuesday, September 25

More days pass, and the day of the parade and festival draws near. Extra travel arrangements are made and verified to get the Company's families to Tal Hae. (You can almost hear the *sendings* zipping through the ether.) Grey Wolf's siblings won't be able to make it, but Ernie's, Kibi's and Morningstar's parents are expected, along with Dranko's grandfather and most of Kay's family.

On September 25th, fifteen days after the closure of the planar *gate*, soldiers start returning to Tal Hae in great numbers. Soon the city is flooded with war heroes, and the churches are overwhelmed with men and women still in need of healing. The three

party clerics spend the day tending to the injured. The rest of the Company expect to see Marbury Tillerson returning with the other soldiers, but night falls and the stars come out without a visit from their long-time friend. Morningstar tries a *sending* to him, but there is no response. "He could be sleeping," suggests Flicker.

"Or dead," says Grey Wolf, sighing.

Wednesday, September 26

The next day, their fears on that count are confirmed. Spence, their liaison to the city guard after Marbury was assigned, shows up in the morning bearing a parcel tied up in string. "I'm sorry to be bringing you sad news," he says, "but the guys at the barracks said you'd be the ones to bring this to, seeing as he had no family. Marbury Tillerson was killed in battle at Verdshane. He's already been buried, as I understand it. I got his belongings here for you." He hands the parcel off to Ernie, and leaves, glum.

Marbury didn't have much to his name – some clothes, a small pouch of coins, some simple cookware and a few other oddments. Flicker discovers a small tied sketchbook tucked into the clothes, and starts flipping through it. "Hey, I didn't know Tillerson could draw. He's... he was pretty good! Here's a picture of the marketplace. And here's one of the docks and the ocean down by the temple of Brechen. And here's..."

Flicker stares down at one of the sketches. His lip starts to quiver, and a tear rolls down his cheek. He holds out the drawing for the others to see – it's a group portrait of the Company, all of them smiling, with Tillerson himself included in the group, grinning along with the rest of them.

Ernie says quietly, "I think we should have a pie in his honor. He was a good man who died fighting for his king. And he loved pie."



Throughout the rest of the day, family arrives. Kibi proudly brings his parents from Eggemoggin via *teleport*, secure in knowing that his new magical vest will allow him to instantly cast *water walk* in an emergency. Morningstar's parents and Kay's family arrive by ship, while Ernie's parents and Dranko's grandfather roll up in covered wagons.

By early evening all have arrived, and the Company give them a tour of the Greenhouse, showing them everything except the basement laboratory and the secret room behind the bookshelf.

Kibi's dad gets straight to the point, asking his son where the distillery is set up. Morningstar's father and Ernie's parents spend almost an hour goggling at the trophies in the living room case.

"Who'd think there were creatures with tentacles that long?"

"That's quite an impressive pelt!"

"Eeeeeeee."

"I hope there was only one of those."

"Is that a tooth?"

Flicker, not hip to the plan, pipes up, "Hey, maybe we should show them the basement!"

"No, it's too dangerous," Grey Wolf quickly interjects.

"We won't touch the evil stuff," assures Kibi's dad.

"Heeee, look how late it is!" says Morningstar. "I think we should take you to the inn where you'll be staying. We've gotten you very nice rooms. You'll love it!"



Thursday, September 27 – Friday, September 28

The morning of the parade comes, with a warm sun shining in a clear sky. Everywhere around Tal Hae are hung banners in the red and gold of the Crown. Halfling stalls sponsored by the Church of Yondalla are already handing out food along many of the main streets along the parade route. Papers have been posted all over town, inviting the citizenry out for a grand day of merrymaking and celebration. (There are also notices that soldiers returning from the war, and who might have trouble finding work, can report to various centers for assignments to public works jobs, most notably the rebuilding of Calnis.)

The Company drop off the family en route to the ducal palace, where they are headed for the start of the parade. They make sure all the parents and grandparents and siblings get front row positions.

All of the Company are dressed splendidly in their royal uniforms, except for Morningstar who has donned her formal Ellish robes. "Dranko," she chides, "I thought you'd be wearing Deliochan attire."

"Well... um... but, er, don't I look good in this uniform?" offers Dranko weakly.

Morningstar stares him down until he is shamed into changing. And a few minutes after that the parade begins, with royal guards on stallions and a dozen trumpeters leading the cavalcade.

The Company are arrayed on several open horse-drawn carriages, riding up high where all can see them. The parade route is lined with thousands of citizens, cheering madly. Word has spread that the Company are great adventurers who were instrumental in defeating the enemies of the kingdom; flowers and copper pieces rain down upon them.

Finally the slowly rolling cart rolls past where the various Company family members are watching, smiling and waving. Ernie's mom waves vigorously, and then starts motioning frantically, with a big grin on her face, for Ernie to hop down off the cart and come over. Ernie waves back happily, but soon realizes that Mom must have something important to say, so he climbs down from the cart and jogs over to her. "Hi, Mom!" he says cheerily. "Having fun?"

"I sure am!" his mom replies. "But I have something important to tell you... Come here..." Ernie steps closer, expecting his mom to impart some motherly advice about his clothes or dietary habits.

"Now, Ernest," says his mom in a low voice, "I want you to stay calm. Please don't become alarmed, since I just want to talk to you... *but I'm actually King Farazil.*"

Samnell: That's just not right.

Destil: Sagiro is a bad, bad man.

Ancalagon: Eeeeeeeeeeeeeep!!! Does this mean that Ernie's mom is gone forever? Or can the Soul Eater "release" her?

wolf96: Snokas comes back. He sees Kibi (the pivot, IIRC) holding the two stones. Methinks the party is going to be "traveling nowhere" before too much longer.

I also think that Sagiro has an awesome ability to draw minor things back into the Story Hour... Snokas's return, Tillerson, and even King Farazil... I think Sagiro is the King of Continuity. Not to mention the biggest rat bastard DM on the block...

coyote6: D'oh! You had to know something was coming – after all, it's traditional in big epics for Bad Things to happen after the heroes win a big victory in mid-epic – but the specifics look like they were a surprise. Did the Company forget to apply the Light Treatment to the families, or did the King get Mom at the inn?

Piratecat: You'll see. Whimper.

Quartermoon: Don't mess with mommies, Sagiro. Just don't. We know where it hurts.

Zaruthstran: Wow. I was squirming as I read the post – like the others, I figured Something Bad was coming. But boy oh boy, I didn't expect something *that* bad. Did Sagiro do a scary voice for that italicised bit?

Ernie's eyes go wide in surprised horror. He is *not* calm, and he is very alarmed. "YOU GET OUT OF MY MOTHER!" he screams, groping in his pocket for his *continual flame* coin.

"Don't worry," says the voice of Ernie's mom, cheerily. "I'm no longer trying to kill you."

Ernie's father looks over in surprise. Granted, there's a lot of general din including some screaming, but... did he hear Ernie correctly? "Dear, is everything all right?" Dranko, seeing the drastic change in Ernie's expression, comes over to see what's going on.

"Dad," says Ernie between clenched teeth. "I need to be alone with Mom for a minute. Why don't you go visit with Morningstar's parents?"

"Ernest, are you sure that..."

"Dad... Please... go... stand... over... there." Dranko gives Ernie a puzzled look. Ernie mouths, "Farazil."

Dranko's eyebrows shoot up. He puts his arm around Ernie's father and strikes up a conversation, leading him gently away. Then he takes out the *mirror of whispers* and sends a message to Morningstar. "Farazil is in Ernie's mom's body. He hasn't tried anything yet, though."

"Shit," utters Morningstar. She starts casting *detect thoughts*.

Ernie turns back to his mother, and speaks in a voice that is tightly calm. "I said, you get out of my mother's body right now."

"Oh, I will in just a moment. I simply wanted to convey a message, and needed to do it in a way such that you wouldn't try anything... rash."

“Then say what you want to say, and get out.”

“OK... fine. Two things, mostly. One, like I said, I’m no longer trying to kill you. My contract is finished. And two, I want to talk about a... possible business arrangement that would be to all of our benefits.”

“We’re not talking about anything,” says Ernie hotly, “while you’re possessing my mother. If you really want to talk, meet us at the Rusty Bucket tomorrow, and not inhabiting the body of any of our families.”

“That sounds fine, under two conditions,” says Farazil. “One, we set the meeting for noon. And two, you promise me right now, on Yondalla’s good name, that you won’t try setting an ambush or any other treachery.”

“Fine. I promise those things, as long as you also don’t try anything. But if you give us any provocation, all deals are off.”

“Wonderful!” says Farazil. “I really have no further desire to antagonize you. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon then. Bring as many of your friends as you’d like.”

And Ernie’s mom suddenly faints, falling backward into the crowded row of parade watchers behind her. A number of townsfolk move to help her up. “Ernest?” she says, blinking. “Oh my! I must have fainted from all the excitement. Don’t look so concerned! I’m still having a wonderful time.”

“OK, Mom.” Ernie turns away from his mom and rejoins the parade before she can fully register the angry frustration on his face.



The parade comes to an end that afternoon; the Company retire to the Greenhouse where they put on a calm collective face to their families. No mention is made of the “incident” with Farazil. After a meal largely courtesy of Eddings and the magical Icebox, the guests depart for a final night at their inn. (Most of them are leaving on ships or carriages the following morning. Kibi plans on returning his ship-phobic parents by *teleport*.)

The Company spend an hour or two before bed discussing tomorrow’s meeting with King Farazil. Ernie is still fuming, and has all sorts of violent and treacherous suggestions that he knows deep down would make Yondalla pretty mad at him.

Everyone is curious as to what made Farazil call off his contract on their lives, what he wants to bargain for, and (worryingly) what he might have to bargain with. They agree that treachery on Farazil’s part is more than likely. A *continual flame* coin will be in every pocket, just in case.

Saturday, September 29

The Rusty Bucket is a tavern of low means two blocks in from the harborside. At noon it is typically full of tooth-challenged mariners, itinerant dock workers and the occasional priest of Brechen making the rounds among his flock. Today is no different; the Company filter into the noisy, smoky commons, drawing a few stares by dint of being fully armed. A small group of soldiers in the corner raise their mugs to the Company, perhaps recognizing them from the parade. Only Flicker waves back; the others are looking to see who in this crowded tavern might be Farazil.

A man is waving to them from near to the center of the room. It’s their tall, white-haired navigator, Sutton, with a big grin on his face and (somehow) two tables all to himself. Dranko grimaces; it had to be someone they knew, didn’t it? The Company wend their way through the crowd until they reach Sutton’s table, and they sit, nervously.

“Next time,” says Dranko, “you don’t show up wearing the body of anyone we know.”

“It’s just a sensible precaution,” says Farazil. “It has occurred to me that you might set up an ambush. Anyway, I’m glad you all could make it! Would you like to order drinks before we get down to business?”

“Just get to the point,” says Ernie. “Why don’t you start with giving us at least one reason why we shouldn’t kill you right now.”

“You mean besides your promise to Yondalla?”

Plane Sailing: Amongst many wonderful lines, I wanted to draw attention to this one. I do so enjoy urbane villains!

Ernie seethes. Farazil continues. “I assume you all have your little light stones ready in case I try anything?” He leans forward and whispers conspiratorially, “It’s a good idea, but it wouldn’t work. It would make me uncomfortable, but it would hardly be sufficient for what you hope would happen. But I know it’s made you feel better, shining a little light in everyone’s eyes when they come to your house. And even just *feeling* secure has value, right?”

He carefully watches the expressions of the Company. Do they believe him? At least one person winces instinctively at the thought that all of their light-testing of guests has been for naught.

"How about you don't give us a reason to find out," suggests Aravis.

"Fair enough," says Farazil, smiling.

"Before we go any further," says Morningstar, "I don't suppose you'd have any objection to a spell that would verify that you're telling the truth?"

"No, of course not. I don't object. For once, complete honesty will serve me the best in a haggling session, and I'm sure it will make you feel better. I promise not to resist the spell. Go ahead."

Morningstar casts *zone of truth*. "Try lying," she says.

"I am the Ki... I am King Cr... My name is not Far... hmm. Well, it's working insofar as I cannot lie about my own name. So now I have neither the desire nor the ability to lie. Happy?" (At the tables nearest to their own, conversations start to falter and break up, as people come to realize that lies simply won't come out of their mouths. Within minutes every table inside the spell's range has emptied.)

"You were saying, then?" prods Ernie.

"Ah, yes. Well, let me start out by telling all of you what I told Ernie yesterday. I don't want to kill you anymore. That particular contract is no longer in force."

"Not that we're not delighted," says Grey Wolf dryly, "but why is that?"

"I reached a deal with my former employer," says Farazil. "Technically, we had come to a verbal agreement after I locked you up in God's Thorn. We both agreed that your imprisonment was as good as, if not better than, an actual killing of your bodies. When it turned out that you had escaped, my employer – I'll just call that person 'he,' though I make no assurances as to his or her gender – was somewhat put out. We... went back over the wording of the original contract, and reached a deal in which he would not attempt to hold me further."

"Who was your employer?" many of the Company ask at once.

"I cannot tell you. That was part of my end of the bargain. I will not divulge any piece of information about him; not his name, his whereabouts, or his affiliations. But since that's not germane to this meeting, I think we can just drop the subject."

"Fine," says Dranko. "So how about you tell us about what it is you want."

"I want to help you," says Farazil, "as part of an exchange of favors. For my part, what I'm willing to give you is my services as a professional."

"You're an assassin!" cries Ernie. "Why would we possibly want that?"

"Assassin?" says Farazil in an injured tone. "Hardly. That's such a limited role. Yes, I can kill people, and yes, I'm very good at it, and yes, I take pride in my work. But for our purposes, say instead that I am an investigator who could also kill someone if called upon."

"We can find out information ourselves when we need it," says Morningstar. "I don't see what we would gain from hiring you."

"I'm sure you're very good," says Farazil, taking a swig from his mug of beer. "But you're not as good as I am. You can't be. Think about what I am! I can infiltrate in ways that you humans never could. I can read minds more reliably and with greater facility than even you Ellish priestesses. For instance, I know that you are currently worried about a certain red-armored escapee from the recent fracas up in Verdshane. His name is Tarsos. You want very much to know where he is. You have no leads at the moment, and neither do any of your allies."

Farazil leans forward again. "But I have leads. And if we reach an agreement, I will follow up on those leads, and before too long I guarantee I can provide you with Tarsos' current address. How does that sound?"

He sits back and watches the Company digest his offer. Eventually Aravis lets out a long sigh. "I hate to ask this, but go on... what is it that you'd want in return?"

"Nothing as grim or expensive as I'm sure you expect," answers Farazil. "What I want is this: to be granted full citizenship in your Kingdom of Charagan, with all of the rights and duties implied thereby... and with a chance to start afresh, from a criminal record standpoint. In return for this, I would offer my services to your King Crunard, to serve in whatever investigatory capacity he wishes. Given the mess that needs to be cleaned up after your little war with Naradawk Skewn, I'd expect he'd be thrilled to hire someone of my unique talents."

The Company exchange startled glances. This sure wasn't anything like what they expected! "But... no!" says Kibi. "The King wouldn't hire you. You're a murderer!"

"Nonsense," says Farazil. "I'm a mercenary. I am hired to perform jobs, and I do them. I try to enjoy them as well as I can, and I strive to do my best, even when performing under duress as with my last employer. Sometimes those jobs involve killing or otherwise inconveniencing my boss's enemies. Isn't that exactly what you do for your archmage patron? How many intelligent creatures have you killed, simply because they have goals that conflict with those of your employer?"

"He has a point," says Kay.

"But he's evil!" says Ernie. Everyone instinctively looks at One Certain Step, who nods, frowning.

"Evil," says Farazil, shaking his head. "It's so subjective. But I'll bet a quarter of the people in this tavern are evil too, aren't they, paladin of Kemma? So what? You don't think King Crunard has evil people in his employ at this very moment, performing vital but unsavory tasks for the greater good? Don't kid yourself. And right now I'm the least of a whole slew of evils besetting your fair kingdom. I'd like to help you fight them."

"But why?" asks Morningstar. "I don't understand what's in it for you. Even if you could somehow be made a citizen of Charagan, so what? You're eager to pay taxes?"

"I'm not sure you'll understand," says Farazil in a softer voice than before. "But it's largely symbolic. I want to belong somewhere. To be a part of something, part of a group. My existence is not like yours. I have no friends. No permanent home. No identity outside of myself. I'm... lonely. The creatures of the Plane of Shadow are petty at best, mindless at worst. I loathe the place. I so much prefer the company of real, solid humanoids. It would have a great meaning to me to think that I was part of a whole kingdom of people, recognized officially as one of them."

The skepticism around the table is palpable. Farazil sighs. "If you need a reason more in sync with your prejudices, consider this: my last employer had me trapped in a bottle, and only released me by forcing me to agree to kill you. I don't like him. And it is not breaking my agreement to say that my old employer and your King Crunard are somewhat at odds. I wish to play for your team. Is that better?"

"Even if we accept your reasons," says Aravis, "there are some logistical problems to solve. For starters, you don't have a body. And if you're going to be a citizen of this kingdom, you can't go around possessing people."

"I don't have a choice in that," says Farazil. "I cannot interact in any other way. But I have anticipated the question. When not on duty, I would propose to inhabit the body of some criminal who would otherwise be put to death. That way your king could keep track of me when he wanted to, to make sure I wasn't up to any mischief. I would subject myself to any truth magic that would allay fears of treachery."

"Speaking of which," says Morningstar. "What about Naboz? We've read about him. I believe the quote from the author was: '...capable of nearly infinite malice.'"

"Naboz," says Farazil, clucking his tongue. "Yes, he got what was coming to him, didn't he? He always was the bad seed. A born troublemaker from the start. And it wasn't bad enough the mischief he got into on his own account. We all ended up painted with the same brush! Look, the Carch-Din are no different than you humans in that respect; some of us are worse than others. I shouldn't judge you by the actions of... of Meledien, or of Parthol Runecarver, right? Then I ask you not to judge me by the stupid antics of Naboz. And besides, his actions got him killed."

"How did they kill him?" asks Dranko.

"I'm certainly not going to discuss that," says Farazil, smiling. "But it was a nice try."

There is a long silence, while Farazil takes a long pull at his mug. "You have my offer then," he says at last. "You get me granted full citizenship in the kingdom of Charagan. You at least convey to King Crunard that I am willing to work for him as a master spy, though that is not a necessary part of the bargain. And you agree that I will be free of persecution by you or anyone else acting in an official capacity. In return, I at very least find out for you where Tarsos is hiding out, and possibly end up serving as a valuable source of intelligence for years to come."

"We'll have to make some inquiries," says Morningstar. "We can't just give you citizenship ourselves."

"Of course," smiles Farazil. "Why don't we agree to meet here again, in a week's time. You advocate my offer to the powers that be, and in the meantime I'll start hunting up information about Tarsos. If we can come to an agreement when next we

meet, I'll share with you everything I've learned. And in anticipation that our next meeting will be fruitful, I'd best get started in my sleuthing."

Sutton stands up. "It has been a pleasure talking with you in such a friendly atmosphere. I'm glad I'm no longer bound to kill you. You've always seemed like nice people. One week from today, right here. In a body that none of you know." He turns his back on the Company and walks through the crowd to the door, shaking hands and patting acquaintances on the back all the way out.

RangerWickett: ... I kinda wish Farazil had been Turlus.

thatdarncat: Of course, if I was Farazil and I really wanted to make an impression, I'd show up riding Tarsos' body.

KidCthulhu: Ah, but then we'd just kill Tarsos, and leave Ferris Wheel (as we like to call him) to whistle for a body. His only negotiating point has always been that he seizes bodies we don't want to harm, like friends, parents or innocent bystanders. Tarsos would be like a present. Kill the body, bug the Carch-Din. It's a win-win.

Fade: I think I've run out of words to describe how much of a rat-bastard Sagiro is. "Stop acting reasonable! You're meant to be a villain, dammit!"

Zaruthustran: Exactly. Nothing like an evil monster that is perfectly reasonable, and even shames you into feeling like the bad guy. Nice work, Sagiro!

MavrickWeirdo: This is a tradition of Sagiro's. The way the players tell the difference between allies and enemies: allies are mean to them, enemies are very polite (with the exception of evil bakers).

Back at the Greenhouse, the Company explode into heated discussion. None of them believe that Farazil has told them the whole truth. Why does he really want citizenship? What actually occurred to terminate his contract on their lives? Who might his previous employer/master have been? And what are they going to do about it now?

"We should tell the Duke," says Morningstar.

"Yeah," says Ernie. "We did promise Farazil we'd see about getting him citizenship, and make his offer to be a royal spy."

"I was more thinking that we needed to warn him Farazil was still alive and at large," says Morningstar. "We can tell him what Farazil asked for, but there's no way the Duke, let alone King Crunard, would accept his service."

"Don't be so sure," says Dranko. "I'll bet His Majesty wants to know where Tarsos is almost as much as we do."

"I'll go see about setting up a meeting then," says Kay. She puts on her royal uniform and heads out the door.

A few minutes later, while the others are still debating the soul eater's motives, the crystal ball starts to keen. It's Ozilinsh on a non-emergency call. "Friends," he says, "and Dranko in particular. After your concerns about Cranchus being Parthol, I made numerous inquiries on the subject, polling other Archmagi and hearing their recollections. Fylnius is old enough to remember Parthol, and he assures me that the Archmagi's first dealings with Cranchus occurred before Parthol was even born! I hope that puts to rest your notions that they are the same person."

Dranko puts his hand to his chin. "How do you know that Parthol didn't kill Cranchus somewhere along the line, and take his place?"

Ozilinsh lets out an exaggerated breath. "Dranko, I put your theory to each archmage. Every one of them discounts it. All of them who had dealings with Cranchus feel that he is... differently schooled than the rest of us. He is a powerful wizard, but he does not fit into our paradigms of learning. Parthol may have been corrupted, but he was provably one of us. And there are nuances of magical communication that would have revealed treachery, if Cranchus were actually Parthol in disguise. Alykeen and Koenig both agree that it would have sent Abernathy's prescience into hysterics at the very least. You'll just have to trust us on this one, OK?"

Dranko reluctantly agrees to let the theory drop.



Sunday, September 30

During breakfast the next morning, the eyes are back, watching Kibi in his head. The dwarf instinctively snaps his head up and looks around. The eyes are like two small white gemstones shining in his peripheral vision. Aravis notices. "Eyes again?"

"Yup."

"Anything new with them?"

"Nope."

They still seem okay to me, says Scree to Kibi. *I don't think they're evil, or have any ill intentions.*

Kibi finishes off his plate. "I had a nice breakfast," he says conversationally, addressing the eyes. As always, they don't answer.

The Company spend the late morning divvying up magic items, including the ones recently claimed as swag from the Verdshane battlefield. Dranko grabs the *ring of djinni summoning*, which he has been itching to try.

"I'm gonna give this thing a whirl," he says, and before anyone can stop him, he puts it on and wills a genie to exist.

Seconds later a fine blue mist starts to pour from the ring's blue stone, a mist that rapidly thickens into a vortex of indigo smoke. From within the blue cloud a glistening blue torso emerges, and within a few seconds an entire genie has coalesced in the living room of the Greenhouse. His body below the waist is swirling vapor; his upper half is a deep blue color. (All are instantly put in mind of Oa-Lyanna, whose appearance is similar.) He wears only a golden silken vest around his muscled chest, and a simple silver circlet around his bald head. A gaudy gold ring dangles from his right ear.

His expression is surprising. The djinn has its mouth open and is staring intently, as if he had just a moment ago been examining his teeth in a mirror. Realizing where he is, the djinn quickly regains his composure, though he doesn't bother masking a brief expression of annoyance. He dips his upper body in a graceful bow, and in a deep stentorian voice laced with... sarcasm?... he intones: "And how may I serve you today, my master? As always I am... Wait a minute! You are not Ramad!"

This is so cool! thinks Dranko. The others stand around, agog. "Ramad is no longer your master," says Dranko, standing forth and trying to sound at ease. "I'm the new owner of the ring."

"Ah," bellows the djinn. "I see. And you are...?"

"I am Sir Dranko Blackhope."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," remarks the djinn, making it clear that this is far from true. "My name is **Al Tarqoz**, and I am at your disposal, my new and no doubt most wise master. How..." (and he draws out the word "how" in a most aggrieved fashion) "...may I serve you?"

"Er... why don't you tell us? What can you do?"

"Do?" Al Tarqoz sighs, as though he's been asked this question innumerable times in his life. "I can do many things. I can cook an exquisite meal in short order. I can operate a business efficiently. I can play the pipes passably well if called upon. Ah..." he holds up his hand. "But your question does not concern these mundane trifles, of course. You wish to know what magical skills I have which you may command me to use."

"Ask him if he grants wishes," whispers Flicker.

"My master," says Al Tarqoz, "You may inform your small friend that I am perfectly capable of being spoken to directly by anyone present."

"Well, do you?" asks Dranko. "Grant wishes?"

The djinn snorts derisively. "If I had the power to invoke magics on that scale, do you think for one moment that I would still be bound up to a piece of jewelry such that anyone could summon me to a far-off plane for aid, even when I am in the midst of attending to my personal hygiene? No, I do not grant wishes. Nor do I bring the dead to life, shoot fire from my eyes, or command the whirlwind. The magics at my command are more modest. Once each day I can create fresh, clean water, or wine of any number of delightful vintages. I can create small and simple items of a wide variety. Furthermore, I can conjure illusions of an exceedingly believable nature. And I can turn myself and half a dozen others into misty vapors that can travel at astonishingly fast speeds. Do you wish me to invoke any of these spells at this time, my master?"

"Uh, no, not just now," says Dranko, grinning.

"Then what, might I inquire, was the reason for your summoning me on this occasion?"

"Nothing in particular. We just wanted to meet you."

"I see. 'Nothing in particular.' Perhaps it did not occur to you, oh wise and benevolent master, that I come from a place, a house of my own in the City of Brass. In the afternoons I run my trade as a silk merchant. In the evenings I enjoy festivals, dancing, drinking, and the company of my fellows."

"But you still have to serve whoever holds the ring," says Dranko. "Who right now is me."

"Dranko!" hisses Ernie, appalled. One Certain Step looks away, uncomfortable.

"Er," continues Dranko, "I think we can promise you that we'll only summon you when we're in great need of your services, Al Tarqoz."

"My master is the very embodiment of beneficence," says Al Tarqoz.

"Perhaps we should dismiss him for now," suggests Aravis.

"I guess," says Dranko. But then he says to the djinn: "Hey, while you're here, would you like a cigar?" He lights one himself and takes a puff. Al Tarqoz looks down at Dranko and wrinkles his nose.

"Your offer is generosity itself; please forgive me as I decline your invitation."

"Suit yourself. Say, how long will you hang around for if I don't dismiss you, and how many times can we call you each day?"

"I will remain on your delightful Prime for one hour, after which I will be returned to my own plane. And I can only be... summoned... once each day."

"How much wine can you create in an hour?"

"Dranko!" Ernie is turning a bright red.

"Oh, fine," says Dranko. "Al Tarqoz, you are dismissed. But if you..."

The genie turns into a billow of blue smoke, which is quickly sucked back into the ring.

"Well, that was fun!" Dranko announces. He turns to find that no one is smiling. Ernie is fixing him with a withering glare.

"What?" says Dranko. "That guy was clearly one of those snotty high society types. It's good to take them down a peg or two every once in a while."

"That doesn't mean you're going to treat him like a slave," says Ernie flatly. "He's a person just like you are, and he shouldn't have people picking at his dignity."

"I wasn't treating him like... look, we *summon* creatures all the time! How is this any different, really?" There is a long silence.

"Snokas," says Morningstar. "How about we go out and spar in the yard. I want to see how good a fighter you are."

"I'll go with you," says Grey Wolf.

"Me too," says Step.

"I'm going to study in my room," says Aravis. "Please excuse me."

Soon Dranko is alone in the living room, looking down at his new piece of jewelry. "Ah, screw it," he mutters to himself. "I feel like getting someone else in trouble."

Dranko spends the rest of the day seeing what he can do about Imperia. (Imperia is one of the two nasty wizards in Sand's Edge who were suspected of blackmailing, or at least extorting, the local city officials during the time of the Turtle Sickness. The other wizard, Fulton, fought and died at Verdshane, while Imperia never showed up.) Though Dranko typically works with more underworldly contacts, today he throws his weight around as a new member of the minor nobility.

Working all the official channels he can find, he arranges for a thorough investigation of Imperia's designs, with an eye toward muscling her out of her current position in Sand's Edge. Having done his best, he comes home to find that the mood has lightened considerably. Ernie is packing rations that look more like picnic lunches than hard trail food.

"Where are we going?" asks Dranko.

"To Longtooth Keep!" says Ernie. "We're going to check out our new castle."

"Oh, you mean Castle Blackhope. Great! I wonder what's taken up residence there while we've been away?"



The Day the Earth Stood Still

Run #142 – Tuesday, January 28, 2003

Monday, October 1

Packed and ready to go, Kibi *teleports* the Company to Hae Kalkas, which conveniently enough is the major city both closest to Longtooth Keep and nearest to Kibi's home town of Eggemoggin. Although their instinct is to immediately begin *wind walking*, the Company decide to (wonder of wonders!) *walk* for the two days it will take to reach the hill-fort of the Norlin Hills.

"We need to stretch our legs, breathe some fresh air," says Ernie. "And get some exercise that doesn't involve beating up bad guys."

It's a warm autumnal day beneath a cloud-bespeckled sky, and the only thing that mars their enjoyment is the fact that Aravis and Morningstar have again acquired patches of the mystery rash. It's still just a minor nuisance, and clerical magic cures it, but it sure would be nice to know what's causing it. The party resolve to visit the Sages' Consortium in Hae Kalkas on their return trip from the keep.

In the late afternoon Kibi feels the eyes upon him again, glinting hard and cold in his mind. They seem particularly expectant, but Kibi can do nothing. He frowns in frustration, wondering what they want. They don't leave this time, and gaze steadily through the rest of the evening.



Tuesday, October 2

They are still watching him the next morning when he wakes. "What do you want?" he cries out. "Are you Cranchus? Are you the Eyes of Moirel? Both, somehow? What?" Nothing.

All day they watch, as the party wind their way up into the Norlin Hills. The roads are in poor repair, strewn with tumbled rock and a few fallen leaves. "I'll bet some monsters have moved in," says Dranko.

"Or maybe a gang of ruffians and outlaws," says Flicker.

"More likely a bear, or some wolves," says Kay.

In the late afternoon they round a sharp peak on a high road and see the four corner towers of Longtooth Keep rising above the rock. The drawbridge is down. They can't remember if they left it that way or not, but they approach cautiously, ready for anything. The small gatehouse still seems deserted and there is no sound at all save from birds and the wind. They emerge into the large courtyard with weapons drawn, but no one greets them, friendly or otherwise.

Kay moves farther in, examining the ground for tracks. The grounds are spotty with weeds and crabgrass, rocks and gravel. "Hard to say," she concludes after a few minutes. "The soil is hard and doesn't leave good marks. The bones from our last battle are still here; you'd think if anyone had taken over the keep in the past few years, they'd have cleaned the place up."

"What a disappointment," says Dranko, throwing his hands up in disgust. "How could this place have gone unoccupied all this time? There aren't even any monsters to fight!"

"Think again, mister!" calls a voice from somewhere above. "It's occupied, by me! And seeing as how this place is mine, and you're a-trespassin' on it, I suggest you leave it this instant!"

Weapons fly instantly into hands, and all eyes focus on the upper storey of the keep's central building. There's someone up there all right, just inside a window, and he's poking a crossbow out, aimed in their general direction.

"Who the hell are you?" Dranko calls up.

"I'll be asking the questions," retorts the voice. "I'm the one with the crossbow. Any of you try anything funny and you'll get a bolt in your belly."

There's some snickering from the Company. The one with the crossbow? Who are the ones with the crossbow, the longbows, the shortbows, the warhammers, longswords, daggers, morningstars, maces, whips and sonic fireballs?

After a moment when no one speaks, Aravis says, "Well?"

"Well what?" replies the man with the crossbow.

"You said you'd be asking the questions. What questions?"

"I don't got no questions. You just turn around and leave before there's trouble."

"Look, pal," says Dranko, "I'm sorry to be the one to break it to you, but this is our keep. We have the title. You're on our land, so why don't you come down here where we can talk about it, OK?"

"You're lyin'," says the man. "This keep's been abandoned for months. There ain't nobody what owns it. 'Cept me, that is."

"This is stupid," says Morningstar. She casts *detect thoughts*.

"Hey now, what's she doin'? What's with all the hand-waving and chanting?" No one answers.

With little effort Morningstar starts to read his thoughts. And what he's thinking is: *Man, I sure hope I can bluff 'em. Yeah, I bet I can. Bluff 'em, that's it.*

"We're not going away," says Morningstar. "And unless you want us to come up there after you, I suggest you come down and talk. I know you have a crossbow. We've got weapons too, but we'd rather not fight at all."

The man squints out of the window. He's thinking: *Damn.*

The crossbow is withdrawn from the window and the Company hear the sound of someone coming down the stairs. "He's just a squatter," says Morningstar. "He's thinking he doesn't have much of a chance, but he's still going to try to convince us to leave."

From the keep's central building emerges a scraggly man in his forties, broad-shouldered and sunburned. He's still got his crossbow out in front of him, loaded and cocked. "He won't use it," mutters Morningstar as he approaches. The man slows as he gets a better look at the Company, bristling with weapons and outfitted in shiny expensive armor. The crossbow dips a bit.

"What's your name, mister?" asks Ernie cheerily.

"It's no business of yours," blusters the man. Grey Wolf clears his throat and lets his hand drop to *Bostock*'s hilt. "Erm... it's **Fergus**. M'name's Fergus. What's yours?"

"Ernest Roundhill. A pleasure to meet you, Fergus."

"Can't say the same," growls Fergus. "Now why don't you folks just go on home, and leave me in peace. I don't want no trouble."

"We are home," says Aravis. "We own this keep. The king himself granted us the deed."

"Yeah? Let's see it."

Aravis fishes out the title to Longtooth Keep. Fergus grabs it and makes a show of looking it over. He's holding it upside down. "He can't read," mumbles Morningstar.

Fergus hands back the deed. "A forgery, I'll warrant," he declares.

"How would you know?" asks Morningstar. "You can't read it. Can you?"

"Are you suggesting that I... that I..." Morningstar is glaring steadily at him. "Well, fine, maybe I'm not brushed up on my letters, but please. You expect me to believe that the king, Crunard himself, gave you this rundown old place with all these weeds and rocks and bones? I could-a come up with a better story myself!"

"Gotta give him credit for trying," says Grey Wolf.

"Look, buddy," says Dranko, stepping forward and ignoring the crossbow. "It's not a forgery. I would know. We just fought a big war over in Verdshane, and we won, and the king gave us this keep as a reward. We earned it, and it's ours, and if you have eyes in your head you can see that there's not much you can do to keep us out. So why don't we see if we can come to some sort of arrangement where we don't just throw you over the walls, and you can keep some of the dignity you've still got left."

Fergus bows his head, defeated. The Company agree that he can stay on as a sort-of caretaker, but warn him that he'd have to pull his own weight plus a little more. They find that he keeps a small garden behind the main building, enough to sustain him. He's got the well working, and he sleeps upon a straw and cloth mat in a squalid little room on the second floor. He's been keeping himself alive, but doing the bare minimum work necessary.

"You can start by cleaning up the grounds," says Ernie.

Grumbling, Fergus does what he's told. The rest make plans for fixing the place up properly. Kibi knows many dwarven stone-wrights in Hae Kalkas and Eggemoggin who they can pay for restoration work, and others who can serve as guards. He'll *teleport* to his home village that night to start recruiting.

SOON.

Kibi suddenly looks alarmed and alert. He and Scree both think to each other: *Did you hear that?*

"What is it, Kibi?" asks Flicker.

"I think those eyes that are watching me, I think they just said something!"

"What did they say?" Everyone is attentive.

"They said, 'Soon.'"

"Soon what?" asks Grey Wolf.

"They didn't say."

"Oh, that's helpful," says Kay.

"Ominous," says Grey Wolf. "The word you're looking for is 'ominous.'"



Wednesday, October 3

The next day, Morningstar awakes to find herself scratching at a patch of rash on her arm. Curious, she drops into *Ava Dormo*; to her dismay the rash is on her there as well. She almost cures herself as Ernie prepares breakfast, but decides to leave it be.

An hour later, she and Dranko are standing in front of the Hae Kalkas Sages' Consortium, having *wind* walked there after eating. They are soon seated with a plump middle-aged woman named **Pearl**, an expert on maladies from unusual sources.

She examines the patch on Morningstar's arm. She daubs droplets of various salves and ointments onto the rash and watches for reactions. She asks them all sorts of questions about where they were and what they were doing in the time before the first instance occurred.

Her final analysis: "I don't know. My best guess would be that the dragon was related; there are records involving many variants of dragon-sickness. The part I am most at a loss to explain is its recurrence. When clerical magic is used to cure diseases, they don't come back. Except in your case. Maybe something you still come into contact with on a daily basis is reinfecting you?"

By late afternoon the Company have gathered again at Longtooth Keep. Kibi has returned from Eggemoggin with a couple of dwarves, who are checking the place out and making notes on what needs to be done. Fergus is still grumbling as he pulls up weeds and makes piles of bone fragments.

"I've talked with plenty of dwarves who would like to help," says Kibi. "I can have a small army of..."

COME HOME.

"I don't know that we need an army just yet," says Dranko. "We can always... uh... Kibi? What's the matter? Eyes again?"

"Yeah," says Kibi, looking worried. "They said, 'Come home.'"

"Which home?" asks Ernie. "Do they mean Tal Hae, or Eggemoggin?"

The eyes, two blazing white crystals, shine in Kibi's mind. They offer no more advice, no more instruction. "I think," says Kibi slowly, "they mean the Greenhouse."

The party spellcasters still have enough traveling mojo to get everyone back to the Greenhouse that evening. For a few minutes, everyone just sits around looking expectantly at Kibi. Nothing happens. "Uh, sorry, guys. I guess the eyes will let me know if something is going to happen. But now they're just back to watching me."

A discussion starts about the rash, and what else besides the dragon might be responsible. Suspicion falls upon their recently crafted wand of *cure serious wounds*. Or maybe that vapor from the basement laboratory is responsible? Nobody knows.

That night, Kibi dreams:

Abernia is your dream, and it cries out in pain, a cry that others do not hear.

The dream shifts. You are the Earth, and you have been shot with an arrow of death. At first you are calm; the arrow has shattered on the impenetrable stone of your being. But no... while fragments are thrown back to land on your face, a shaft has wormed its way in and has lodged in your heart.

You are yourself, but the pain of the world is still yours. It burns like a black flame. With a voice impossibly deep, Abernia itself contrives to speak to you. **MY CHILD**, it intones, **THIS SPLINTER CANNOT STAY WITHIN ME. BUT ITS REMOVAL WILL BRING ABOUT THE END OF ALL THINGS. IT CALLS.**



He wakes with a clear memory of every word, every image, and the terrible pain of the earth. The eyes are luminous in his mind, and Kibi realizes that he sees them now as part of the real world, superimposed over his normal vision. He shares the dream with the others over breakfast.

"So you think you needed to be back here in the Greenhouse in order to have that dream?" asks Aravis.

"I don't know," says Kibi, deep in thought. "Yeah. I guess."

"What does it mean?" asks Flicker. "What's the splinter?"

"I don't know that either," says Kibi helplessly. "Earth, we could be a lot more helpful if you'd just ask for something clear."

The eyes shine. "They're watching me all the time now," says Kibi. "If they expect something, they should..."

KIBILHATHUR. WE WANT TO SPEAK WITH YOU.

THE TIME IS ALMOST UPON US.

GATHER AROUND US WHEN TWO HOURS HAVE GONE PAST NOON,

AND WE WILL SPEAK TO YOU.

BRING YOUR FRIENDS; THEY SHOULD ALL BE PRESENT.

"Oh," says Kibi faintly. "That helps." He tells the others what he just heard.

"That's only three hours from now," says Aravis.

"After all this bother, they'd better have something useful to say," mutters Dranko.



As the appointed hour draws near, the Company contact Ozilish on the crystal ball and update him on current events.

"I agree," says the archmage. "It sounds like the Eyes of Moirel have some announcement to make. You be sure to let me know what it is; with any luck, it will have some bearing on the whereabouts or plans of Parthol Runecarver."

The sun inches across the sky. The Company fidget, none more than Kibi, wondering what the Eyes will say. The dwarf keeps looking out the window, watching the post-noon shadows start to lengthen.

"I think it's time," he says eventually. The entire Company tromps down to the basement. *Continual flames* on the wall illuminate the large room, still filled with laboratory equipment from their last magic item making spree. A shaft of sunlight spills down the stairs as well, from a ground floor window.

Kibi walks over to the closet where the Eyes of Moirel are kept. He can see them clearly, as if he has x-ray vision that penetrates through the closet door and the heavy locked trunk. Scree rumbles along beside the dwarven wizard, as nervous as his master.

Kibi opens the door and drags out the trunk. One by one he unlocks the heavy padlocks and unwraps the chains that are wound around the heavy chest. Inside lay the two Eyes of Moirel; they glint in the ambient light. Kibi gulps, reaches down...

Around the dwarf, the rest of the Company hold their collective breaths, fearing that the Eyes of Moirel will leap into Kibi's eye sockets to speak. They are spared that gruesome sight; Kibi carefully picks up the Eyes, one in each hand. Their glow seeps out through the gaps between his fingers.

"It is my vision, come to pass," whispers Snokas.

Kibi turns to face the group, gripping the Eyes tightly. His face holds a myriad of emotions – fear, excitement, anxiety, curiosity. *Whenever you're ready*, he thinks.

Seconds pass that seem like an eternity. It is just creeping into peoples' minds that nothing is going to happen, when they start to feel the vibrations. At first there is no sound, just a silent thrumming that buzzes through their bodies from all around. Then a low rumble begins, sounding through the basement walls. The Greenhouse is trembling, ever so slightly.

"Kibi? Are you okay?" asks Ernie.

"Yes. They aren't saying anything."

The rumble becomes louder, as if a small earthquake is shaking the foundations of the house. An alembic on Aravis's workbench starts to rattle. In Kibi's head, words form:

EARTH WIZARD, YOU ARE BECOMING WHAT WILL BE ONE WITH US.
BEFORE THE END YOU WILL DESCEND, DESTROY, AND OPEN THE DOOR TO YOUR GREATEST FEAR.
BUT THE JOURNEY FROM NOW TO THEN IS A JOURNEY FROM NOW TO THEN TO NOW,
AND MANY YEARS LIE 'TWIXT KEY AND DOOR.
NOW, ALL OF YOU... WAIT, FOR THE TIME IS ALMOST UPON YOU.

Kibi repeats what he heard to the others. As they ponder the words, the Greenhouse creaks, as if a gale has started to blow outside. The laboratory equipment is all a-clatter; a flask falls on its side, rolls off a table and shatters on the hard earth floor. From upstairs they hear the sound of windows yammering in their frames.

KidCthulhu: Not only is this a nice bit of phrasing, it's a very apt description of what we were doing too.

Words cannot begin to describe the RBDM-ness of Sagiro. Who I will now be calling Beef Rigamaroles in punishment.

The shaft of sunlight shining down through the stairwell goes out, as if the sun has been switched off. And from Kibi's mouth two voices speak, his own voice doubled, sounding in unison. The Eyes in his hands glow brightly, purple and green, as the words come.

IT HAS ALL COME UNDONE.
YOUR ENEMIES UNMAKE THE WORLD,
BUT YOU SHALL NOT BE UNMADE,
AND ALONE OF ALL THINGS YOU SHALL BE REMADE.

Flicker bounds up the stairs in a panic. It's a bit past two in the afternoon, and all is dark outside. And not just dark. Lightless. He runs to a window and puts his face to the glass, but there is nothing outside. For all that he can see, the Greenhouse is floating in a great black void. He runs back down to the others.

The Greenhouse groans as if something outside is trying to twist it apart. All around them their glassware is rolling off tables and benches, crashing onto the floor.

The green Eye glows brightly, and from Kibi's mouth comes its voice.

OUTSIDE, THE WORLD IS AS IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN –
SLAVES, TOIL, FEAR, AND THE ENDLESS DIGGING.
THE EMPEROR DRIVES THEM, ALWAYS DEEPER INTO DESPAIR.
EVIL BEYOND EVIL, AND YET HIMSELF ONLY A MEANS TO AN END.
FEAR HIM, BUT FEAR MORE HIS SUCCESS.

There is a series of crashes from upstairs as jars and crockery fall from kitchen shelves. Tiny cracks appear in the floor, the walls. The sound of shaking and rattling becomes almost deafening, and it seems a miracle that the Greenhouse is not flying apart in a shower of beams and bricks. Beyond the sound of the house is that of a wailing wind, or the scream of an unearthly voice.

The purple Eye flashes in Kibi's hand, and his voice sounds clear above the din.

INSIDE, THE WORLD IS AS IT NEVER WAS –
HOPE, STRENGTH, FREEDOM AND THE SAFETY OF FORESIGHT.
THE ARCHMAGE CRAFTED IT, A HAVEN TO BE ANATHEMA TO YOUR ENEMIES' DESIGNS.
WISE BEYOND WISDOM, AND YET HIMSELF ONLY A MEANS TO AN END.
TRUST HIM, BUT TRUST MORE YOURSELVES.

The Greenhouse quiets.

Is that all?

Sweat is dripping down Kibi's face into his beard. His grasping knuckles are pale.

A shaft of light again shines down the stairwell, but brighter, oh so much brighter. From outside the Greenhouse shines a light brighter than a hundred suns, absolutely blinding, filling every window with its blaze.

Both Eyes glow again, purple and green light intermingling with the powerful ambient sunlight from upstairs. In his strange double voice Kibi speaks a final time.

THEY ARE FOLLOWING BACK THE PATH OF MOIREL.
THEY HAVE ALWAYS DONE SO.
WE CANNOT PURSUE THEM WITHOUT OUR BROTHER.
IF YOU WISH TO TRAVEL NOWHERE, TO UNMAKE THE WORLD,
BRING US TO THE HOME OF SEVEN DARK WORDS AND MAKE US THREE.

BEWARE THE WORLD.

The dazzling light goes out. The Greenhouse is still.

Kibi's hands open reflexively and the Eyes drop to the ground, quiescent. He thinks: *Scree?*

I'm here, Kibilhathur.

Good.

Some of the Company go upstairs. The house is a mess. Furniture has tipped over, glasses have broken, and the trophy case has disgorged its pelts, tentacles and other mementos onto the floor.

Eddings stands there, wide-eyed, Argol perched on his shoulder, Smeggy nestled in his arms. "We seem to have weathered the storm," he says, voice trembling slightly.

Light, normal afternoon sunlight, is coming in through the windows in thin bands. Flicker walks to one of them and peers out. He is surprised to find that the window has been boarded up from the outside!

Faintly, from somewhere outside in the far streets of Tal Hae, there is a distant shriek.



HERE ENDS PART ONE
OF
THE ADVENTURES OF ABERNATHY'S COMPANY



Victim: Man, Part 1 of the AoAC was really short. I hope the other parts have more meat to them.

Nail: Wow, are you guys screwed...

RangerWickett: PART ONE?!?!?!

Sagiro: Well, I've always envisioned the "grand story arc" as having two parts. The first part was primarily about Emperor Naradawk's efforts to break through at Verdshane, and the Company's role in thwarting him.

The second part will be about... well, you'll see.

arwink: You're leaving it *there*? I now feel the need to vent: Bastard, bastard.

Tallarn: I second this opinion, only with more bastards.

thatdarncat: Gee, what a good impression on my new co-workers the gibbering under the desk makes. Thanks Sagiro, ever so much.

Wolfspirit: You know, that update should have a disclaimer at the beginning: "Do not read if you've got a test or something in the next few hours that reading this might distract you from."

Now I keep having thoughts of "What... did the world fall down go boom? Are they in the other side? RBDM!"

Piratecat: We are so very, very screwed. It's so much worse than you think.

Remember our various sets of enemies? Abernathy once said that our biggest advantage is that they didn't know about one another, or cooperate easily. We had the Sharshun (and Sagiro Emberleaf), Mokad and the Black Circle, and the red-armored warriors.

Well, we thwarted Mokad's attempts to bring across the armies of the emperor by (not) killing Grey Wolf when the spheres aligned. We thwarted the designs of the red-armored warriors at the Battle of Verdshane. But... er... the Sharshun have been really quiet lately, and Rosetta was concentrating on them, and, er...

And while we were having our victory parade and bossing people around with our new titles, **they have remade the world so that the Emperor never left.**

Wolfspirit: PCat, see above. You're not helping.

Nail: Yep. PC, you know that feeling you get when you've been able to guess the Story Hour's direction, but are still absolutely amazed at the outcome? That's how I'm feeling right now.

You guys are so "messed with." And it's awful sweet from here...

Kaodi: Jeez, Sagiro, you really set us all up to take a fall... Here we are, thinking, "They've saved the world, they have this nice new castle, something now a little relaxing, if still deadly and painful, is going to happen... *TIME WARP...*" and here we are.

Sammell: Cool! I wonder how many old friends and allies turn out to be loyal supporters of the only regime they've ever known now and want nothing to do with these dangerous criminals.

Enkhidu: Samnell, my guess would be not part, not most, but *all* of them. The only ones not affected by this strange turn of events were those actually in the Greenhouse.

Zaruthustran: Cooooool. It's like *Sliders*, with less Gimli.

LightPhoenix: I for one would just like to applaud Sagiro... I had a feeling as well that something like this would happen. Just one thing – why didn't Snokas say anything about this?

Sagiro: Snokas didn't know anything. His vision from Ell was that he and the Company were standing around in the Greenhouse watching Kibi, who was holding two gems in his hands. That's all, and he did tell the party that much. He didn't know why they were gathered there, or what the fallout would be.

LightPhoenix: I would just like to point out that I don't think the players are quite as screwed as they think they are – I'm not really sure how much I should extrapolate, but two points that I think are readily obvious:

1. They still have several powerful resources at their disposal. *cough*

2. They already have two of the Eyes of Moirel, of which they only need one more to be able to unmake the world themselves.

I forget how many Eyes there are, but I'd find it terribly amusing if there was a competition between the Sharshun and the heroes at unmaking the world – every few hours or so everything gets undone again...

Vargo: One question I have – is there anything that the Company could have done to prevent this "remaking" of the world? I don't recall seeing any hints in the story so far indicating that this was coming – and I don't see any way the company could have prevented it...

But on the other hand, the baker might actually be friendly now...

Sagiro: On the one hand, no, the party was never given specific direction to stop this particular threat.

On the other hand, the party has known since very early on in the campaign approximately where the Sharshun "hidden base" was. They could have followed up on that avenue of investigation.

On the first hand, I kept them pretty busy with other problems. And if they had prevented the "unmaking," a whole bunch of my prophecies and records would have ended up looking pretty silly...

KidCthulhu: And on the other, other hand, not only have we known the Sharshun were up to something, we've known for a long time that they wanted to use the Eyes to "go nowhere." And within the last year or so, we've gotten plenty of hints that going nowhere allowed you to do something heap powerful.

And on the other first hand, just before the Battle of Verdshane, we specifically asked Ell (during a *commune*) if we should try to use the Eyes to go nowhere or if we should go check on the Sharshun. The word from the gods was, "No, there's more important stuff to do." D'oh.

Sagiro: For the record, the *commune* in question was cast about two or three months before the battle at Verdshane, and the relevant questions (and answers) were as follows:

Is leaving for Kivia in order to get the Eye of Moirel the best course of action to prevent the Emperor from coming through to Charagan?
NO.

If we leave for Kivia in nine weeks, will the Crosser's Maze be needed before we return, to prevent the Emperor from coming through to Charagan?
MOST LIKELY.

Is pursuing the Sharshun the best course of action to prevent the Emperor from coming through to Charagan?
NO.

Note that in all cases, the questions clearly concerned the Emperor's plan to breach the gate at Verdshane.

Not that the Company did anything that I wouldn't have done in their shoes; I don't mean to imply that their plans were bad. Quite the opposite; my players take a lot of well-spent time to review information, prophecies, strategies, etc. before acting.

KidCthulhu: That's the problem with *commune*. Garbage in, garbage out. D'oh and double d'oh.

