

Miles Flavius adjusted his metal breastplate and looked at the soldier next to him. The sun was quickly retreating from the sky but there had been no word from inside the meeting room. And no sign that their talks would end soon. The soldier next to him was Miles Brucius, a non-descript Thyatian of few words. Flavius hated guard duty with him. The hours crept by like a tortoise on Lucinius Beach.

It had been three years since Flavius had joined the Legions of Thyatis. His enlistment was all but over. In fact, as soon as they returned from Specularum, he would be an average citizen again. That sounded just fine to him.

All told though, his position was not a bad one. He had been spared going to the Hinterlands by being made a guard for Deputy Trade Counsel Montius Extragillius almost immediately upon leaving Tiro (recruit) status. Because of Extragillius, he had been trained in advance sword arts without ever really risking his life. In his position he had also been able to travel throughout the mainland of the Empire as well as to Karameikos and the Five Shires. Ah! The people of the Five Shires. Though Halflings all, they had heart and they knew how to have a good time. The memory of the taste of Moon Hill rum made his mouth water. He would have to go by the Hungry Halfling tonight after this meeting ended. If it ever ended . . .

Oh, that was probably one too many, thought Flavius. But where as that barmaid's looks seemed almost hostile earlier, they sure looked inviting now. Perhaps he should have a word with her. He stood up or at least meant to do so yet his legs barely cooperated. It was time to go. The Trade Counsel would not like that he slipped out tonight.

Flavius walked towards the door. Hmm. What about that barmaid? He looked around and saw that her eyes and words were with another gentleman. And they were both staring at him but trying hard not to look as if they were not staring at him. His inner soldier's voice was trying to tell him something but his dulled mind and enlarged bladder got in the way. "Oh well. No matter. Time to get home."

Flavius shuffled into the alley outside the tavern and leaned against the wall to relieve himself. "I don't think I had that much but I sure seem to

have lost control over by pant strings," he chuckled. While he was fumbling, he failed to notice the men quietly slipping out of the tavern behind him. One, the staring man, carried a sap, the other a large knife gripped in sweaty hands. "Umph!!" A blow to the base of his skull and Flavius was dead to the world . . .

"Argh. Another day of this. How did I get here?" Akair's head hurt and his eyes strained to eke out any form or shape in the dark. Shouts and screams are heard from all around. It stinks. No, it really stinks. This must be a boat for the waves are rocking it. Side to side and up and down. The monk has never been to sea before and this is much too rough to be a lake. At least any lake near where he was before he was attacked. Trying to relax his mind and muscles, Akair slips back to sleep.

The mystic awoke again. "How many days has it been?" His last clear memory was walking on the docks in Specularum, taking in the night air and the sounds and smells of that strange city. He had never been to such a large and crowded place. Though his monastery was a short distance north of Kerendas, he had never really stayed in that city. Besides, it was not nearly the size of Specularum and the city of horsemen was very different. Calmer and cleaner. But, as Master Esterius often said, the true servant of the Gods must be aware of both the word of the Gods and the make of their people. All brothers, whether they seek the path of the mind or the path of the body (like them), the true servant must venture out beyond the protected fields.

He had been on the docks when a man walking past brushed into him. He looked at the man to say that he was sorry when two others appeared and struck him with clubs. He was able to throw one of them in the water but then there were two more men. One must have slipped behind him and whacked him with a sap because next thing he knew, he was waking up in a covered wagon, tied to several other people. He found out that he was now the property of the Iron Ring. That was a name he knew little about other than the rumors from his childhood: slavers, black marketers, pirates; takers of naughty children. But that was a far off fairy tale and this had become all too real a few days ago.

After a while in the wagon, he was gathered with other slaves, being picked to ship to market. It was all done in a desolate warehouse. A man all in black (even the eye slits of his helmet were black steel and his eyelessness was utterly disturbing) inspected them. He was accompanied by the tallest, gauntest man he had ever seen. The man in black killed a slave right beside Akair, without word or look, just a quick flick of a wrist and a dagger to the throat. But after that, Akair's sole focus became Hafkris. The sailors and slaves call him the Half-Orc and if such abominations truly exist, he is surely one of them. Hulking and ugly with a turned up snout that reminds one of nothing less than a pig. Stringy black hair, full of grit and grease. Red skin, harshly treated in the salt and sun of the sea. Cruel as the legends of Orcs suggest. He was the chief slave master during the sea voyage and he named them all "meat."

For what seemed like many days, the mystic tossed in the hold of the ship, sick from the smell, the gruel served once per day, the constant waves and most of all, Hafkris and his whip. When he has been in a good mood, Hafkris has said the slaves are bound for the slave markets of Highport. From the sound of it, it is a great and secret city of pirates and slave traders. No matter. Akair and the other captives are firmly chained to the deck and there appears to be no way out of the shackles. Mockingly, the keys to them are hung from a hook right by the hatch to the deck, only five or six feet from the group of prisoners. They might as well be miles away.

Now, however, it is dark and perhaps night. It is hard to tell because of the storm. Crash! Another thunderous boom and the ship feels as it will turn full over through the water. A while ago (who knows how long since hours seem like days in the hold), Hafkris came and took twenty slaves above deck. He is now back and picks twenty more, leaving but six slaves in the hold. In the flash of lightning with the hold door open, Hafkris can be seen to be in an even fouler mood than normal. And is that a sign of worry or concern or even fear . . .

Still later, the cries and screams can barely be heard above the din of the storm. The wind is becoming stronger. Then . . . KABOOM!!!!!! A gut-rending, limb busting crash and a black maw appears in the hull of the ship, the wood

splintering like kindling. Wind and rain and seawater and sand spray the slaves. All is confused as the ship turns over on its side. Akair closed his eyes against the stinging sand and rocks. He did not see the piece of ship's timber that struck him in the head. He just faded to black . . .

The ship had run aground on a large sandy beach. The front end of the boat was disintegrated. A few bodies were lying face down in the sand and Hafkris walked amongst them. After the crash and the subsequent turning and tumbling of the boat, Hafkris awoke. He had consumed his lucky bottle of wine first. Then he searched through the remains of the aft storage and found the only unbroken bottle of wine and consumed that too. He was rip roaring drunk so he went for some air on the beach.

Meanwhile, the last of the slaves were awakening in the damaged hold.

"Unggh!! What happened?" Flavius forgot that he was chained and tried to bring his hands up to his aching head.

Next to him was a Dwarf. "It appears we have come to a sudden stop."

The soldier looked sideways at his short, stocky companion. "You don't say. I guess I am just glad you speak Thyatian. Well, I believe that my bonds are looser. Perhaps we can get ourselves out of here."

A voice called from the other side of Flavius with a distinct Alphantian accent, "Can anyone now reach that key that has been tormenting me these past few days?"

Flavius pulled with all of his might and what was once impossible due to a lack of leverage was suddenly easy. The chains came unripped from the wall with a mighty screech. "I think I can get them," he said.

The Thyatian dragged his chains over to the hatch and grabbed the key ring. Quickly undoing his bonds, he turned back to his fellow captives. "Ladies first." He walked over to the sole female among the six captives and undid her bonds. She smiled weakly and rubbed her wrists. Flavius moved from one to the next until all were

free: a thin man with the look and voice of an Alphatian, a Dwarven man, two men with the look of fellow Thyatians and the woman.

"Well, now that this is done. Let's see where we are and how we get out of here." The Alphatian moved passed the group towards the gaping hole in the bow. Rain came down in sheets and the gusting wind forced it in sideways. Through the gloomy light, they saw a man walking haphazardly on the beach. Shouting and thrusting his fist into the sky. Above the roar of the wind, they could catch snatches of word: "Cursed luck . . . kill him . . . ran us through the worst . . . die!"

There was no mistaking that form. It was their captor Hafkris.

"Now what?" asked the woman.

"I think we should take care of Hafkris before he comes back to take care of us," said the Dwarf.

"He appears to be inebriated," said one of the two Thyatian men. He had the shaven head of a monk. It was hard to tell since they were all in rags and barefoot.

The Dwarf and soldier started looking around. The other Thyatian looked puzzled and said, "What are you doing?"

"We are looking for wood to use as weapons," they said in unison.

"Good idea. I will look for enough wood to fashion together a symbol of the Church. We will need the luck of the Immortals on our side." He went towards the back of the broken ship.

The monkish looking man spoke again, "I will lure him back here. Wait in the shadows and take him when he gets close."

Akair leaped out of the hole in the bow and started to climb the broken timbers up to the main deck. He glanced back cautiously at Hafkris. The drunken sailor was staring right at him.

Hafkris came charging after the Monk. "Get back in there, meat!"

As he got close to the hole, he hesitated. A flicker of something caught his eye but by then it

was too late. Chronos stepped from the shadows and swung the club into the slaver's shoulder. Flavius quickly followed, holding his club like his gladius and jabbing the ugly man in the chest. The Dwarf scramble under the priest's swing and tried to land a blow of his own but was off balance and missed. Hafkris's leg jerked unexpectedly, in strange rhythm to the gestures of the Mage. His swing was thrown off and the blade went inches above Flavius' head.

From above, Akair yelled, "Up here Orc!" Hafkris paused and became unsure. He had forgotten the monk. Akair jumped down behind the Dwarf and the Fighter as they together landed blows from their makeshift clubs. Hafkris, surprised at the daring of these slaves, cursed and slashed his sword at Sarmboc. A line of bright red ripped through his tattered shirt and the pale tan began to turn crimson. A smile snarled Hafkris' lips.

Then, a sound like popcorn, and the voice of the mage sang clear, "Behold your doom, slaver." A streak of blue sparkles flew from Syndyls' hands and like an arrow, pierced Hafkris' neck. His eyes grew wide and a little gurgle mixed with blood escaped his lips. With that he was dead, his body twisting backwards into the sand.

"I have never said this about another living thing but I am truly glad he is dead. May the gods redeem his spirit. Thank you for killing him. Hafkris was truly an evil soul." Those were the first words the woman spoke and the group was surprised she was there. They had forgotten her in the heat of their first battle. "My name is Melisana."

"Well met, fair lady. I am Brother Akair of the Order of the Mountain Sun." The monk bowed as was his fashion.

"A mystic? No wonder you were climbing up the boards like a monkey." The Dwarf said as he moved to see Melisana a little better. Akair smiled and nodded at the short figure.

Flavius bowed to the lady. "A monk maybe but the Order of the Mountain Sun is at least Thyatian. This . . ."

"We have no allegiance but to the gods and the purity of self, sir," interrupted Akair.

"Yes, yes. But what I was to say is that the one back there is clearly no friend of ours, despite

his vanquishing of Hafkris. The wizard is Alphatian by Vanya."

"Ay, that I am. From your tone and hooked nose, you must be Thyatian. It would seem though that at this moment we are less of our nations and more of each other. The wind is picking up and we should find some shelter." The Alphatian squinted at the rain as water ran into his eyes. "If you must call me a name it is Syndyls."

"And mine is Chronos," said the Cleric. "Chronos of the Church of Karameikos."

The Dwarf, chuckled. "Look at the lot of us. An Alphatian, a Thyatian and a bunch of Karameikans. It would make for a good joke." He reached a hand out to the Cleric. "My name is Sarmboc of Rockhome, Clan of the Stonetowers."

After finishing their introductions, the party turned to Hafkris' body. Carefully searching him for any valuables, they only found his sword, boots and leather armor of any use. In death, the slaver was even more foul. Besides the equipment they stripped, the only thing of note was the crude tattoo of black manacles found on his wrists.

The group then climbed the broken planks of the ship to the top deck. What remained of the mast was lain across the hatch which once held them in their doom. The deck was buckled and broken and only three cabins appeared at all intact, their doors still on hinges. The first was at the far aft and contained the remains of the grain and wine held on board for the captain and senior crew. Smashed bottles, broken barrels and wine soaked grain lay scattered about. Hafkris' bootprints could be seen here as well as the empty bottle he had tossed to the side after draining its contents.

The next room had a small cot and a chest. Inside the chest was a pair of slippers, a shirt, a cloak, several navigational charts and maps, a log book and a spell book. Syndyls examined the spell book carefully and has determined that it contains at least six spells. He can only identify the first one: Read Magic. He will need to use that spell to unlock the secrets of the others.

The final room was obviously Hafkris'. It smelled like him. However, there were two hammocks

slung on the walls and one chest. Inside the chest was another pair of boots and a crossbow with 50 quarrels. Everything else has been smashed.

Having searched the remains of the ship, Melisana begins to tell the group of herself. She is the daughter of Melkeras Basarius, a merchant in Specularum. She thinks her father would surely pay a handsome reward for her safe return. He must be very worried as she has missing since she left to go to the market and was convinced to delivery a giant lizard to some unknown person. She remembers that he cast a spell at her and she was then waking up in a dark dungeon. From there she was given to the slavers and smuggled aboard the ship.

The adventurers agree that they will keep her with them (and as safe as possible) then return to their grim work of looking through the wreckage; this time at the bodies washed up on shore. They all appear to be slaves as were they. None have any worthwhile possessions.

As they carry on their exploration, the wind and rain are relentless. With little to protect most of them, they are soaked and chilled to the bone. However, they cannot agree on what to do next. Akair and Syndyls decide to climb the sand berm that borders this beach to the west. Looking around reveals little except that the terrain is hilly with many small valley like trails through the dunes. No trees or other vegetation is visible but the rain makes sight short. North of them, the sand berm extends into rough, rocky land and perhaps stays high to the sea. It will be a difficult journey going that way. To the south, the sand berm flattens eventually into the sand. In that direction and to the east the terrain is more even and less rocky. While no civilization is visible, it appears that if they are to find any shelter, they must look inland.

The Dwarf and the Priest decide that a shelter may be made out of the remains of the boat and the sand. With pieces of timber, they begin digging in but the sand is heavy with rain and the wind causes it to slide in upon itself as soon as it is dug. They persevere with Sarmboc talking about the engineering skill of his clan and how he knows he can build a shelter with two toothpicks and a rock, if necessary. The Priest does not seem to hear him but keeps his back in his digging.

"I do not think that digging a sand shelter in this storm is wise," says Melisana and the mage nods in agreement. He says, "Let us search in two directions and return in two hours. I will go with the legionnaire and Brother Akair, you go with Mistress Melisana."

The soldier stares at the wizard as if to say something but holds his tongue. He instead goes to the Dwarf and takes Hafkris' sword. "Just in case," he says.

So the party splits up: the Dwarf and Cleric attempting to make a shelter in the sand, the Mage and Soldier heading north and the Monk and Melisana heading south. Meanwhile, the winds howled a little louder and the rains fell more heavily. It is growing colder . . .

"Arghhh! This is pointless!" The Dwarf stands in the middle of a shift depression on the beach. His face is raw from the bite of the blowing sand, howling wind and pouring rain. Chronos says nothing but squints at the sky where he thinks the sun should be. Despite his name, he has no idea how much time has elapsed since their companions ventured off. He shares the Dwarf's frustration though. It is obvious that they will be unable to make an adequate shelter that will protect all of them. Hopefully, the others were having more luck . . .

Just at that moment, Sarmboc could make out the shapes of the Mage and Soldier coming back from the north. They were shuffling and hunched against the wind.

"Well?" grumbled the Dwarf.

"There is nothing of use in that direction," said Syndyls. "Barren beach, bleached rocks, a few dead bodies from our ship and a cliff wall too sheer to climb without equipment."

Flavius nodded his agreement with the wizard's assessment.

"Alright then. The priest and I have not had much luck with building sand castles here. Let's pack up our stuff and head south to find that monk and the lady."

Quickly the group gathered the waterlogged bounty they had scavenged from the ship including the broken cot and two net hammocks. Without looking back, they began to move out to the south along the beach.

The wind howled on the beach and sand began to kick into Jonathan's face. He could hear the sounds of the pig men around him and he held his breath. Just maybe they would think him dead and move on. Out of one barely open eyelid he had seen what happened to the Captain when he ran. It was not pretty. And though Jonathan was no stranger to violence, it was definitely not his favorite pastime. The Captain had begged in the end and Jonathan's anger won over his humanity. He hoped the pigs would not spare him. They did not.

Now, they were moving amongst the washed up bodies, searching in vain for loot on the poor dead slaves. Those who stirred go a swift sword to the back or the head or the neck. He had to make them believe he was dead.

Jonathan could smell the salty stink of one. His boot was so close that the air from it moved Jonathan's hair. The hair rose up to meet the cloth boots and Jonathan willed it down. One would have thought the rain that was steadily falling would have plastered it to his scalp but that one hair was being stubborn. Please, gods, let him move on. A grunt. A yell from somewhere to his left. This one yelled in return. Harsh words spoken from the back of a nasty throat. Jonathan could not tell what language that could possibly be but whatever, it was sweet to Jonathan for it caused the pig man to move on to the next body.

Jonathan tried moving his eyelids just a little again. The pig men were moving away. Unfortunately, he could not see where. Just away from the water. Away from him. Their sounds grew fainter and finally melted into the wind and rain. Jonathan still dared not move.

Brother Akair moved as stealthily as possible over the sand. Reaching the first body, he noticed it was one of the slaves he had seen aboard the ship. The body was battered and if

that had not killed the poor soul, surely the deep dark slash in the back did.

One did not look quite right. Brother Akair crouched motionless and silent, letting his body adjust to the movement of the world around him. Yes, there it was. That body was moving; breathing, almost imperceptibly. Alive but how alive, thought the monk. Well alive by the breathing. Whoever he was, he was dressed like the other captives and he was controlling his breath as not to be noticed. Brother Akair called out, "I think it is safe now. I am Akair." For a second the body did not move then quickly the head turned and looked at him, eyes blinking against the wind, rain and sand.

"There were pig men about. Orcs. They slaughtered everyone who moved. Including the Captain as he tried to run away."

"Were you one of the captives on the ship?" Brother Akair moved closer to the blinking man.

Getting up and brushing the sand from his rags, the man spoke, "Yes. I am Jonathan." He shivered as the wind hit his now exposed wet front.

"Well, Jonathan, we had better get off this beach. You said there were Orcs around. I do not want to be here when they return. Plus, we should go meet my companions. One is there," he said pointing to the sand and rocks where Melisana was hiding. "Are you at all injured?"

"No, I am okay but I am cold. And hungry."

"I am sorry. I may not be able to help with that. We were not able to salvage too much from the ship and the Immortals have seen fit to keep this wind and rain up beyond all imagination. I have never seen anything like it."

The two quickly checked the other bodies to see if they could be helped but all were beyond saving and quite dead. There was also nothing of value amongst them. Even the Captain's body had been stripped. They walked to Melisana and returned back up the way they had come, bending against the wind and rain.

Just then, the rest of the party came shuffling down the beach. Brother Akair quickly introduced Jonathan and the group decided to follow the Orc footprints. They led between two

large dunes. Many of them ran together and finally led to several paths. Following one, they went up a bluff which looked down upon the beach where Jonathan had washed ashore. Nothing there but some bones from what may have been a chicken (Jonathan eyed them hungrily but did not pick them up).

Following the main tracks, the group ventured deeper into the island's interior at some point, it became clear that those who were making them were dragging something. Flavius guessed that it was a person but Melisana thought it might be a chest. Jonathan hoped it was food. Sarmboc didn't care as long as the tracks led out of the wind and the rain. He longed for a dry cave in Rockhome with a nice fire.

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As the party walked along in the depression between two large hills, they became aware of a noise - a very faint noise, like grunting voices and steel clanging on steel, barely audible over the noise of the rain and the wind. It seems to be coming from the left, beyond the hill to their left. The characters scrambled up and noticed that below them, there was a ravine separating the line of hills from the next ridge. And there's a battle going on down there.

It looks like a dozen squat yellow skinned humanoids (Sarmboc identifies them as Goblins) and half a dozen Orcs going at it pretty fiercely. The goblins are fighting with bows and spears; the Orcs have axes and pole arms, and one of them appeared to have armor, too. Most of the fighters don't have any sort of armor, but all of them have cloaks.

About 50 feet behind the line of Orcs there appeared to be someone lying in the ravine; a human man, a white-bearded old man wearing tattered robes. He's lying down, twisted over to watch the fight; his arms are behind his back and look as though they've been tied.

Flavius turned to the others. "We cannot leave that old man to those beasts. We must rescue him."

Jonathan looked down at the fight and the man. "I think I can sneak around and release him without them seeing me."

"Do any of you remember him from the ship?" asks Melisana. They all nod no. "Just wondering," she says. "I agree that we cannot leave him alone but we cannot fight all of those creatures."

"Let us let nature takes its course and have them fight each other," says the cleric. "Meanwhile Jonathan here can sneak around and free the man. Then when the rest are worn down and down with fighting, we will swoop down and finish them off."

"Does not sound too honorable . . . but I like it," smiles Flavius.

So Jonathan began sneaking around to get the man while Brother Akair covered with the crossbow and the party watched the fight. Swords swung and pole arms lunged. The Orc on the right flank was pierced with arrows while one goblin archer on left flank was killed by daggers and one goblin on the line took a deadly axe blow. Jonathan made it to the man and began to untie him.

Next, an Orc on the left flank went down under a hail of arrows while the second goblin archer on left flank fell to Orcish daggers. Jonathan started to move with the old man, motioning him to keep quiet.

The battle kept raging but a Goblin had a feeling something was happening outside his range of vision. He fired his bow then turned to look around. Meanwhile an Orc in the center of the line was run through with a Goblin spear and the Orc commander was brought down by arrows). The Orcs were not through though and two goblins on the line succumbed to axe blows. Jonathan and the old man were on the move back to the group.

The goblin archer turned towards Jonathan and fired an arrow at him right as he and the old man got back to the group. Just then the one of the last Orcs was speared by a Goblin as the Orc chopped off his arm with his halberd. The other Goblin archer was too intent on the last Orc to notice the other archer turning to confront the Humans.

Akair let loose a crossbow bolt at the archer as the Cleric, Dwarf, Melisana and Soldier began a dash down the hill to the remaining Goblins. It stuck the Goblin in the neck and his companion

looked on in fear as he realized the battle was not over. He let loose his arrow at the Orc anyway (striking him through the heart) but the Orc was able to swing one last time and fell a Goblin.

The Cleric's charge carried him to a surprise Goblin and his club pashed deep into the shoulder of the small creature. A sickening crunch and a small whimper came from him. The Dwarf and Melisana were just as deadly in their efforts, overwhelming their opponents and creating pools in the sand. The last Goblin archer weighed his odds. He was alone but surrounded by his dead comrades. He could run but was not sure if he could win. He decided to go down fighting and let loose an arrow at the Dwarf. It flew over his head and stuck into the sand dune. By then the Cleric was upon him and knocked his head from his shoulders like a golf ball.

The party scanned the wreckage of humanoids. None were left standing. Flavius and the Dwarf, without speaking, began the process of stripping the bodies and collecting the useful salvage. They were used to the carnage of a battlefield. All in all, they found many weapons but all of dubious quality. Given their dire straits though, they were happy to have some weapons, armor and clothing.

Once the clean up was done, they turned towards the old man. He was a scarecrow of a man: bald, with a matted dirty beard that would be white if washed, a sallow complexion and wide eyes. Since he had been rescued, he had been mumbling to himself; always chattering. Finally, the old man spoke, "Thank you for saving me. My name - haven't needed it in a long time - is Keestake, and you're the first human faces I've seen in more years than I can remember. It's true.

"And you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but in my day, in my day, I was personal groom to himself - to Viledel, the Sea King. Yes, this is the Island of Viledel - you didn't know that?"

"But himself died when the pirates crushed the island, years and years ago, when my hair was still black and my face unlined. I didn't fight on the day the pirates came, just hid in an overturned, ruined boat no one looked under, while the murdering and the burning went on day after day. And finally the pirates were all

gone, and I've been here alone since then. Living in the house of the Sea King, protecting the treasure left behind - for the pirates never found the real goods of Viledel, just some of the trinkets and baubles kept in the manor-and becoming tired and gray. How long has it been?

"The Orcs came a few days ago. They captured me, and said the stories said that the treasure of the Sea King had never been found, which was true enough, I guess. And they said I knew where it was, which was true, too, but I never told them so.

"The goblins came two days ago. The Orc chief and the goblin chief talked, and the goblin chief said they were there to claim the island as their new stronghold, but the Orc said they were there for the treasure too, and as soon as he said it the goblins wanted the goods, and there's been war ever since.

"The Orcs are all set up in the old soldiers' barracks, and the goblins are all in the old stables, and the manor in the middle is where they hunt around for treasure and fight one another most of the time. But there's another place, where they went once but leave alone now - the temple of the goddess. It's on the far side of the hill overlooking the manor, and if you and your friends want to take shelter there, no one will bother with you."

The group agrees to follow the old man. Keestake leads the characters down back trails and across rough terrain; he explains that he doesn't want to be recaptured by the Orcs or the goblins. Eventually the group arrives at the hillside below the temple and sees it silhouetted against the dimming sky-the first indication that it was almost night time.

When they got within a hundred yards of the temple, the characters see the unimpressive sight of the building. The building was obviously once a beautiful temple - two stories in height, crafted from well-fitted planks of dark hardwoods brought from the mainland. The windows were spacious and cheerful, closed against the wind with brightly-painted shutters; a gate of well crafted wrought iron once stood before the large front door, and a trellis for well tended ivy once leaned against the right half of the front face of the temple.

Today, after 60 years of neglect, the temple is a wreck. The expensive wood is old and pitted, cracked and decayed. The windows are still spacious, but most of the shutters are gone; the few that remain bang open and closed in the wind, or hang crookedly from a single hinge. The wrought iron gate is as intricate as ever, but rusted over, rusted clear through in places. The ivy once planted as decoration now covers the entire right side of the front wall, and continues around the whole right side of the temple. It's a spectacle of gloom and disrepair. There are, however, no lights within, no sign of habitation, and the walls may be sound enough to keep out the worst of the weather.

The old man leads the characters clear up to the gate at the entrance, pulls it open a little-it makes a squeak, alarming but really not too loud-and steps through the still working doors of heavy oak into the temple itself. Once the characters entered, they found that the main hall where they stood was thoroughly shielded against the wind, for it has no windows, and the front doors are sound. After being in the temple for a few minutes, their shakes subsided and their fingers and toes became less numb. This first room once had plastered walls painted with frescoes of the goddess, her symbols and her deeds. The paint and plaster have badly flaked over the years. There is no furniture in the room, only wind-blown rubbish. There are two sets of double doors in the room, one leading outside and the other, further into the temple.

Beyond these doors, was a very large chamber, two stories in height. There is broken furniture all over the tiled floors; the remains of chairs, tables, and perhaps low couches. Most of the wood looks aged, but the breaks are all fresh. On the east wall, in the middle, is a set of double doors, closed. On the south wall is the set of double doors by which the party entered the chamber. On the north wall, at the east corner, is a very small and inconspicuous door. All the doors in the chamber are still hanging on their hinges.

The west wall was actually a flight of three shallow steps leading up to a line of pillars. Between the pillars, cloths or tapestries, now ratty and sagging, have been hung, blocking off the view of the chamber beyond. The walls of the hall were once plastered smooth and painted with frescoes of the goddess in all her aspects. Now the paint is curling, the plaster is broken

and peeling, and there are large cracks in the plaster, probably from the foundation of the temple settling over the years. Additionally, someone has taken a club to the walls here and there, evidenced by deep gouges and tears in the plaster, and places on the wall have been smeared with filth.

Keestake says that the damage to the room (the smashed furniture, the damaged and befouled walls) all took place when the Orcs investigated the temple, looking for treasure. Enraged because they found no gold, they destroyed all the furnishings and much of the painting, defiling the decoration; they would have done more, but the sudden arrival of the violent storm made them break off their vandalism and flee.

Pushing past the hanging tapestries and the columns, the characters see that the far end of this chamber is raised about a foot and a half above the floor of the rest of the hall. The ratty cloths were once fine velvet, purple embroidered upon in gold, but they had aged now into a uniform, revolting brown and it was impossible to tell now what the embroidery represented. "The hall of the goddess," says Keestake, "it was once the glory of the island."

Sitting here is a statue of the goddess: Diulanna. Akair and Chronos tell the group that she is the goddess of will power, heroes and luck. They all nod solemnly except Syndyls who smiles. Alphasians believe in the Immortals but hold that they have little sway over mortal man. Especially those who become masterful of magic.

As a statue, Diulanna is sitting on a throne, looking down into the hall of the goddess; her expression is thoughtful, with the faintest trace of a smile on her lips. The sculptor must have been a tremendous talent, for the statue is posed in a very natural manner, head slightly bowed, left hand extended in a gesture of blessing, right hand gripping the arm of the throne. But it, too, is a ruin now. The nose has been broken off, the left hand likewise, a great crack runs across the torso and the face and torso are smeared with filth.

The other object in this area is a low table, obviously an altar, set down before the statue of the goddess. Since it bears no trace of bloodstains, new or old, it must have been an altar for offerings instead of sacrifices. Both statue and altar are sculpted out of fine marble.

The walls of this chamber are white and unadorned.

Akair, Melisana and Chronos, try to clean the statue some but the dirt is ingrained. The others want to explore before it gets too dark so they enter a few rooms and find nothing useful. However, they decide that the hall of the goddess is too open and decide to rest in a smaller room where they can block the door. After starting a small fire, they find it is fully dark outside, they are exhausted and hungry but warm and dry, and eventually they drop off to sleep.

"Akair."

The monk heard his name, clear as day. He looked around but everyone was still asleep. Sarmboc was snoring.

"Akair."

"Who was that," thought the mystic. "And where is that voice coming from." It was a woman's voice, soft yet forceful. Perhaps the most beautiful voice he had ever heard. It was alluring in a non-sexual way.

"Akair, come to me." He was certain it was coming from the other room; beyond the hallway. He moved over and tried to wake Jonathan but he did not budge. He decided he would not go without someone but no one would awaken. He sat back down.

"Do not be afraid, come to me Akair."

Flavius was awake and staring at Akair. "Who and what is that?"

"I don't know," said the monk.

"Let's go find out." Everyone was awake. They all went into the hall of the goddess. A glow appeared around the statue. The statue changes subtly; slowly: the filth disappears, the broken nose and arm float up and affix themselves, the crack in the torso repairs itself, and the statue even moves and stands, inhabited by the essence of the goddess.

The goddess spoke,

"You see about you the results of the raid of the Hak-kubra, the pirate Orcs. They have defiled

my sanctuary. When men came hither three generations ago, they slew the men of this island, but let my temple be - as is proper. Since then, my sanctuary has been subject to wind and storm, age and rot, but I was not offended, for that is nature's right - to beat down what men have raised.

"But the acts of debasement you see about you have offended me I choose to destroy this island, and all living upon it: a proper cleansing of the stain made by the Hak-kubra. I see no reason for you to die for another's offense, however. So I will not cleanse this island this night, as I had planned, but will stay my hand another day, and lay waste to this place at nightfall tomorrow. If you are fled by then, I will adjudge you fit to survive, and the storm which destroys this place will do no harm to your craft.

"It is a difficult test. I see you have not chosen your adventuresome paths willingly. So this aid will I give you: there are items of power to be found on this island. For the time you remain here, I will allow you to use any as if you were trained in their use. Should you find an object of magical power, use it wisely; perhaps it will help you toward your goal."

The goddess answers a few questions then the glow begins to fade. Again she reminds the group that they must be off the island by night fall tomorrow and bids them farewell. They decide to build a fire here and sleep in the shadow of the goddess' statue which is now repaired.

After speaking with the goddess, the adventurers settled down to sleep in her hall. With the goddess watching over them, they were certain that no harm would come in the night but the goddess had other plans; testing their mettle would begin tonight.

Quietly, slipping down from the chimney in the kitchen came a dark figure. His skin was gray green and rotting; his clothes were rags in place of his once proud vestments. It had been many years since Curate Kantinomeiros had heard the sounds of humans. For the past many years, he had been undead and no one had come. He had been undead since he had starved to death after the raid, his soul tormented by his lack of courage to help his king or even to warn his

people when the raiders came ashore. Cursed by the goddess he was.

Kantinomeiros crept silently across the hallway, the scent of living beings thick in his dry nostrils. Not much of his mind was still there. Just enough to make him hate all that was living and those who reminded him of his former glory and final fall from grace. "Oh," he thought, "they are peacefully sleeping and will not notice him break their necks."

Akair was used to sleeping while still monitoring what was happening around him. The slight change in air pressure from the opening of the door aroused him but he lay still in the darkness. His eyes groped for some sign of what was there but the flickering of the fire made it impossible to sort through the shadows. His ears strained to hear above Sarmboc's snoring. There. No. Maybe. A shuffle. Someone was moving around; stepping between them and coming closer. He quickly reached out his hand and grabbed a leg.

"Who are you?" he commanded. In fear, he then realized that maggots were covering his hand and the face looking down on him was not alive.

"We are under attack!" yelled the monk.

The ghoul backhanded him across the face and slipped from his grasp. The adventurers were surprised but quickly stirring to action.

Keestake awoke and ran for the doors leaving the place. Syndyls looked at the old man then at the creature. Turning again, he yelled, "Come back here!" and followed the man to the doors.

By now, everyone was up but Kantinomeiros was in their midst. He lunged for the soldier and raked his skin with bony claws. A chill went down the Thyatian's spine and for a second he seemed stunned. He shook off the feeling and swung his sword, narrowly missing the ghoul. Chronos by now had his makeshift holy symbol in hand.

"By the power of the gods, I banish you foul beast and pray that your spirit seeks peace not on this earth." The cleric stood tall and the light of the fire shone a little brighter. The ghoul paid it no mind and went back after the fighter. This time as his hand grasped around the soldier's neck, a feeling of utter peace swept through

Flavius. He went limp and fell to the floor. The ghoul laughed dryly, the giggle echoing in his hollow chest.

Akair had retreated and grabbed the crossbow. He took careful aim and sent a quarrel into the undead creature. It turned to him but was confronted by the Dwarf who swung at him with a sword. Bits of rotted flesh and maggots flew from the place where the blade bit.

During this, Jonathan was sneaking around trying to get behind the beast but it saw him and snarled. It leapt away from the Sarmboc and clambered towards Jonathan. The cleric let his holy symbol fall on its leather thong against his chest and brandished his club against the ghoul. Both he and Melisana struck at the same time knocking it off balance. It turned and swiped at her but missed.

Another quarrel came whizzing into the melee but struck nothing but the wall. The ghoul leapt at Jonathan, colliding into him and rending his arms. Foul, gray teeth came inches from the man's neck as he rolled the creature off of him just before his body went limp. Sarmboc stabbed at the beast and struck home. A feral light shined in the creature's eyes as he leveled them on the Dwarf. But he was distracted by the double club attack from Chronos and Melisana.

Somewhere in the recesses of his failed mind, the ghoul knew he was in trouble. Having been a coward in life, he was just slightly less a coward now. He glanced towards the doors in the room and calculated which exit would be best. Just then a quarrel found his neck and knocked him off his feet. He scrambled away but the Dwarf was there. "Thwack!" The sword bit again into his undead flesh.

He grabbed at the Dwarf's legs and knocked him off balance, scratching him but not paralyzing him. An opening appeared and he ran. Unfortunately, the Cleric and Melisana were there on either side of the gap and rained blows down on him. He slipped and spilled across the floor. Another quarrel found its mark and the sword came down upon his neck.

Finally, after many years of undeath, he was done. In his last moments upon this planet, he felt the warm embrace of the goddess as he pled for forgiveness. Forgiveness of his cowardice; forgiveness for his lack of faith and

forgiveness for his bitterness and evil which led him to ghouldom. In that instance, his face relaxed and he smiled. The light was gone from his eyes and Curate Kantinomeiros was finally and truly dead.

The standing adventurers sighed and smiled. Relief fleeing as they noticed their fallen comrades.

Syndyllys came dragging the old man back into the main room. "He tried to escape rather than help us."

"And you thought it so important to chase him that you left us here?"

"I am not a trained soldier. I did what I thought was best."

And so, the night was quiet. Akair, Melisana and Chronos tended to Jonathan and Flavius who were paralyzed but not dead. Syndyllys kept an eye on Keestake and Sarmboc ruffled the rags on the floor and went back to snoring as loudly as he could.

His body wanted to shut down but the cold was keeping him awake. Each wave that splashed over him was full of little daggers which pricked his skin. It took all of his concentration to not swallow the briny seawater. The stormy waves swelled and carried him more than he could swim. This was a long way from the forest of his adolescence.

Ariston tried to open his eyes against the howling wind and driving rain but each time he did, saltwater splashed in them. He was suddenly hit by something. A shark? A sea monster? No, it was a board; most likely from his ship. While he hated that ship, he was happy to find a piece of it now. He grasped blindly and caught it. It was large enough for him to climb half on and begin kicking his legs. If his sense of direction was correct (he was a Forester not a Sailor), he was going to shore. If not, he was going to his death.

It was his lucky day. After what seemed an eternity, he reached a rocky shore and dragged himself from the water. His chest heaved as he coughed out water and breathed in fresh air. The wind was making it hard. He laid on the

rocks for a while, the pelting rain stinging his face. He did not care; he was alive. However, he knew if he stayed here, with no shelter, the elements would kill him. He turned over, spit out the water which had collected in his mouth and looked bleary eyed at the beach around him. A sheer cliff totally surrounded him. He had only two choices: go back in the water to try to swim to another beach or climb that wall. He rubbed wet sand on his hands and started the climb.

Rocks cut his hands and snagged the rags he wore as clothes. His knees became a bloody mess, rain water mixing with his blood and running like rivers down his shins. But he did not give up. He did not make a sound and he kept his breathing steady. Finally, he dragged himself to the summit and rested for but a moment. Looking around he saw the island: it was hilly; very, very hilly. It looked as if a ridge of mountain tops had pushed its way above the waves of the ocean. Looking across the island, Ariston saw that the highest and most forbidding hills were westward, running the entire length of the island from south to north. Northward was broken terrain, passable but not easy going, while eastward the terrain seemed to flatten out a little. There was no sign of shelter or a human community in any direction. There was not much green to be seen either. The island seemed barren and abandoned; almost scoured and totally lifeless.

Between the hills were some possible trails and Ariston slipped down the hill to see what type of game had run along them. In the rain it was difficult to tell from afar but up close, it was clear that marks had been made by humanoids, some in boots and some barefoot. They went in all directions but he picked one and wandered the island. Where there were humanoids, he would find shelter.

Coming around a bend he saw the carnage of a great battle. Arrows stuck up from the sand and the stripped bodies of a dozen Goblins and a half a dozen Orcs were scattered across the sand. He noted that all useful items had been stripped; there were no weapons and little clothing. Drag marks indicated that someone had survived. He followed them, cautiously looking around to make sure no one was watching.

Several hours later, he was standing at the base of a hill in the dark. Above him lay a dark and

mostly ruined structure. It may have been a temple at some point but not now. What was that in the ruined window? A light. No, a fire. Someone was inside and there were more than one of them. He decided he was too tired to fight should they prove hostile (who ever it was appeared to have beaten a dozen and a half beasts down in the ravine). He covered himself with remains of clothing he had found on the Orcs and Goblins then on top of that buried his legs in dirt and sand. His body heat warmed it slightly and he fell asleep in the shadow of the temple.

Akair awoke with a start. It was nearing daybreak. All of his companions were sleeping, undoubtedly worn out by the evening's activities. He left them sleeping and slipped out of the Hall of the Goddess. He quietly opened the main doors and stepped outside. The overcast was keeping it dark still but a flicker of pink was beginning on the horizon. The monk stretched then began jogging down the hill.

As he reached the bottom, he stopped. Something was wrong. "Unghhhh!"

A sword dug into his side, the blade jaggedly ripping his skin and cutting into his vital organs. The monk twisted around, wrenching the sword out of his body. Attached to the weapon was an Orc, glaring at him with a pig faced grin. Another was standing beside him and was about to strike. He dodged quickly to his right, avoiding the blow while drawing his dagger. He parried a blow from the first Orc but lost his grip on the dagger. It went flying into the dirt. Another sword swipe nicked his arm and blood trickled down it.

The mystic jumped and kicked one Orc in the face, a satisfying crunch of bone and cartilage responding to the blow. The Orc went down but the monk landed on his feet. The blood from the first blow had seeped through his rags and cloak, a dark brown spot on the already brown cloak. He had no time to think about it because the other Orc was swinging at him with the sword. He side stepped and landed a blow to the back of the creature's neck, causing the Orc to stumble.

He knew he should run but he thought he could win this fight first. He turned to the Orc he had just punched and swung for his face. The Orc

was not as winded as he thought and ducked the blow then landed a clumsy blow with his sword, the flat of the blade slapping the monk's thigh. It sounded like a bolt of lightning.

The other Orc was stumbling to his feet and trying to rejoin the fight. Akair hesitated for an instant while he decided which one he should attack first. However, his danger sense told him it was time for reinforcements. He turned towards the temple and began to run. The Orc he had kicked lunged at him and caught his cloak, knocking Akair off balance. He spun and punched the Orc but the other was with them and ran him through with his sword.

The monk's eyes grew wide and he tried to speak. No words came out as he crumpled to the ground, sliding off the Orc's blade.

Ariston awoke to the sound of combat. He leapt to his feet and ran towards the sound. He saw two Orcs staggering and stumbling over the body of a human. Running, he smashed into one, swinging his fists as he came. The Orc fell over backwards and twisted into the sand. His head hit a rock and he was out. The other was surprised and jumped away from the Forestor.

Ariston had the battle fever upon him and gave no quarter. He ducked under the Orc's sword thrusts and lit into the beast's chest with his fists. The Orc stumbled back, winded. A roundhouse kick from the ranger sent the Orc into the sand, his sword flying. Ariston leaped onto the Orc's chest and put both hands around the beastman's neck. With all of his might he squeezed until the Orc stopped breathing.

Slowly the Forestor got to his feet. He gathered the two Orcish swords and went to go check on the Human. He could see from where he stood that there was little hope. The man's body was twisted in the pose of one who had died a violent death.

Just at that moment, the doors to the temple opened and the party began down the hill. They saw a human male with long dark hair, matted by the wind and rain, holding two bloody swords and standing over what could only be the body of monk.

"Drop those swords and move away from the body!" shouted Chronos. He came running down the hill, Flavius close at hand.

Ariston looked up at the rag wearing group. "You have it wrong. You should drop your weapons."

The party was surrounding the young ranger now but he was defiant. The battle fever was still on him and now he had a real weapon. He was very skilled in handling a sword and felt confident versus any normal man. He eyed the one who had spoken. He spoke Thyatian with a slight foreign accent but he looked Thyatian. Probably a Karameikan.

Another man spoke. He had the look of a Thyatian soldier and an accent to match. "On three we will all put down our weapons and talk. You appear to have been a victim of the same boat voyage as us. And you look vaguely familiar." He did not smile but he did not appear to be threatening either. Given his size and the sword in his hand, it appeared that he could be if he wanted to be.

"Alright," said Ariston.

All of them carefully laid down their weapons and Syndyls spoke. He explained who they were and the predicament they were in. While he was talking, Melisana and Chronos bent down and ministered to Akair. He was beyond aid.

After the mage finished explaining the situation, Ariston introduced himself. He acknowledged being a captive on the slave ship and then briefly gave his story of how he found the dead monk. There were solemn nods then the cleric moved to bury him.

They stripped his body of useful items, wrapped him in his cloak and buried him in the shadow of the temple. Chronos said a few final words and the group moved back down the hill.

Syndyls, who was not one for ceremonies of the sort, spent the burial going through the items the group had collected. He decided they would need to travel quickly and only kept the items they needed. He wrapped the extras in the hammocks and left the bundles inside the temple.

Keestake found a large leaf and drew a map of the island for the adventurers. He noted the location of the manor house, the barracks (which was taken by the Orcs) and the stables (taken by the Goblins). He described the once proud little town on the edge of the shore which now was in ruins, having been utterly destroyed by the raiders many years ago and rifled through again by the Orcs and Goblins more recently.

Keestake also described the manor house as a low but sturdy H shaped building. He also looked away, starry eyed and quietly stated, "Aye, I know about some odd bits and pieces hereabouts. The Sea King had many treasures from his years of adventuring before settlin' down here. The pirates ran off with most of 'em, but they didn't recognize all of 'em. Nor would I.

"But one of 'em that he gave the queen was this little stick o' wood that would throb in your hand when it was near the Sea King's funny treasures. I never bothered with it, these 60 years. "

He mumbled, under his breath, "Not my place to be meddlin' with the treasures of the family. Nor yours either . . . if it weren't life or death." His voice grew louder again, "I'll show you where it is, if you want."

The cleric said, "Yes, you should show us." And the group decided they would make it to the manor house, avoiding what creatures they could. Two hours after burying Akair's body they settled on a slight rise above the manor house.

The mansion, just as the old man described, was an H-shaped building, very long and low. It seemed to be built of granite. The exterior looked like it had stood up to the elements better than the temple. Unlike the temple, all the exterior windows had solid-looking, if rusty, iron bars across them. It looked as though it was made to be defended, though it was no castle.

From their vantage point, they could see the Orcs and Goblins at opposite ends of the manor. There was a cluster of Orcs in front of the entrance to the northwest wing, and a trickle of Orc traffic between there and the barracks, a little north-west of the manor. There was a somewhat larger cluster of goblin-guards in front of the entrance to the southeast wing, and a corresponding trickle of Goblin traffic between there and the stables, a little to the south-east.

The terrain around the manor was rolling, with great patches of grasses and weeds and scrub growing all over. Keestake pointed out another topographical feature: a depression, some sort of little ditch or break in the ground which starts a few hundred feet southwest of the manor and runs almost to the southwest wing.

"That's how I'd creep up on the thing," Keestake asserted. "Along that ridge. We couldn't go in the door there, we'd be spotted in a second, but there's a window on the west wall near the south side where the bars are loose. I 'magine we can get in there."

Everyone agreed that that seemed to be the best approach. However, Jonathan and Ariston believed they should go first, stealthily make it to the window and ensure that the bars could be removed. As they set out into the ditch, they noticed it was filled with junk. Unsure of his footing, Ariston slid on the mud, tumbled through a broken chair and knocked Jonathan off of his feet. A loud crash echoed against the stone of the manor house.

Syndyls and Sarmboc shook their heads while Melisana held her breath. From their vantage point, Chronos could see that several Orcs were looking in their direction. He quietly motioned for the Jonathan and Ariston to be still but they were picking their way through the rubble in the ditch, crouching and walking. Chronos dared not make more noise or motion.

Two Orcs split from the group of six and started heading towards the ditch. They were perhaps 250 feet away but looking towards the sneaking Jonathan and Ariston. They stopped and looked at the ditch.

Looking back towards the group, Ariston saw the motioning cleric. He tapped Jonathan on the shoulder and they came to a halt. They were about half way, 50 feet, away from the end of the ditch. The ditch ended perhaps five feet from their destination window.

The Orcs closest to the ditch were not moving. The far Orcs were involved in a dispute which had them pre-occupied. Occasionally one would look at the outlying Orcs and shake their pig like head.

The two adventurers in the ditch began moving again. Unfortunately, the mud was slippery and being totally quiet was out of the question. They moved ahead twenty-five feet. The Orcs were on the move again, as if they had heard them but did not know who they were.

Chronos and Syndyls had a plan. Syndyls would try to take out the far Orcs with a spell then they could charge the other two and pepper them with arrows. Flavius and Sarmboc got their bows ready. Chronos motioned to Ariston to stop and wait for a barrage of arrows. Unfortunately, the Forester did not completely understand the signal. He came to a halt.

Tapping Jonathan on the shoulder stopped him as well. He decided to sneak a peak at whatever was distracting the cleric so much. He stood up and exposed more than he wanted. He thought the ditch was deeper and it was not.

The Orcs saw the head of a human pop up out of the ditch and they yelled something in Orcish. Swords out, they began to run towards the ditch.

Seeing their plan kick off before he was quite ready, Syndyls cast the spell he had been able to decipher from the old spell book. He guessed it was the will of the goddess to reveal it to him without the standard Read Magic spell. He hoped that it was also the will of the goddess that this worked. He said the last word and closed his eyes. He felt a slight tremble in his hands and looked at the far group of Orcs. One by one, they fell to the ground, asleep.

Sarmboc and Flavius let loose with their bows, catching one of the Orcs with their arrows. The sudden onslaught caught the Orcs short and one turned tail and ran back to the group of four sleeping on the ground. Ariston fired an arrow his way but it missed. Jonathan ran the rest of the way out of the ditch and began tugging on the barred windows.

Chronos urged Melisana and Keestake into the pit and told them to run for the building. Syndyls followed them.

More arrows were unleashed from the archers in the group. One caught the lone Orc nearest the ditch in the thigh and he slumped to one knee. The others fell short of the fleeing Orc who was just arriving at the group of sleeping Orcs. He woke two and moved on to the next.

The archers formed a line and awaited the Orcs getting into range. Chronos formed behind them, ready to heal any damage. Jonathan made it through the window, disappearing into the darkness. The others were still running to the window. The lone Orc on his knees slumped down to the ground, in a pose suggestive of death.

The last two sleeping Orcs were awake and the running Orc kept running, rounding the corner and disappearing from view. The others saw what was going on and drew their weapons. They began their advance at double time and spread out to avoid the archers.

Another adventurer disappeared in the window. And the archers moved forward and took aim. Arrows flew, dropping one of the Orcs but they came running into the group.

They clashed into the adventurers but the archers had their arrows notched. At close range, they stuck another one, dropping him. The others began swinging their swords but found no purchase.

Syndyls was inside the room by now and he could hear footfalls and grunts on the other side of the door. He quickly aligned those inside the room to strike anything that battered the door. Jonathan had his sword out but did not look to comfortable holding it.

The Orcs outside again swung their swords. This time, one found Flavius. A slash opened on his arm and he dropped his bow. Ariston dropped his bow voluntarily and moved to his sword. Sarmboc, on the end, let loose an arrow which stuck in an Orc's shoulder. It screamed in pain. Chronos moved in beside the other Orc and bashed its shoulder with his club.

Inside the room, something heavy struck the wooden door. A loud grunt came from the other side.

The last two Orcs on the outside again swung for the adventurers but Chronos hit his again with his club. Ariston stepped into the other Orc's body space and grinned. The swing of his sword was smooth but firm. With one stroke, the Orc's head was separated from his shoulders and his body stood for a second, as if stunned,

blood spurting high in the air. Sarmboc turned in shock at the Forestor, "Nice lad."

The door inside the room burst into a thousand splinters just at that instant. A rolling ball of Orc flesh burst into the room but Jonathan and Syndyls were ready. They brought their weapons down on its neck and laid him flat on the ground. Orc blood spread in a pool on the floor. Behind were two more Orcs, the first slipped slightly on the blood of the now dead one and missed with the swing of his battle axe.

Outside, the last Orc had had enough but saw that it had no way to escape. He pressed his attack against the cleric but was met with the dual swords of the Thyatians, Flavius and Ariston, as well as the club of Chronos and the battle axe of Sarmboc. He succumbed with little fanfare.

Meanwhile Jonathan, Melisana and Syndyls dispatched one Orc and stepped aside for the last to enter the room and meet his maker.

The group outside ran to the window to see if they could help. However, the group on the inside easily dispatched the last Orc. The group on the outside began climbing into the window.

Flavius was the last one in but as he was climbing, a sword struck out at him. It was the Orc who had pretended to die outside. His blade opened a cut on the soldier's side.

Flavius screamed and turned, swinging his sword. The Orc deftly snuck under it. The group inside the room was surprised and Chronos went to the window and tried to pull the warrior inside.

"What are you doing?!" yelled Flavius, his sword stroke ruined by the cleric.

"Hold him for me," chuckled the Orc in his native tongue. Unfortunately, no one spoke his language. He attempted to skewer the soldier but he moved just in the nick of time.

Flavius struggled free of the cleric and sliced the Orc across the chest. It looked surprised as life fled his body and he fell backwards into the dirt.

Finally, the battle was over. Flavius gave Chronos a quizzical look then climbed inside the window. Ariston gave him a hand.

Huddled in the darkness of the room, all of the party took a moment to catch their breath. Melisana looked at Keestake and thought for a moment. "Sir?" she said. "Wasn't it customary for sea people like King Viledel to bury their family with boats for the afterlife?"

The other adventurers began to take notice. Sarmboc moved closer so he could hear and everyone stared at the old man.

Keestake turned to her, "Why of course. Don't all civilized people do that?"

She was undaunted. "Did the king ever bury any of his family on the island?"

"Aye, of course. Twas very sad, very sad indeed. He lost his only son, Prince Horedel, to seaweed fever. The child was barely a man and had just begun to sail with his own crew. It tore the king's heart as it did the queen's and everyone on the island. They buried a good boat with him, they did, I watched it be crafted myself." Keestake seemed a little misty eyed but the party could not tell if it was the memory, his age or the misty rain blowing into the room through the open window.

"Keestake," Melisana said, "Can you draw us a map of how to get to that boat?"

"Certainly," said Keestake, "but it is the Prince's boat . . ."

Gathering the spoils of their last fight, the group quietly peered out the broken door. The corridor led both north and south. In the dim light spilling in from their entrance room and other unknown sources, they saw that the hallway was once nice, paneled in wood, but now was the victim of 50 plus years of neglect: cobwebs hang; dust balls lie scattered and mold seemed to be growing on the slightly damp walls. No sounds came from either direction so they began to check out the doors to the south.

The adventurers were as quiet as possible and entered each room cautiously. Syndyls made a joke about Jonathan and Ariston walking quietly but no one paid it much mind. By one door,

Keestake stopped and almost seemed to whimper.

"Tis me own room. Someone has been inside, I know it!" Keestake wanted to see it but he had not seen it since he was captured by the Goblins. Inside, they find it is a mess. The furniture he had taken to his choice room and kept up all these years was recently destroyed and picked through, including his bed, his chest of drawers, his tables, his chairs. He complained and moaned loudly until Flavius turned to him and glared.

In most of the rooms to the south, they found nothing. Keestake said they were the quarters of servants like him except the next to last one on the eastern wall. In this room, they find only enough broken furniture for one person. On the northern wall is a large (8 feet tall, floor to ceiling) wooden plaque, only slightly damaged weapons. It is a piece of relief sculpture showing a harpooner (full size) drawing back his weapon to release at a distant whale. The plaque has been pulled bodily from the wall, presumably by those searching for secret doors, and leaned against the wall. Braving the moldy conditions of the room (they can hardly breathe), Sarmboc and Aniston examine the sculpture. They soon discover that the harpoon the figure is holding is a separate piece, inlaid into the wood of the plaque but easily removable. It has been painted to look like part of the plaque, but it is not. Aniston tugs on the harpoon and it easily slides free of the sculpture. When he did so, the harpoon head dropped off and revealed a golden and quite sharp head underneath. Not knowing what to do with it, he kept it, tying it to his back with some of the rags of his clothing.

The characters turned towards the northern part of the hallway, going by their entrance room. As they headed that way, Syndyls heard something and called the group to a stop: voices perhaps and the scuffling of shoes or boots on the floor. Quickly listening at each door they pass, it becomes clear that it is the last door on the eastern wall that hides someone or something. The group confers quietly in the hallway and Sarmboc decides they should bust open the door like the Orc did previously. "Perhaps we can surprise them," he says.

Flavius and Chronos were silent about the plan but Syndyls nodded his agreement that it might work. The Dwarf backed up in the corridor then

ran as fast as he could into the door. In slow motion, the door splintered then Sarmboc fell into the room. Three Orcs stood at the ready with their swords and all three connected with the Dwarf. Blood splattered onto the door's frame and he crumbled under the blows. The party, having hoped to surprise whatever was on the other side of the door was in turn surprised.

The first seconds of the fight were almost the last for the party. Flavius and Ariston were both hit and nearly brought low by the Orcs. But then, from the far shadows came a tumbling shape. It expanded into a woman and she struck one of the Orcs with her fists. That rallied the party and distracted the Orc.

Ariston thrust his sword into the heart of one of the Orcs and twisted it out just in time to avoid the blade of another. From tip to hilt, it was covered in Orc ichor. Droplets sprayed as Ariston swung his sword.

The third Orc found his mark and Ariston winced from the blow. Flavius stepped up and hacked into the unarmored Orc's shoulder and the beast shuddered from the blow, moving back five feet from the Forestor.

The party noticed that there was not just one more human in the room but two others. They were busy untying themselves in the far corner. The one who had tumbled up to the fight was scrambling for the fallen Orc's sword. She grasped it just in time to block a blow from the lead Orc. She side stepped and swung but he moved out of the way and into the way of Jonathan's sword. A line of red appeared on the Orc's forearm.

The Orcs' nerve was unwavering and they pressed the attack. They focused on the obviously wounded Thyatians. Ariston was forced to his knees and Flavius was knocked to the wall. With a yell, the new woman landed a blow to one of the Orc's back as Melisana landed a club to its head and Flavius cut its stomach. It clutched its entrails as it fell; dead before it hit the floor.

The last one, the obvious leader, stood over Ariston. Syndyls stood poised behind the large Orc, dagger at the ready but the Forestor grunted and jumped to his feet. The primal sound and spring powered his swing and his sword separated the Orc's head from it

shoulders. The body took three steps backwards then fell onto the dirty floor.

Once the Orcs were dispatched, the group made introductions. One of the new people, a man, did most of the talking.

"This here is Kyri," he said pointing to a slight woman. It was clear that she was an Elf, not human as the party first thought. She bowed gracefully then turned to pick up one of the Orc swords.

"My acrobatic friend is Jael." The man turned to the woman who was cleaning Orc's blood from her newly acquired sword. She was tall and attractive with dark matted hair which was probably quite nice when clean. "Besides her tumbling skills, she is a great singer and kept us heartened during the last night."

"And I am Chae de Trey," the man said with an overstated bow. He spoke Thyatian but with a distinct accent. Flavius knew it to be Darokinian.

Chae explained that they were all three onboard the slave ship together, taken up to row (Melisana and Syndyls recognized Jael but none of them remembered an Elf onboard).

Chae continued, "So lightning struck the main sail and cracked it in half and some of the slaves jumped off the ship. The slaves started revolting and we Jael, Kyri and me) were all bound together. The deck was rocking and rolling, pitching and acting right ornery. Just then, a wave hit the ship and we were knocked off our feet. Being bound together, we were probably a sight to see as we struggled to get back up. Unfortunately, the Immortals had other plans for us and the water reached right up and pulled us in. Luckily, that Jael is pretty quick and she grabbed onto the broken mast that was bobbing in the water."

"We all grabbed on for dear life," said Jael. She had begun searching the Orcs and finding nothing.

Seeing that he was perhaps missing out on loot, Chae kept talking but started searching as well. He cut off the little steel belt buckles from each Orc and motioned as to put it into his pocket. He seemed not to notice that he did not have any pockets in his rags.

"So, anyway, we grabbed onto that mast and floated. We kicked and kicked against the tide. It was not much use so we just went with the flow. We wrapped our chains around the giant log so we would not fall and let the Immortals take us." Chae slipped another buckle into his imaginary pocket. It stuck somewhere and did not clatter to the floor.

"We were very lucky." These were the first word the Elf had spoken and everyone looked at her. She looked away. She moved closer to the Cleric, who was tending to the Dwarf, trying to stop the bleeding of his wounds. Sarmboc was not yet dead but close.

"Well as I was saying," said Chae, "We eventually wound up on shore. Using the wood that was all around us, we were able to get our bonds off. The rain was coming down like widow's tears and we knew we could not stay on the shoreline. So, we trudged around in the muck and eventually found what looked to be an old and forgotten village. There were rotten piers and a few sloping chimneys. We found the largest chimney and curled up inside its fireplace. Jael sang us to sleep with a song I had not heard since my childhood. She's from Darokin too.

"Anyways, we stayed in the fireplace as a break against the wind and the rain. We were stiff and still tired when we awoke but Kyri was stiff as a board. I asked what was the matter and she pointed at the largest, meanest group of pirates I had ever seen (not that I have seen many). They were all Orcs.

"They had us surrounded so we decided not to fight. Besides, we had just been slaves a little while ago and the Immortals saw fit to release us. I figured they would come help us again. So luckily, I speak a little Orc from my days helping my parents as a scout. They kept asking about "the old man" and if "he" was working with the Goblins. None of us knew of an old man nor any Goblins but I don't think they believed us. Instead they tied us up and marched us here. Then you came along and helped us escape, just like I thought it would happen."

"Oh, that's a mighty nasty wound you have there," Chae was looking at Ariston. "Let me see if I can do something about that. I learned some of the healing arts when I was scouting."

Ariston looked hesitantly at Chae and then at Kyri. Kyri again looked away but there seemed to be a smile on her face. Chae was already tearing off bits of his rags and tying them on to Ariston. Tighter and tighter, like a tourniquet.

"Hey, stop that!" Ariston pulled away. The tightened rags had turned bright red. He was on the verge of swooning and leaned on the wall to steady himself. "I will be okay. Save your touch for someone else."

"Suit yourself," said Chae. He moved on to try to help Flavius who looked at him with slightly widened eyes.

The cleric took a few moments to pray for the party and the Immortals answered his ministrations by making Flavius and Ariston feel slightly better. However, they are faced with a dilemma. Sarmboc is still unconscious. Ariston states that death is natural and the weakest die first. He wants to leave the Dwarf behind. Flavius and Chronos balk, "He will most certainly die if we leave him here. There has already been enough death on this island."

The new party members seem indifferent. "I just don't want to carry him," said Jael.

"I will carry him. My spirit is lightened by the weight of this burden," said the priest.

"Well, I will hold any heavy items he may have been carrying," volunteered Chae.

The cleric ignored the scowling Ariston and joking Chae and shouldered the Dwarf. The party then gathered up everything of value or use and decided to explore more deeply into the manor.

Back in the hallway, the party listened at the door to the north. Hearing nothing, they went through it and into another hallway. This one was also lined with dusty, cracked wood panels and showing the wear and tear of 60 years of neglect. Tattered cloth on the walls indicates the hallway was once hung with tapestries and drapes. Keestake wistfully says this wing housed the royal family of Viledel. The hallway stretches both east and north.

Jael moves to the front of the group. "I am going through those double doors." She moves eastward to the doors in the northern wall. Syndyls looks indignant. "No, we should go north. Keestake's map says the throbbing stick is that way." Jael ignores him and moves to the doors. Chae, Kyri, Flavius, Keestake, Jonathan, Melisana and Chronos (and of course Sarmboc) follow her. She shakes her head. The Mage and the Forester move away to the north.

Listening at the door, Jael hears nothing. She forces the slightly stuck door open and sees a rather large room. There were the moldy remains of a rug on the floor, three smashed desks, and two ruined tables. On the far side wall, a small barred but glassless window looked out on a courtyard. Heavy rain was pouring down and the sound of thunder could be heard in the distance. A tapestry hung on the wall beside the window which Jael moved aside with her sword. Beneath was a small wooden door. She motioned for her entourage to be quiet then listened at the door. Nothing was heard so she opened it, forcing it with her shoulder.

Keestake appeared in awe as he entered this room. He muttered, "The chambers of himself, the King." He bowed slightly and averted his eyes to the floor. It is clear that this room was once lavishly appointed but now has been slashed brutally. Broken sofas and tables are piled in the center and it looks as if someone tried to start a fire at some time in the past. The party briefly searched but found nothing of value. Double doors led to the west and a single door led to the north. Jael listened at the single door but heard nothing.

As they were going through, Syndyls and Ariston joined them, moving quietly but quickly. They were clearly agitated.

"There are Orcs around the corner and up the hallway. Perhaps four or more of them." Ariston looked back as if they were being followed.

"Well, I guess we should go back and take them out," Jael said matter-of-factly.

"Wait, I need to check this out." It was Kyri who spoke. She was examining a desk which had escaped being totally demolished. "It does not look quite right."

The room in which they were standing was again large. A barred window was on the eastern wall, through which flashes of lightning could be seen. A single door led north. The contents of the room were demolished furniture but one desk, the one at which Kyri was standing, appeared to have an untouched drawer.

"Stand back, Kyri," said Chae. "When I was a scout, I learned to find and remove the traps of overly cautious hoarders. Let me take a look."

He examined the desk but found nothing. He agreed with Kyri, though, that there appeared to be extra space. She nodded then moved him out of the way and yanked on the drawer. It came out, empty, and she dropped it on the floor. Peering into the space left behind she said, "Aha" and reached in.

She pulled out a dagger in a moldy leather sheath and a small, blue, glass flask, stoppered and sealed. She pulled out the dagger and it was amazingly shiny, showing no sign of rust after all these years. It was a good double-edged fighting-style dagger with a black stone hilt inlaid in gold in the design of cresting waves. She handed it to Jael who began to study it; searching her memory for clues to its origin. She came up empty.

The little glass flask definitely contained a liquid but there was no clue to what it was. No one wanted to open it but Jael wanted to examine it. There were no marks on the bottle and she could not tell what it was. She handed both back to Kyri for safekeeping.

"Let's go get some Orcs," she said and headed for the door to the south.

The group followed Jael back through the Sea King's rooms. They eventually came to the double doors in what was once the king's study. Jael and Ariston approached the double doors to the west and Kyri was right behind them.

Ariston quietly opened the doors and listened. For a second, there was nothing then there was the distinct sound of footsteps both from the north and the south. The Forestor looked at the Bard quizzically. She shrugged then squinted into the darkness, carefully standing in the

doorway. In the shadows, she could see nothing. But the footsteps stopped.

A loud and deep yell from the north caused Jael to flinch. It was quickly followed by a higher pitched scream from the south.

"Let me take a look," whispered Kyri. She stepped in front of Ariston without stepping into the hall. A quick peek and she saw the heat of large humanoids to the north and a group of smaller ones to the south.

"YAAARGGGHHHHH!!!" The deep yell came again from the group to the north and was answered by the group to the south.

Kyri backed up. "Let's close the door," she whispered.

A voice from the north demanded something in a language most could not understand. Kyri and Chae knew it to be Orc: "This is our section of the manor! Leave now."

Kyri whispered as loud as she could, "Close the door!"

A large pole flew past the door, headed north. A shout was heard from the northern group then running footsteps from both directions. Kyri pushed Ariston and Jael out of the way, "I said close the door!" she shouted. She slammed the door shut as the two groups clashed together outside of them.

"Now what?" said Syndyls.

Jael was back to her senses. "I will sneak around and see if I can see how many of them there are. We will only have to fight the winners and they will be weak." She headed towards the southern door and quietly slipped through it before anyone could stop her. Syndyls went and listened behind her.

Flavius and Jonathan listened at the double doors. A large battle was obviously developing. Cursing in Orc and Goblin could be heard as well as the cries of the wounded and the grunts of the straining warriors.

Jael slipped back in. "Some of the Goblins slipped into a side room. They are all still fighting but I cannot see much in the darkness.

The party listened to the fight. Finally, they heard a high pitched yell and footsteps ran off to the north. The group waited for a few minutes then moved to the door. Opening it carefully, they were confronted by the battle's gruesome results. The bodies of several Orcs and Goblins lay scattered. None were moving.

Jael and Ariston moved to the door opposite them. They could hear arguing in an unknown language. Gathering together, the group bashed the door down and charged in. In the far corner, three Goblins were faced away, arguing with someone or something they could not see. The Goblins were surprised, turning towards the sound of the bashed in door. Quickly, the adventurers surrounded the little beasts and attacked. The first two were quickly and bloodily dispatched. The third put up his hands and prayed for quarter. Jael was not swayed and swung at him but he deftly moved out of the way of her sword. Flavius stood next to him to protect the creature. No one knew Goblin but they could tell he was fearful.

"What do we have here?" said Jael. She had spotted a Halfling, bound and sitting on the floor. She temporarily forgot the cowering Goblin. "Hello, sir. You are safer now. Let me get those bonds off of you." She moved to release him and as she unbound him, Chae and Kyri used the rope and rags to bind the Goblin.

"He's so small," whispered Chae to Kyri. She did not acknowledge his comment but Chronos nodded.

"I may be small but if you would give me a sword, I can show you how it is used." The Halfling rubbed his wrists as he stood.

"That's not necessary. I am Chae and I seem to remember you from the ship. There was only one Halfling that I saw."

"Halfling is impolite," said Jael. "They are the Hin."

"Oh, sorry little guy." Chae looked around to see if there was anyone to heal. He didn't hear the Hin say he was quite comfortable with Halfling, Hobbit or Hin.

"Well, I thank you for saving me. They kept asking something but since I don't speak Goblin, I had no idea what it was. They dragged me

here but I am not exactly why. By the way, I am Orin Hornblower Took. I have an odd question. Does anyone happen to have any tobacco?"

The group stared at the little man but no one had found any tobacco. The Halfling shrugged. "Never hurts to ask. I don't have a pipe either so I guess I had just better make due."

Syndyllys stepped forward and continued the introductions begun by Chae. He also described their predicament and need to get off the island as soon as possible. "Sounds like we have tarried long enough. However, one thing I did catch was that the Goblins were looking for a stick. Something that shook when it was pointed. Not sure what that would be."

"Oh yes," said Keestake. "The queen's funny treasure stick."

"Keestake. Is this the queen's quarters?" Syndyllys looked at the old man.

"Yes, these be the rooms of herself, the Queen."

"Everyone, look for the wand." The mage began shuffling through the broken furniture on the floor. The rest of the group followed suit except Jael. She had walked behind the bound Goblin. "I cannot have you watching us," she said. In one smooth motion, she struck the creature with the pommel of her sword. He crumbled, unconscious, to the floor.

"Is this the stick you are seeking?" Orin held up a gnarled piece of wood, about twelve inches long and slightly tapered. The type of wood was hard to distinguish. It was covered with some grime.

"That looks to be it," said Syndyllys. "Please carefully hand it to me." He took it from the Halfling and cradled the stick in his hands. He held it out to judge its weight then tried to clean off some of the dirt and grime. He then stuck the stick into his rag belt.

"Well now that the wizard has found the wand, we need to focus on getting out of here." Ariston looked around at his comrades. They all agreed so they gathered what things of value they found on the Goblins (one had a little pouch with a few plens (Minrothad copper pieces)). Chae carefully collected all of the belts and buckles he could

find. The Hin looked at him oddly but said nothing.

Lining up in their traditional marching order, the adventurers headed out. Not knowing how long it had been since they had entered the manor (the dark clouds outside hid the true time of day), they were concerned over the goddess's deadline. They decided to skip rooms rather than explore further.

While creeping down the hallway, Keestake kept mumbling to himself. It was hard to make out so most of them paid him no mind. He was quiet enough and they figured that fifty years on an island by yourself probably took its toll on one's mind. Melisana, however, turned to Keestake. "Are you okay? Your voice keeps changing while you are mumbling."

The old man stared at her for more than a few seconds. He then shook his head and giggled. Melisana shrugged and looked at Ariston. He shrugged too. The group kept walking.

Following Keestake's map, the group briefly stopped at the chapel. It was amazingly untouched though dusty. Benches were gathered in the center of the room, facing an altar. A statute of Diulanna stood behind the altar and the walls were painted with scenes from her liturgy. Nothing of value was found.

The group next stopped at the kitchen. Someone had the idea that perhaps there would be food available. Unfortunately, fifty years of neglect did not leave anything edible. The adventurers kept following Keestake's map and headed for the room which contained the hidden entrance to the catacombs.

Listening at the door to the scribe's room, the characters heard nothing. They boldly strode inside and found it filled with the remains of two broken desks, numerous broken chairs and shelving units which featured small trays filled with mold and scraps of paper. The shelves stretched almost to the ceiling.

Keestake closed the door to the room. "It was here that the scribes kept the paperwork for himself. Always busy they were." He walked to the north bookshelf and pointed to the top. "All you have to do is push the big button on top. The goblins were too teensy to ever see it."

The characters could not see it either but Chae said he could climb to it. Indeed, on top of the bookcase was a round button, about two inches in diameter. He hesitated for an instant, looking around for traps. Then with his thumb, he pressed the button. Nothing happened. He pressed harder and it sunk perhaps a quarter inch deeper. Again nothing happened. "Now what?" he called down from on top.

Everyone looked at Keestake. He shrugged. "It always worked in the past. . . ."

Looking around for a few minutes, the group saw nothing that appeared to help. Kyri began inspecting the bookshelf. "I think we can pry it off the wall. It looks heavy though."

Everyone gathered around and decided that that was their only option. They used the pieces of broken desks and chairs as levers and started to pull the shelf off the wall. As it came loose, a large grinding noise almost deafened them. The top of the rack began to teeter. "Look out!" yelled Chae and the group jumped away. As if in slow motion the bookcase began to fall.

CRAAASSHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

It fell with an earsplitting boom that shook the walls and floor. Dust, dirt, scraps of moldy paper and splinters of bookshelf flew everywhere and covered the adventurers. Syndyls stifled a cough.

"Well, that seems to have worked," said the mage. He caught himself trying to clean himself with a cantrip but realized that he did not have it memorized.

A dark shaft, three feet wide went down into darkness. The shaft was lined bricks and small, somewhat rusted steel rungs (like staples) led down the shaft. A single torch in a bracket on the wall hung above the hole.

"Do we have any light?" asked Orin.

"None. Nor do we have flint," responded Ariston. He took the torch from its bracket and looked at it. It appeared dry but usable.

"You're the Forestor. Can you make fire?" Jael looked sideways at him.

"I will try." Ariston began hitting his sword on the floor, throwing sparks. Using some of the drier paper, he quickly lit the torch.

"Impressive," said Orin.

Using the torch, they peered into the hall. The shaft went only about ten feet down then opened up into sloping downward hallway. More torches could be seen below.

Kyri thought she heard a horn somewhere in the distance. Perhaps somewhere in the manor. "Let's not tarry. Who's first?"

Keestake practically jumped into the shaft, pushing the Hin out of the way. "I'll go."

The party wasted no time in going down the shaft and proceeding down the hallway. However, they did collect the old torches for the wall and vowed to keep two burning at a time. By their best estimate, each would burn about forty to sixty minutes. They would keep track of their time below with the burning of them.

As they walked down into the growing darkness, they could hear something behind them. There was little doubt that either the Orcs or Goblins had heard the crash and now were in pursuit. Keestake yelled that they must move more quickly and the party began to run in the shadowy light. Flavius and Chronos struggled with the weight of the Dwarf but they were determined to get him out alive (if they made it out alive themselves).

They could see the walls expanding into a chamber and Keestake, still in the lead and amazingly spry for his age, turned left around a corner. Running into the room, they noticed Keestake standing at a lever. The air was dank but they were only concerned with their pursuers. Keestake made sure everyone was in the chamber then he tugged the lever down.

A tremendous crash resounded from overhead and the sounds of descent changed momentarily to screams and then to silence. Then a tremendous cloud of dust rushed out of the hallway and a hail of medium to large rocks crashes to the floor, covering the party in a fine dust and fluttering their torches but not putting

them out. Finally, a solemn silence descended over the chamber.

In the torchlight, the characters could see that the chamber, not just its air, was dank. The room had rough stone walls and a damp, oppressive atmosphere. Just as Keestake had indicated on his map, the space seemed to have been partitioned off into three storerooms, each piled high with crates and jars; each storage area was about 20 feet broad and 40 feet deep, and the areas were separated from one another by walls of red brick. To the south, a low shaft led deeper into the catacombs. There was no noise except for the distant drip of water, a faint scurrying, and the burning of the group's torches.

While the characters were debating, Keestake again began mumbling. He was growing louder but caught no one's attention yet.

The old man wiped his brow and shook off his hands. "Well, we made it. Knew we would. Haven't been down here in a while. Remember the worst trip I ever had to make down here. Right after them first pirates left, 60 years ago. I had to do right by my sovereign, don't you think? I couldn't leave him lying there, hacked up and stripped down. Had to prepare him right and fine for the afterworld. So I hauled his body down here. Hard work that was. Dressed it up in some clothes and goods that the pirates missed. Laid it in a crypt near his son. Hauled his queen's body down, laid it between her husband and her son. That was grisly work. I was sad. Never been so sad since.

Himself had a ring, something he'd found adventuring. Made things happen, if you just wished for it. But they'd stabbed him in the back before he got a chance to do any wishing. I took it off him and prayed that they'd never decay, they'd always be in one piece when it was time for the dead to rise up for the afterlife. Knew I'd done right; it always seemed his eyes followed me after that. Year after year after that, he never decayed. He's in as good a shape now as he ever was, likely. Don't know for sure. Haven't been down here in a while."

Jael's ears had perked up at the mention of a ring. "Did you say there was a wishing ring down here, Keestake?"

The old man ignored her and kept, mumbling. "You need to get used to your quarters, you know. You're going to be down here a piece. You're not leaving, you know. No more so than me. Y'see, I really couldn't let you wander off with the Sea King's treasures and pretties. Can't let you profane the tomb of his son. What kind o' servant would I be if I let that happen? I wanted to get down here and shut up that shaft when the Orcs first landed, but they got me. You've done me a favor. Got me down here so that I could shut it off."

The others were now listening. Orin interrupted him, "What are you getting at Keestake?"

The old man turned to the Hin. "Sorry to say you won't be leaving. You're not going to find the entrance to the tombs. Going to die here, like me."

Melisana was bewildered and looked around at the rest of the party. "What are you saying, Keestake? We trusted you. We have to get off this island." Melisana appeared to be on the edge of tears.

The mage stepped up to the old man. "Listen here. We are getting off this island. We have come too far for this nonsense."

Suddenly, a very long knife appeared in Keestake's hand. "Back off wizard or I will hasten your death." The knife glinted evilly in the torchlight but the mage refused to step back. He had quietly drawn his own dagger.

Ariston and Flavius were slowly moving to opposite sides of Keestake. His eyes caught Flavius' which caused the warrior to stop. A weird cast came over Keestake's eyes and the entire party realized that he had been crazy all this time and leading them here, to their deaths. The old man began to giggle somewhere in the pit of his belly, an unnerving giggle that sent shivers down their spines. Then, like a cat, the old man who once appeared frail and weak, leaped at the mage and attempted to drive his knife into the wizard's heart.

The Forester, Bard and Soldier were too quick for the old man. Syndyls side stepped and Flavius' sword caught Keestake in the shoulder. The old man grunted and spun, avoiding the blades of Ariston and Jael.

The old man grabbed at Melisana's hair. He pulled her off balance and into the way of his attackers. He let go as she fell to the floor screaming. His dagger flashed and he slashed Syndyls across the stomach. The mage looked down in disbelief at the growing red slash. He put his hand to his stomach and drew it away as he felt the warm blood. He staggered back into Melisana.

Meanwhile, Flavius, Jael and Ariston were back to attack Keestake. Jael faked a wide swing but then stuck the point of her blade into Keestake's left shoulder. He again grunted in pain. He turned to move away from her but Ariston's long sword was coming across like a scythe. It cleanly cut through the man's neck and severed his head. Blood splattered the wall and Orin looked away in disbelief. Keestake's body slumped to the floor and spasmed slightly.

Ariston calmly wiped his sword clean. Flavius checked out the body to see if Keestake had been hiding anything else. He had not.

Chae moved to look at Syndyls's wound. It was deep and painful but the scout did what he could. Syndyls was shocked that he had been hit and did not move away from Chae's ministrations.

The party regrouped and debated for a few minutes what to do. After a while, Syndyls turned to Kyri. "Perhaps that liquid we found is a healing draught. Let me check it out."

"Okay," she said. She unstopped the flask and smelled it quickly. "Oh. That is awful. It smells like sweaty humans. No offense."

"None taken," said the mage. He took the bottle and tried to figure out the color in the torchlight. He then smelled it. He agreed. Sweaty soldiers perhaps. He stuck his finger in the bottle and dabbed into the liquid. It was thicker than expected and the smell was almost overpowering. He tasted it. Salty but nothing happened. He did not feel anything different.

"Seems like a potion of do nothingness," quipped Chae.

Orin turned to the mage, "In my experience, potions often have clues to their use in the way they smell or taste. Perhaps this is a potion of speed. Syndyls, try running."

The magic-user shrugged his shoulders then jogged across the room. He did not feel faster.

"Oh well. It was worth a try. At least we know it is not poison." The mage passed the bottle back to the Elf.

The group turned their attention to the alcoves. In the first one, they found large wooden bins that contained the residue of what appeared to be grain. If indeed grains were kept here, they were probably long ago eaten. The wood of the bins was damp and rotted and showed signs of chewing from large (possibly) rodent teeth. Nothing of value was evident.

Chae and Ariston were anxious to check out the spot that Keestake had indicated was full of good armor and weapons. They went to the third alcove while the rest of the group checked the second. In that one, the group found many decayed bolts of cloth, mostly utilitarian linen and wool, and hanging masses of mold that once were probably animal hides. If they were hides, not one of the party can tell what sort of animal it was. Though Syndyls thoroughly examined the find, he discovered that none of the stuff could still be used as clothing. They did think about using the linen for torch wrappings but they had enough torches to last through the destruction of the island so extras made no sense.

In the third alcove, Chae and Ariston found it was piled haphazardly almost to the ceiling with very large wooden crates. The crates appeared to fill the chamber from front to back and from side to side. Unfortunately, in their zeal to get to the promised weapons and armor, the two did not notice a spider web thin steel wire stretched from wall to wall at ankle level just inside the opening to the chamber. As they entered, the top part of the pile of crates (loaded with bricks) tumbled down on them. Chae tried to give a warning but it was too late. The crates shattered, sending wood and bricks showering painfully down upon the two adventurers.

Orin quickly came to bind their wounds. While he was doing that, Chae and Ariston noticed that the crates were probably only piled up in a wall designed to collapse. The room was empty beyond the fallen wall of crates. Orin wondered aloud, "Who would do such a thing?" The others were silent on the issue.

Collecting themselves again, the group moved what they thought was south, out of the chamber and down a wide hallway. In the torchlight, they eventually came to a large curtain which blocked their path. Cautious after the experience of the falling crates, both Jonathan and Chae checked the curtain for traps but came to the conclusion that it was just a rotting tapestry. They had no idea why it was hanging here in the hall way.

When the characters parted the curtain, they saw, perhaps twenty feet ahead, another tapestry, just like the first one. Orin and Chae went ahead to inspect the next tapestry. Luckily for the group, Chae discovered a thin steel wire running through the bottom of the curtain. Orin decided he should look on the other side and slithered under it (and the wire) into the darkness. He shouted that it was dark on the other side of the tapestry so he began to try to light a torch.

Meanwhile, Kyri, Chae and Syndyls had decided to cut the top of the tapestry so that it would fall without disturbing the steel wire. At first, it went well. However, about half way through Kyri's cutting, Syndyls began to get a cramp in his hand. He tried to ignore it but it was bad. The lack of sleep and food had been wearing on his body and the muscle concentration involved in holding the curtain steady was taxing him too much. His hand involuntarily jerked. At first, they thought nothing had happened. But just when Chae was about to let out a sigh of relief, the floor beneath them started to drop.

Kyri and Chae tumbled forward, through the curtain, ripping the rest of it from overhead. Syndyls on the other hand, fell. He tumbled head over heels and landed on his back, in an inch of water about ten feet below. Though he was alive, he was afraid to move, lest he discover he had broken something.

The characters who had been standing back, rushed to the edge of the now present pit. Using the rope that Jael had saved from various people being tied up, Jonathan and the cleric lowered themselves down to check on the mage. He was surprisingly unhurt. "You Alphatians are tougher than I thought," said Chronos. The mage's shoulder did appear to be out of socket but the cleric painfully put it back in and the mage felt much better. The three of

them carefully used the rope to get back out of the pit.

Having survived another trap and getting back together, the group bravely resumed their walk down the dank hallway.

Soon, it opened into a room which like the first in the catacombs, was divided into three alcoves. The first was piled high, front to back, with dirt-filled, rubbish-filled, and earth-filled crates. Thinking of the trapped crates in the first chamber, the group decided to leave this space alone. Kyri did think that it was weird that someone would take the time to fill these crates with junk but not to make a trap (at least she did not find a trap) like the first one.

The next alcove again appeared to contain trash filled crates. But when Ariston began to move a few, he heard large scurrying. He thought rats but their scurrying was heavier. As if these rats were larger than any he had ever encountered. The group again decided to leave well enough alone. Besides, according to Keestake, the boat was not here.

The group checked the last alcove and found it to be different from the others. It was empty except for a circular, stone-lined well set into the floor and the bucket and winch apparatus erected above it. The characters could hear water rushing far below. They decided not to lower anything down (including the bucket) and instead to move along. They were confident that only a few hours remained before the goddess would cleanse the island.

Proceeding down the hallway, Orin noted that on Keestake's map, it said, "Go slow hallway." Syndyls shook his head. "Nothing he has told us so far has proven to be true. Why should this be any different?"

Ariston agreed with Syndyls. "The scratches I received from those bricks attest to that; as well as his failure to mention that pit trap. Let me roll something down the hallway to make sure. It does appear to sag a bit up ahead."

Ariston ran back to the alcoves and grabbed a large rock. He then bowled it down the hallway. It bumped along out of sight into the darkness. "Hmm," said Ariston. "Nothing happened. I still think we should do the opposite of what Keestake said from now on."

Orin shook his head. "I am pretty light. Let me go first. I will probe ahead with this stick." He hefted the broken table leg he had been carrying since they found the entrance to the catacombs.

The entire party looked at him then shrugged. "Be my guest," said Syndyls.

Orin tentatively moved ahead. He moved slowly, using his stick as a probe. Melisana held her breath. The Hin was just beginning to cross the sagging area when there was a loud creak. He froze but the floor did not. He dropped through a gaping hole and screamed. It sounded like he hit something but the yelling continued, moving further down. The group rushed to the hole but it was too late. The Hin was out of sight. They could only hear him screaming and crashing. Then it was silent except for a distant sound of running water.

Ariston turned away from the hole and ran down the hallway. The rest of the party followed suit; even the cleric, who was still shouldering the Dwarf. No one looked twice for the Halfling.

The group emerged in yet another large chamber. However, it was not as they expected from the map. Instead, there was a large squarish block built into the eastern wall. The adventurers' hearts sank a little as they realized that there was no boat here. There was not even an entrance to the outside.

Visible from where they had entered were small wooden doors, spaced about every ten feet on the brick block's wall facing the group. There were five doors. Walking around the block, they found five more doors.

Each adventurer picked a door to open. Inside the first few, they found rotted cots and chairs, but no treasure, furniture or weapons of worth. Inside one, Syndyls found a surprise: a trap which fired a crossbow bolt at him. The old rusty crossbow was barely able to send the quarrel across the little room and Syndyls jumped out of the way easily.

After exploring the entire large chamber and each of its smaller brick rooms, the party was exhausted. There was no boat, no way to go forward and no way to return to the surface. It

appeared that Keestake had been right. They were destined to die down here.

Melisana sat down on the floor and tried not to cry. She would never see her father again nor the streets of her home, Specularum. No one would ever know what happened to them because in a short while, the goddess would wipe the island clean. They had failed.

Kyri stood motionless. She was thinking. There had to be a way out. There was always a way out. "Was there anything we missed?" she asked.

"Nothing," said the mage confidently. He was tired. His wounds had taken a toll. He was almost ready to accept their fate.

"We did skip searching through all of those crates in the second room," Chae noted.

"Then we had better go back and search everything," said Kyri. "I plan on living a few hundred more years. Besides, it is unfitting for a child of the forest to die so deep in the dark underground." She adjusted her rags and started for the northern hallway.

They stood in front of the two alcoves, both piled high with junk and crates. Kyri motioned to the middle one, "Ariston, Jael and Jonathan. You search the one with the scurrying noises. Flavius, Chronos and I will search the other one. The rest of you, keep watch."

Melisana did as she was told. She kept thinking she could hear the Orcs yelling but knew it must be her imagination. There was no way that they could have gotten through the cave-in that Keestake had pulled down with that lever.

Syndyls stood back. He was happy to not be moving those dirty crates. A wizard had to keep certain standards. He pulled out the wand they had found. A funny little stick indeed. He did not know if it had a magic word and if it did, he knew of no way to find it on the island. He pointed the stick at his companions and waved it. Nothing. He concentrated harder.

Suddenly the stick began to grow warm and jiggle slightly. The mage was sure he was not imagining it. Then, he saw something else. The

dagger that the Elf was carrying, appeared to glow. She did not seem to see it but he certainly did. He turned towards Ariston and noticed that the spear the Forestor carried also was glowing. And so was the bottle that Kyri had.

So it worked after all! He was excited but said nothing to the rest of the party. He slipped the wand back into his rag belt.

Meanwhile, the others were making progress. But Ariston jumped back. "What was that?!"

Suddenly, large rats, each the size of a dog, scrambled forward, following Ariston. They looked ravenous, as if whatever they subsisted on down here was not enough. Unfortunately for the adventurers, the rats seemed to think that the group was for snack.

Before the Forestor could jump too far away, a rat sank its teeth into his leg. He grimaced in pain and stumbled away, wrenching his flesh from its fangs. Jonathan stuck it with his sword and it squealed. Black blood spurted and the creature turned belly up, dead. However, more were crawling over the top of the crates and one leapt onto Jael, almost knocking her over. Its claws dug into her shoulder but she shook it off.

Flavius, Chronos and Kyri were oblivious to the battle. They were moving around the crates in their room, trying to find anything that would help them escape. Kyri began to stare at the back wall.

Chae stepped up to assist the battling members of his group. He felled the one that Jael had tossed off. Jonathan turned to another and nearly sliced it in half. Ariston, recovered from the shock of the bite to his leg, dispatched one with his blade. Jael, having the one that had clawed her dispatched by Chae, turned to the last one and bashed it with the makeshift club in her hand. It tried to get away so she hit it again . . . and again . . . until it stopped moving.

"I think I found something!" Kyri yelled from the other chamber. Still oblivious to the fighting she looked back at Melisana who appeared to be in distress. "What's wrong?" asked the Elf.

Melisana pointed and Kyri crawled back to the entrance. She peeked over and saw the carnage

laid down by her companions. "Oh. Well, I think I found a door."

She explained that there was a definite frame in the rock. The heat looked different at the edges due to the thickness of the wall there. She surmised it was a secret door.

The group quickly cleaned up the bitten party members and crammed into the back of the room where Kyri had found the door. With great trepidation, they attempted to open it. It did not budge. Kyri noticed something else: a discolored rock. It was hard to spot in the darkness. She reached out and twisted the rock. It turned easily and the secret door slid open. Beyond, the secret door opened inward into a rough-hewn tunnel cut out of stone. The air of the tunnel was danker and less wholesome than that of the catacombs, but it was not completely foul.

Just then, Melisana and Kyri both thought they heard something. Perhaps an Orc from far away. Surely they could not have made it through the ceiling collapse but the characters wanted to take no chances. They went through the secret door and closed it behind them.

After many hundreds of feet and through several twists, the hallway opened into an enormous chamber, with a partially smooth and partially rough-hewn floor and rough-hewn walls. In the torchlight, the group could not see its limits. Without a doubt though, the characters knew they had reached the crypts. If Keestake had been at least a little truthful, there was probably a boat and a way out down here.

The group cautiously peered around in the torchlight. This was the sixth set of torches. If the adventurers were right, somewhere at the end of this set or the beginning of the next, the goddess would wipe the island clean. Everyone felt the urgency.

Using the wall left wall as a guide, the group began to move around the room. They came to a chamber that appeared to be about thirty feet deep and twenty feet wide. The northern wall was rough. In the cent of the room was an upraised slab of stone. Otherwise the room was empty. The group searched the walls for any markings but found none so they went on to the next one.

Inside, was another thirty by twenty room. This one had some brick walls and the center slab was occupied. On it was the body of a man bedecked in rich blue garments (not tattered) and dulled scale mail. A large and shiny mace was laid out beside his right hand and a golden coronet was worn on his brow.

Roughly carved in the front of the slab was the inscription:

Viledel
Sea King
Tamed the Islands
Laid Low by Pirates

Ariston and Jael moved closer to the body. In the torchlight, they could tell that the flesh of Viledel was not decayed. It was just as Keestake had predicted. The Sea King's face was pallid, with bruises and cuts still showing vividly. The blood in the cuts was brown, not red. But most disturbing was that his eyes were open, but did not move.

"He will not need that armor," whispered Ariston. I am going to take it off him. Sad to dishonor the dead but death is natural and the body just a husk. I will cut off his head to make sure he will not fight us."

Jael nodded her agreement but said nothing. The others stood back, watching.

In the torchlight, Kyri noticed movement in the third crypt which was still unexplored. There was no sound and she watched breathlessly.

As Ariston crept closer, Viledel sat up. The body swung its legs off the slab and stood.

Meanwhile in the other crypt a woman emerged from the shadows. She looked to be about 40 years old and would have been extremely attractive, but she was cold and pallid in death, with one great brown stain in the chest of her once-lustrous green robe. Her hair was still blonde and shining but her eyes were lifeless.

As the undead Sea King approached Ariston, Jael drew her sword. "It's about time we had a good fight, eh Forestor?"

The king, still regal despite his undeath, stood in front of Ariston silently. His scale mail still shone, little crested waves etched on the scales. His tabard was ripped and brown stains darkened the light blue cloth. Dark scars crisscrossed the king's cheek, having never healed but the blood had dried more than fifty years ago. As the Forestor took a step back, the king stepped forward; not speaking, unblinking, his heavy mace held at his side.

None of the party knew what to do. Ariston and Jael stood near the king. The others stood back and kept an eye on both the king and the queen.

"We mean you no harm, my lord. We just seek passage off of your island." Ariston spoke to the king but there was no response. "Sir, I implore you in the name of Diulanna, provide us the assistance to leave you to your rest." The king stared mutely.

Not knowing what to do, he decided to fell the king with his sword. He swung but the zombie lord was quicker than expected and blocked the Forestor's blow with his large mace. The king slipped his mace down the blade and struck the Forestor with such force that Ariston staggered back, a little stunned. Jael stepped up to meet the king and the fight was on.

From the shadows to the south, came something shambling. In line, three long dead warriors appeared out of the darkness. Their clothing was rotted and barely there. The faded blue cloaks of Viledel's royal guard had been ripped in the fight to save the king originally and time had not been kind on the remains. The guards themselves were no more than skeletons, their flesh having turned to dust or been eaten by rats many years ago.

Kyri and Syndyls had been standing apart from the rest of the group and were the first to notice the skeletal guardians.

"Chronos!" yelled Kyri. "We could use your help with these departed souls."

The cleric slid Sarmboc gently to the floor and moved back as Jonathan, Melisana and Chae moved up to stop the queen. She moved forward, no light in her eyes but clearly intending to kill the adventurers.

Flavius, Jael and Ariston flanked the king but their blows were easily deflected by Viledel. He in turn bashed the Forestor, opening a large gash on his forehead. Blood ran into Ariston's eyes and he attempted to move slightly away from the undying creature in front of him.

The skeletons were closing in on Syndyls and Kyri and they readied themselves for a fight. However, Chronos appeared between the Elf and Mage. His arms were raised and he looked fearlessly at the advancing undead.

"By the power of Vanya and all the Immortals, I banish thee to your eternal rest. Let you no longer walk amongst the living. Thus to the undead!"

The skeletons stopped in their tracks. The air in the chamber seemed less dank and the light of the torches appeared to shine a bit brighter. The skeletons turned and moved away into the shadows.

Meanwhile, the queen focused her attention on Jonathan, raking his arms with her jagged undead fingernails. Melisana bashed Liala with her club but the queen showed no emotion nor any sign of being deterred.

King Viledel swung his mace again, the wind of his blow whistling. It came to land on Ariston's unprotected left flank and the ranger spit out all of the air in his lungs. He staggered back but ignored his bruised ribs. His own weapon reacted, slicing at the king. Sawdust like blood spilled from the gash Ariston had opened in the king's neck. Flavius stabbed with his sword and his blade slipped under the scales and entered dry flesh. Jael missed with her club.

Chronos turned from the skeletons and shouted again, "King and Queen, once very alive and now not quite dead but animated by evil. Stay your hands and lay down your heads upon your cold slabs. Let your spirits depart to the next world!" There was no effect on the royal couple.

Thinking that the king was the more dangerous of the two, Chae left the queen to Jonathan and Melisana and maneuvered to get behind the king. Jonathan and Melisana's landing blows appeared to do little to the queen. Instead she struck at Jonathan and knocked him aside, scrapping his face with her hands.

Syndyllys and Kyri were still curious about the skeletal guards. They advanced into the darkness. As Syndyllys moved away with the torch, it became darker near the crypts and Chae smiled as he disappeared in the shadows. "I will backstab this undead king," he mused to himself.

The king had other plans in store, however. He pressed his attack upon the ranger. The gleaming and now bloody mace fell upon Ariston again. It was an upward blow though, that caught the young Forestor under the chin and sent him sprawling and unconscious. Jael barely noticed and struck the king again to no avail. Flavius stabbed again, using the short sword as he would his gladius. This time, it went right through Viledel's body and the king turned to him. Flavius barely was able to pull the sword out.

A trickle of blood was running down Jonathan's cheeks, red and broken lines down his handsome face. He smiled and wiped them with the back of his hand. He then swung again at the queen but his blows seemed to do nothing to dissuade her. She punched him in the chest and he felt breathless. He wheezed, "You are stronger in death than you likely were in life, my queen."

Melisana struck again and the queen turned towards her, death in her eyes.

Chae's chance to hide was ruined by the king's finishing of Ariston. The king was glaring at the spot where the rogue was. He did not attack him though. Instead, the mace was meant for Flavius who just barely sidestepped it. "King, I grow tired of this fight," said the soldier. "You should not have to die twice but you will."

Jael clubbed at the King but the blow was shrugged off. Flavius stabbed again but this blow was caught by the corpse's tattered cloak. Flavius twisted the sword and the blue fabric ripped in half, flying behind the king.

Chronos had stopped to check on Ariston. A hint of blood was on the unconscious adventurer's lips. However, the priest found he was still alive; barely but alive. He began to administer to him as best as he could, tearing off parts of the ranger's rag clothing to act as bandages.

Syndyllys and Kyri turned to go fight the queen. The skeletons were clearly no longer an immediate threat. Syndyllys marveled to himself over this display of clerical magic. He knew of no spell that was its equal. He would have to learn more about this power. Now was not the right time though. He slipped one of his daggers out of his makeshift belt. He wished it was the one that Kyri had in her belt.

The queen again went for Jonathan. This time she pushed him with both hands, knocking him off his feet. She then kicked him. He howled in pain.

Melisana turned to him and backed away from the queen. Suddenly, she felt as if the tide was turning. She could see that the king may have killed Ariston (she could not tell if Chronos was administering last rites or trying to heal him). She also saw Jonathan down and had no idea where a few of the party were. She was afraid for her life and a tear slipped down her cheek. The king turned to Chae and swung his mace. It just grazed the acrobatic rogue. Jael and Flavius were there in response and both struck the undying royal.

Syndyllys and Kyri reached the queen but she was ready. In one swift movement, she grabbed the mage about his neck and squeezed with undead might. Luckily, Kyri's blade struck and forced her to drop him. Syndyllys' dagger fell to the floor, quickly followed by him.

Flavius knew that they could not fight much longer. They were hungry, thirsty and tired. Most of all, they were mostly unskilled humans who would quickly tire in a fight. Meanwhile, their opponents were undying, tireless minions animated by evil. He had to do something.

Under his breath, he prayed, "Oh Diulanna, you have challenged us on this island. But my goddess is Vanya, the ever victorious. I will make her proud this day."

Flavius stepped next to the king and swung his short sword with all his might. It sang through the air and cut deep into the dry flesh of Viledel's neck, above the protection of the scale mail. It was the same wound that Ariston had opened earlier but this time, without dry muscle to oppose it, it connected with the neck bones, cracked them in splinters and came out the other fleshy side. A sound like the crackling of

fire or the snapping of twigs, but much louder, came from the king. Blood long powdered in his veins puffed out and his head went in the opposite direction of his body. A chill wind sent shivers down Flavius's sword arm and King Viledel, the once mighty Sea King, was finally truly dead.

The queen did not notice but kept fighting. She swung at the advancing Kyri but the Elf was too quick. She responded with a swing of her sword which if the queen had been alive, would probably have felled her. Instead, Liala kept fighting.

Chronos had finished giving Ariston what aid he could. The Forester was awake but groggy and in no condition to fight. The priest had heard Jonathan grunt but saw that the man was still crawling. Chronos got to his feet and gripped his club.

"If you want someone to take care of not quite departed spirits, you need a priest," he murmured to himself.

Flavius was glad that the king was down and for a second he rested. However, he knew he needed to fell the queen too. Melisana could be seen on the far side of the queen, panic stricken. It appeared that Jonathan and Syndyls were down and the priest was finishing up tending to Ariston. Jael looked at Flavius and they grimly nodded to each other than moved to attack the queen.

Liala struck at Kyri, scratching at her rags. The Elf sidestepped and thrust the long sword into the queen's side. This too would have been a killing blow but the queen was already dead once. Vital organs were dust inside her body and their piercing did not have the same effect as it would have fifty years ago.

Chae was trying to figure out how to sneak up upon the queen but there were no close shadows. He decided to follow the Bard and the soldier instead.

The queen tried once more to rake Kyri with her fingers but all of the fighting adventurers were ready for her. They cut her down all together; clubs and swords landing upon her and forcing her to the ground. Finally she could join her husband in eternal rest.

With the battle over, the group took stock of their situation. Sarmboc was still mostly unconscious. Ariston, Jonathan and Syndyls were barely able to walk. Looking around, the skeletons were no where to be seen. The crypts of the king and queen appeared bare. However, Ariston roused himself enough to begin stripping the armor from the king's body. It was still in outstanding shape, glistening slightly in the torchlight and was just his size. He liked the little crested waves on some of the scales but silently wished they were something sylvan instead. The cleric took the mace of office gently from Viledel's unmoving hand while Syndyls removed the circlet of gold from his separated head.

Searching this area of the chamber, they found yet another tomb. However, this one had been bricked over. A finely engraved bronze plaque was centered on the wall. It read:

Here lies Prince Horedel
Brought Down by Illness
In the Twentieth Year of Viledel's Reign

Ariston, Jael, Jonathan and Flavius examined the wall. Not knowing what else to do, they began to bash it, trying to break the bricks. Chae did not participate. He was focused on comforting Melisana who still seemed upset over their near death experience.

Syndyls, Kyri and Chronos slowly walked in the direction of the skeletons. They did not relish being attacked again in the party's current condition. They found the skeletons huddled together in a far corner. They appeared to be either flattening themselves against the wall or unsuccessfully trying to climb it. The also found a very large wooden door, twenty feet wide and perhaps as much tall. A lever was on the wall to the right of the door.

"We should put those spirits out of their misery, like we did to their king and queen," said Chronos.

"Ok," said Syndyls. Kyri said nothing and went to examine the lever.

Syndyls and Chronos began bashing at the skeletons who did nothing to oppose them. It was quick and odd work. When they were done, they turned to Kyri.

"Well, what do you think?" asked Chronos.

"I say we try to lift it up. It probably opens the huge door. I also thought I heard water or wind on the other side. I definitely heard thunder." Kyri motioned for the other two to put their ear against the wood.

Kyri lifted the lever which moved easily. At first there was no response. Then, slowly and creakily, the wood started to rise but then stopped. A squeak of twisting wood came from the door.

"Uh oh," said Kyri. Syndyls began to back away from the door. Kyri followed suit.

"Uh oh what?" said Chronos.

"Move away from the door, priest," said Syndyls. The door began to creak and pop. It was buckling in the middle. However, a great blast of cold wind and rain crashed into the chamber. Lightning flashed but when it was over, it looked completely dark.

As the realization hit the three adventurers that it was dark outside, the door splintered with a loud boom. Splinters of wood showered them, hanging in their hair and rag clothing.

On the other side, in a flash of lightning, they could see a tiny figure, perhaps a human child. It was wet and barely moving but started to slowly stand. It stood on a deck and the deck jutted into the water inside a cave.

"Orin!" yelled Syndyls. "You are alive."

"I think I am. I was almost not. I was hoping you would find me but I had resigned myself to being scoured. It is almost dark." The Halfling looked a mess. What remained of his rags were ripped, wet and dirty. He was covered with bruises and small cuts. He was definitely developing a black eye and he was favoring his left arm as if it was broken or severely sprained.

Chronos helped Orin and looked at his wounds. The priest thought the arm was just tender not broken. Together, the group of four joined the others back at the bricked in tomb.

"Orin," called Chae. "I am glad you are still alive little guy. You missed all of the excitement with

the king and queen. Turns out they were not quite dead yet."

"What does that mean?" Orin asked but then he saw the remains of the two royals. "Oh," he said.

The others were still bashing in the wall and soon had a Halfling sized hole. Using Syndyls' torch, Orin slipped in and everyone could see their final prize: a boat, a gloriously large, seaworthy boat. However, Orin stopped in his tracks and yelped. He saw someone in the boat.

"Orin, what is it?" asked Flavius. He knew that they were not really up for another fight.

"Oh," said Orin. "I think I found the prince."

Lying in the boat was the body of a man. His clothes were old but he was also wearing chain mail and held a large bastard sword and a shield painted with crested waves. He was surrounded by grave goods: several small chests and golden dining ware. The man was unmoving but Flavius and Ariston hurriedly removed more bricks so they could help Orin if he needed them.

The entire party started to remove bricks as they needed to make a much wider hole. From where they stood, they could see lightning and hear thunder through the open large doorway. The cave made it look dark as if night were upon them but since they were still alive, they knew they had not yet reached the goddess' deadline.

Once the hole was big enough, they began pushing and pulling the boat. Melisana stopped and looked quizzically at the entrance to this large tomb.

"Did anyone hear that?" she asked. No one had heard anything.

"Sounds like shouting," she continued. Then she heard it again. Clearly someone had found the secret hallway and was coming this way.

"Let's hurry!" urged Orin as he climbed into the boat to supervise. He gently stepped around the body of Horedel.

As they began to push the heavy boat down the room, Kyri could see warm shapes moving rapidly at the entrance. The party's torchlight did

not extend that far but there was no mistaking what she saw with her infravision.

"Everyone," she started, "we have company."

They were nearly out of the hole but Kyri could see five large man sized shapes moving quickly. As they got closer, she could tell that one was different. He was bigger and his heat image was different somehow.

"Everyone get in the boat, I will push it in the last bit," exclaimed Flavius.

"We will be too heavy," cautioned Ariston.

"Just get in the boat or we won't get away," responded Flavius. The boat was now outside the door and resting on the dock. The figures were clearly Orcs and closing in. They could be heard running towards the group.

Most of the group clambered inside. Flavius squinted into the darkness then put his shoulder to the stern of the boat.

Flavius gave one final push and the boat slid off the dock. He stole a glance backwards and saw the Orcs were nearly upon him. The lead one was clearly different. He was a good three inches taller than any of the others, and his skin was greener. His ugly Orc nose was pierced with a straight bone and he had a necklace of feathers and bones which hung down to his hairless chest. But what struck Flavius most was the wooden stick the Orc held. It was like a paddle with pieces of squarish metal stuck into the sides but the creature held it like a sword. The determination to kill the group was clear on the Orc's face.

The boat was pulling away from the dock and Flavius jumped as hard as he could. He felt as if in slow motion. An arrow (where did that come from, he thought) appeared in the stern of the boat as he moved through the air. For a second, he thought he was not going to make it but he did although a little clumsily. Most of him landed on Chronos, knocking the priest back but not out. His shin hit the gunwale and a stab of pain drove straight through him. A few more arrows hit the boat but none struck any of the characters.

As a flash of lightning streaked across the sky, the little boat shot out of the mouth of the cave.

There was little time to note (but both the Halfling and the Scout noticed) the large statues carved into the rock of the small cavern. They were of the king and queen and perhaps their ancestors, standing silently while guarding the sea entrance to the tombs.

The group did look back and see the group of Orcs turn around and head back into tombs. The big one stared for a moment but eventually turned as well. The adventurers had little time to ponder the Orcs, however. The little boat and its crew were being tossed and buffeted by the wind and waves. Loud crashes of thunder and jagged spears of lightning surrounded them. Jael had a stoic look upon her face but Kyri looked a little worried. Orin watched her and grew worried himself. Flavius and Ariston had the oars and feverishly struggled to get the boat further out to sea.

The sky overhead was completely covered in storm clouds, but the group could still see the island. It seemed to be lit by a faint glow, enough for them to see what was going on. Tornados, 10 or 12 at least, descended from the heavy mantle of clouds cloaking the sky. The tornados began tearing along the island and stripping great tracts of territory up into the air. Hurricane-force winds scoured the island and from the characters' vantage point they could see the ruins of the town, plus the manor, barracks, and stable, begin to disintegrate, being thrown plank by plank and beam by beam into the air. The Orc and Goblin boats on the beaches were driven up onto the beach, torn apart by the winds and battering seas. Crews could be seen running, scattering, some of them being thrown like leaves up against the cliff side, others swept out to sea by the waves.

By the time the little boat was a quarter of a mile out to sea, the rocking and pitching had begun to subside. It no longer threatened to throw Orin overboard. But things were worse, not better, back on the island, which seemed strangely obscured, covered from shore to shore by a gray-brown whirlwind of rocks and scrub brush and sand and sea which seemed to scour the island.

By the time the boat was a mile away, the whirlwind lifted and the island was gray-white and smooth, resembling not at all the island the group had landed upon the day before. There was not one hill, not one topographical feature

that they remembered. Suddenly, the seas around them were still, the clouds overhead clear, and the stars and moon could be seen overhead.

The group was glad to be away from the island but they still had no food or water. They also had the body of the prince still in the boat. That first night, Chronos and Ariston decided to commit the body back to the sea. The priest said a few words, invoking the powers of Ixion (the god of the sun and light), Protius (the god of the sea) and King Viledel's most favored god, Diulanna. The Forester spoke of the cycle of life and that all things return to their natural state. He spoke of it being right that the son of the Sea King should return to the sea, not stay buried under the ground. They then stripped him of his chain mail and slid him into the ocean. The body floated for a while, away from the boat then they could no longer see it. They went to sleep as Melisana softly shed tears for the lost prince.

The second day broke hot and calm. The group used the remains of the hammocks they had taken from the slave ship as nets. It was slow going but they did catch a fish which they all ate raw and hungrily. It was the first food they had had since shipwrecking.

None of the group knew anything about sailing, especially on the ocean. They used the sun as a guide and tried to rig the sail to push them north. They also used the oars but the activity quickly tapped their strength in the growing heat of the sun. Using the cloaks and the bastard sword, Flavius created a sort of tent which they all crowded under to avoid the sun. Unfortunately, their body heat made it hot underneath. For most of the day, they slept while taking turns searching the horizon for signs of ships or land. There was none.

The third day was very much like the second but worse. All of the rainwater they had collected was now gone. The salt water looked tempting to drink but Ariston kept them from touching it. "It will make you sick then thirstier than ever, if you do," he said. Orin just stared and tried to lick his parched lips. He consoled himself with the thought of how much tobacco their recent haul would allow him to buy.

At the dawn of the next day at sea, they all awoke grumpily. Even Sarmboc was awake and unhappy.

NOTES AND SESSION SUMMARIES

Outline:

The docks
Dinner with Melisana
Yet Another Tavern
Avery's Aviary
Meeting with Yolanda of Luln
The Shopping Trip
Leaving Town
Rumors:

1. More and more frequent reports are made of monsters and desert folk skirmishing along the Sind Desert border of Darokin. No caravans return from Sind and no goods come from the desert kingdom. Soldiers are needed and Darokin agents frequent adventurer haunts.
2. The King of Vestland has been missing for some time now (at least a year considering how slowly news travels to Karamaikos from the Northern Reaches).
3. Adventurers are being sought in Thyatis as the Empire is bent on conquering the Hinterlands. Adventurers who pursue this course will stumble into DDA1: Arenas of Thyatis.
4. A new College of Wizards is being founded in Krakatos. The Duke just commissioned the building of the school on the site of the ruins.
5. A bard is telling the tale of a warrior named Retameron who with a band of adventurers saved the village of Orlane from a powerful sea demon. If questioned, the bard says that he met the adventuring party near Retameron's father's home in Threshold. Those adventurers were planning on next finding the lost stronghold of Rogahn and Zelligar.
6. While at the Crossed Swords Inn, the adventurers heard from Allyn Cadel, a Minroth bard, who described strange goings on in the village of Orlane, a small fishing village to the east of

Karameikos, near the Thyatian border. Allyn describes the village as having missing people and shut doors, very unfriendly to travelers which is a change from its past.

Outline:

- Leaving town
- First day
- Ariston catches a deer and hangs the skin from the back of the two wheeled cart
- The buzzing sound and Syndyls' wall of fog
- Second day
- Wolves in the night
- The slums of Radlebb Keep
- The spice merchant: Havard's Supply
- The bar: Maiden's Blush
- The bartender's information
- Ariston's blinding eyes fight
- Leaving the town
- The ambush on the Road
- Arriving at Luln
- The Shoemith's shop

Around the campfire at the end of the first day:

The group sat around the campfire, enjoying the deer that Ariston had caught. It was fresh and gamey but they thought back to their days on the island and the open sea and it seemed like a feast. Once Ariston brought out some wine, a full scale celebration seemed at hand. Even Syndyls began to loosen up and he began to talk about his home.

"To tell you the truth, I have never met an Alphatian," said Ariston, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Me either," agreed Kyri. "But I had met precious few Thyatians either before I left Alfheim. I wanted to see both empires when I left."

Syndyls looked at both of them. "Well now you have and I hope you are suitably impressed." He shyly grinned and the entire party laughed.

"But Syndyls, you have said that you came with your mentor. Why come all the way to the mainland . . . excuse me . . . our continent? It seems like a terribly long way and as you discovered, a dangerous journey." Orin stoked

the fire while he spoke. He was also thinking that the time was just about right for an after dinner pipe.

"I have asked myself that as well, Orin. But for that you must understand my teacher, Eridalun. He was not a traditional Alphatian but instead a Thothian. I don't suppose any of you has heard of Thothia."

The party shook their heads.

The mage continued, "Well, I have actually never been to Alphatia proper being from the Isle of Dawn. However, I grew up in a family of pure Alphatians amongst the many peoples of the area. Those are the people you normally think of when you talk about us. But in the center of the island there is a part of the empire known as Thothia. It is an ancient and mystical culture. The pureblood people of that kingdom are related in some way to the ancient Nithians. Have you heard of the Nithians?"

Orin spoke up. "Aren't they one of the tribes of the desert in Ylaruam?"

Syndyls nodded. "Yes and no. The ancient Nithians, it is said, are the ancestors to both the Thothians and the modern Nithians. However, they are said to be cursed by the gods to remember nothing of their former glory as the Empire of Nithia. Scholars have found that they were a widespread empire who built great pyramid tombs and huge cities of stone before even the Alphatians came to this world. They call their king a pharaoh and believe that he is a representative of the gods. The modern Nithians and the Thothians do not acknowledge each other as kin but they look the same and have the same traditions. There are two pharaohs as far as I can tell.

"Eridalun has always been interested in unlocking the past of his people. He taught me that they had great and powerful magics that could be rediscovered. We spent many days searching ancient tombs for clues and spells. I have seen the great pyramids in the Thothian desert and many very old, crumbling tombs on the edges of civilization. He told me of so many legends and pieces of tales of his people but he and other scholars like him have yet to put all the puzzle pieces together to find out truly who they were and why they have forgotten their history.

"One day, Eridalun found that there may be clues to be found in the western continent, your continent. He began a correspondence of sorts with several wizards in Karamaikos and Thyatis who also sought out secrets from the Nithian past. They said that they were on the trail of something important concerning the ancient Nithians: several objects of power and truths about the past. Eridalun told me that he was not sure they could be trusted but he never told me their names. He said he did not want to curse the name of a man without proof. He wanted me not to judge them.

"Eridalun was convinced we had to make it to Thyatis and find out just what it was that they had discovered. We booked passage on a ship bound for Ochalea where we knew we could then find passage to your "mainland." It was the Silent Sea and an Ochalean captained it. He was a mage himself and blew the winds into his sails.

Unfortunately, the ship was attacked by pirates. The captain tried to fight back, letting loose a lightning bolt from his fingertips that looked to kill several of the buccaneers but he was taken down by crossbow bolts in the first few seconds of the fight. His crew quickly surrendered and turned over us passengers in hopes to save their lives. In the confusion, Eridalun found me and cautioned me against fighting the pirates but instead said to observe and look for the right time. We were all taken as captives (including the ship's crew) and transferred from ship to ship. As the days went by, I noticed that they divided us and took some of the others to different ships. I lost track of Eridalun after the first ship. For a while, I was held in what could only be described as a prison. I was put aboard another ship and eventually the ship where we met.

"I do not know what happened to Eridalun but do feel he is still alive out there somewhere. I will find him. Only then will I return to the Isle of Dawn."

Outline:

- The fight in the shoe shop
 - Orin dagger to wizard's throat

- Synd magic missile to kill one
- Kyri sliced off the top of the big guy's head
- Ariston killed guy who surrendered in shoe store
- Chae found boots with dagger sheath in shoe shop
- Split up the party
 - GG: Alexei, Ariston, Chae
 - Saschia: Kyri, Syn
 - Livery/Stable: Orin
- Sheakley the Scribe - left a message for Mistress Saschia
- The Mangy Manticore
- The herbalist
- The journey to Fort Doom
 - The Patrol
 - The gates/arrival
- Meeting with Petronius
- Entering the sewers
- Gnoll fight

Above outlines summarized: For about a week beginning on the 4th of Thaumont, the party floated on the open ocean. They were rescued by Nicolae Halligan, a logger's son who was scouting new forest in the islands of Minrothad and Ierendi. They were entertained by Nicolae and his crew (chief among these were Windmaster Konstantin who taught the mage some new spells, Captain Elan Pierzina [a flashy Gypsy like Traladaran] and twin Ylari sailors Alia ibn Shihuh and Chukri al Shihuh). They eventually landed in Specularum, capital of the Grand Duchy of Karamaikos on the 12th of Thaumont. They heard several rumors while staying at the Crossed Swords Inn but nothing which struck their fancy for adventure. Instead, while being feted by Melisana's grateful father, Arthur, they decided to investigate their captors, the Iron Ring.

The group sought out information from Yolanda of Luln, a popular singer at the Black Heart Lily Tavern. She told them to seek clues in Luln and to trust no one except Saschia, the town's leader. Before leaving Specularum, the Halfling bought a mule and wagon and some wares to sell. The Forester purchased a trained crow and using his Ranger skills, sent it to take a message to his mentor, Thalos Corin, in Thyatis. Arthur provided cover with one of his wagons and a drover named Rogero. Extra items were handled by Carl, Arthur's butler, and they were off.

It was a relatively uneventful journey until the group got to Radlebb Keep, a nasty tower complex astride a stream which protects the road between the Black Eagle Barony and the Grand Duchy proper. Ariston got involved in a dispute between a wizard and a man who cheated someone named Bargle (known to be the Court Wizard for Baron Ludwig Von Hendricks of the Black Eagle Barony). The man was killed and Ariston temporarily blinded by the mage who disappeared as Chae and Orin showed up. They noticed that there was a hazy shimmering to his features as if he was disguised by magic. Fleeing the possible wrath of the wizard, the group journeyed outside of the wooden palisade of Radlebb and settled down for a night's sleep just off the road. Their peaceful sleep was ruined by the arrival of Alexei, a tall Traladarn wearing platemail, and a subsequent attack by Iron Ring members who were chasing him.

Following Alexei, the party arrived in Luln just to be attacked again and finding Alexei's contact, Garen, near death in his shoe shop. Taken in by Leraith, a rebel against the Black Eagle Barony, they were told of the Baron and Iron Ring's latest plot: the theft of the Eye of Traldar, a magical artifact of great power. The group was enlisted to recover the Eye which had been taken to Fort Doom, citadel of the Black Eagle Baron.

Before leaving Luln, the group attempted to see Saschia but were told by Shakeley the Scribe that she was not within the city to receive guests. They vowed to return and he noted their names.

Braving patrols along the border of the Barony and dressed like turnip farmers, the group entered Fort Doom where they were met by Lemnos, a shifty eyed spy. Lemnos guided the group to the sewers beneath the Baron's central castle and they met Petronius, a noble looking spy. Exploring the caverns, the group faced several encounters but eventually found a ladder up to the dungeons. Releasing many prisoners, including several guardsmen from Luln led by Tibor, the group carefully picked their way through the dungeon. They were assisted by an angry and hungry Ogre named Orok.

Now that the dog man (Ariston and Chae identified it as a Gnoll) had been dispatched, the group carefully looked around the cavern. Kyri attempted to see if there were other warm bodies in the cave but the lanterns and torches of the party interfered with her infravision.

"What have we here?" questioned Syndyls. A little pile of rocks covered up a small belt pouch and a dagger. "Mine!" he said as he picked up the dagger. He drew it and gasped delightedly. The blade was made of silver reinforced with steel. A very beautiful weapon.

"Doh!" shouted Chae as he realized that Syndyls would never give up the dagger.

Ariston picked up the pouch and peered inside, finding some Karamaikan coins and a silver flask. It did not look like alcohol so he handed it to Chae who opened it. An odorless, colorless liquid with a weird property: it was dry to the touch, as if it was not there. It unnerved the rogue.

"Here Orin. What do you make of it?"

The Halfling removed the stopper that the Rogue had replaced. He sniffed it. "A slight hint of cedar, I think." He dipped a finger in it. To him it was also dry to the touch. "It is familiar but I do not think I have seen something exactly like this is my tobaccanist shop." Orin passed it to the mage. Syndyls said nothing and hid the flask under his cloak.

The cavern showed the signs of having been used as a den for the creature but nothing else of value was found. The group resumed their marching order and headed towards the exit opposite the room's entrance. They proceeded slowly in the lantern light and the Halfling stayed ahead of the rest of the group.

The narrow passageway (approximately five feet wide) was very roughly hewn and the intermittent stalactites and stalagmites made it somewhat difficult to maneuver. As the group walked, their feet made wet splattering noises which echoed throughout the caverns. Fortunately, the constant dripping and splashing throughout the caves made their own noise indistinguishable. At least they hoped it did.

Orin motioned for the group to stop. He could hear little scurrying sounds up ahead and the

passageway appeared to open up into a room. Slowly, the group resumed movement but they were wary.

The cavern quickly expanded and Orin could not see the limits of it in the lantern light. He thought he saw a set of eyes reflect in the flicker. A shudder shook him but he kept going. Skittering sounds were all around except behind. His fellow adventurers were there, back about twenty feet.

Something moved quickly behind a stalagmite ahead and Orin paused. Instantly, four rats of unusual size were surrounding him. Each was about the size of a medium sized dog but thinner and with a much longer tail. Orin noted that he was surrounded but his fellow adventurers were quickly catching up. He dodge one of the rats as another sank its teeth into his knee. The Halfling jerked away and cried out in pain.

Two arrows whizzed by the Hin. The first struck one of the rats and spun it around. The second clattered against a stalagmite. Ariston stepped aside and reached for another arrow.

Orin was back in the fight and swung his short sword at one of the rats. It connected but the vermin kept charging. By now, Kyri and Chae were there. They swung with their swords and Kyri nearly split one in two, its dead carcass flying into the distance. Chae missed.

One of the rats had made its way in front of Syndyllys and bit his ankle. The fleeting thought of disease went through the mage's mind but he stepped back and stabbed the creature with his dagger. It stopped moving.

Ariston let fly another pair of arrows. The first again found its mark and the second flew off into the darkness. The rat tried to escape but Alexei stepped up and ended its wretched life with his sword.

The adventurers again regrouped and searched the cavern. Other than the obvious signs of rats having made this a home, they found nothing. They resumed their march into the depths, going through the passageway opposite where they had entered.

Winding through the wet tunnel, the group again emerged into a much wider cavern. This was the largest so far, with the walls beyond the reach of

Orin's lantern light. The group fanned out, weaving around the many stalactites and stalagmites. Syndyllys stood in the doorway, wary of any more rats or other beasts that should be lurking in the darkness.

As Orin was walking ahead of the group, Ariston noticed a stalagmite that did not look right. It appeared to breath and began to crumble before his eyes. Just as he was about to cry out alarm, the stalagmite stuck out an incredibly long, pink tongue. It flicked at Orin and just barely missed.

Chae rushed forward to stand beside Orin, his sword flashing in the lantern light. Ariston and Kyri switched to their bows and sent arrows towards what they could now see was a giant cave lizard. The creature was gray, like the rock of the cave. It was also more than five feet long.

With all eyes on the cave gecko, no one noticed that Alexei, who had been last in line, was not present.

Ariston's first arrow found its mark but the second clattered on the stone floor. Kyri's arrow found it way into the lizard's side. The two piercings had made the lizard mad and it lunged forward, towards Chae and Orin. Both were quicker and dodged the gecko's vicious bite.

Syndyllys, turned to see why Alexei was not joining the fight and was met with two claws, one on each shoulder, which sliced into him. The cold tug of death spread through his body and he collapsed. The man creature held him and quickly dragged the mage into a pile with Alexei then turned to see who would be next.

Ariston and Kyri let loose more arrows. Ariston cursed as his first hit but second missed. Kyri's missed. However, Chae and Orin struck the lizard with swords. The creature was obviously wounded but kept fighting, not smart enough to sense that doom was coming. It struck again at the Halfling but missed.

The Hin leapt at the lizard. With a combination of luck and skill, he drove his short sword into the creature's back, severing its spinal column. The gecko spasmed and convulsed then was still. Black ichor spurted up and onto the short sword. Looking back with a grin, he wondered who it was that stood beside Kyri. Whoever it was, swung both its arms at her.

"Aaaaahhhh!!!" She twisted away with a scream. The smell of death came from her attacker. In the torchlight, the group could see it was roughly a man dressed only in rags. His fingernails were exceedingly long and large bites appeared in his chest. His hair was wild and the color of his skin was slightly green. His tongue was not human; it was forked and long. He seemed to try to speak but only a loud hiss came from his throat.

Ariston sent two arrows at the beast. The first one struck it in the throat but the second missed. It was undaunted and sprung forward, trying to get to Kyri. She sent an arrow into its side then dropped her bow in favor of her sword. Chae and Orin rushed forward.

The creature clawed at Kyri, catching her arm and spinning her around. She barely held on to her sword but recovered quickly and slashed at the monster. It recoiled from her strike as both Chae and Orin walloped it with their swords. It was still up and fighting.

Ariston sent another pair of arrows flying towards the creature. Once again, the first hit (just missing Chae) and the other went wild. The creature turned away from Kyri and reached for Chae but the rogue nimbly avoided its blows. The Elf took the opportunity to stick her sword between the ribs of the beast. The tip came out the other side and the light fled from the monster's eyes. It crumbled to the floor and she kicked it off her blade.

Orin saw that Alexei and Syndyls were lying awkwardly in the entrance to the passageway from which they had come. The group checked to make sure they were alive (they were) but they were stiff and staring. Ariston and Chae dragged the two into the center of the cavern.

"Hey. Didn't Syndyls mention something similar back on the island," the rogue recalled. "He said that a few of the group was paralyzed by a creature in the abandoned temple back on the island. They had assumed it was something undead like a zombie or ghoul."

"Yes," said Kyri. "The only cure was to wait for the paralysis to wear off."

Orin set his lantern on a broken stalagmite. "Given the need to wait for those two, why don't we stop and rest here?"

The rest of the group agreed. While they set up camp, they noticed that there was a bundle of cloth near the other entrance to this cavern. Examining it, they made an unpleasant discovery. It was the remains of a Halfling. In its hand was a torn purse, Karameikan gold spilling from it. It also had a golden neckchain. Picking up the purse, Orin said that he found nothing other than the gold.

The group returned to setting up camp, fixing dinner and preparing for sleep. Before most had drifted off to sleep, both the mage and the warrior were moving again. They all ate silently in the glow of the torch candle then went to sleep. One member stayed up as a guard. Near the end of their resting period, the wakening members heard voices. Orin quickly awakened the sleeping members of the group and they listened.

"What is that light?" asked a gruff voice. Most of the group did not understand it but Kyri, Ariston and Chae recognized the Orc language.

The voice spoke again, "Stay here. Don't move." It then switched to Thyatian. "I said stay here! I am going to run up ahead and check out that light."

There was shuffling then someone broke into a run. Whoever it was was coming down the passageway. Ariston let fly two arrows into the darkness.

A muffled cry but the footsteps did not stop. Into the cavern stumbled a man sized creature with an arrow in the shoulder.

"Wait!" yelled Chae and Syndyls. "It's the Chronos!"

Indeed it was. The cleric had stumbled and fell near the lantern. The group heard laughter and running footsteps from up the passageway. Ariston let go two more arrows and the cleric stood and moved his hands, casting a spell. The passageway was suddenly lit up and a moving figure appeared briefly before escaping back into the gloom.

"Let him go," said Kyri. She turned instead and looked at the cleric. Ariston did as well but he had a strange smile on his face as he inspected the arrow.

"What are you doing here?" asked the Forestor.

"I had to find all of you. Plus I thought it safer if we were together." The cleric gently removed the arrow from his shoulder. It had not been deep since his newly purchased armor had deflected most of its power.

"It was not hard to find you. That may make it worse. It's the Iron Ring. They know we escaped from the ship and we are now wanted for hijacking a trader ship. That's how they have spun the tale, anyway."

"I was at the church in Specularum when one of the priests asked if I knew anything about a man with red hair. It appears that he had been asking questions about us, wanting to know where we were and who we were spending time with. I did not know what to make of it. The next day, while in the City Market, I was struck from behind and someone yelled at me, 'Beware the Iron Ring. We know who you are.'"

"I spoke with Melisana's father and found out where you were headed. I traveled with a group of clergy to Radlebb Keep and found out you had had trouble there. I kept going towards Luln and found Carlen, Melisana's father's man. He said you had gotten caught up in something with someone named Alexei." He turned to the warrior. "I am guessing that is you."

Alexei nodded then motioned for Chronos to continue.

"Well, I finally tracked you down by that mule cart. The stable boy said he had overheard you were going to try to get to Fort Doom. I shuddered at the prospect but decided I had better try to get in and warn you. I used my church contacts to get inside the fortress but then got captured by those Orcs when I was poking around. As luck would have it, they led me right to you."

Ariston was suspicious. What coincidences would have to align to make this happen? "So, you expect us to believe that you came just to warn us about the Iron Ring?"

The cleric stammered, "Yes. And to let you know that there is a wanted posted for us. It claims that we were responsible for the hijacking of merchant vessel (which I can only assume was our slave ship) and the murder of its captain,

one Desmond Karanstan. I don't know if that was the captain of the ship we were on but we are being sought for his murder regardless."

Syndyllys thought for a moment. "This is most unfortunate. I see nothing which causes me to stay in this wretched region. At my first chance, I am going to find a ship and sail back to Alphatia."

Kyri stared at the lantern and Chae stared at her, waiting for her to say something wise. She did not.

Finally, Orin spoke. "Well, let me tell you what we are doing here. There is no way back so we must press forward." The Halfling brought the cleric up to speed on the group's mission: to rescue the Eye of Traldar. As he spoke, the group made preparations to break camp.

The group has resumed their movement through the caves. The floors were still wet and the sound of dripping echoed throughout the complex. Small rocks sometimes made the path just that more slippery. Luckily, their noses had grown accustomed to the musty, death smell that permeated the caverns.

It had been some time since they had reached an expanded cavern but Orin could tell in the lantern light that they had reached another. Each time previously they had found themselves in a fight so Orin approached very cautiously. He kept close to the walls and strained his eyes to peer ahead. He thought he could just barely make out the figure of a man, standing and unmoving. He stopped.

"Now what," the Hin thought to himself. He motioned the group closer to him and pointed at the silent figure.

"Surely, if he is alive, he can see us," said Orin.

"But he has not moved yet?" asked Chae.

"Not in the slightest. He may just be a statue." Orin looked nervously at the figure again. "I am going to get a little closer."

The light from the lantern shone on the man. Orin could see that the man was dead. His face was gaunt and dry, part of the bone of his skull

exposed under his scalp. Orin shuddered. "How can he be standing?" thought the Halfling.

Just then, the corpse jerked to life and let out a horrific scream, "AAAAEEEAARRRRGGHHH!!!"

This scream was joined in by something unseen, behind the man. It sounded the same: mournful, alarming, half dead. Then another joined in as well. The sound reverberated around the cavern and through all the passageways. If anything was alive down here, it knew something was going on.

Orin jumped back and almost bumped into the cleric. He was proceeding forward. "Stand back my little friend. I sense the presence of the undead."

Chronos revealed his holy symbol and stood firm. "I banish you, the ones who should have taken eternity's rest but have refused. May evil have no further sway over your mortal bodies!"

The undead man turned and fled in the direction opposite of the cleric. However, they did not stop wailing.

"Hey!" yelled Ariston. "Why did you do that? I was ready to crush their unnatural bodies. Now they just ran away to group with something else bad."

Chronos stared at Ariston but said nothing. The others waited.

"Let's not stand here. Let's find out where they are going." Syndyllys was leading the way.

Ariston and Kyri caught up to the mage and stepped in front. "Careful, hot blooded wizard." Kyri just noticed that where Syndyllys' clothes had been ripped, they were now mended and freshly cleaned. "How do you keep doing that?"

"What?" asked Syndyllys.

"Never mind," said the Elf as she pressed forward.

They went ahead slowly, still hearing the man creatures wailing. Now however, they had been joined by a whining, growling sound. Like the sound of dogs being restrained from dinner.

In following the creatures, the group found themselves once again in a narrow passageway. However, they kept up their speed and eventually reached an expansive cavern. In its center there was a tall ladder surrounded by the undead creatures. Also, two very large dogs (pit bulls) sat at the ladder's base, not paying any attention to the man creatures but definitely agitated by the presence of the adventurers. They did not come forward and they were not tied. They looked as if they had been told to sit and wait for something.

Not wanting to wait, Ariston sent two arrows towards one of the dogs. At the same time, Syndyllys raised his hands and cast a spell. Both dogs collapsed into slumber but the one on the right took an arrow to the chest and no longer moved. Ariston's second arrow missed and fled into the darkness.

The adventurers were perplexed but all but Kyri moved forward towards the ladder. The cleric unlimbered his sling and sent a stone flying into one of the creatures. It seemed to become more persistent in wanting to climb the ladder.

Orin, Chae, Chronos and Alexei moved forward and dispatched the creatures and dogs around the ladder. In their haste, they did not look back to see what was coming up behind the group.

From out of nowhere, something large and metallic struck Kyri. She turned and saw something furry and well over seven feet tall. Instinctively, she ran towards the rest of the group. Blood streamed down her face and matted her hair. She let out a scream as she ran, "What in the gods' names is that?!!"

The rest of the group turned at the Elf's yell. They could see two more of the men who looked to be undead and another dog. But it was the seven foot tall furry creature that impressed them most. It wore the largest, most ragged chain mail shirt they had ever seen and orangish-brown fur stuck out everywhere. The creature had long horizontally pointed ears and fangs. Around its neck was a large silver change on which hung a large bloodstone. But perhaps most impressive was the huge mace, dented and rusty except for the spots which were covered with Elf blood.

The creature grunted and moved towards the group, looking to finish off the Elf first.

Again, Ariston sent two arrows its way but both missed. The cleric meanwhile stepped up and bared his holy symbol, seeking to turn away the undead, "I banish thee of undeath. Go away from here and do no more evil." This time, however, the creatures did not run.

The dog and Alexei ran at each other but the blade of the warrior was too quick for it. He sliced off its front paws and sent it reeling to die in the corner. While the dog was dispatched, Orin sent a sling stone at seven foot tall creature. He missed him but a stone struck one of the undead. It seemed to wobble but kept advancing.

Kyri had switched to her bow and was sending an arrow downrange. It struck the creature that Orin had just hit and knocked him back. He did not get up.

Syndyllys threw a dagger and it sank deep into the furry beast. He yelped and swung at Ariston who was closest. The Forestor thought he heard the sound of waves as the armor kept him safe. However, he was now too close for his bow so he dropped it and drew his sword. Kyri and Orin could not get a good shot as the crowd was jumbled; swords, maces and daggers all looking for vengeance. The Elf did get a good shot on the other undead creature and sent it to the final resting place.

The remaining creature laughed deeply and kept swinging his mace, finding all of the group to be targets. Luckily for the adventurers, its blows were glancing and little damage was done. On the other hand, it was being cut up by the blades of Alexei, Ariston, Chae and Syndyllys. By the time it knew it was in danger, it was too late. Its eyes grew large with fear but the group struck as one and felled the beast.

All of the adventurers were out of breath as they began to bind their wounds. They collected the necklace from the creature and found a few coins as well and some very ornate ivory dice. However, their attention eventually turned elsewhere.

The large ladder led up to the ceiling where there was a very large, round trap door. The group stared down at the dead bodies around them then back up at the trap door. They hoped the worse was not yet to come.

More sessions summarized: The group waded through enemies and emerged in a suite of rooms attached to the external castle walls. They found that the Eye may be in the Sage's Tower nearby so braved an assault on it. In the course of searching, they liberated Nikolai Monescu, an elderly sage who had been forced to study the Eye. They also fought and killed Paurillian, an evil cleric, and Menelaus, a member of the Iron Ring. However, there was no Eye.

Lighting the Tower aflame, the group entered the gatehouse and discovered Aurelian, Bargle's assistant, and Tiberian, a guard captain who was preparing to evacuate Aurelian. After an arduous fight, the group recovered the Eye. Using the chaos caused by the flaming Sage's Tower, the group stole horses and rode out of the castle then the city. They rode hard and arrived at night on the 21st of Thaumont at the gates of Luln.

Alexei stopped at the top of the stairs and caught his breath. "This is harder than fighting Orcs." The man next to him, Chae, agreed but could only nod. They had finally lugged the last of the oil to the top floor. The two began to spread the oil over the floor, the furniture in this bedroom and across the tables of magical research. The old man, Nikolai, had assured them that nothing of real value was left among the tables. Syndyllys had agreed.

Chae, wearing much lighter armor than Alexei, climbed the ladder to the battlements and opened the trapdoor. He did not pause to look around but did notice it was still light outside. He had no real idea what time of day it was. The two men then started trailing the oil down the carpeted stairs.

Down on the first floor, Orin was double checking to make sure they had missed no treasure. Kyri was still struggling to get the chainmail off of Paurillian's dead body and Syndyllys looked on with a grim smirk on his face. Orin snuck glances at the rest of the group as he looked around and splashed oil in spots. Ariston was helping to spread the oil in the other rooms on this floor. No doubt taking the

opportunity to take a nip of wine as he worked, thought Orin.

While the group scurried around, Nikolai sat in a chair watching Orin. He was obviously glad to be free but seemed worn out by the excitement.

The group gathered together in the downstairs. The smell of oil assaulted their noses and made them a little lightheaded.

"Everyone ready?" asked Orin. They all nodded agreement. "Then I will be the last one out. Act like we belong here."

They walked out of the door single file. Ariston, Alexei and Kyri were dressed as guards. Syndyls wore a guard's tabard but no armor underneath. Chronos was dressed as Paurillian and Chae was trying his best Menelaus impersonation. The Halfling, the only one still in his normal clothes, took one last look back then threw his lit lantern into the room and shut the door. He heard it shatter and then a small "whoomp" noise as the fire took hold.

Quickly and with purpose, the group walked around the tower and headed for the main gates into the inner fortress. No one challenged them but people were everywhere. Without showing emotion, they crossed a darkly stained patch of ground where the Ogre had met his demise. Someone had already dragged off his corpse.

They arrived at the main gates which stood more than eighteen feet high. Banded wood and covered in pitch to make them resistant to burning, the gates loomed imperviously. However, there was a small door cut into the left hand side gate. A bell was attached to the gate and a small rope hung from it. In the small door was another sliding peephole, like the one in the tower door.

Ariston pulled on the thin rope attached to the bell and stood back. Kyri kept looking back over her shoulder, wondering when the tower would explode in flames. It did not but a faint twist of smoke was coming out of the open trap door. No one in the courtyard had yet seen it.

After a long minute, the little sliding door opened. "Yeah, what do you want?" a gruff voice said from the other side. "Oh, beggin' my pardon, lieutenant. What do you need?"

Ariston stood a little taller and deepened his voice. "Open this door right away. The troublemakers have gotten into the wizard's tower. Already the inside is aflame but I believe we have them trapped. I must report to Aurelian."

"Right away, sir!"

"That was too easy," mumbled Ariston. He looked back at the group. Though he had escaped injury, he worried that if they faced too many more encounters between here and the Eye of Traldar, they would all perish. All but him had received the blessings from their healing staff meaning that they could not receive it again until after the sun rose again. He said a little prayer to Ilsundal in his head. It could not hurt.

The group could hear several locks and bars being moved on the other side of the gate. Slowly the door opened and they saw a single guard, dressed in leather armor and wearing the double headed Black Eagle tabard most of them were also wearing. He seemed disinterested in the party, barely managing a salute to Ariston. "We were told to watch the gate in case those troublemakers came this way. Aurelian is afraid of them I think. He is making a ruckus over in the Watch House." The guard pointed towards a slightly ajar door a ways away from them. "If you want to talk to him, he is with the Captain. We will be here in the guard house if you need us." With that the soldier saluted Ariston and walked away. He entered a door and closed it behind him.

Alone in yet another courtyard, the group looked around. The ground was dirt and the area was open to the sky. The enclosed area was perhaps thirty to forty feet square. Another pair of eighteen foot high gates opposed the ones through which they had entered. Two solid wooden doors were on the other two sides. One was now closed since the guard had returned to whatever activity lay on the other side. The other was again, slightly ajar. The group quietly moved towards that door and as they approached, they could hear two men arguing.

A slightly nasal and whiny voice was strenuously making a point, "This is too dangerous! Just because there are a few troublemakers in the place . . ."

He was interrupted by a much gruffer and sarcastic voice, "Just a few but they've accounted for enough of my men and we don't know where they are. I had to send some troops into the city to find the escapees they let go so we don't have a lot of people to waste on protecting you. I don't care what you think. You're no soldier and I am not going to be to blame for losing you or that thing. If it gets lost or stolen, I am for the high jump. By sending you out to meet the Baron, you'll get that thing to that cold blooded swine Bargle in half the time. And you can deliver these strategic plans to the Baron a day early in the bargain."

The other man was still protesting, "Please, Tiberian. Sending me out on the road, even with an escort, is absurd. I demand to be taken to the Obsidian Tower for safety. I will await my master there."

There was a guttural laugh then the other man's voice could be heard again, "Once you're out of here, you're not my problem and I have enough problems. For all I know they are in your lab tower now. We have not seen Lieutenant Aenolas for some time. Surely he would have gathered your things by now. Anyway, there's five good men here now and another 20 when my orders get to that idiot Julianus. Just wait a few minutes."

The two voices continued arguing along the same lines but the party had turned away their attention and huddled together to plan their next moves.

"Well, I am not sticking around to wait for twenty more soldiers," Orin stated.

The group nodded their agreement. "Let's just go in and take them out," said Chae. There aren't that many of them.

"No, let's act as if we are the escort then we can get the Eye from the mage when we have him alone," Ariston suggested. Kyri nodded her agreement with that plan but Syndyls looked skeptical.

"If they follow us they will surely discover that we are not the escort then we will be stuck in this courtyard with an unknown number of attackers on both sides." He motioned towards the door where the guard had disappeared.

"I am going to scout it out. Maybe I can get the Eye without them noticing me if I use this," Orin held up the potion of invisibility that Nikolai had identified.

"Chae and I will distract them as you go in," said Ariston as he sheathed his sword. "Everyone else stay here."

The Hin took the silver vial from his pocket and removed the stopper. All in one gulp, he swallowed the liquid which was tasteless and seemed almost without volume. Everyone looked at him and waited. It did not take long before he seemed to be fading out of sight. He became transparent first then with a blink was gone. Chae laughed. "Now that's a nice trick."

"Okay," said Orin's incorporeal voice. "Open the door and I will go in right in front of you, Ariston."

The Forester did as instructed, waited a second to give the Halfling time to move into the room, then strode in like he belonged there. He could see the room was filled with four bunk beds and in the center of it all stood seven men. Four were dressed like most of the other guards they had seen: leather armor covered by the double headed Black Eagle tabard. One of them had a crossbow and the others had short swords. Ahead of them but faced away was a large man in chainmail who carried a shield. Facing him were two last men. The first was a short man in leather armor but no tabard. A short sword hung at his waist. His face was almost too plain; he was an every man who would meld into any situation without being noticed.

The second man could only be Aurelian as he was wearing a yellow robe and a black cloak with no visible weapon. A heavy silver chain hung around his neck and a platinum brooch served as a clasp for his cloak. But most striking to Ariston was the man's face. He had dark brown hair and a shortly cropped beard. From here, he looked like the man who had blinded him in Radlebb but he could not be totally sure. There was something different about him. However, the resemblance made Ariston pause and the other men in the room turned towards him.

"Yes?" asked the big man in chainmail.

Ariston shook his head and cleared his throat. "Sir, you sent for us. We are here to escort the wizard."

The leather armored man in back turned suddenly with a quizzical look on his face. Ariston and Chae pretended not to notice.

Aurelian looked Ariston and Chae up and down. "Tiberian, I still disagree with this decision."

"Shut your yap," the man in chainmail said. "Get that box and get ready to get out of my sight . . . good riddance." That last part was mumbled but still loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Wait." Tiberian tilted his head and inspected Ariston and Chae. "There are supposed to be twenty of you. And lieutenant, I have never seen you before. Where is Julianus and who are you?"

"Julianus sent us," came Ariston's reply but it happened at the same time as Chae's movement. The rogue unsheathed his sword and sliced the stomach of the man in front of him, all in one fluid movement. Everyone, including Ariston looked on in shock as the man grabbed his belly and tried to keep the blood from gushing out.

"What the . . ." started Tiberian but he was interrupted by Alexei walking in and pointing at him. "Who are you?" said Alexei.

"Huh?" said the Watch Captain. He went from shocked to confused. "Attack that soldier!" He said, pointing to Chae.

Alexei moved further into the room and started to run between the beds and the wall. Tiberian was still pointing towards Chae but the Rogue was busy taking another swipe at the guard in front of him. Ariston shrugged and drew his sword, trying to kill the guard in front of him. He hit but with little damage.

In the open doorway, the Cleric appeared and pointed at one of the guards. "Who are you?" Chronos asked.

The guard paused in mid swing and looked back at Tiberian. The Captain yelled, "Don't be confused, kill him before they kill us all!"

The crossbowman sent a bolt towards the newly arrived priest but Chronos deftly stepped out of the way and behind one of the bunks. The bolt stuck into the wall behind him.

Chae and Ariston continued to battle the guards at the door but stepped out of the way for Kyri to get a clear shot with her bow. They were glad they did as her first arrow whistled close to their eyes but embedded itself in the neck of the guard with the crossbow. He flew backwards before crumpling into an unmoving heap.

Chae blinked and stopped short. Where there had been one Aurelian, now stood four versions of the mage. All four of the images laughed hideously.

Meanwhile, outside the room, four guards ran up to those still outside. Seeing Syndyls in a guard's uniform, they did not attack him but they did swing at Nikolai. The old man staggered and tried to avoid their blows.

"Wait! Wait! Leave him alone. The enemies are in the room!" Syndyls shouted at the four guards and tried to shield Nikolai. They sheepishly helped pick the injured man up from the ground, dusted him off then turned to enter the room.

The last one in line was quietly (and thankfully unnoticed by the lead three guards), stuck in the back of the neck by one of Syndyls' thrown daggers. He gurgled and stumbled into the dirt floor.

Seeing the guards enter, Chronos pushed one of the bunk beds over onto the first guard. The metal frame of the top bunk banged into his skull and knocked him sprawling onto the floor. The sheets from that bunk floated seemingly in slow motion as it covered his now unconscious body. Nimbly, the second guard escaped his comrade's fate and just barely jumped out of the way.

Seeing the success of the cleric, Alexei too tried to tip the bed and aimed his for Tiberian. Unfortunately, the focus of his push was too low and he scooted the bed but it did not tip over.

Kyri had stepped closer into the room and was a ways away from the two remaining guards. She sent an arrow whistling at close range into the lead one and though he had avoided the bed, he

did not avoid her bowshot. The arrow sunk almost to the feathers into his chest. He dropped his sword as he was knocked back, tumbling over the bed that covered his compatriot.

The scene in the room was chaotic as the group and the guards fought ferociously. No one showed any sign of retreat. But the party whittled down the guards until only Tiberian, Aurelian and the Slaver were left. Many fell victim to multiple magical red arrows shot by Nikolai from his hands. The normally kindly old sage was vengeful.

In the fight, Orin had been spotted by the man in leather armor. Despite the Halfling's best efforts, it had become necessary to fight both one of the mage's images and then the man in leather armor. Now, being fully engaged, the man had turned his back on the rest of the fight. That was his fatal flaw. Ariston, having switched to his bow, sent to well placed arrows into the man's spine. Both dug deep and paralyzed him. Orin was not sure he was dead but it was clear that he would never fight again.

The mirror images of Aurelian had also been dispatched; most notably by a cleverly used unseen hand cast by Syndyllys to cover the one closest to a bunk bed. With only one left, and enemies on all sides, Aurelian did not see the Rogue behind him. Taking careful aim, Chae drove his long sword into the mage's back, a sickening crunch almost stopping his hand as the blade sliced through the spinal column. With just a slight exhalation of breath, Aurelian was dead and slid clumsily off of the sword, onto the floor.

At this point, Tiberian knew he was helplessly outnumbered but also knew that he was a dead man either way. Bargle would kill him for not keeping his apprentice safe and the Baron would kill him for losing both the Eye of Traldar and his battle plans. There was only one hope, fight long enough to have reinforcements arrive. He pressed his attack on Alexei, forcing the large man backwards.

Now clear of the man in leather, Orin dove through the nearby bunk bed and tried to tackle Tiberian. His attack missed but threw the Captain off balance. Given that break, Alexei advanced and with a quick sideways swipe, knock the captain's helmet from his head. With the helmet however, was the top of the captain's

skull and the brain beneath. Blood spattered over the crouched Halfling and the soldier toppled backwards from the blow.

The fight was finally over and it became eerily quiet. The group quickly summed themselves up to make sure no one in the party was dead.

Okay, let's find out what is in the box, Orin." Chae was cleaning his sword and looking at the Halfling.

"Do it quickly," said Syndyllys. Those twenty soldiers cannot be far off. He was still tending to Nikolai's wounds.

"What happened to the tower?" Kyri asked. "I would have thought it would explode with all of that oil in there."

Just then, they heard a muffled boom in the distance. Unmistakably, the tow had become fully engaged and the stone and wood were bursting under the heat. Kyri smiled grimly. "Let's gather this stuff and get out of here" she said.

"Ah!" exclaimed Kyri. "There is always one."

"What is it?" asked Alexei. He was not much of a horse expert though he did know how to ride. The group had fled from the gatehouse to the stables and was looking for mounts to help them leave the fortress. With the explosion of the tower, soldiers were crawling all over the place looking for the invaders. They had slipped by the twenty reinforcements, just as the party had finished hiding the carnage in the gatehouse.

"I was looking for a black horse and here is one. She's no Elven pony but she will do for the ride back to Luln. Won't you girl?" The Elf patted the side of the horse and spoke gently to her while she placed a blanket and saddle on. Carefully, she then tied another horse to the pommel using a bit of rope she saw laying on the ground. This one was another mare, gray but spotted with black. Her black horse appeared as calm as deep water and black as night. Kyri eased on top and the horse barely moved.

"See? Perfect."

The others had found steeds as well and were ready to ride out. All except Orin who was too short to ride one. He had been opening the stall doors and now was standing in the middle of the stables, lightly swinging another lantern.

"Can I ride with someone? It seems these are larger than my usual steeds."

"Hop on, Orin." Chae steered his horse closer but the horse did not like the lantern.

"Okay. Get ready to ride!" The Halfling climbed on in front of Chae then threw the lantern into the far corner. The lamp broke and instantly flames were licking their way up the wall.

Collectively, the horses gave snorts and moved away from the fire. The ones still in corrals saw the fire and burst out. "Let's ride!" shouted Alexei and the party steered their horses through the front doors of the stable. They were quickly followed by the unclaimed ones, all breaking for full speed.

"Hey! What are you . . . Oh . . . don't run over me!" The lone stable boy leapt out of the way, narrowly avoiding being stampeded.

Without hesitation, the group rode to the gates. They called for them to be open in the name of the Baron and stated they had orders to secure the city. There was so much confusion that no one challenged them. Riding through the city, the group never looked back. They went unchallenged at the Main Gates (they were still wearing the uniforms of the Black Eagle Barony) and escaped into the countryside. They rode at full gallop for as long as they dare push their mounts then stopped beside the marker that told them they had indeed left the Barony.

Resting their horses by a little stream, they removed the guard uniforms and bound their wounds. Finally, they turned to the wooden box and examined the Eye. It was a yellow-orange gem, the size of a large hen's egg, mounted in a dragon's claw setting fashioned from toughened reddish gold. It did not look like an eye at all but was oblong like an egg. A slight glow came from it which slightly illuminated the darkness of the wooden box.

"It is not what I expected," said Orin.

The Forester edged closer, "are you sure that is it?"

Alexei shrugged. "I thought it was going to be green and look like a cat's eye."

"That has to be it. I can feel its power from where I stand," asserted Syndyls "and perhaps Nikolai, you can give me some guidance. You stated that its power varies from mage to mage."

"There is not too much more to add to what I have already told you. This is the Eye of Traldar and it is powerful in the ways of detection." The old man coughed. He was still recovering from the short beating he received from the soldiers. "However, I do not think it wise to hold on to this item, despite its powers. It belongs to the Seer of the Lake of Lost Dreams so it is rightly his. He and his forbears have protected since the days of Petra and Halav. Also, surely, those who have had it recently will again attempt to claim it and woe to the one who holds it when they come calling."

"The man has a point," grinned Orin.

"Besides, it is the honorable thing to do," spoke both Chronos and Alexei.

The Elf spoke, "Then it is settled. We will make for the Sage after seeing Alexei's friends in Luln. Perhaps also, this Sascia of Luln can give us assistance."

With that, the group saddled up and began their ride again.

It was dusk by the time the village of Luln came within sight. Exhausted, the group arrived at the gates of Luln but they were already closed for the night. It took some pleading (and a few gold coins) but they were finally let in and headed for the Growling Griffon Inn.

More summaries: The characters made it through the gates without too much fuss and safely back to the Growling Griffon Inn. Leraith greets them warmly and listens intently to their tale. He requests that they go to the Lake of Lost Dreams to return the Eye to its rightful owner and they agree. Alexei suggests a northerly

route which skirts Koriszegy Keep but avoids major civilized areas and again the party agrees. Before going to bed, Syndyls uses the magic wand to see what items are magical and many are found to be.

In the morning, Chae, Syndyls and Kyri set out to meet Saschia, the town's ruler. Caught while trying to invisibly sneak into the manor house, Chae is beaten until Kyri recognizes one of the guards as one they rescued. They are granted an audience with Saschia and are given a small house in which to stay the next few nights. They also attend a dinner at which Saschia relays the legend of Koriszegy Keep and answers questions (like what does Bargle look like). She presents them with brooches that proclaim their virtue in Luln.

On the 25th of Thaumont, the group leaves for Eastern Karamaikos. During this first day out, they seem to be followed by an owl (they cannot tell for sure that it is the same owl). Ariston lies in wait in a tree for an hour, waiting to try to detect magic from the owl but to no avail. Before he can rejoin the group, Syndyls spots the owl and drops it with a sleep spell. The resultant fall kills the owl who appears normal.

The second day is uneventful but the third day ends with the finding of a field filled with three foot long beetles. The group shifts south to go through the forest and avoids and encounter with the bugs.

The fourth day out is rainy and uneventful until they discover the dead body of a human. He has been stripped of his shoes, belt and any valuables. He looks to have been in a fight with a large bloody gash down his center torso. The priest says a few words and the party buries him.

The rest of the trip passes uneventfully and they end up in Rifillian on the evening of the 28th of Thaumont 997.

Entering the town of Rifillian, the group finds it different than most other towns they have encountered. Rifillian is a trading post established by the Callarii Elves. Most of the population is Elven so Kyri feels at least a little more comfortable. The town itself is not walled and gated but is surrounded by immense and

ancient trees. The group finds the Silver Swan Inn which is run by a Hin by the name of Stubbs Plattermann. It is a nice respite from the bustle and danger of the human communities and wild countryside with which the group has become accustomed.

The group spends the 28th of Thaumont as well as the 1st of Flaurmont in Rifillian. The first night is spent in the inn, discovering rumors:

- * goblins are becoming increasingly brazen about attacking the local countryside;
- * it may have been goblins that stole the artifact owned by the Sage of the Lake of Lost Dreams;
- * no one knows if the sage is still alive but some Vyalia Elves have gone to check on him;
- * the goblins are organized and it is suspected that a human hand is guiding them;
- * Lord Forester Roderick of Rugalov is building a band to find one of the goblin leaders, the Dymrak Dread.

Because they shop for some time on the 1st, they decide to leave the next morning. On the way out of town, they meet a bruised and battered warrior. Everything he has is dirty and bloody and torn. He warns them against traveling the main road south to Specularum as he was beset by bandits. After dispatching them, he found they all shared the tattoo of manacles on their wrists. Chae and Orin recall that as the mark of the Iron Ring.

On the road to Kelven, the group encounters a group of adventurers. They do not speak and pass each other with only nods and waves. That evening, they arrive in Kelven. Orin, Ariston and Alexei spend most of the evening getting drunk in Alexei's favorite tavern, the Hillfollow Hall.

The next day, they book passage on a river boat with Kalanos, a familiar and trusted face for Alexei. However, they are forced to sell their horses as there is no room onboard for all of them. Only Kyri's two, Al'lilia and Sansa, and Orin's ponies are kept.

Along the way, the group is attacked by bandits who have placed a chain across the river. Their leader escapes as do most of the thugs. The boat continues on and arrives at Misha's ferry which is the first place from Kelven on the river which can be safely crossed. The group never finds Misha but find a bear that they assume belongs to her.

Starting out the next day, the group is attacked by goblins troops, all dressed in shades of red. They show uncanny discipline but are put to sleep by the mage's craft. One is kept as prisoner until the group realizes that none speaks Goblin. The Forestor then kills the hostage.

Continuing their journey on this, the 4th of Flaurmont, the group does not arrive at their next destination until near dusk. It is the homestead of Sukiskyn and is under attack by multiple goblin tribes. One is dressed in shades of red and the other wears wolf pelts. Narrowly escaping death at the hands of multitudes of goblins and wolves, the group enters the structure, ushered in by two friendly but grim faces . . .

Just before the group is able to enter the structure, more goblins appear in the fiery wreckage of the barn and collapsing north palisade. Never ones to run from a fight, the group rallies and charges the goblins. Unfortunately, one of the beckoning homesteaders (later to be identified as Alfana) nearly pays with her life as she is impaled upon a thrown spear while keeping the door open. The party is able to dispatch the invaders and most enter to be greeted by Pyotr, the clan master of Sukiskyn. Ariston and Orin keep watch outside, listening intently to the constant beating of goblin war drums.

Pyotr gives a small tour, peppered with grim jokes. He has already lost two of his clan and Alfana lays dying upstairs. His clan is made up of his wife, Darya, his eldest son, Taras, his son's wife, Alfana, his daughter, Irina, his youngest son, Matvey, his mother, Kuzma, the widow of one of those slain tonight, Masha, and his hired hand Stellios. Not present is his brother Stephan who has not been seen for more than a week. Attacking the homestead are at least two goblin clans, the Wolfskull and the Red-blade. There was a third, the Vipers, but they left after stealing the horses in the now destroyed barn. Pyotr can offer little comfort other than a straw mat upon which to sleep and a hearty meal. However, there is safety in numbers and no one wants to face the might of several goblin clans at once.

Rest is not to be had in this night, as soon the drums stop and Ariston and Orin are harassed by arrows from the north, just beyond the tree line. This signals the next wave of attacks in the siege of Sukiskyn. Goblin Worg Riders and Sappers enter the structure from two sides. Ariston succumbs to the blows of several sappers and lies unmoving in the dirt. Orin moves to cover him and shields the Forestor from further attack. Though the goblins are able to enter the main structure (and Masha is killed by a roaming dire wolf), the characters persevere and fight back the intruders. Syndyls is able to blind the attackers inside the structure using a wall of fog then lights a few aflame with oil and a torch. All of the characters are able to dispatch at least a few goblins or worgs in the melee. Syndyls's fiery trick leaves the interior stairs charred and useless but it did stop further advance by the monsters.

However, in the confusion, several more horses are stolen including Kyri's two, Al'lilia and Sansa, and Orin's ponies. Perhaps more troubling, Alexei is startled by rampaging horses, spooked by Chronos' sudden use of a light spell. Without thinking, he dodges but strikes with his sword. The magically sharpened blade and his skill combine to gut the animal. He becomes distraught and covers the horse's body with his own.

Abhorring the death of innocent animals, Kyri walks over to Alexei. She looks at him, then again at the dead horse. She shows no emotion but keeps looking at him and the horse. Finally, she bends over the prostrate man and taps him on the shoulder. He scurries to his feet, obviously shaken and tries to get Kyri to understand what happened. In mid sentence, Kyri strikes him as hard as she can with her chain mailed fist. Alexei stumbles and falls but does not fight back. Kyri leaves him kneeling in the dirt as she tries to find her horses. They are nowhere to be found.

The drumbeats have begun again and it is just around midnight. . . .

There is little time to mourn over the fallen and lost horses. The drumbeats do not stop and therefore, everyone inside little Sukiskyn knows the night is far from over. Periodically, the drumbeats and chanting stop, only to be

replaced by an eerie silence that is in some ways worse than the noise. Then, inexplicably, the drumming will continue.

After an hour or so of relative peace, a shriek pierces the night. Just at the edge of the eastern woods, there appears to be a scuffle. A woman in a yellow dress makes an attempt to get to the homestead but several goblins pounce on her and begin to drag her back into the woods. Darya claims that her friend, Katarina, from the Cherkass homestead always wears yellow dresses but Pyotr and Stellios agree that it is probably a trick. There is no way that Katarina could have broken through the lines of goblins out there in the night. That does not calm Darya or the party so they leave the safety of the stockade and prepare to enter the woods. Kyri covers Ariston, Alexei and Orin from the tower. Her infravision is not strong enough to see exactly what is going on in the woods but she soon realizes it is indeed a trap.

Meanwhile, Chae has convinced Pyotr to give him a more in depth tour and is busy making plans for mechanical traps to help safeguard the home. They soon discover that another human has been hiding in the homestead, a man named Arturo Dugalle, a minstrel and entertainer who happened upon this settlement and has been resting in the cellar until this night so rudely interrupted him.

Hearing Kyri's shouts of trouble, Chae excuses himself and heads outside. There, Alexei and Ariston have fallen and the Halfling is holding off a seemingly endless tide of Goblins. With Chae's assistance, the wounded are evacuated back to the homestead but not before Orin sees someone or something in the yellow dress: too big for a Goblin yet the size of a strong Human female. Its face is in shadow and the being escapes into the woods before he can definitively identify it.

Another hour of drumming commences before giant bats descend upon the homestead. They try to squeeze through windows and attack anyone outside. However, as suddenly as it began, the attack ended; as if they were called off or away.

A few more hours get the group to the break of dawn. Again, the drumming stops but after some yelling, a new chant begins, this one very different than the vigil kept through the night. At

the edges of the woods to the north and east, there is a flurry of activity. Then, without warning, a flaming arrow is shot out of the woods to the north and lines of Goblins begin to fill the clearings north and east of the homestead. The party and the homestead's occupants, grit their teeth and begin to finalize their safeguards against this next pending attack.

The group stood watching the approaching Goblins with trepidation. They had made preparations to secure the homestead, as best as they could, locking doors, wetting down walls and making traps. However, the number of Goblins seemed endless as they raced across the fields to the north and the east. Those defenders on the top and in the tower aimed arrows at the approaching horde and some fell but others kept coming.

All of the Goblins were similarly dressed; leather armor with wild splashes of red across it, their shields and even their weapons. Definitely Red Blades. Each group also carried several ladders but the ones to the north dropped them as they got closer to the ruined wall and burnt barn. There would be no need for scaling as the homestead was wide open in that direction.

They began with flaming arrows, trying to burn the homestead to the ground or at least so occupy the humans and Elf so that they would not fight back. A lucky shot of one hit the Rogue and set him to flames and perhaps to his death.

The other adventurers and homesteaders battled on. Though many Goblins were killed, none of the Humans or the Elf were. The homestead burned in spots, the structure was invaded through every opening and the carnage was great. Finally though, the Red Blade King called a retreat. His Goblins stopped in mid-attack and withdrew. The defenders had other plans and still brought down the King and his minions with well placed flechettes. Only a few slipped into the darkness of the forest.

There was no more drumming nor chanting. Only the muffled sounds of the almost dead and the cracking of fleeing Goblins moving away in the forest. The defenders had survived the night and were finally safe. At least for now . . .

The battle was over but the recovery was still ahead; there were tens of Goblin and Wolf bodies to remove. While the river was tempting as a final resting place, it was the main water source for Sukiskyn so contamination could not be risked. Instead, the bodies were heaped and burned, sending large plumes of acrid smoke high in the sky. While the adventurers had all made it safely, the same could not be said about the homesteaders. The bodies of family and friend were carefully prepared and burned per religious practice. All of this work continued with almost complete silence. Only the quiet prayers of Chronos and the other clergy and the lament of he now orphaned infant could be heard from time to time. Darya and Kuzma did their best to care for the child but he seemed to know that his parents were gone.

While some were disposing of the dead, others began the hard work of repairing the homestead itself. Parts of the palisade and stables were burned or otherwise destroyed; most of the doors were no longer attached and inside, blood and smoke stains smeared the walls and floor. In the center of the main structure, there were still no stairs since they had been razed by the mage during the fight. The smell of death and burnt beings (Goblins and wolves) hung thick in the humid air.

Late in the morning, Pyotr approached the group. He knew that they wanted to find their horses and ponies and he desperately needed to reclaim those from the homestead. Forty horses were quite a large chunk of their livelihood. Feeling guilty for having killed one, Alexei quickly agreed to pursue the fleeing horse thieves. Concerned with their own mounts, Kyri and Orin also agreed. Never shying away from adventure, both Ariston and Chae also agreed to go. Taras, Pyotr's son went with the adventurers, hoping to lend a hand with his bow and exact revenge on the fleeing Goblins. Syndyls, Chronos and Arturo decided to stay behind to recover spells and assist the homesteaders where they could.

The trail was easy to follow through the nearby woods. Most it was quiet and without encounter. A short run-in with an abandoned farmhouse yielded nothing (except some ground rumbling and a shadowy but very large insect creature as its cause) so the group pressed on. Eventually,

the trail clearly yet abruptly veered off into the woods.

Fearing ambush, the Forester decided to climb a tree and get a better look ahead. Despite refusing to remove his plate mail, he made it clumsily up with the help of everyone in their party. The Elf shook her head as the Forester stood on her shoulders to reach one of the lowest branches.

From his vantage point, Ariston saw the remains of a battle in the clearing ahead. Then he noticed some movement. Something was crawling between what looked like the bodies of horses and goblins. The stripped and bloody bodies of a score of goblins lay mixed with the torn carcasses of horses and the obese corpse of a dead goblin was hung by his feet from a nearby tree. Ariston quickly (and noisily) descended and the party advanced.

Beetles the size of coffee tables attacked the party. Slings from the Hin and arrows from Kyri and Taras whizzed by as Ariston and Alexei closed with their swords. All was fine until Ariston got hit by the searing, oily discharge of one of them. Blisters formed on his exposed skin and he yowled in pain. Through some measure of luck, the group vanquished the bugs and Orin caught a spectator, a Viper Clan Goblin who had escaped the recent battle. The only problem: no one in the group spoke Goblin . . .

Meanwhile, back at Sukiskyn, four men from a nearby logging camp came bearing bad news. Goblins had burned their camp the night before the attack on the homestead. Several other homesteads had been raided in the past week or so and there were only sketchy details on survivors. At the logging camp, Ilyakana, Kalanos the Ferryman had been left, hiding in the wreckage and refusing to leave. Worst of all for Pyotr, his brother Stephan was seen taken prisoner by the Goblins. Upon hearing the news, Pyotr turned and walked away in silence.

Orin tends to Ariston's oily burns but the pain and itching are intense still. The Hin assures the Forester that the wound is not permanent to which the ranger angrily snaps, I know. Orin walks away and turns to their prisoner. No one is able to communicate with it but they decide to call it Jub Jub, mocking the noises it makes

when trying to communicate with them. Taras and Alexei suggest that some from the group return with it to Sukiskyn but the others disagree. Orin and Chae walk the prisoner away to do conduct an "interrogation" while the others search through the battle remains. A few minutes later, Chae cries out and when the others turn, Orin is slitting the Goblin's throat. "She tried to escape" he says. Alexei is suspicious but says nothing. Taras wonders aloud if it would have been helpful to get it back to the homestead. The cleric smiles awkwardly and turns around, returning to his work, stripping the Goblin bodies.

Taras confirms that only 17 of the horses are here while Orin and Kyri are happy that none of them are their steeds. The group continues on their way, following the trail through made by the fleeing horses and Goblins. After a few miles, the group encounters an overgrown track which leads to a series of signs. All proclaim the camp of Madam Fyodorll, "Equine Entrepreneur – Dealer in Fine Horses."

Without notice, the group is confronted by a man in gaily-colored clothing, including a bright headscarf which contrasts starkly with his pencil thin, black moustache. He bows in an exaggerated fashion and informs them that his name is Rinaldo. He welcomes them to the camp and leads them to Madam Fyodorll where the group tries to bargain for the return of the horses. When confronted as a horse thief, Fyodorll challenges them, noting that some of the horses are marked with the sign of the Black Eagle Barony and that the group does not look like followers of the "bloody Baron." She strikes a bargain with them, saying that she will give them all of her horses (except the war horse she has trained) in exchange for killing an Ogre named Olot and returning Silverwing, a Pegasus trained by her "Travelling Folk." She tells them that he has also stolen much gold from the group and that they can have it all (as well as their eternal gratitude) if Silverwing is returned. The group agrees but says they will need to get the rest of their party before confronting the Ogre. She gives them four days to return and a warning to avoid the "big man" which guards Olot's cave. Rinaldo says that the big man is covered in metal plates and looks menacing but only attacks Travelling Folk. The group thanks them for the advice, vows to return quickly and departs Madam Fyodorll's, arriving at Sukiskyn just after dark.

There is a muted feast at the homestead as Pyotr tries to thank the party for helping to defeat the Goblins. However, the family is saddened by the situation with the horses, the deaths of those from the settlement and the kidnapping of Stephan. Kuzma tells stories, Alfana and Taras dance and Pyotr leads Ariston, Alexei and Orin in drinking games. Pyotr also shows the group the family's treasures including a stuffed eagle, an extremely large wolf's head, an ancient but intricate hunting horn (which Pyotr says belonged to one of his ancestors who knew Halav himself) and two very old tapestries hung on the wall, one showing wild, running horses (the clan's symbol) and the other with a intertwining, geometric pattern.

During the night, after Alexei has passed out from too much drink, Pyotr asks the group for its help. He understands that Alexei will want to check on his family and that the group is dedicated to getting the horses back but he would also like them to help find and rescue his brother. Taras says that he must help with a backup plan in case they cannot rescue the horses but will rejoin them when they begin searching for Stephan. Pyotr agrees to split evenly the proceeds from selling the horses once they are returned as well as giving them anything else that he can provide for life. The group agrees then rests in anticipation of the next day's adventure.

The journey to Olot's cave is uneventful. Just as described, there stands a huge man, more than seven feet tall, criss-crossed with scars and covered in large metal plates which appear to be bolted directly into his flesh. He is unblinking and the only movement is the constant clenching and unclenching of his hands. The group is hesitant to try to skirt around him, wary of a trap. A few sneak by then others, giving wide berth to the man and scrambling on rocks to climb above him on the trail. Only the Bard and Forestor stay behind.

Thinking that perhaps they can destroy him easily, the Bard and Forestor decide to throw burning oil and fire flaming arrows at the man. The first shot goes awry but the second connects and the man springs to life. With a few quick steps, he stands before the Bard and pounds him into the dirt. The young adventurer doesn't even have time to let out a whimper. His

bloodied corpse falls to the ground with a sickening thump.

In shock, the group doesn't know what to do. The Forester, still holding his bow, steps back and shoots more arrows into the advancing beast. They sink deep but seem to have no effect. The creature swings back and nearly kills the ranger. The other party members move to attack but their weapons seem to have no effect either. At some point Ariston drinks his potion of heroism and advances with his sword. The cleric, smelling death about the creature, tries to turn him but it is no use. Finally, the group realizes that only magic can fell this beast but the sleep spells cast have no effect. Only the magic missiles and Syndyls' dagger seem to have lasting effect. With the party in utter confusion and death on its way, Orin steps up, his sword glowing brightly blue. On the other side of the man-beast stands Ariston. As Orin goes to strike, Ariston lets loose a spell and everyone but Kyri (who is by this point safe and hiding in the nearby cave mouth), fall asleep. The creature stops and begins clenching and unclenching its fists again, oblivious to the near catastrophe it has caused the young party.

Ariston and Kyri quietly awaken everyone and get them into the cave. They seem to be trapped. . .

Hunkered down in the mouth of the cave, the group quickly moved to access their current state. Surprisingly, they were mostly either uninjured or just slightly injured. Ariston and Alexei were the worst off (if you did not count Arturo). Orin tried not to look at Arturo. Despite his recent adventures and the death he dealt with his sword, it was hard for the Hin to accept that someone with whom he had recently traveled was that smashed pulp alongside the trail.

The priest used a spell to bring some life back to Ariston and the Forester felt almost as good as new. Alexei waved off healing attention, knowing that it might prove more useful later.

Kyri snuck a peek outside the cave and saw that the metal plated man was still there, staring blankly and clenching and unclenching his fists repeatedly. If only they had not attacked him in the first place, that bard may still be alive. She

knew, however, that nature runs its own course and even if he was not to fall to the scarred man, he was destined to die today. May his ancestors watch over him now.

Something caught her eye while looking out. It was a short but broad humanoid. Whoever, it was was moving cautiously around the big man and towards the cave. Most likely a Dwarf given its platemail, beard and stature. She called over a few of the others to watch his approach but Chae eventually stepped forward and greeted him.

It was a Dwarf by the name of Greyscale. He had seen the group fight the big man and came to see if they needed assistance. After a few wary and tense moments (especially between the Dwarf and the Forester), the group proceeded down into the darkness of the cavern.

Though the cave was originally made by nature, it had been significantly enhanced by various hands. The Dwarf noted that it was gently sloped downwards and that any stalactites and stalagmites had been shorn. The place was also full of traps which seemed to focus on Alexei. The first was a gas trap that slowed the young fighter as well as the priest and the priest. The next was a pit trap which snared Alexei, resulting in some slight wounding from a spear. The next was a room with seemingly random placed pit traps and dripping water. The final one was a rolling ball which threatened to flatten the entire group (despite Greyscale and Orin's attempts to stop it).

Finally bypassing that, the group came to the lair of Olot the Ogre. He divided the party with a giant boulder and began to taunt those directly facing him. However, Greyscale, Ariston and Orin, fought bravely. By the time Olot figured out his predicament, it was too late. Ariston felled him with a well placed arrow through the eye (similar to the shot he used to dispatch Olot's mangy guardian dog).

With the Ogre defeated, it was easy to find the Pegasus. However, Silverwing did not wish to be ridden. Ariston found that out the hard way. The group gathered up the treasure they had found in the lair and made preparations to hunker down for the night before returning to Madam Fyordorll and her Travelling Folk.

After debating the merits of various ways to stiff the Traveling Folk and/or the homesteaders of Sukiskyn, the party decides to send several members back to Madam Fyodoryll to negotiate up. Primarily they want the war horse thrown in for the return of the Pegasus. Upon leaving the cave, Orin finds Rinaldo and another Traveling Folk man waiting by the horses. They quickly agree to give up the war horse and are eager to help heal anyone in need.

Returning to the camp, Fyodoryll is ecstatic about Silverwing's return and not only gives them the war horse but also a special sword: encased in a special scabbard and engraved with Elven runes which tell the story of the wielder's ability to light the path before caravans and protect the Traveling Folk. The party presents it to Alexei in return for his continued efforts. During the celebration of their success, Fyodoryll whispers some words of wisdom to the young fighter but no one else hears what is said. She also explains that she is more than 500 years old and that while her mother was Elven, her father was a Thyatian Human.

Leaving the gypsies in the morning, the group returns to Sukiskyn as heroes with the remaining horses. A feast is held in their honor there as well and they spend another day and night recovering from their recent battles. Even Ariston is happy but that is more due to receiving a return message with his crow from his mentor, Thalos Corin. The excess drink available does not hurt his demeanor either.

In the morning, they head out again, this time in search of the Lake of Lost Dreams and perhaps some answers from the sage. Syndyls is hesitant as he has become intrigued by the powers of the Eye of Traldar.

Half a day out from Sukiskyn, the group is treated to the rare flyover of a white Dragon. The creature doesn't stop and pays the adventurers no mind. However, for these young adventurers, it was nerve wracking. Luckily, the rest of the day goes well. The next morning is much the same except Ariston and Orin manage to catch several wild boar and dress them for dinner, finally using the salt that Ariston purchased some time ago.

The end of that day finds the group meeting up with a patrol of Ducal Guards who are clearing the remains of the homestead of Segenyev. They exchange news of the odd Goblin tactics but no one knows for sure what to make of it. The patrol's leader, Lieutenant Angelarian, suggests that the creature the group saw at the homestead was a Hobgoblin, bigger than a Dwarf, smaller than a Human and aiding Goblins. He notes that there are rumors of a few self styled Hobgoblin Kings in the area of northern and eastern Karamaikos. He also believes there is more to the Goblin raids than them simply seeking treasure.

The next morning, the group heads out again, skirting the forest and walking up and down the ever larger hills. At the top of one rise, they are attacked by giant bats which are quickly followed by very large Goblins, larger than Dwarves but smaller than Humans. Each rides a huge, overly furry black wolf except the biggest one of them who rides a wolf the size of Ol' Bill, the pony. This wolf is also stark white. Syndyls uses his sleep enchantment to stop the bats and the party locks blades with two of the worg riding creatures. Two are felled but the other three (including the leader) slip away from the battle without engaging. The group wants to pursue but cannot.

It is mid-day on the 11th of Flaurmont, 997 AC.

Continuing on their journey, the party finally reaches the Rugalov River at sundown. They camp uneventfully and head north the next morning. At mid-day, they reach the very misty shores of the lake of Lost Dreams. Sitting, staring moodily across the waters of the lake is Goriidel and her band of Vyalia Elves. They have come to seek counsel and check on the Seer for he has not visited them in some time. No heir to the Seer has been appointed but they fear that he may be dead as he is very old for a Human. The Vyalia have noted the rise in Goblin attacks and their uncharacteristically coordinated tactics as well. Finally, they talk of a band of Pixies, friendly at first but increasingly evil. They stole a beautiful silvered bronze statue from the Elves who had received it in payment for services provided to some nearby Dwarves. Because the Pixies lived on the island, the Elves think they took it there.

However, the island is taboo to their clan and they were hoping that someone would come who could row to the island, ensure the Seer's safety and recover the statue. Sighing at the prospect of yet another quest, the group agreed to go to the island and see what could be done. It took a day and a half to build a raft large enough for all the party (without their horses) but it was a sturdy one, approved of by the Vyalia's. The Vyalia reward the group's efforts with a large but simple feast of forest cuisine. The Elf and the Ranger welcome the familiar meal but the Dwarf grumbles despite eating the most of anyone.

In the late afternoon of 14 Flaurmont, 997, the group begins its journey across the Lake. The mist is thick and unnatural. As they move across the lake, some of them become wary. A sense of unease settles amongst the group and the Elf actually becomes physically sick. She has second thoughts about going forward but the group is determined to go on. She huddles quietly in the center of the raft.

Upon reaching the shore, it is almost dark but the group decides to press onward. The mage consults the Eye of Traldar and announces that there is a sense of both magic and evil permeating the air of the island. He decides to wait on the shore until it is light and the Elf agrees. She is no longer showing signs of illness but professes to feeling a little sick to her stomach. The others proceed up the beach and into the dark woods. Along the way, Orin tells a story of Sylvan creatures, including Pixies, defeating a band of marauding Orcs, many years ago. He cautions the group to watch the treetops as he thinks the Pixies can fly. As he ends his tale, there is the sound of laughter and pandemonium breaks out. The rogue yelps in pain as he is stabbed in the back but no one sees anything. There is scrambling in the bushes to both sides of the trail then the group is pelted with rocks. Greyscale and Chae manage to light a flask of oil and throw it into the bushes while everyone runs deeper in the island. Cursing in Elven and shouts of pain chase the group which does not look back.

The closely ranked trees of the path gave way to a grassy clearing. In the center stood a small, colonnaded building, its white marble stonework stained with age. Once there was a large stone statue standing at each corner, but one of these has toppled and smashed. In its place stands a

three foot high, silvered bronze statue. The group deduces that that must be the Elves' statue but decides not to take it yet.

Ariston sends his crow back with a message for Syndyls and Kyri then the group runs across the small clearing, fearing a return of the Pixies, and enters the shrine through an ancient wooden door. In very small room, they find a ladder down into darkness.

Going first and looking for traps, Chae is cautious. Orin holds a torch from above. When the rogue reaches the bottom, he hears a scrapping noise and hordes of skeletons move to attack. They come pouring out of the side chambers and the rogue backs up against the ladder, staring down the undead. But he is not alone for long. The group scrambles down the ladder, and Chronos reveals his holy symbol. In the light of Orin's glowing torch, it glistens and the skeletons are blasted into dust, their souls freed from unliving bondage. In all, almost 40 skeletons are laid to rest.

By now, it is also time for the group to rest. Having not received back his crow, Ariston and Alexei climb back up the ladder and head towards the shore.

Meanwhile, Kyri has been busy. Her sickness is gone but it has left a cold heart in its place. She secretly casts sleep on the mage and strips him of his belongings. She is unsure where this feeling comes from but is sure that Syndyls has been holding back spells from her. Plus, she wants that dagger back. She considers plunging it into his side but does not. She instead buries him (except for his face) in the sand. With his aversion to dirt and mess, that might be a fate worse than death. Or maybe, worse for the mage will be her theft of the Eye of Traldar. She thinks, just wait until he wakes up . . . maybe a dagger to the throat would be the kind thing to do but she is far from kind hearted right now.

She then sinks the raft and takes the sage's little boat. Pushing off from shore, she laughs at the pitiful Humans (and Dwarf and Halfling, of course) who are going to be stranded on this little patch of forsaken rock. . . .

Kyri sat in the boat, her head in her hands and trying desperately not to be sick. The evilness

around her heart had worn off. She was confused and unsure of what she had done. She could remember it but not clearly, as if it had been a dream. Perhaps a nightmare. However, she was holding both Syndyllys' dagger and the Eye of Traldar so she knew it was not a dream.

In the darkness, she could see a bird flying low along the beach as if searching for something. It then turned to sea and was headed straight for her. She scrambled to her feet and grabbed her bow. This was not natural. A bird at night? Headed for her? This cursed island was full of surprises. She drew back the bowstring and took aim then realized, perhaps it is the Forestor's crow. She remained wary but did not fire. Indeed it was and around its little leg was a scrap of paper. She gently grabbed the bird (who did not protest) and eased off the paper. It was a message describing the adventures so far: Pixies, a temple, some fire in the woods. She quickly composed her own message describing what had happened (she left out the part that it had been her that sank the raft) and threw the bird up into the wind. It took flight and headed back to the island. She sat down again. She needed to think.

Ariston and Alexei had left the temple and cautiously headed back to the beach. They did not want to run into the Pixies again. Stumbling in the darkness, they arrived on the beach but could not find the raft. This was surely the right spot as the little dock and shed were still here but neither the raft nor the boat were. Alexei lit a torch. As they walked in circles, Ariston tripped over a very large sand mound. When he fell on top of it, it screamed. It was the wizard, buried, all but his face, in the sand.

The wizard was not happy. After being dug out of the sand by the two warriors, he quickly mumbled a cantrip under his breath. The clean clothes made him feel a bit better. However, there was something nagging at him. He could not put his finger on it but something in the back of his mind was trying to make it to the front. He shook his head and began to question Ariston and Alexei. From what he could make out, they had run into trouble. That was not really of any consequence to him. More pressing was the issue with the Elf. Kyri had taken advantage of him, cast a Sleep spell and taken his things; including the Eye of Traldar and his spell book. He needed to get those back. A part of him wanted to punish her for the theft as well. He

shook his head to clear that thought away but the movement made him queasy. He had had enough of Ariston and Alexei. He waved his hand dismissively and turned away. He entered the little shed and hoped that sleeping a bit would give him the answer of what to do with the Elf.

Alexei and Ariston stood on the shore, staring alternately at the lake and the little shed where Syndyllys had disappeared. There was no moon in this fog but they were soon greeted by a shout from across the water. The Elf had returned. She said that she could not come back out to the shore but if they wanted the Eye or Syndyllys' things, they could swim out and get them. Ariston was no fan of the mage but they needed to return the Eye and a mage without spells is useless. He stripped off his armor and swam out to the boat. Kyri did not look him in the eye but simply handed over the things she had stolen. The ranger carefully wrapped them in a water resistance oilskin sack and tied it to his waist. Then without another word, dove back into the water and waded onto shore. As he was coming ashore, he thought he heard the door of the shed quietly close. He shrugged and shook off the water dripping from his long hair. He placed Syndyllys' things next to the shack door but kept the Eye. He then smoothed an area of sand and laid down, trying to see the stars through the clouds and fell asleep thinking of Thalos Corin and the letter his mentor had sent. Just where was the master now and should he join him? Perhaps his dreams would tell him. Then again, his dreams never foretold good things. They just made him relive the bad . . .

Syndyllys stared out across the water at the nodding Kyri. His heart was filled with hate. That Elf had embarrassed him and taken his possessions. Chief among them his spell book and the Eye. He could not let it go. Something deep inside of him was yearning for her death. He was barely able to keep it in check. Felling a little stronger now, and less likely to make a stupid mistake in the name of revenge, he quietly walked to the shore, saying the words of a spell under his breath. He noticed that Ariston and Alexei were no longer there but they had left his spell book and some other things by the door to the shed. They did not leave the Eye.

As Syndyllys got closer, Kyri looked up with that unemotional Elven way that really irked

Syndyllys (never so much as now). The mage shouted the last word of his incantation and a fiery red arrow leapt from his hand, streaked across the water and slammed into Kyri. She twisted trying to get out of the way and staggered down to one knee in the boat. Syndyllys smiled, thinking of how much that had had to hurt. He called out, "Never touch my stuff again or I WILL kill you." He turned and walked away, unworried about retaliation as he knew he was right and she had been foolish to try to take him on.

Now, where was the Eye? The mage thought. Oh yes, the Forestor had taken it. He would have to pay as well. Syndyllys walked up the beach, into the forest and headed for the temple.

Meanwhile, Alexei and Ariston had rejoined the rest of the party inside the ancient temple. They were not sure if they should have. The group had descended further and discovered two statues which had proved to not be static. They had the gruesome visage of gargoyles you might see on the tops of building in Thyatis or Darokin but they attacked. The room itself was of marble. Fine Human craftsmanship had created this chamber. Just barely perceptible were crypts embedded into the walls. Several pillars supported the weight of the roof and the statues had stood at the far end of them, away from the group. Between the two hideous monsters lay a rod of swirling black and blue.

Seeing the danger, the group had sprung into action but it appeared that the creatures could only be hit by enchanted weapons and spells. It looked bleak but in the end, the group was victorious.

The last gargoyle crumbled into stone dust and rubble and the Dwarf sighed with relief. He picked up the curious swirlingly colorful rod and smacked it as hard as he could against the floor. Thwakk! "Well, I guess it is indestructible."

So intent was Greyshade upon the rod that he almost did not notice the mage slip in, cast a spell upon the Forestor and begin to rifle through his pockets and sacks. Almost. However, he could not ignore that there were four exact copies of the mage and all of them were doing something to Ariston.

"Hey! What is going on here?" yelled the Dwarf. All four Syndyllys images looked up, smiled and began to run from the room . . .

It has been a while since our last recap but we have played several sessions. If I wait until I can write three or four separate entries, we will wait forever. Instead, I am posting a recap of the several sessions since July 17, up through the session on September 12. This is a place holder for that posting.

The party stood in awe around the giant tree. It grew through the roof but was surrounded by a spiral staircase which seemed to grow from the tree itself. Once it exited through the roof, nothing could be seen further up the stairs.

Kyri and Ariston began examining the tree. It had to be a Tree of Life. They could almost feel the magic surging through its roots. However, there were two peculiar things about this tree. First, it was a relatively young tree. Second, it was not well. Something about it was definitely sickly. However, neither were Treemasters and therefore they could not tell why it was sick. Its upper trunk (right as it passed above) seemed covered with spider webs, some of them thicker than any the party had seen. However, with nowhere else to go but up, they knew that they must begin their ascent.

The Forestor asked the group to wait and he sent Poe ahead, with instructions to find out what was upstairs. He got his answer quickly for as soon as the bird was out of sight, he began to squawk and caw excitedly, as if trapped. Ariston ran up the stairs, two by two, disregarding the weight of his heavy armor. He was half way up when a mass of sticky webs shot from above and swarmed him, trapping his arms and knocking him off balance. He clattered down the stairs, wildly swinging his sword with only his free wrist. The sharp steel began to cleave the web.

Orin and Chronos were next up the stairs and they were met by a monstrosity: hunched, grey-purplish skin with a distended white belly, spider-like face, long skinny arms, short stubby legs, and two sharp, black chitinous claws instead of hands and feet. It and two spiders the

size of large dogs pressed the attack. The cleric was dispatched by the creature's claws and left half in and half out of the hole in the ceiling/floor which marked the divider between levels. The Halfling fought on with support of the Elf's arrows from below. Soon the beast was felled and only one spider left.

The spider leapt and collided with the Hin, sinking fangs filled with poison deep into his shoulder. However, Orin rolled and pushed the spider off of him. The Hin looked elated but weakened by the fight. He stood unsteadily and smiled down at the rest of the party, shaking goo from his right arm and holding tightly to the dagger that had killed the spider. It had been pointed straight out when the spider jumped on top of the Halfling.

As if an afterthought, he began to look around for his pouch. He quickly opened it and began looking for something. With a look of hopelessness and horror on his face, he stared again at his companions. The Forester began to run up the stairs, two by two. Orin's face went slack and it could be seen that his lips were turning blue. He tried to speak but only frothy spittle came out. His knees buckled and he crumpled onto the stairs, one hand still inside the pouch.

Ariston grabbed the pouch and began to tear it apart. There were too many herbs and he could not remember which one would save someone from spider venom. He threw the bag down in disgust and picked up the limp body of the chain mail clad Hin. Orin's eyes were half closed and the pupils were wide. A little froth still came from his mouth but it was clear and inescapable: the Hin was dead. Ariston laid him down gently and cursed. "Not again," he whispered, "not again." He carefully removed Orin's diary and placed it in his own pouch.

There was a long moment of silence as the adventurers stood in shock and realized what had happened. The mage spoke first. He wanted to bury the body of the Hin and move on. There could be no better place than an Elven Tree of Life for Orin's final resting place. Several others wanted to leave his body, with the unconscious Cleric (Chronos' wounds had been closed by the Mage's quick use of the healing staff but he was still not awake) and guarded by anyone who would stay. They felt they were

close to finding the sage and getting rid of the Eye of Traldar which seemed to be more trouble than it was worth. In the end, only Syndyls stayed and began digging a hole in the shadow of the tree.

Winding their way up the stairs, the group eventually came to a room of many doors. One led to a long hallway and the others led to temples. They were dedicated to Immortals of the Traladaran pantheon: Halav Redhair (whose door was decorated with a sword plunged into an anvil and whose temple was largest with a steel altar), Petra (whose door was adorned with a round shield with a boss in its centre and whose temple was simplest with a small wooden bowl on the floor) and Zirchev (whose symbol of a hawk riding a wolf was on his door). The altar in Halav's room had a spot just perfect for the Eye of Traldar but no one could find it. Had the Mage secretly stolen it after all? They did not know but pressed onward to find the mage.

The group proceeded down the long hallway they had found. The Dwarf moved more and more slowly, breathing heavily and grunting as they moved down the hallway. He could go no farther and the group stopped. With a heavy thud, the Dwarf removed the swirling glass rod from his bag and dropped it on the floor. Kyri, Greyscale, Alexei and Ariston were at a loss. Why would the rod become so heavy? Where had the Rogue gone?

Alexei and Ariston decided to continue on. They had seen down the hallway and into a room made of darkness. In its center was a highly polished piece of black glass in an ornate frame. The glass had a concave section missing, just the right size for the rod.

The two strong humans were put to the test. Each step was harder and their muscles strained to be free of the burden. Then the Elf, the Dwarf and Alexei fled. A tremendous sense of doom had entered all three of their hearts and they could not bear to witness whatever would happen if the rod were placed in its spot. They ran all the way to Halav's temple and hid behind Greyscale's shield. There they found Chae, staring at the Eye of Traldar which sat in its spot on the altar. They asked no questions, just closed their eyes in fear.

Meanwhile, Ariston was alone with the swirling glass bar. With his last bit of strength, Ariston

grunted, swung the rod into the slot on the mirror and slumped to the floor. The entire mirror began to pulse. Glass tinkled and tiny cracks appeared in its surface. With a deafening “thwump” the mirror shattered into a thousand shining pieces; and all was silent. The Forestor could not move, knowing that he would be bleeding from every exposed area of flesh. Slowly, he untangled himself and stood. There was no blood. Even more astonishing, there was no trace of the mirror except the golden frame. Lying on the floor behind where the mirror once stood was a breathing but otherwise motionless man, dressed in simple gray robes, cinched by a belt of rope.

The man blinked his bright brown eyes and smiled at Ariston. Coughing quietly, he sat up then stood. “Thank you, brother Forestor. I knew someone would come. Are you hurt?” Ariston was surprised at how awake and spry this man was. He had at first appeared very old but the ranger could tell that he was not old as much as ageless. His gray beard was shortly cropped and his face was kind yet wrinkled with sun, wind and age. He gave off the sense that he could be sixty or six hundred. Could he be trusted? Was this his true visage?

The man introduced himself as Allaran, Sage of the Isle of Lost Dreams and the Lake of Lost Souls and Keeper of the Secret Tree of Life. He claimed to have been trapped in the “mirror” just destroyed by Ariston. But everything is now to be set right. He must know two things: Is he accompanied by a Dwarf, a Hin and an Elf? If so, is the Elf the child of Feadiel? Ariston replied that he does not know the Elf’s lineage but yes, he is with a Dwarf, an Elf, a Halfling and several Humans. But there is bad news, the Hin is dead. At this, the man looked sad but quickly asked how long ago did he die and where is the body. Finding that the Hin was just killed a short while ago, the man demanded that Ariston not bury the body at the tree and bring it to him in the temple of Petra. Before Ariston left, he saw the man extract a quill pen from his robes, shake it twice and a full staff was in his hands.

The Forestor gathered his companions and met at the tree where Syndyls was just about to place Orin’s tiny body into the ground. Everyone felt themselves again and there was no trace of the evil that had persisted or the more recent

foreboding. They looked on as the mage emerged from a shallow hole. It had been hard work for the mage (and slightly demeaning given that graves in Alphatia were either dug by magic or by hired labor – he did not mind as much given that this was his fellow adventurer but he was still glad that no one from home could see him). When the group told him that they were not going to bury the Hin after all his hard work (digging with the little camp shovel that Alexei carried was not the easiest), he looked annoyed. He said a few words under his breath and his clothes were as fresh as ever.

They carried their friend to the temple where the man was sitting on the floor, surrounded with bowls of what appeared to be water and a few branches (from whence he got them, they could not say). He asked that they go downstairs back into the dining room where they would be fed to their hearts’ desire. Ariston asked if there would be wine and the man smiled. “Yes, of course,” answered the sage with a twinkling smile. Ariston forgot all other concerns and the group left Allaran to tend to Orin.

Several hours, which seemed like minutes, passed as the group stuffed themselves full of food. There was something for everyone and even Ariston did more than imbibe wine. As soon as they could not eat or drink another thing, Allaran entered the room. He was dressed differently, a dark gray green cloak over leather outdoorsman gear. He still held his staff and leaned on it a bit. His eyes still sparkled but he seemed very weary.

“Your little friend is alive but barely. He will sleep for many days, perhaps three or four, then awoken as the hungriest Hin you have ever met. Feed him and in a fortnight, he will be as strong as he will ever be again. The Immortals always exact a price and I have snatched him from the Goddess. She will make both him and me pay, I just don’t know in what way yet. However, if he and you are who I hope you are, it is worth the price.”

The sage shook off questions and said that he must leave at once for there were many things to which he needed answers. He would be gone exactly two weeks then would meet them at the Tree of Life. He assured them that they would be safe upon the island and could feel free to search around and use his study. He asked only that they leave his bedroom and the room where

the mirror had been alone. He needed them undisturbed for later study. Without more, he walked from the room, leaving the adventurers to their thoughts.

Over the next few days, Orin did indeed awaken. He did nothing but eat, seeming even incapable of words between bites. He went from eating to sleeping, right at the table, and right in the midst of their meals. Ariston, knowing the sage was gone for a while and that Orin was alive, took to the woods and scarcely saw the others. Chronos, Syndyls and Kyri spent most of their time in the sage's library, always worried about the clock but nothing bad ever happened. Alexei and Chae stayed with Orin, always making sure he was okay. Gradually, Orin began to speak of his dreams while he had been gone, for if not dreams, he could not explain what they were. He had trouble believing that he had truly been dead.

A fortnight from the time they had saved the sage, the group sat in silence, watching the Tree of Life. There was a crackling sound as if branches were being split and the trunk of the tree began to change. It took on the visage of the sage and he emerged from it, his skin returning from wood to flesh as he began to speak, "Good. You are all here. My questions have been answered with more questions and my heart is filled with fear. Yet I promised answers and I will share what I know or at least what I think I know." He sat at the foot of the tree and began to weave a tale.

Allaran is the thirteenth and perhaps final sage of the Lake of Lost Souls and the Isle of Lost Dreams. Ancient Traladaran history claimed that the lake here was created by the tears of the Handmaidens of Petra after she left them and took the dead King Halav. They cried for his soul and the size of their grief was what convinced the Immortals to raise him and set him upon the quest for Immortality himself.

Most do not know why the Isle is called that of Lost Dreams but it is because of him and the sages before him. This island was created by a secret member of Clan Feadiel, the only surviving clan of the exodus from the Sylvan Realms more than 400 years ago. The lone Elf, Carlwyn, under orders of the Treemaster, took a branch of the tree to hide and grow in case the clan was ever again threatened and the clan that was headed to Alfheim did not survive. Because

he was the only Elf, he had to trust to a small band of Human Druids and Mages who he found near this place. He taught them to bind themselves with the new Tree of Life and learn the ways of the Treemasters. The devotees spread the rumors among the local Elves that the Isle was taboo and forbidden to Elves so that the secret did not spread. In time, their ability to trust the secret to others and to recruit members dwindled and now, there is only one Treemaster at a time. That person is the Sage. Allaran became a sage quite by accident, after he left the Forestors of Thyatis. He was raised by a Thyatian Forester when his Traladaran parents were killed by Orcs.

The sage continued, "I am sure that you saw my notes in the study about the three rings of darkness. They are about you I believe as is the statue in the main hall. Carlwyn said that a child of Feadiel with companions of all the major races (Hin, Dwarf and Human) would one day come during the time of the last Sage. They would rescue the sage and quest for the center of the Universe. They would face three rings of darkness before finding the core of the world. From them, the Sylvan Realm would be restored and the world would be renewed. While you, young Kyri, are silent on your heritage, perhaps you do not know and I will not pry, but I believe you may be that child. I am not a seer, just a sage."

The man shifted on the ground and began to stroke the staff he held. In the blink of an eye, it became a pipe and he stuffed it with tobacco then passed his little pouch to the Hin. He touched a finger to the dry weed and it began to emit smoke. He similarly lit Orin's pipe. He took a few puffs then continued.

"I began my search by speaking with the Elves across the lake. I assured them that you were okay and that things were returning to normal. I asked them to return to their clan and seek out information. I then went to find a seer, my friend Shalfey of the Tower of Stars. Yes, he truly exists," said the man smiling at Ariston. "Many of the emperors of Thyatis have consulted with the Master of the Tower of Stars. But my visit was troubling. Something seemed amiss and I could not get an audience. His assistants would only tell me that he could not be seen. I waited and could never get an audience. I tried speaking with his protectors, the Brothers of the Mountain

Sun but got nowhere. I worry that something is seriously amiss but I decided to move forward.

I traveled throughout Thyatis, Darokin and Karameikos, everywhere that I had planted a tree in my youth. These are indeed troubling times. Each country seemed tense and full of apprehension. In the far west of Darokin, there is one who has arisen who calls himself The Master. No other name do I know. He has long been the ruler of lands beyond the Great Sind Desert. Legends say he has lived a thousand years but is not an Elf and he is destined to rule his Great Realm for another thousand years. Of course, no one knows exactly what he looks like. Reports range from a kindly old man to a fierce desert wizard to a warrior in shiny black plate armor. However, it is said that he now also controls the desert itself and the mountain kingdom which borders Glantri. And now, trade has stopped with Darokin from all points west. Caravans which make it back from excursions west report having to turn back because of the prevalence of bandits and foul creatures. No one has news of Sind or Hule. But it is said that the black sailed ships of Hule can be seen in the harbor of Halag or as you may know it, Fort Doom. I am not sure what all this portends yet but my soul tells me that this has something to do with the three rings of darkness. It is the darkness of a lack of knowledge that has disturbed both Darokin and its most powerful ally, Thyatis. Any threat to Darokin is an assault on all the free trading nations of our part of the world. Thyatis will not rest until it knows for sure what has happened in the far West.

"I believe I have faced and perhaps you as well have faced another of the circles of darkness: Bargle the Infamous, Court Wizard of the Black Eagle. He and his apprentices are spreading evil through all of ancient Traladara, searching for lost artifacts of the times of Halav and bending them to their will; fomenting unrest amongst the Goblinoids; supporting the Iron Ring and helping the Black Eagle in capturing the Duchy. It is this that has caused the tension in Karameikos. As far as I can tell, Bargle has three apprentices who call themselves the Hands of Death: Aurelian, Golthar and one who has seemed to have taken the name Skarda.

"Ahh. . . I see the glimmer of recognition in your eyes, Alexei. Yes, Skarda is the name of a legend, a boogiemer. Even from my childhood I remember the tales of Skarda who would make

entire villages (the people, the animals and all the riches of them) disappear at night. My parents told me that if you wandered too far into the forest, Skarda would follow you back home and make you and your family disappear. I imagined him as a great psychic Nosferatu, sucking the souls of all and withering their bodies into dust. You can imagine that I would be more than eager to meet him when I received a message from Skarda. Yes, he contacted me.

"I had been tracking the movement of another apprentice, Golthar. He had recently become interested in certain artifacts of a lost empire of fantasy. He is looking for items from Ancient Nithia. I smiled too, Orin. Nithia is but a small kingdom of the Emirates of Ylaruam, to the east. History says nothing of a great Nithian Empire, definitely not one which would stretch from the Isle of Dawn and beyond the lands of the Five Shires. But that is what Golthar believes and he had begun correspondence with an Alphatian, actually Thothian (whose dusty people are similar to the Nithians of the Emirates) mage. This piqued my interest as I too had had correspondence with the Alphatian, Eridalun. Well, I trusted my ability too much and invited Golthar and Skarda into my home. Skarda was hidden by some powerful changing spell so I don't really know exactly how he looks. I wanted to get a view of him with the Eye but never got the chance. They came with an Elf, tall and handsome and with a striking similarity to Carlwyn. I was distracted and soon overwhelmed. Golthar admitted to trapping Eridalun and then they trapped me, inside the mirror you destroyed.

"I do not know exactly what it is that Golthar is after. I know Skarda wanted the Eye. He said that his Master required it for study and that it might help to find what Golthar was seeking. I do not know where Eridalun is but I get the sense that Golthar was keeping him with him and that he was still alive. Eridalun is a scholar and teacher from the Isle of Dawn. With the arrival of an Alphatian mage to run the new Karameikan School of Magic, I was interested in finding out more about the Empire and I happened across Eridalun and began correspondence with him. He seems to be a decent fellow but I have never met him in person so I could not tell you what he looks like.

"I believe your destiny lies in finding out what Bargle is up to. At least most of you. Alexei, I

think you must follow a different path. You are of Karameikos but have never been outside its borders. I therefore am giving you a quest which will take you outside. I ask that you find out what has happened to the Seer of the Tower of Stars. In return, I have this for you.” He removed a rolled scroll from beneath his cloak. Its slightly yellowed paper crinkled and cracked as he unrolled it. “It is a deed of land along the border of Thyatis and Karameikos, signed by the emperor himself. This land is far enough to escape the ravages of war which may soon visit this land but close enough to be considered home. Your homestead has been razed, like many others in this part of the country. Your family is scattered. Find the Seer who can help you track them down then establish a new home with them in the land described in this deed.”

Alexei was stunned. A single tear ran down his cheek and he stammered, trying to find words. “I have grown accustomed to this group. From Ariston’s and Orin’s company at the drinking table to Syndyls’ ability to always be clean. The silly songs of our now dead bard and Chae pushing me to lead the way despite us all knowing that the road ahead is trapped. Even Kyri and Greyscale whispering about me from the corner, no doubt chuckling about some human behavior I have exhibited. They are all my friends and I hate to leave them. But you must have seen inside my heart that since we have discovered the burning of the homesteads, I have been worried about my own home and family. Not many survive, having been taken or killed by the Iron Ring. I will find them and from this new home, continue to fight the Iron Ring. Thank you.”

Kyri rolled her eyes and looked away.

The Sage continued. “I think you should seek out the allies of the Hands of Death, the Goblins of the surrounding lands. They will lead you to Golthar. Golthar will lead you to Bargle and this first ring of darkness. I can tell you how to find the Wolfskull Clan, perhaps his most powerful group of Goblins. But first, I have some tools from Carlwyn which will help you in your journeys. Come.”

The Sage led them upstairs and had them wait in the shade of the trees. He went down the long hallway towards his room but returned in minutes, carrying large sacks.

“Carlwyn foresaw that his tools would one day guide the heroes of whom he spoke. These tools I bestow upon you. First, Chronos: to you I give Carlwyn’s special scroll and several magical liquids. He said the reader of the scroll will be protected against dark magic while the potions would heal, make you immune to fire and help tame natural beasts . . . “

Allaran continued to hand out gifts. To Chae, he gave a black cloak that Carlwyn called the Cloak of the Bat which would enable him to hide at night when he was fleeing the Sylvan Realm and to turn into a bat or fly as necessary. To Orin, he gave Carlwyn’s wooden amulet which it was said would protect the wearer from most harms. Greyscale received the Elf’s Long Sword, Moordenaar. The mage, Syndyls received Carlwyn’s ancient ring. It was inscribed with runes and according to Allaran, could store spell energy and allow its user to fully know the spells inside. To Ariston, the sage gave Carlwyn’s Elven Chainmail and 10 special arrows. Though they were more than 400 years old, the shafts were straight and hard and the green feathered fletching was as full and smooth as any already in the Forestor’s quiver. Finally, to Kyri, Allaran gave Carlwyn’s diary which he said contained not only a history of the Exodus but also things of magical usefulness. He also gave her Carlwyn’s fine ebony long bow. With that weapon, he felled many great and terrible beasts from Goblins to Giants.

That night, they feasted the return of the sage and celebrated the glory to be had. Orin told many stories of his true love Penny and Chae shared tales from his childhood as the son of two scouts in the service of Darokin. He stopped suddenly when describing the last time he saw his parents; the night of a humanoid raid. Not wanting to end the night on a down note, Chronos chimed in and told everyone of his days as the biggest and strongest candidate for priesthood during his early days in the Thyatian Church and his conversion to the Karameikan Church at the behest of his father, a Thyatian who had followed Duke Stefan to claim the Grand Duchy (he did not personally know the ruler but did fight beside him at one point during the Marilenev Rebellion; Chronos’ father still proudly displayed his dented shield and sword in their family home).

The next morning, the group set out together. After crossing back over the water, they found

two Elves still watching their horses and ponies. On the shore of the lake, they said their final goodbye to Alexei and headed south, into the heart of the Dymrak Forest. The journey was uneventful until, right at dusk, they came to the sign of which they had been told by the Sage: a petrified forest. None of the adventurers had encountered a petrified forest but Kyri and Ariston had heard tales of them. This, however, was nothing like what they expected. First, the area of petrification seemed huge. In the fading light of dusk, the forest appeared as an eerie and silent place, with little or no color to relieve the grey stone of the stiff, blighted trees and undergrowth. The trees were transformed while in full leaf and now formed a dense, opaque canopy. From where the group stood, just outside the thick of the petrified forest, nothing could be seen in the dark gloom. No sound came from the darkness and the only living things which could be seen were patches of pale moss and lichen on the tree-trunks and limp, web-like creepers hanging like shrouds from the branches.

The group made camp at the edge of this desolate place. They did not even make a campfire for fear of attracting too much attention. Their sleep was fitful and they carefully made sure someone kept watch all night long. Throughout the night, wolves could be heard far off, howling to the dark sky.

The light of the next morning brightened the forest just barely. What had been impenetrable dark the evening before was now a twilight gloom. As they moved silently through they found stony lumps which revealed themselves to be petrified birds and animals (deer, foxes, boars, etc.). Patches of tangled, petrified undergrowth had arisen to an average height of at least eight feet and seemed unsmashable. The petrified forest was so dense, dark and tangled that visibility was very short, perhaps 100 feet but even that was limited by the twists of the many trails through the area. Although torches did not need to be used, the walk was painfully slow.

Following one promising path (what made the track promising, the Forestor did not say but he seemed to think their path was ahead and no one challenged him), they wound their way through yet more lifeless trees. Kyri felt nervous, unsure how to respond to these trees of stone. Greyshade seemed perfectly at home amidst so

much rock. Ahead, they spotted several small humanoids, leading a pack of very large wolves. They were headed straight for the group but did not appear to have seen them and were arguing amongst themselves. Goblins for sure and they wore the distinctive wolf skin cloaks that the adventurers had encountered before.

The group scurried to the sides of the road except Orin. He goaded the goblins then began to run away. As the little monsters got closer, Ariston stepped out and cast a spell. Immediately, the goblins fell to the ground, tossing and tumbling into the dirt but not awakening from the magical slumber induced in them. The wolves, startled by the sudden change, turned tail and ran away. In stepped Orin, Chae and Greyshade and they delivered killing blows to all but one of the little yellow skinned humanoids. This last one, Chae bound then began to smack until he woke up. Greyshade smiled at the Goblin and said in its native tongue, "G'morning, Sunshine. Now just who are you and where do I get one of them nice cloaks?"